

Vol. 1091
No. 1



Wednesday,
23 September
2026

DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 23 Meán Fómhair 2026

Wednesday, 23 September 2026

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

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

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

Deputy Emer Currie - To discuss the abolition of the deemed disposal rule.

Deputy Albert Dolan - To discuss access to planned residential placements for adults with intellectual disabilities.

Deputy Duncan Smith - To discuss the loss of the remains or partial remains of unidentified bodies.

Deputy Paul Lawless - To discuss the future of a school in County Mayo.

Deputy Seán Kyne - To discuss the status of a new school building in County Galway.

Deputy Matt Carthy - To discuss funding for a public swimming pool in Carrickmacross.

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 Louise O'Reilly - To discuss the need for EV charging infrastructure to be located in developments.

Deputy Gary Gannon - To discuss the development of intergenerational community hubs.

Deputies Richard Boyd Barrett and Paul Murphy - To discuss the upcoming Ireland-Israel football match.

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

Deputy John Clendennen - To discuss recurring water supply disruptions affecting Birr, County Offaly and concerns regarding the reliability of the network and communication with affected residents.

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

Deputy Malcolm Byrne - To discuss the need for improvements to the Dublin to Rosslare rail line, in particular for passengers south of Wicklow town.

Deputies Cathy Bennett and Natasha Newsome Drennan - To discuss the failure of BreastCheck to achieve mammogram targets. To discuss the failure of BreastCheck to achieve mammogram targets.

The matters raised by Deputies Cathy Bennett and Natasha Newsome Drennan; Deputy Ruairi Ó Murchú; Deputy Conor Sheehan; Deputy Tom Brabazon; and Deputy Seán Kyne have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Health Screening Programmes

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Over 3,500 new breast cancer cases arise in the State every year. It is absolutely shocking to say that 20% of the scheduled examinations did not take place last year. This should be seen as a red flag for Government and a huge concern for us all. The Minister needs to understand why this is happening and seek to address it immediately, whether through advertisements, education, more flexibility in the service in terms of missed appointments, and any other mechanism necessary. However, last year is not the full story of the missed targets. The missed targets over the past three years amount to 122,334. These can be taken in tandem with figures released to Sinn Féin earlier this year that show 45% of breast cancer surgeries are not happening within the recommended timeframe. With a growing and ageing population which will see the number of women eligible increase from 500,000 in 2019 to 700,000 by the end of the decade, the picture painted is one that should be deeply concerning for the future. It is not sufficient to simply increase targets and expect everything else to flow. We have seen the outworkings of that in terms of HRT, blister packs and so on. What I want to hear from the Minister of State is her comprehensive plan to set this right now - not just targets, but the substance.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: In little over a week we will mark the beginning of cancer awareness month. This should be a time when we can talk about the great progress being made in fighting cancer across the State. While progress is being made in some areas,

which is positive and should be strongly welcomed, the national target for mammograms has been missed for a third consecutive year, and not by any small amount; it has been missed by 46,000. That is 46,000 women who should have been scanned. While the numbers of those being scanned are reaching record highs, we must ask why these targets are being missed by such a vast amount. If breast cancer is detected at stage 1, 99% of women will survive but survival drops to 37% if detected at stage 4. Data suggests that nearly one third of women are not getting breast cancer surgery in time. Women's lives should not be a statistic. These delays are crippling families with the fear of the unknown and reducing survival rates. University Hospital Waterford's webpage states that the hospital "provides a high quality service which addresses all aspects of care for women affected by breast cancer". Therefore, what is happening? Have there been cutbacks in the hospital? What multi-annual investment in cancer care will be seen to address demand and to prevent these backlogs increasing? Behind each and every one of these figures is a mother, a daughter, a sister and a grandmother. The devastation to families caused by failures to detect breast cancer early is absolutely immense.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I thank Deputies Bennet and Newsome Drennan for this opportunity to discuss the important matter of breast screening. I am taking this Topical Issue on behalf of the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill. I genuinely thank the Deputies for raising it. It is really important. The more awareness we can bring to breast cancer screening, the better. It is not often I get the opportunity. I will be in the Seanad at 10.30 a.m. answering a similar question and I welcome that. I am standing here as, I assume, the only woman who has availed of BreastCheck for those aged 50 and over.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: No, I have too.

Deputy Mary Butler: The Deputy certainly does not look old enough. I am going to draw on my own lived experience in relation to this because it is really important. If we only take one thing away from today it is that we urge every eligible woman to attend for breast screening when they are called as the numbers are only at 70%. The last time I attended was two years ago in the summer. I remember arriving at about 11.05 a.m., five minutes late, and I apologised to the nurse on duty who told me not to worry as I was the first person to arrive that day. She said that when the sun was shining unfortunately the screening was not a priority for people. It is really important that it is noted on the floor of the Dáil that people turn up for only two out of every three appointments. The question is what we do to improve that and to look for solutions.

Enhancing Ireland's cancer screening programme is a priority for the Minister for Health and for all of us in the House. These programmes are a vital component of our health services. Breast cancer is the most common non-invasive cancer in women, with over 3,500 cases diagnosed in Ireland every year. About one third of these are detected through screening. BreastCheck, Ireland's national breast screening programme, screens women aged 50 to 69 years of age. It aims to detect breast cancer at the earliest possible stage and provide assessment and access to onward care for women who need further interventions. It operates four regional screening units and 24 mobile units serving 54 locations across the country. In 2025,

BreastCheck screened 173,443 women, the highest number in its history. However, the HSE acknowledged that this was below the target it set itself for that year.

The Government has made significant investments in cancer screening programmes in recent years. This includes improvements to infrastructure, staffing and technology, and the Minister for Health understands from the national screening service that these improvements include a new patient database system. This is a modern system that simplifies and streamlines workflows for BreastCheck's team. It enables real-time data tracking of screening a participant's journey and helps address the service gaps. The HSE has also implemented a streamlined appointment system and reorganised radiography staff to increase weekday appointments using its current resources. Since 2023, the NSS has recruited new consultants and senior radiographers, secured additional recruitment funding and expanded training places. BreastCheck has partnered with University College Cork to launch a postgraduate mammography certification in Ireland. This is really important because it enables mammographers to train in Ireland. Three new mobile screening units have been added since 2020, bringing the total number to 24. BreastCheck continues to commission new mobile screening units and plan for additional screening infrastructure. BreastCheck has been engaged on inviting women at higher risk, those waiting longest, newly eligible women, and women from marginalised groups who may face barriers to screening. We really want to encourage all women to attend their appointments or to reschedule them. Filling every slot helps to ensure that more women receive screenings.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: As I have said before, we need to make BreastCheck more visible so people know to have their breast checks done. The HSE and BreastCheck are failing too many people, with patients on trolleys, years-long waiting lists, delayed diagnoses, overcrowding in hospitals and families just left in limbo right across the whole of the HSE, not just in BreastCheck. Just in my locality of Cavan and Monaghan this week, there has been a patient lying on the floor. I realise that it is not about BreastCheck but I thought I would bring it up with the Minister of State here today. It is absolutely horrendous that we have people lying on the floors in our hospitals and patients who cannot get their BreastCheck screenings. Despite the millions being spent by the HSE, people still are not being seen in the timely manner needed. The public deserves more in every area under the HSE. I ask the Minister of State to take this on board.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: I know a woman in my community who found a lump. She went to her GP straight away. She did everything right. She got her referral for an appointment but had to wait seven weeks to be seen, only to be told then that she needed an urgent ultrasound and a mammogram but would have to wait three to four months. This was despite the presence of the lump and a history of breast cancer in her family. Her own sister had it at 36. That should be setting off alarm bells. Four months later, she got her scan and a biopsy and received a positive diagnosis of breast cancer. She has dense breast tissue and needs an MRI scan as a result. First, she was told it would take two to three weeks. A day later, she got a phone call and was told she would be waiting another eight weeks. That is over six months of waiting that this woman has had to endure, all while the cancer is growing. How is it acceptable to leave a woman waiting like that for an urgent scan? The woman, Linda, would like to ask why she is in this situation and how many more women are just like her.

Deputy Mary Butler: As Deputies will know, I cannot talk about individual cases on the floor of the Dáil.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: Nobody wants to talk about it. I sense it.

Deputy Mary Butler: Sorry, but it is not an over-and-back. The most important thing we can do leaving here today is to encourage women, first and foremost, to avail of screening. Only 70% of BreastCheck screenings are accessed every year. That means two out of every three women avail of the service. We can all agree that we should leave here today trying to encourage people to avail of it.

The second point is that one third of all breast cancers are detected through screening. I have a very good friend who, many years ago, went for her very first mammogram, was diagnosed with breast cancer and had a very positive outcome.

In relation to the cases both Deputies have raised, the circumstances are simply not acceptable to me as a woman or as a Minister of State in the Department of Health. It is not a situation we want to see arising. The HSE is making every effort to expand services.

The point made on visibility is important. Breast cancer is not something we should be hiding away. In Waterford, my constituency, the BreastCheck van is in the Regional Sports Centre for six months of the year and in Dungarvan Community Hospital for the other six. Every eligible woman aged from 50 to 69 in a particular area is invited to attend. Unfortunately, only two out of three do. Notwithstanding the case cited, it is important to get the message out that if a woman of any age notices a change in a breast, she should go to her GP immediately and get support in as timely a manner as possible.

I thank the Deputies for raising this. It is so important that we talk about women's health on the floor of the Dáil. I will bring the Deputies' comments back to the Minister.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: She knows about it. She has her email. Nobody is answering me.

Mental Health Services

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I thank the Minister of State for being here. It will not be the first time we have had this discussion. It is a very difficult discussion to deal with. We all know that in Ireland we have a history of it being far too easy to get an involuntary admission to mental health services. The problem is that, on some level, the pendulum has swung too far the other way. There can be difficulties at times. I am talking people who are obviously sick. While they may not be, from the Garda's point of view, an imminent danger to themselves or others, they are definitely in harmful circumstances and in mental anguish. At times, it looks like the State has washed its hands, and that is why many people may be attempting to do an awful lot of good work.

I will go through a number of examples without getting into any more detail than I need to. I dealt with the case of a man who had been put out of emergency accommodation. He had obviously breached the rules within this emergency accommodation. He had mental health

issues and a long history of mental health issues. He was known to mental health services. There was an attempt at a voluntary admission whereby the Garda and a mental health social worker attempted to cajole him to go to Crosslanes. That did not work out. The problem is that this probably happened two weeks into the event. It probably took about six weeks before there was an authorised officer.

We are looking for more authorised officers who can deal specifically with these sorts of cases. If we were in the North or in Britain, it would probably be a lot easier for an authorised officer to deliver an involuntary admission. Therefore, we need to consider this. Obviously, a GP is needed and, as gardaí will often say, GPs will generally not sign forms for involuntary admission, even in cases where they would at times believe it should happen. Whether it is a matter of guidelines, protocols or re-examining the legislation, we need to find a solution. There is a very wide conversation to be had.

I spoke to the Minister of State previously about a woman in similar circumstances who went months refusing help but needed help. I could not get into the issues that were impacting on her. The gardaí had taken her in during really cold weather. She was dealt with and is in a better place at the minute but it just took far too long.

I also have an issue at the minute concerning a man who had previously been homeless and had been housed by Louth County Council. He is now having a recurrence of his mental health issues, which has happened previously. The problem, I assume, is that he is not taking his prescribed medication. There is probably street medication. Street tablets would be taken. He now has in his house a whole pile of people that neighbours would not necessarily want to have there, creating an awful lot of antisocial behaviour.

Louth County Council is attempting to address it. The question is how the response can be escalated. The Garda says that it is difficult for it to bring about an involuntary admission. Mental health services are not offering anything. There is talk, when dealing with circumstances like this, that maybe it is the HSE or the social inclusion and community activation programme that has to escalate the response but the protocols need to be understood.

I have two more cases. They relate to parents who are in really difficult situations but I will leave those for the next round. It is a matter of the overall solution that is required. I will talk to the Minister of State about some of these issues afterwards.

Deputy Mary Butler: I thank the Deputy for raising this really important issue and for his persistent advocacy in relation to mental health.

The Mental Health Act 2001 sets out the current legal framework for the involuntary admission and treatment of people in inpatient mental health services, known as approved centres, where a person has a mental disorder within the meaning of the Act.

Even though I passed the Mental Health Act earlier this year through the Houses and the President signed it into law, it has not been enacted because there will be a lead-in time of approximately two years. It is very complex legislation and it deals specifically with involuntary detention, especially for those who do not have capacity.

On the thrust of what the Deputy is saying, involuntary admission involves a three-step process. First, an initial application may be made by a family member, a member of An Garda

Síochána, an authorised officer in the HSE or another person. We currently have 126 authorised officers around the country but we will be expanding that number considerably because, when the new Act comes into play, a member of An Garda Síochána will not have that authority anymore.

I expect to have approximately 500 authorised officers around the country.

Following the making of an application, the person is examined by a GP or other medical practitioner. Under the Act, if the medical practitioner believes the person has a mental disorder, they will then be referred to an approved centre for examination by a consultant psychiatrist. The consultant psychiatrist must certify that the person has a mental disorder and requires admission before an order to involuntarily admit that person is made.

For a person to have a mental disorder, there must be a likelihood of the person being an immediate and serious risk of harm to themselves or to others or, because of their condition, the person is likely to seriously deteriorate in the community and his or her detention is likely to be of material benefit to the person. To be clear, members of An Garda Síochána cannot admit anyone. They can recommend. They can ask for a consultant psychiatrist to look at a person and determine whether they should be voluntarily or involuntarily detained for their own safety.

The following is really important. To deprive someone of their liberty is a serious infringement of that person's human rights and must only be done when it is absolutely necessary and only in accordance with the robust legal safeguards. The decision to involuntarily admit someone under the Mental Health Act is a clinical decision and can only be made by a consultant psychiatrist. Just because a person may benefit from inpatient admission is not sufficient grounds to deprive them of their liberty. A person is entitled to refuse treatment for physical or mental health conditions. Only when a person meets the criteria for involuntary admission can they be admitted and treated without consent.

That said, I fully accept that many people experiencing homelessness and severe mental illness need more support. The answers cannot simply be to broaden the grounds for involuntary admission. We need services that are more responsive, more flexible and better able to meet people where they are, particularly those whose illnesses, housing circumstances and complex needs make it difficult to access or engage with traditional services. Our focus must be on reaching and engaging people earlier, building trust, and ensuring that care is available in ways that work for them before a crisis point is reached.

I have to be clear that a person's housing status does not affect their right to refuse care, provided they have the capacity to make decisions about their own care. That is why we are opening Solace Cafés across the country. We have six open now. Three more are funded this year for Donegal, Mullingar and Kerry, and I hope to open many more next year, if I receive the financial support in the budget.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I understand what the Minister of State is saying in relation to the lead-in that is required for the new Mental Health Act. However, even in the short term, is it the case that we need guidelines, whether they are being given to local authorities or GPs at times? We could all have an argument about what is immediate or serious harm and whether someone is going to seriously deteriorate. I would argue on the cases I have cited that there

has at times been a deterioration that is very obvious, but people are afraid. Furthermore, I get the idea that, in a perfect scenario, we assume there is capacity, but we are dealing with issues where people are making really dreadful decisions that are impacting on themselves and others and, in some cases, are very dangerous.

On some levels, families do not have the capacity to start the forms and their interaction with mental health services can sometimes be imperfect. I accept that some of that is down to them seeing themselves as being constrained by rules, laws and resources, but I have seen circumstances where there had been an attempt. One of the young men has a diagnosis of schizophrenia and is off his tablets. The mother had previously had to get protection orders. He is living there and she is very worried that the situation is deteriorating. In fairness, there was an attempt at getting a voluntary admission, but it did not work. I will not even bother reading out the response I received from the HSE. We need to find a way to deal with this.

Just in the last day, a mother was in. Her son, who is 29, has a long history of mental illness. In some instances, mental illness has brought him into prison, but he does not want support at this point in time. They cannot get a referral from a GP. Community services have put him off the books and his mother needs a solution.

Deputy Mary Butler: The Deputy mentioned several cases that I cannot speak to individually. However, I must be crystal clear that there are absolutely no circumstances where, if a consultant psychiatrist determines that a person must be involuntarily detained against their consent for their own safety or the safety of others, there is a resource issue. That is categorically not true. If we do not have enough capacity-----

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It is about getting the person to that point.

Deputy Mary Butler: The Deputy cannot throw out statements like that, saying it is a resource issue in relation to involuntary detention.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: People have to get them to the psychiatrist.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): One speaker.

Deputy Mary Butler: I am sorry, but Deputy Ó Murchú must listen to the answer because we cannot just change a whole piece of legislation that has been there since 2001 for individual cases. We have to be very clear that there are huge criteria relating to how people are involuntarily detained, especially when they do not have capacity. We did not mention that today. We also did not mention the fact that, in a lot of these cases, there is a dual diagnosis of a mental disorder and drug addiction.

It has to be understood that it is not down to the garda, the family or the GP alone. In many instances, it is the family and GP working together. They make a referral to mental health services because they believe the person meets the criteria to be legally detained under the Act, and there is a legal framework to back it up. A consultant psychiatrist will then determine whether the person reaches the capacity or not. The capacity must be the likelihood of that person being an immediate and serious risk of harm to self or others or because of their

condition the person is likely to seriously deteriorate in the community and his or her detention is likely to be of material benefit to the person. The department of psychiatry is not a place to put a person because they are homeless. We must be very clear on that. It is about all elements of the State coming together.

The Deputy might send me a couple of the cases he mentioned to see if I can be of any help to him. I know he is genuinely worried about them, but I have to work within the Act I currently have.

Closed-Circuit Television Systems

Deputy Conor Sheehan: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Ardagh, for coming here this morning. It is good to have someone from the actual Department.

This feels to me a bit like Groundhog Day because it is my fourth time raising this issue. It is my second Topical Issue Debate, and I am effectively going to say the same thing I said ten months ago, so I sincerely hope that the Minister of State's Department has not given her the same reply as they gave another Minister ten months ago.

There is a comprehensive network of CCTV cameras in Limerick, 240 of which are monitored live. They were put in place for a specific reason, that being, we previously had a very violent feud in Limerick. They were put in place because, ten years ago this month, two children were burned alive in a car in Moyross. These cameras are stationed explicitly mainly in the city's four main regeneration areas, namely, Moyross, Southill, Ballinacurra Weston and St. Mary's Park. They were initially funded through economic social intervention funding through the regeneration process through the Department of housing. Regeneration has now concluded. That funding is being progressively wound down, which means there is a funding deficit every year to fund the ongoing live monitoring and maintenance of this camera network.

Last year, thankfully, the Mayor, John Moran, stepped in with his mayoral fund and plugged the gap of last year's funding deficit. He did that on the basis that he was asked by the Minister of State's Department and by the Minister for justice effectively for more time to deliver a permanent funding solution. We are now nearly a year on from that and a funding solution has not been forthcoming. This year, State funding is going to drop to €550,000, leaving a €660,000 shortfall that our local authority cannot absorb.

The issue is that, when I raise this issue, I get a response from the Minister of State's Department that intimates that I might be talking about community CCTV and that the Department can only fund CCTV up to €40,000. The issue here is that we have a specific, almost bespoke, case in Limerick because, unfortunately, we have had quite significant violence in the city.

The cameras have been transformative. There is a 70% prosecution rate with them. The tragic murder of Rose Hanrahan was effectively solved because the perpetrator was apprehended through the cameras. The chief superintendent and An Garda Síochána have been clear this is one of the most important tools they have to carry out their day-to-day duties. If the Minister of State turns these off, she might as well take 20 or 30 gardaí and bus them back to Templemore. This is something we have cross-party consensus on. My colleague, Senator Ryan, raised it in the Seanad recently. Deputy O'Dea raised it with the Minister, Deputy

Chambers, recently and the Minister said he would endeavour to make sure the cameras do not have to be turned off.

A working group was supposed to be set up last year to deal with this issue. I would like to know, though maybe the Minister of State will have to come back to me with this, how many times that working group met. What were the outcomes of those meetings? I cannot get that information through parliamentary questions. Will the Minister of State and her Department agree to meet with Oireachtas Members from the mid-west and with the Mayor to find the solution to this? Will she agree, at least in principle, that the cameras cannot be turned off and that it would be detrimental to public safety and confidence in policing locally?

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Catherine Ardagh): I thank Deputy Sheehan for raising this matter. He said he has raised it on numerous occasions in this House. He outlined the huge success rate of CCTV in Moyross and Limerick. CCTV across the country makes us feel more secure in the community and in our own homes.

Community safety is a top priority for me, with delegated responsibility for youth justice, and for my Department. Everyone has the right to feel safe and free in their communities. Community CCTV plays a huge role in achieving this. CCTV in public places gives people a greater sense of security. It is also effective in deterring criminal activity and antisocial behaviour and in assisting with the investigation of crime.

The consideration and operation of community CCTV is a matter for the local authority concerned. As Minister of State, I have no role in the day-to-day operation of local authorities. Updates on individual schemes should be sought from the relevant local authority. CCTV infrastructure across the city and county continues to support community safety, assist Garda investigations and deter criminal activity and antisocial behaviour.

I am aware of concerns regarding future funding arrangements for the Moyross CCTV scheme. It is not straightforward in terms of who is responsible for the funding. The majority of funding for this scheme was previously provided through the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, together with significant support from the mayoral fund.

In August 2025, a business case was submitted to the Department of justice seeking funding for the retention of the Moyross CCTV scheme after the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage indicated its intention to reduce its financial contribution over time. In September 2025, the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, wrote to the Commissioner stating that the Department could not provide funding as the business case and application did not fall within the scope of the community CCTV scheme. The Minister met with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, James Browne, and the Mayor of Limerick, John Moran, in November 2025 to discuss future funding arrangements. Following those discussions, a decision was taken that funding for 2026 would be provided through the mayoral fund.

My Department's position remains that the Moyross scheme should either continue to be funded, directly or indirectly, by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, or be funded by the Mayor's office or Limerick City and County Council. I recognise the value placed on the scheme locally. Information provided by Limerick City and County Council

points to extensive use of CCTV footage in Garda investigations and highlights the importance of the system in supporting public safety and criminal prosecutions, particularly where witness intimidation has historically been a concern.

I note the Deputy's asks on the working group, how many times it has met and the outcomes. I will have to come back to him on that. I will make a note of that today. I will also pass on his request for a meeting between Limerick Oireachtas Members and the Minister.

In relation to a commitment that the CCTV will not be turned off, as a junior Minister in the Department, I cannot give a full commitment today but I will come back to the Deputy. As the funding is at the moment divvied out by the Department of housing and the mayoral fund, maybe he is asking the wrong Department but I will come back to him with an answer on that.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: My frustration is that the Department of housing and the Department of justice seem to be operating in silos in relation to this. They do not seem to talk to one another. We are talking about €600,000 per year to plug the gap and ensure the continuation of this service. The irony is not lost on me of Government putting €58 million directly into infrastructure for the Ryder Cup, while we are talking about the live monitoring of the CCTV network that keeps the people of Limerick safe - not just Limerick city, it goes into Limerick county as well.

The Minister for justice often talks about his belief in high-visibility policing, yet he is effectively going to allow An Garda Síochána in Limerick to be blindfolded if the live monitoring ceases. This is incredibly serious. We have a feud bubbling up, particularly in the Ballinacurra Weston area. It needs the cameras. Cameras are very effective when gardaí get reports from communities. The Minister of State represents a similar type of constituency. People are not inclined to come forward with specific reports when incidents occur but when gardaí check the cameras, they clearly see what has happened. I do not want the people of Limerick to become collateral damage in a game of ping-pong between the Department of housing and the Department of justice. The Department of housing constantly states its position is that ESIF funding is gone, regeneration has concluded and, because of that, it no longer has a vehicle through which to fund it. Could we not at least sit down with all the relevant stakeholders to see if we can find a solution to this and allow the live monitoring to continue, so the safety of the people of Limerick is not put at risk?

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: I represent a similar constituency with significant intergenerational disadvantage and intergenerational trauma. We do not have widespread CCTV in Dublin South-Central but I can absolutely see the benefit of it. The Deputy makes a compelling case for ensuring this deadlock in relation to funding is overcome. I will be certain to pass on his requests to the Department.

The Government is progressing nationally a new framework for the authorisation and operation of CCTV schemes through Part 5 of the Garda Síochána (Recording Devices) Act 2023. This will provide a modern and consistent legislative basis for CCTV schemes with clear responsibilities for An Garda Síochána and local authorities. The Deputy will not have to come into the House and try to mediate who will be paying for this CCTV scheme. I am pleased the legislative and operational work required to support commencement is expected to be completed within the next few weeks. The new framework will support the continued

development of CCTV as an important community safety tool and provide greater clarity on the operation of CCTV schemes.

I recognise the important contribution CCTV infrastructure makes across Limerick, including the Moyross scheme, and the value local communities place on such schemes. I welcome the engagement that has taken place between all relevant stakeholders regarding future arrangements. I look forward to continued co-operation between my Department, An Garda Síochána, Limerick City and County Council and other stakeholders to ensure CCTV infrastructure across Limerick continues to support safer and stronger communities into the future.

Schools Building Projects

Deputy Tom Brabazon: Is scoil dara leibhéal, lán-Ghaeilge í Gaelcholáiste Reachrann. Tá sí lonnaithe i measc seomraí ranga atá ar iasacht ón scoil béal dorais. Tá prefabs in úsáid aici chomh maith. Beagnach 25 bliain ó shin, gealladh go mbeadh foirgneamh á sholáthar ag an Roinn chuig pobal na scoile, ach níl sé sin tar éis tarlú go fóill in ainneoin an ama sin ar fad. Tar éis na moille seo ar fad, tá dul chun cinn beag déanta againn. D'imigh an foirgneamh amach le haghaidh tairiscintí an bhliain seo. Tugadh gealltanas dúinn ar fad go mbeadh an tógáil ag tosú sa ráithe deireanach den bhliain, ach níor tharla sé sin go fóill agus an chéad trian den ráithe sin beagnach imithe. Tá daltaí, foireann agus pobal na scoile ar fad ag fanacht rófhada don scoil nua seo. Caithfear brú áirithe a chur ar an Roinn chun an scoil seo a sholáthar gan a thuilleadh moille.

Minister for Education and Youth (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): I thank the Deputy for raising this matter as it gives me the opportunity to outline to the Dáil the current position in relation to the new school building of Gaelcholáiste Reachrann in Dublin 13. This school building project will cater for a long-term projected enrolment of 600 students with additional classrooms for children with special educational needs.

It is a project which has been a long time in development. The preliminary design stage 1 focused on assessing the most appropriate options for locating the new school building on the school site at Grange Community College. This work included site surveys and an assessment of impact on the existing Grange Community College school. The process confirmed the viability of the project on the Grange Community College site and enabled my Department to approve the project to stage 2A of the design process in February 2013. The design team submitted its stage 2A report in August 2015 and my Department authorised the design team to progress to stage 2B in February 2017. As the Deputy is aware, the original grant of planning was due to expire in December 2022. Due to changes to the planning Acts in September 2021, a new application was required and the final grant of planning permission was received in December 2023. I am pleased to inform the Dáil that the invitation to tender issued late in the fourth quarter of 2025. Tenders have recently been returned, and the design team is currently carrying out a detailed review in order to submit the tender report to my Department. It is envisaged that construction will commence in the fourth quarter of 2026.

Since 2020, the Department of education has provided over €2 billion in capital funding for Dublin schools. Over this period, a total of 300 schools have been upgraded through provision

of either a new school building, extension, modular accommodation or climate pathfinder projects. Some 20 school projects to go to tender or construction in 2026 and 2027 were included in the NDP implementation plan, including Gaelcholáiste Reachrann. There are currently 47 large scale extension, modular or climate pathfinder projects in Dublin under construction. There are also 53 projects under way through the climate action summer works scheme. In addition, since 2020 a total of 541 special classes have been sanctioned in Dublin, of which 140 were sanctioned for September 2026.

Deputy Tom Brabazon: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Dhá bhliain ó shin, bhrath daltaí, tuismitheoirí, bord bainistíochta agus foireann na scoile nach raibh aon dul as acu ach dul amach ar an mbóthar ag agóidíocht de bharr na moille agus easpa soiléireachta ó thaobh spriocdhátaí don próiseas tógála de. Is mór an náire atá ar an Roinn gur thóg sé 25 bliain le teacht chuig an bpointe seo. D'imigh daltaí, a thosaigh a gcuid oideachais dara leibhéal leis an ngealltanas go mbeadh scoil nua ar fáil dóibh, tríd an córas i sean prefabs a bhí briste agus fuar. Tá na daltaí sin críochnaithe lena gcuid oideachais anois. Níl sé seo maith go leor. Cathain a bheidh na tarracóirí agus na tógálaithe ar an suíomh ag obair ar an tionscnamh áirithe seo?

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: It is envisaged that construction will commence in the fourth quarter of 2026. When I came into this Department earlier this year, Gaelcholáiste Reachrann was announced as part of the 105 school building projects on the NDP list, so this is a priority for my Department and, as I have said, it is due to go to commence construction in the fourth quarter of this year.

Schools Building Projects

Deputy Seán Kyne: I thank the Ceann Comhairle's office for choosing this Topical Issue. It is a matter close to my heart. It is my local school and my former primary school that I attended until 1987, and I thank the Minister for attending here this morning in person.

I acknowledge that Scoil Mhuire was one of 105 schools on the list of priority school buildings for the years 2026-27 as part of the €1.6 billion investment for this initial tranche published in January of this year. I thank the Minister for her involvement in this and for including Scoil Mhuire, Maigh Cuilinn ar an liosta.

At present, there are 383 pupils enrolled in Scoil Mhuire. There are 24 teachers, seven special needs assistants and an administrative principal, Terry Kavanagh. I acknowledge Mr. Kavanagh's work and that of the board of management and I thank previous boards of management for their dedication on this project over the years.

The brief of this project is the demolition of the existing and original single-storey building and the development of a new 16-classroom primary school with two classrooms for pupils with special educational needs at the current though enlarged site in Moycullen.

Tréaslaím an obair atá déanta ag an Aire, an Teachta Naughton, an príomhoide, Terry Kavanagh, agus an bord bainistíochta. Tá Scoil Mhuire ar cheann de na 105 scoil ar an liosta a d'fhoilsigh an tAire i mí Eanáir. Teastaíonn scoil nua go géar. Tá 383 dalta ag freastal ar an scoil faoi láthair. I measc na foirne, tá 24 múinteoir, seacht cúntóir riachtanas speisialta agus an príomhoide riaracháin. Tá an bord bainistíochta ag lorg scoil nua ina mbeidh 16 rang agus

dhá sheomra oideachais speisialta. Tá cead pleanála ag an mbord bainistíochta agus an deoise. Tá an scoil ar an liosta tosaíochta. Cad is cúis leis an moill?

The diocese and the board of management have planning permission for this school. They have had it for a period of time. It has appeared on a number of lists, including, thanks to the Minister, the list of 105 schools that was published in January of this year in this initial tranche.

I have raised this on numerous occasions in this House and the other House and I have every confidence that this will be the last time that I will have to raise this school project. As I said, it is a project that is very close to my heart. It is on the priority list of 105 schools. The present facilities are not good enough. There is a great standard of education and it is a great school, but there are a lot of prefabs. It is a single-storey building. It needs to be demolished and upgraded. Where are we at and what is the delay?

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter as it gives me the opportunity to outline to the Dáil the current position in relation to the new school building for Scoil Mhuire, Moycullen, County Galway. At the outset, I would like to state that the delivery of this new school building is a significant priority for me and my Department and I know this is school in the Moycullen area is close to the Deputy's heart.

The brief for this major project is to provide a new 16-classroom primary school with additional classrooms for children with special educational needs at the existing site in Moycullen. The board of management has acquired additional land to accommodate the new build. This project is included in my Department's NDP implementation plan and is part of a first tranche of 105 prioritised schools to go to tender or construction in 2026 and 2027. I expect Scoil Mhuire to go to tender in the coming weeks.

As we both know, and the Deputy knows very well, Moycullen is part of the Galway city commuter belt and continues to experience strong population growth due to its proximity to the city and the attractiveness of that area as a residential location for many commuting families. The project supports the Department's objective to ensure sufficient school places in areas of population growth. The additional capacity will allow the school to accommodate projected demographic growth while providing a high-quality environment for teaching and learning.

The project for Scoil Mhuire is being delivered as part of the Department's ADAPT programme. The ADAPT programme uses a professional external project manager to achieve the best possible timeframe for the project through the stages of architectural planning to tender and construction. The project is at the completion of stage 2B of the architectural design process. Stage 2B involves detailed design, securing all statutory approvals and the preparation of tender documentation. Planning permission was secured in May 2023. As I said previously, this project is expected to progress to tender in the coming weeks.

I have visited the school, so I know the fantastic work that is happening there in teaching and learning, as well as the need for a new school. I know the work that Deputy Kyne has put into this, given that it is his local school. We look forward to seeing progress on this over the coming weeks.

Since 2020, the Department of education has provided over €283 million in capital funding for Galway schools. Over this period, a total of 98 schools have been upgraded through the

provision of either a new school building, extension, modular accommodation or climate pathfinder projects. Ten school projects to go to tender or construction in 2026 and 2027 were included in the national development plan implementation plan, including Scoil Mhuire, Moycullen. Since 2020, a total of 111 special classes have been sanctioned in Galway, of which 33 were sanctioned this September.

Deputy Seán Kyne: I thank the Minister for the response and for the excellent news that this project will go to tender in the coming weeks. I take it, therefore, that the Minister has engaged with the Minister, Deputy Jack Chambers, and that this project has been or is ready to be sanctioned by the Department of public expenditure. I acknowledge the progress with other schools as well. We were out yesterday at Coláiste Cholmcille in Indreabhán ag casadh an fhóid - turning the sod - on that extension. Work is also going ahead at Clifden Community School, which is also on the list. Therefore, three schools that were on that list have seen substantial progress. It is great news that this project will go to tender in the coming weeks. If the Minister could be more specific on the date, it would be great. I know the principal and board management will be anxiously awaiting a letter from the Minister's staff and the Department in relation to the official sanction to go to tender. That will take some time, of course, but I am very happy to hear this news.

The school has been delivered under the ADAPT scheme, which is a devolved scheme. It is important to acknowledge the work of the principal and board of management. This is good news for Scoil Mhuire, Moycullen. Is é an dea-scéal ná go bhfuil an tAire ag rá go mbeidh an scoil ag dul go dtí an chéad chéim eile i gceann cúpla seachtain agus go mbeidh sí in ann dul amach ag lorg tairiscintí. Cuirim fáilte roimh an dea-scéal sin. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire.

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: I also acknowledge the hard work that the board of management and all the school team have put into this project. As I said, it is expected to proceed to tender shortly. In relation to engagement with the Department of public expenditure and reform, all school building projects that are over €10 million must be submitted to the Department of public expenditure and reform for its approval before proceeding to tender. This is one of a number of projects currently under review by the Department of public expenditure and reform. Our engagement has been positive and, as I said, I would expect this to go to tender in the next few weeks. We will keep Deputy Kyne updated on the matter. I thank him for raising it.

Message from Select Committee

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): The Select Committee on Arts, Media, Communications, Culture and Sport has completed its consideration of the Broadcasting (Amendment) Bill 2026 and has made amendments thereto.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 9.54 a.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 10 a.m.

Sitting suspended at 9.54 a.m. and resumed at 10 a.m.

10 o'clock

Fuel, Energy and Carbon Tax Relief: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

recognises that:

- households, farmers, agricultural contractors, hauliers, tradespeople and businesses are facing renewed and significant increases in the cost of fuel and energy, adding further pressure to an already severe cost-of-living crisis;
- petrol and diesel are essential rather than discretionary expenses for hundreds of thousands of people, particularly in rural Ireland where access to adequate public transport and viable alternatives to private vehicles remains limited or non-existent;
- farmers and agricultural contractors have no practical alternative to diesel for the operation of tractors, harvesters and other essential agricultural machinery, and that rapidly increasing marked gas oil, or green diesel, prices represent a direct threat to the viability of primary production and agricultural contracting;
- increasing fuel costs have consequences extending far beyond the individual fuel user, increasing the cost of producing and transporting food, construction materials and other goods and ultimately increasing prices for consumers;
- households dependent on kerosene and other home-heating fuels, particularly throughout rural Ireland, face significant additional costs as the winter period approaches and frequently have no immediately available or affordable alternative heating source;
- businesses which manufacture, produce or supply goods and transport those goods using their own vehicles make an important contribution to employment and economic activity but can be excluded from existing fuel rebate arrangements because of requirements relating to haulage licensing;
- the Government has made approximately €85 million available for fuel support for farmers and agricultural contractors, but only approximately €26 million of this allocation has been claimed to date, leaving substantial funding available which should continue to be used for the purpose for which it was allocated;
- approximately €15 million in European Union (EU) assistance towards increased agricultural input and fertiliser costs is insufficient to meet the scale of the additional costs currently being experienced by Irish farmers;
- carbon taxation has a disproportionate impact on people who have no realistic ability to reduce their reliance on fossil fuels, including rural commuters, farmers, contractors, hauliers and households dependent on oil heating;
- further increases in carbon tax are already provided for under existing legislation and will further increase the cost of transport and home heating unless those increases are abolished;

— Dáil Éireann was recently recalled to prevent increases in fuel taxation from taking effect, demonstrating that Government can intervene where taxation would otherwise add further to exceptional fuel costs; and

— comments suggesting that diesel prices in excess of €2 per litre could become a "new normal" are deeply concerning and that the role of Government must instead be to use the measures available to it to protect households and businesses from exceptional energy costs;

further recognises that:

— international conflict, geopolitical instability and volatility in global energy markets are outside the direct control of the State, but decisions relating to domestic taxation, expenditure and targeted supports remain within the control of the Government;

— taxation intended to encourage behavioural change cannot achieve that objective where reasonable and affordable alternatives are not available;

— rural communities should not be disproportionately penalised because successive Governments have failed to provide adequate public transport, alternative heating systems and other infrastructure necessary to reduce dependence on fossil fuels;

— maintaining the viability of farmers, agricultural contractors, hauliers and other businesses is essential to Ireland's food security, employment, rural economy and national supply chains; and

— exceptional additional Exchequer revenues arising during periods of elevated prices should, where appropriate, be used to protect households and productive sectors of the economy from exceptional cost increases; and

calls on the Government to:

— abolish all further scheduled increases in the carbon tax, rather than merely postponing those increases, and ensure that households, motorists, farmers and businesses are not subjected to further automatic increases in carbon taxation;

— maintain appropriate reductions and reliefs in excise duties applying to petrol and diesel for as long as exceptional fuel-price pressures persist, and use the taxation measures available to the State to ensure that increases in international oil prices are not unnecessarily compounded by domestic taxation;

— explicitly reject the proposition that diesel prices in excess of €2 per litre should be accepted as a "new normal", and commit to using all reasonable taxation, expenditure and policy measures available to Government to reduce the impact of exceptional fuel prices on families and businesses;

— ring-fence the full €85 million allocated for agricultural fuel support, ensure that any portion not initially claimed is not surrendered to the Exchequer or redirected away from fuel assistance, and use the remaining allocation to extend fuel support for farmers and agricultural contractors for a further five months;

- recognise the exceptional impact of marked gas oil prices approaching €1.50 per litre on farmers and agricultural contractors and ensure that future agricultural fuel supports properly reflect the actual additional costs being incurred by those sectors;
- provide additional Exchequer funding in Budget 2027 for farmers facing exceptional fertiliser and agricultural input costs, over and above the approximately €15 million being provided through EU support, and ensure that this constitutes additional funding rather than the reallocation of existing agricultural programmes;
- introduce targeted measures, in advance of the winter period, to protect households from exceptional increases in the cost of kerosene and other home-heating fuels, with particular regard to older people, low-income households and households in rural areas with limited alternative heating options;
- urgently review the eligibility criteria applying to fuel rebate and support schemes for the haulage and commercial transport sectors, with a view to ensuring that legitimate businesses which transport their own goods as an integral part of their business are not unfairly excluded from support solely because they do not hold a particular category of haulage licence;
- require a rural impact assessment to be carried out before any future increase in taxation on transport fuels or household energy, including an assessment of the availability, affordability and practicality of alternative transport and heating options;
- publish, on an annual basis, a clear account of the total revenue raised through carbon taxation, the amounts allocated to individual programmes, the amounts actually expended, and any unspent, surrendered or carried-forward balances;
- ensure that future energy and taxation policy gives appropriate and balanced consideration to affordability, energy security, food security, economic competitiveness and the particular circumstances of rural Ireland, alongside the State's environmental and emissions-reduction objectives; and
- commit that the State's response to exceptional international energy-price increases will be based on actively protecting households, farmers, contractors and businesses from costs beyond their control, rather than accepting permanently higher fuel prices as inevitable or as a "new normal".

I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. Everyone knows there is a war and there are crises in different countries. When you have a crisis, you have to try to protect your people as best as possible. When the Covid-19 pandemic came around, in fairness, the Government brought out different measures to try to handle it as well as possible. It cannot solve everything and we will never claim that it can but what we have to do, as the Government has said many a day, is to see that the people who get up early in the morning and the people who cannot get up early in the morning, for one reason or another and who may have a disability, are looked after. We have to protect all parts of society.

Our motion states, as we have always said, that the carbon tax is very unfair. Future increases must be got rid of, to put it simply. It is not us. We are not economists. The Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, stated clearly that the carbon tax is the most regressive

tax on Irish people. In fairness, measures were brought out. There were tax reliefs for white diesel, petrol and all of that. Those reliefs must continue.

Money was announced for the agricultural sector and contractors in the amounts of €85 million and €15 million. That was welcome but the problem is that there is no good looking at money when you need it. You need it spent. You need to cushion the blow.

I will give an example. I tested a tractor agitator yesterday. In one hour, it burned €64 worth of diesel. That is a fact. Agitating is heavy work but that was what it was burning. Only a fraction of the money that has been allocated, the €85 million, has been spent. That money was ring-fenced for the contractors and farmers around the country who produce the food. There is an example today from across the Border. We would all love to see a united Ireland. One of the biggest potato producers in this country has gone into administration. That is a sign of pressure. Any money is welcome and we are not against getting money but that money needs to be ring-fenced and another round of the fuel support needs to be given because if it is not, there will be consequences for agriculture and in farming circles.

The Government was a part of it when EU decided it would put an extra carbon border adjustment mechanism, CBAM, on fertiliser. That has driven fertiliser prices mad, to be quite frank. I know the EU has offered a paltry sum of €15.3 million. New money needs to be found for that. It should not come from the €85 million. That money was given by the Department of public expenditure for the fuel in the agriculture and contracting sectors. That needs to be resolved.

There is also another cohort of people. I will give an example of a discrepancy. Three days ago, I did a synopsis of the situation. If I were to buy 1,000 litres of kerosene in Dundalk, it would cost €1,610. If I were to walk down the road and across the invisible line of the Border, I could have bought it for €1,236. That is because of the differences in VAT and carbon tax. We must ensure, as we move towards the winter, that we look after the people in their hour of need, no more than when Covid was here. Any time you have a crisis, you try to help the people. Those are the people who come good again and pay the taxes of this country. Many people are under pressure, to put it simply.

If the Government wants to persist with carbon tax, we gave an alternative. People have the option to go on holidays and if they want to pay an extra bit in carbon tax, they can. However, you do not have an option to drive, especially in rural areas. People have to drive 20 km or 30 km where the Minister of State comes from, where the Leas-Cheann Comhairle comes from and where we all come from. They do not have an option but to drive to work most days of the week. That costs money. The Minister of State will say that some of the carbon tax goes to retrofitting, and it does. I do not deny that. If it were applied to aeroplanes, we would bring in more money and could put it towards whatever we want. At least a person has an option to board an aeroplane. They do not have an option when they are going to work.

The Minister of State is in the Department and I wish him well in his new portfolio. We hear about the amount that is going to agriculture, and that is right. There is an amount going to agriculture. The Leas-Cheann Comhairle and I would have quizzed the Department about that at the agricultural committee. How come in 2009, when there was no carbon tax, under a rural environment protection scheme, REPS, we were able to give farmers €700 more each? What has happened? Has the agricultural budget been cut and are we pulling money from

somewhere else? We have to face up to this argument, which I am hearing being thrown out, that agriculture is getting it. Agriculture got €700 more from the Exchequer in 2009. That is 17 years ago. Saying that it is going back to farming is a red herring. Money has gone from farming.

In the past week, we met IBEC about competitiveness, as I am sure that other TDs did in their different areas. Look at yesterday. We always heard of Zetor Tractor, "Buy a Zetor and you will never forget her." Yesterday, Zetor announced that it is pulling out of Europe and going to India and China. Talk to pharmaceutical companies that have to go and tender among themselves. This is not competition. Ask them if we are losing competitiveness.

Have a look at the number of ordinary people under pressure in regard to electricity. People try to keep going as best they can. Working people are quiet people. They go to work every day. We must protect them but we must also protect vulnerable people who are under pressure. You hear the stories on the radio. There are people who are afraid to turn on their heating and lights. That is not an Ireland that the Minister of State or I would sign up to. Thankfully, the country, in the line of revenues, is going pretty well. However, it is a sad thing if a country is going pretty well and two thirds of its people are under pressure. Those are the statistics that come from the polls.

I see that the Government's counter-motion does not mention where the rest of the €85 million is going. A lot of what is in our motion was side-stepped. The budget is coming in two weeks' time. We need to ensure that we do not make a hames of it, as we did the first time we tried the fuel support. We saw what happened after that.

You have to look and listen. We are messengers of the people. We are Teachtaí Dála and we listen to the voice of the people. I ask the Minister to take this motion on board and make sure that it is delivered. This is not politics; it is about people right around our country who are hurting.

Deputy Michael Collins: Today, people are being crucified by the cost of fuel. Farmers, agricultural contractors, hauliers, small businesses and ordinary working families are being hammered every time they pull into a filling station or fill the tank with home heating oil. What are they being told? They are being told that diesel costing about €2 per litre could become the new normal. I want to make one thing absolutely clear on behalf of Independent Ireland. We will not accept €2 diesel as normal. There is nothing normal about families having to watch the fuel gauge because they are afraid of the cost of living and filling the car. There is nothing normal about a farmer wondering how much it will cost to keep the machinery running or about an older person being afraid to turn on the heat as winter approaches.

The Government will say that international events are responsible for rising energy prices. Of course international events affect the price of oil, but the Government decides the tax, excise, whether to impose another carbon tax increase and whether to put its hand into the pockets of people who have no alternative. Do not come into the House and pretend that the Government is powerless. It is not powerless; it is making choices. For far too long, rural Ireland has been paying for those choices. A worker in rural Ireland cannot walk out the front door tomorrow morning and get on a bus that does not exist. A farmer cannot run a tractor on fresh air. An agricultural contractor cannot harvest a field without diesel. A haulier cannot deliver goods around the country without fuel. Have the fishermen of the country been factored

in when it comes to these increases and the crisis we have at the moment? They have told me that they are in a dire situation. Some boats have stopped fishing due to the price of diesel. A 700 horsepower trawler towing for whitefish and prawns burns 3,000 litres during the course of a few days. That could cost up to €30,000. This is no longer sustainable in an industry that this and previous Governments have devastated in any event. An elderly person with an oil-fired heating system cannot magically produce thousands of euro to replace it because Government policy says they should do so.

The Government cannot tax people into alternatives that it has failed to provide. That is the fundamental point behind this motion. We are demanding that all further scheduled increases in carbon tax be abolished, not postponed or delayed until political pressure dies down. If the Government wants people to change behaviour, it should give them a realistic and affordable alternative. It should not punish them for living in rural Ireland or for having to drive to work. It should not punish families for heating their homes with the only means available to them. Our farmers and agricultural contractors need action now. Some €85 million was allocated for agricultural fuel support. According to the figures in our motion, only around €26 million has been claimed. Leave the balance where it belongs. That money was allocated to agriculture and it must stay there. We are calling for the full €85 million to be ring-fenced and for the remaining money to be used to extend fuel support to farmers and agricultural contractors for another five months.

Let nobody underestimate the situation facing agricultural contractors. When the price of green diesel is heading above €1.70 per litre, the sums simply stop adding up. These contractors are not operating machinery for recreation. They are cutting silage, harvesting crops, spreading slurry and carrying out the work that keeps Irish agriculture moving. If contractors cannot survive, farmers pay more. If farmers pay more, producing food costs more. If producing and transporting food costs more, the families and hard-working people of this country doing the weekly shop ultimately pay the price. This is not simply an agricultural issue; it is a food security and cost-of-living issue. It is an issue for every household in the country.

The most recent figures from the Central Statistics Office, CSO, show that overall consumer prices have risen by 3.7% in the past year, but that headline figure does not tell the full story. Housing, electricity, gas and other fuel costs are up 8.5%. Transport costs are up 5.4% and education costs have risen by 8.9%. The CSO specifically points to rising home heating oil and electricity, rents and mortgage repayments, while higher petrol and diesel prices are adding to transport costs. Winter is approaching. Thousands of households, particularly across rural Ireland, depend on kerosene. Where are they supposed to go? What exactly is the Government's answer to the pensioner in west Cork or some other part of rural Ireland watching the price of heating oil rise? Is it that they should put on another jumper? That is not good enough. We need targeted winter assistance for older people, low-income families and households that are facing exceptional heating costs.

We also need fairness for hauliers and businesses that transport their own goods. If a legitimate Irish business is manufacturing products, employing people, paying taxes and transporting goods using its own vehicles, it should not be pushed outside a support scheme because it does not tick the right bureaucratic box. These businesses create jobs. They deserve support, not red tape. There is another thing we are demanding before any future Government

increases taxes on fuel or household energy: there should be a rural impact assessment taken out.

Deputy Peadar Kirby: Cuirim fáilte roimh an gnó Comhaltaí Príobháideacha seo ó Independent Ireland inniu. A bill was presented to me this week by an 89-year-old woman who is a constituent in my county. She paid €860 for less than half a tank of home heating oil for her house. That is the equivalent of about three weeks' income for her. The amount of oil she bought is unlikely to do her until the other side of Christmas. That is an incredible price for any elderly individual living on their own to have to pay just for a staple good. That heating would swallow up three weeks' income in that period is absolutely incredible. The Government is taking €200 of that €860 in tax, which means that it the cause of a significant portion of the difficulties she is having in regard to paying for her oil.

Right now, it takes more than €100 for a worker to fill a tank with petrol or diesel. That individual is a worker who gets up early in the morning and who our Government is very fond of talking about on a regular basis. Of the €100 that goes into his or her tank, €45 goes in Government taxes. The Government talks about the fact that there are wars in Iran and Ukraine and that both have helped to push up oil prices. That is correct, but the Government is one of the biggest drivers in respect of the increase in the price of fuel in this country. The Government is tax-gouging the people of this country in regard to fuel. Fuel is not a luxury good; it is a staple. People cannot do without fuel. They do not have an alternative to putting on the heat in their homes or to getting into the car to get to work. It is actively the Government's policy objective to increase the price of fuel.

Aontú was the only political party a number of years ago that opposed the introduction of carbon taxes. The reason we did so was very simple. The idea of introducing a tax that, year on year, would increase the price of a product irrespective of the economic circumstances that people would be in or the international price of that product is absolutely wrong. It is scandalous, and the Government did that. We have had an acceptance and admittance - nearly an apology - from the Tánaiste in recent weeks that the idea of bringing in a carbon tax is a stupid and dangerous idea as regards families.

Let me illustrate how quids in the Government is in this case. As a result of the war in Iran and the fact that prices have increased so significantly in recent times, it will take in €280 million more this year in VAT than it did last year. The Government will take in €1.6 billion in VAT on energy this year. In April and May, it took in €440 million in accumulated VAT because of the increased price of fuel. Last year, the Government took in €4.5 billion in fuel taxes, the most in the history of the State and in the jaws of a cost-of-living crisis. Just when people were suffering significantly in regard to the cost of fuel, the Government reached into their pockets and took more money out of them.

It is very important to realise why we have reached this juncture. Why has there been a change of heart among those in government in recent times in respect of this issue? It is simply down to people power. The reason the Government has taken a different tack in recent months is because hundreds of thousands of ordinary Irish citizens could take no more and took to the streets last April. Ordinary individuals, the people who keep this country going and who do the work to pay the taxes could not take any more.

This Sunday a really important meeting will take place at the Well in Moate, County Westmeath. It has been organised by those protestors. It is to look at what the next steps will be in order to try to ensure that the Government listens to the people about the price of fuel. I encourage people to go along to that. Aontú will be there standing with them, as we did last April. Does this Government not realise that its policy is bad for families, bad for businesses and bad for the economy? The Government has to change tack on taxation on energy. If it does not do so, many more businesses will go to the wall and many families will not be able to put on the heat or feed themselves this year. We will have serious difficulties as a result. I implore the Government to listen to common sense for a change on the issue of energy.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): I welcome Mr. Robert Watson to Leinster House and to the Gallery, from where he has been observing proceedings this morning. Fáilte romhat, Robert.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Niall Collins): I move amendment No. 1:

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

"notes that the Government:

- remains deeply concerned about the ongoing conflict in the Middle East and Gulf;
- recognises and understands the pressures that have arisen due to rising fuel costs as a result of the conflict in the Middle East for all families and businesses, in particular for sectors most reliant on fossil fuels;
- highlights that successive Budgets have provided targeted support to help households with cost-of-living pressures and re-affirms that energy affordability is a priority for this Government; and
- remains committed to decarbonising our society, increasing investment in renewable energy sources and recycling carbon tax revenues to protect those most vulnerable to fuel poverty through targeted welfare interventions;

recognises that:

- this Government has delivered one of the largest support packages in the European Union (EU) per head capita which has included:
- excise duty reductions on diesel, petrol and 'green diesel';
- an enhanced Diesel Rebate Scheme for the entirety of 2026;
- the deferral of the 1st May Carbon Tax increase;
- the extension of the fuel allowance for one month;
- funds made available for payments to road transport operators under the Road Transporters Support Scheme;
- funds made available for payments to farmers, farm contractors and fishers under the Fuel Income Support Scheme; and

- a reduction in the National Oil Reserves Agency (NORA) Levy;
- it is not possible to offset all of the increases in energy prices, which are driven by market factors, using the tax system;

further recognises that, in the long run the best way to protect Ireland from the impact of international fossil fuel prices is to reduce our dependence on fossil fuel imports, which we will achieve through the progressive decarbonisation of the Irish economy and society and through the steps that will be taken to meet the Government's commitment to reach net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050;

further notes that:

- current support measures instigated by this Government are estimated to cost over €1.3 billion from March 2026 to the end of February 2027 and have provided significant relief for households and businesses across the country;
- the Government has responded and will continue to respond in a way that protects those most vulnerable to fuel poverty; and

highlights that, the Government remains cognisant of the pressures faced by households and businesses as a result of increased fuel prices owing to the conflict in the Middle East and will seek to address this as part of Budget 2027."

As Deputies will be aware, we are living in an extraordinary uncertain period internationally. The consequences of this are being felt in every home and business right across the country. As a small, highly open economy and a net energy importer, Ireland is naturally exposed to movements in international energy prices. However, throughout the crisis we have monitored developments closely. We continue to examine the international situation and have always taken decisions which result in practical supports for households and businesses across the country.

The motion before the House does not fully take into consideration the array of supports which have been implemented by Government as a result of the conflict in the Middle East. This Government has delivered one of the largest support packages in the EU *per capita*, totalling over €1.3 billion and targeted at households, farmers, agricultural contractors, hauliers, tradespeople and businesses. Since the beginning of the crisis, this Government has acted to reduce excise duty on diesel, petrol and marked gas oil and to ease pressure at the pumps. We moved to defer the 1 May carbon tax increase on home heating fuels and we are now examining different options available in relation to the cost of home heating oil ahead of the budget. We enhanced the diesel rebate scheme for hauliers and passenger transport operators. We introduced bespoke schemes to support road transport operators, farmers, farm contractors and fishers. We also reduced the NORA levy. It is for these reasons that the Government will not accept the Independent Technical Group's motion.

I am happy to have the opportunity to discuss some of the key points made by the Deputies on fuel, energy and carbon tax relief. I am aware that people who live in rural communities like mine do not have the same public transport options as those living in urban communities, but to suggest that there is little or no public transport available across rural communities is simply not true. Government commitments under the national development plan and in the Connecting Ireland rural mobility plan will strengthen rural economies and communities. It

means investments in new and existing public transport infrastructure and increasing connectivity, particularly for those who live outside of major towns and cities. The Deputies argue viable alternatives to private vehicles remain limited or non-existent. However, reliance on petrol- and diesel-powered vehicles is decreasing. One in four new vehicles purchased in Ireland in 2026 was an electric vehicle, EV. Industry data for 2026 shows uptake of EVs in rural counties is proportionally higher than in urban counties. The recent interest in the Government's EV scrappage scheme is encouraging and highlights increasing consumer engagement with the transition to electric vehicles.

I assure the House that the Government understands the exceptional pressure rising fuel costs have placed on our farmers and farm contractors. We have worked intensively with representative stakeholder groups with a view to providing adequate and targeted supports. The announcement of the further extension of the fuel excise rate reduction until the end of October will have provided some reassurance and certainty to farm families and to businesses. It should be noted that existing legislation provides relief for expenditure relating to carbon tax on farm diesel incurred by any person carrying on the trade of farming. In effect, this keeps carbon tax on marked diesel fixed at a rate of just 4 cent per litre for the farming sector. That is the rate that applied in 2012.

As Deputies will be aware, the Minister for agriculture acted to implement a comprehensive €100 million fuel income support scheme to assist farmers, agricultural contractors and fishers facing unprecedented increases in fuel costs. The scheme provides €20 million per month in supports. Farmers and agricultural contractors benefit from a support rate equivalent to approximately 20 cent per litre of marked gas oil used based on the verified fuel consumption in 2025. This targeted and practical support package ensured those most exposed to these increases received meaningful assistance at a most crucial time of the year. On fertilisers, the European Commission announced at the end of July an exceptional aid package to compensate farmers impacted by increased fertiliser and energy costs due to the Middle East crisis. The EU package is worth €540 million in total with Ireland's allocation being €15.4 million. It is crucial to note that the EU regulation which provides for this funding also makes provision for member states to provide for up to 200% in additional national funding. In Ireland's case, this would be up to €30.8 million which would allow for up to €46.2 million to be disbursed to Irish farmers under this scheme. The regulation provides for support to be targeted at farmers most impacted by increased costs and disbursed to farmers no later than 28 February 2027. The Minister, Deputy Heydon, and I are actively working on behalf of Government are to finalise a scheme which will deliver this funding to the farmers most impacted by higher fertiliser costs and as quickly as possible. The consideration of additional national funding to top up the EU exceptional aid funding is being actively considered as part of the 2027 budget discussions.

It is important to note that the motion also fails to reflect the reality that the spikes in the price of home heating oil are not as a result of taxes or Government policy but, rather, the wholesale price of oil. The motion also fails to recognise the drivers of energy inflation are global in nature and that it is not possible for the State to control volatile energy prices. Our need for society and the economy to decouple from fossil fuel dependence has been even more apparent in recent times given the levels of volatility in the international fuel prices. The best way to achieve energy security and insulate our economy and society from fuel price shocks is to reduce our dependence on fossil fuels. The carbon tax is an important long-term policy tool in helping to achieve energy security.

The fuel excise applied to kerosene home heating oil is purely carbon tax. The non-carbon component of the mineral oil tax is not applied. Setting the carbon tax rate at zero would have consequential impacts for the most vulnerable to energy poverty. Carbon tax revenues are recycled and used to protect those most vulnerable to energy poverty. Successive budgets have provided additional funds for the just transition measures. This ensures that carbon tax is a progressive tax. Funding from carbon tax provides additional funds for targeted social protection payments, residential energy efficiency measures, as well as funding to encourage green farming practices. As of budget 2026, the Government had allocated over €4.2 billion in carbon tax revenue to fund the just transition and decarbonisation measures since 2020.

In examining changes to the carbon tax system, it is incumbent on us all to take into account our obligations under the EU emissions trading system legislation and the conditions of the derogation which this Government has negotiated with the European Commission. The principal condition of this is that our national carbon tax remains above the average auction clearing price of the emissions trading system for buildings, road transport and additional sectors, ETS, 2, thereby avoiding double taxation.

Heating fuels such as kerosene and natural gas are within the scope of the ETS2. Losing this derogation would result in carbon revenues being controlled at EU level, thereby undermining our national programme of home energy upgrades and retrofitting, the investment in our electricity grid and development of indigenous renewable energy on the scale required. This will take investment and time. The Government is committed to continuing to make these important investments in Ireland's future.

This motion comes less than two weeks ahead of budget 2027, in a period when we are examining the different options available in relation to the cost of home heating oil, rural impacts and agricultural supports, as raised in the motion. Looking at these issues in the round to ensure an impactful response for households and businesses across the country is the responsible way to act. While no government can fully shield all households from all the impacts of the crisis, this Government has acted time and again to mitigate those impacts. We will be taking further significant action in budget 2027, which is less than two weeks away.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I thank the Minister of State for his response. I am not sure who wrote it, but it appears to have been a civil servant who does not understand rural Ireland and has not walked in the Minister of State's constituency or in Cork North-Central, which is mine. The Minister of State talked the big talk about energy security, yet this Government and its predecessor, in which he also served, stopped exploration for oil and fossil fuels. He talked about energy security as a benefit for people who were struggling. There are 500,000 households in energy arrears in this State. That does not sound like energy security to me; it sounds like the highest level of debt we have seen in respect of gas and electricity bills.

I bring a human story to the Minister of State's attention. I visited a gentleman the other day who was living in a cottage in Rathcooney. He had one bar lit on his fire and was wrapped in blankets. It reminded me of something one might see in a movie from the fifties or sixties. That man was frightened to death to turn on the heating. He has to choose whether to heat his home today or eat tomorrow. That is not an exaggeration on my part. Every TD worth his or her salt is out talking to people locally, listening to people at the till, talking to people struggling

at the petrol pump and hearing from taxi drivers about how they might have to take their cars off the road. These are people's lived realities in this State at the moment.

I have said it previously in the House and I say it again today that carbon tax punishes the people in this country on the lowest incomes and with the fewest choices. Government members talk about energy renewal and moving to solar, assuring us people will be grand. Where will people find €18,000 or €19,000 to put solar panels on their roof, for which they will get back a grant of €1,800 or so? A person would need a ball of money under the bed to be able to avail of some of these grants. They are quite useless to the people who are most vulnerable when it comes to energy security.

As I said, 500,000 households are in arrears. Home heating oil has gone up by 45%. The Minister of State, as defender of the Government, says that this is out of its control, that it is the result of what is happening in the Middle East. Nobody denies what is happening with the conflict in the Middle East. However, if I drove my car onto a forecourt in Malta today, I would pay €1.21 for a litre of diesel. Malta is part of the European Union but it is able to keep its energy costs down. If I drive my car onto a forecourt in Ireland today, I will pay approximately €2.20 for a litre of diesel, which is the price I saw advertised on the Naas Road the other day. That is what we are looking at in this country.

How can that price be sustained for the guy living in Youghal who has to drive to Cork city or Ringaskiddy because there is no bus or train service he can use? It is all well and good to say we must look at the models in other European countries and how they are doing so well for commuters and all the rest of it. The services are not there for people in this State. The Minister of State and his Government colleagues need to wake up on this issue. What about the guy in Mallow? There is a train service from Mallow to Cork but where is the orbital bus service in Mallow town to get him to the train? He still has to drive his car to the station. For many people in this country, the car is their only option to get to work. We continuously hear from the Government that it represents the people who get up early in the morning. In fact, it is the people who get up early who are suffering. They are suffering at the pump and the till.

The Government is like Nero, fiddling with bits and pieces and giving out a reduction here and a couple of cent there while it watches Rome burn. We are constantly told we live in a wealthy country. The Minister for Finance cannot pass a microphone without telling everyone what a fantastic job he is doing and how people should be saving. There is nothing there to save. People are struggling in this economy and finding it harder than ever before. The State is not doing enough to protect them. We are not doing enough for the small business owner who is paying €5,000 to €8,000 every month in energy costs for refrigeration.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: It is unfortunate that successive Governments, going back to the abolition of domestic rates in the seventies, have been very dependent on excise duty revenue. We do not have a very broad tax base. When pressure is felt, there is a question mark in the accounts about how, if this income is reduced, it might impact on our overall day-to-day spending budget. I am sure everyone in the Government is at least aware of how much people are feeling the pinch right now, especially those in rural Ireland, who are more dependent on cars and on kerosene for fuel. They must be given a break, however temporary it might be, given the mayhem Trump is facilitating around the world.

At the same time, with the effects of climate change becoming more apparent, we are conscious that we must wean ourselves off our addiction to fossil fuels. I have mentioned energy self-security 15 or 20 times in the Chamber since I was re-elected in 2024. We must address our addiction to fossil fuels from the Middle East and elsewhere and become self-sufficient through the use of green hydrogen, electric vehicles and biofuel. We must become a net exporter of energy and have a *quid pro quo* when the sun is shining and the waves are moving. We need to be in a position to get the revenue from the data centres and to be 100% self-sufficient in respect of our public transport needs.

I will focus in particular on public transport and electricity because we are trying to get people off fossil fuels, but the reality is they have no option but to drive vehicles that run on those fuels. There are not enough incentives to drive EVs. In all the new housing estates, for example, the current policy is to put in a few EV chargers, which is great, but residents are paying a commercial rate to big business. They are not being charged at the domestic tariff. I am lucky enough to live in a house that was built in the 1960s. I have a driveway and can charge my EV using a cable, for which I pay a very cheap overnight rate. People are being encouraged to buy into new home developments in places like Adamstown, Kilcarbery, Seven Mills and Citywest, all of which are in my constituency, but they cannot even get a parking space. If they manage to win the fight for a space, they cannot put a cable under the ground for charging their EV because that is against planning law. Technology exists in Portugal that allows people to key in a code and pay a domestic-type tariff for their EVs. If we had that type of technology, we would accelerate the move towards electric vehicles that can be powered more by the grid.

At the moment, some of the energy produced by wind is going to waste because we do not have the capacity to store it.

We are so dependent on gas as the baseline that we are paying an excess in electricity prices. People are being screwed left, right and centre because of the lack of vision in Government circles. I have spoken before about the need to invest in the grid infrastructure so that we can have private, home production and people are not disincentivised from storing solar electricity in a battery at home and, if there is a power cut, using the power in their homes rather than having to switch off, like so many houses do at the moment, especially when it is tied to an Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, grant.

We need to think about the big picture, but this motion is about the small or more immediate picture. The more immediate picture is that people are strung out trying to pay costs they have no alternative to in the short term. We need to start moving more towards the big or macro picture and increase momentum while - it is not a dichotomy - trying to help people out during the current crisis, because it is a global crisis. It is not either-or. If we are trying to wean people off fossil fuels, we are going about it the wrong way by increasing public transport prices and having ghost buses in the estates I mentioned. Even if people have the choice, they will not make it because they do not know whether they will get to work reliably. It is a mess, but it is within the Government's power to sort out some of it very quickly.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I thank Independent Ireland for bringing forward this motion. I am disappointed the Government is once again negating its impact. We are seven months into this crisis and the situation is only getting worse, with diesel prices hitting more than €2.20 per litre

at the forecourts. Home heating oil costs €1,600 for 1,000 litres and green diesel is almost €1.70 per litre for farmers. As workers and families suffer, the prices continue to rise at the pump and the Government is the only one winning, with record revenues coming from VAT.

Workers, families and farmers across rural Ireland are facing the brunt of this crisis. They need their cars to get to work, go to the shop or bring their children to school. Farmers need their tractors to spread slurry, move silage, feed livestock and much more. The majority of family homes in rural Ireland depend on home heating oil to heat their homes. The Government delays in addressing the cost-of-living crisis are adding to the pain and hardship families are going through. Thousands of families are in arrears on electricity bills and barely making ends meet.

Last night, Sinn Féin introduced legislation to remove carbon tax entirely from home heating oil, taking €183 off the cost of 1,000 litres. It was the eighth time Sinn Féin had brought forward legislation to cut the price of home heating oil and I call on all sides of the House, including the Government, to support it and give people a break.

The Minister for agriculture introduced a fuel support scheme for farmers, fishers and farm contractors with a budget of €100 million. He promised the budget would go to fuel support for farmers, farm contractors and fishers. In a reply to a recent parliamentary question, the Minister told me that more than €60 million allocated to that fuel support scheme had not been spent. This money should not be redirected to other areas. It should be allocated to, and spent on, fuel support.

The fuel support scheme was flawed. It was only a sticking plaster on a major crisis. The Minister should have reduced the price of green diesel at the pump and that is what should be done now. I call on the Government to use the €60 million to reduce the price of green diesel at the pump, which is what should have been done last April.

The cost of fertiliser has skyrocketed since the start of this crisis, which was brought on by the war in Iran. In the budget, the Government needs to provide €30 million to co-finance the EU fertiliser support scheme of €15 million. We should not take money from the fuel support scheme to co-finance fertiliser support. They are two separate issues affecting agriculture and the Minister should not use one pot of money to solve both problems. The Government needs to start putting workers and families first. It is time that half measures were over. We need to see real solutions to help farmers and workers to get through this crisis.

The reality is that much of this has been caused by the conflicts across Ukraine, Iran and Gaza and all these things. It is quite ironic that the EU puts rules in place for governments about what they can and cannot do on VAT and so on. It makes it difficult for governments to act appropriately in many of these situations, and the EU does not act appropriately in many of these situations. We need the Government to recognise that we will have huge problems if it does not act forcefully to ensure we help people out by bringing down prices for everyone across the board.

Deputy Pa Daly: At the core, this debate is about a growing sense among ordinary people that they are being left to shoulder more and more of the burden while the Government sits on its hands. Ordinary workers, families and pensioners are paying more. Rural communities are expected to shoulder the cost of Government failure and inaction. For months now, families

across the State have faced soaring living costs and household budgets are going through the roof. Yet, when practical measures are put forward to help people, the Government delays, does not act and says that now is not the time. It is turning its back on ordinary people.

The reality facing people on the ground, particularly in rural Ireland where families have no alternative but to rely on private transport and home heating oil, is stretching beyond all recognition. Heating is not a luxury for people; it is a necessity to prevent them getting sick and keep them warm during winter. The alternatives are not available. There is no just transition. There is a bigger and bigger green divide, or even a wealth transfer to people who can already afford it, while other people in older homes and rural areas cannot afford it. The Government continues to pile cost upon cost on people who have few alternatives.

Nowhere is that more apparent than with carbon tax. Sinn Féin has said that there should not be any more carbon tax increases. The Government cannot keep increasing the costs for rural families while failing to provide any alternatives to allow them to transition. It cannot tell people to stop relying on oil and cars and reduce their bills while refusing to deliver on public transport, energy infrastructure and supports to make that possible. Rural Ireland is being left behind and people see it in rising fuel costs, soaring home energy bills and few or no public transport services. They see communities being forgotten, while Ministers in Dublin tell them that everything is fine. The Government says it wants to support people in the here and now, but that is now. It means helping people, including pensioners who are worried about turning on the heating, to face another winter. It means recognising that many households are already struggling with bills such as mortgages, rent and childcare and cannot face any more. Some 500,000 people are in arrears on their energy bills. We need real action, not more words. The Government has totally failed.

Yesterday, Sinn Féin brought forward legislation to remove carbon tax from home heating oil. It was the eighth time we had sought action on this issue and the eighth time the Government parties or Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and some Independents had chosen to reject the proposals. People are not fools. They can see what is happening. They can see a Government that talks about helping families but repeatedly votes against commonsensical measures to put money back in people's pockets. It is a Government that is more than happy to collect billions of euro in tax revenue as prices rise while refusing to give meaningful, practical relief. The Government has failed to understand the pressure felt in the communities, but the House has a choice. It can continue down the road of higher costs, higher carbon taxes and more pressure on families or it can send a clear message that enough is enough, that rural Ireland matters, that heating homes is a necessity and that struggling families deserve support and not lectures. It can send a message that, when people are facing a crisis, the Government will say it has their back. For these reasons, I support the motion and encourage others to do so.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Hundreds of thousands of families heat their homes with home heating oil. I can speak with authority. In Donegal, most families rely on home heating oil. They are facing into the winter and a bill costing €1,600. Last year, it was €900. It is a massive burden, particularly for older and vulnerable families.

People who live in Donegal are being penalised for making a choice they do not have. Where will older people get the money to retrofit their homes? How can people get to work without driving a car, van or lorry in a place like Donegal where the public transport system

just is not there? They are being penalised for making a choice they do not actually have. This is nonsense. The Government has been doing this for years. It is not listening, but now we are at a profound point because our electricity is the most expensive in Europe. Home heating oil is at an unmanageable level and petrol and diesel are at the level they are at now. The Government has been slow to respond again and again.

I will talk about electricity.

The last time the Government gave energy credits was when people were voting at the last election. The cynicism is unbelievable. My colleague, Deputy Pa Daly, who is our energy spokesperson, has revealed that the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, has only met one of the energy companies this year. He has met just one, back in January. There are three he has not met at all. The Government is doing nothing to confront the energy companies about profiteering. It is giving families no energy credits. It has provided no clarity on home heating oil and has not taken one cent off the price throughout this crisis. That is why people are so angry. That is why there is again talk of protests. There is no urgency. There is cynicism. The Government is not listening to people. We in the Opposition are going to continue to come in here to tell the Government the truth as we see it in our communities and to hold the Government to account until it wakes up and does what needs to be done.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: There is a lot in this motion, which I thank Independent Ireland for bringing forward, but I will focus on petrol and diesel prices for now as successive Government policies have made my home town of Drogheda a commuter town. Decisions by Fianna Fáil governments that there should be a focus on just one town in a county - in the case of Louth, that is Dundalk - has seen foreign direct investment and a lot of jobs go to Dundalk while jobs continually leave Drogheda. The closure of BD, which employed hundreds of skilled workers, is the most recent example. According to the last census and the Drogheda business improvement districts, BID, commuter survey, 8,000 people leave Drogheda every day and almost 15,000 leave the wider area of south Louth and east Meath to commute over an hour to work, usually here in Dublin. Some 65% of those surveyed leave for work before 7 a.m. and do not return until after 6.30 p.m. Because of the huge increases in fuel prices, they are paying a fortune for the privilege of doing so. That was the last census. With the huge increase in the number of residents in Drogheda thanks to the house building boom along the port access northern cross route and with job losses locally, that figure of 15,000 is sure to rise in the next census.

This State ran a surplus of €12.5 billion last year, over €2 billion more than the Government projected on budget day. It has the resources to make a real difference but has refused to do so thus far. What sorts of prices do we need to see on the forecourts before this Government steps up? Nobody wants to see people forced to once again launch protests against fuel and energy prices, shutting the country down. I ask the Government to please not let us get to that point. We in Sinn Féin have brought forward legislation to reduce taxes on petrol, diesel and home heating oil. Cuts to taxes on diesel would have made up roughly of that, with green diesel, petrol and home heating oil cuts making up the majority of the rest. Our proposals would have made a real difference to my constituents in the Drogheda, south Louth and east Meath area and to others around the State who commute daily and who are now paying well over €2.20 per litre of diesel. This cannot become the new normal. The Government parties can remedy this problem if the Government legislates for the good of the people of Ireland and cuts the

taxes. It needs to lift the burden of people whose backs are against the wall with the rising cost of petrol, diesel and home heating oil.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Workers, families and everyone across this country are facing a situation in which everything seems to be going up. It is not just homelessness, house prices and rents but also the cost of petrol, childcare, home heating oil and electricity. It is absolutely everything. There is not a household in this country that are not looking at their bills, trying to figure out how to get to the end of the week or the month, depending on how they are paid, because everything has to be accounted for.

During this debate and previous debates, the Government has trumpeted the various things it has done but people know well that it had to be dragged kicking and screaming to do an awful lot of those things and that those things have not gone anywhere near far enough. To be honest, I suspect that, if there had not been enough public pressure and if the international circumstances had not changed, we would be looking at some of the duties being added back on. We also know that not a single cent has come off the cost of home heating oil and that nothing has been done in relation to energy credits. The Government ignored warnings from the Opposition that, if it got rid of the energy credits, people would fall into arrears. Lo and behold, record numbers of people are now in arrears with their energy bills. It is not just us saying that; the energy regulator is saying so as well.

People are tackling issues all the time. Families are trying to deal with rents like they have never seen before and childcare costs that are absolutely crippling them. The Minister of State needs to act on this. He needs to deal with the issue of home heating oil at last. People have seen huge increases. We need more action on the cost of living in general and on the cost of childcare, education and healthcare. It is right across the board. The way that this State is set up means that middle-income earners who pay taxes are not only not getting support but are being asked to pay a second time. Through voluntary contributions, GP fees and third-level fees, the cost-of-living crisis comes back to bite them every time.

Deputy Pat Buckley: I thank the Independent Technical Group for bringing forward this motion. Where will I start? Constituents have told me that they go cold and hungry and that some days they do both. They cannot afford to heat their homes and their kids are constantly sick. They end up cutting back on food to pay for electricity. Cold homes, empty fridges and impossible choices face some of my constituents in east Cork, who are forced to choose between heating their homes and putting food on the table.

As I listened to the Minister of State's response, I was sitting here thinking "Jesus wept. The Government has now normalised poverty in 2026." It is a sad indication of where this Government is going. It had a knee-jerk reaction last year when normal, ordinary working families, farmers and others who were struggling went out on a protest. It labelled those people for standing up and trying to tell the Government, which is supposed to serve its people, that they had enough and could not take it. The Government is going to see that again.

The Minister of State mentioned the Government supports. They are not working. Ministers speak about it as if it is the Government's money. It is the taxpayers' money. It is our money. The Government is supposed to support the people who support us in supposedly doing our job up here. The Minister of State also mentioned rural transport, saying that what

has been said about it is a myth. It is not a myth. Rural transport is at zero. I was in contact with the NTA during the week about rural link services for Ballymacoda, Shanagarry and Knockadoon. It told me straight out that the Government is not giving it funding. Its priorities are up its backside because it is so self-centred. I hear some Government TDs say that they are listening to their constituents. I do not know what planet they are on. I can walk down the street and see people who are struggling every single day.

There is a knock-on effect here. The majority of stuff in the supermarket, in the chemist and everywhere else was carried there by a diesel-run engine. Where there is action, there is an instant reaction. If the price of diesel goes up, the price of carrying goods goes up and that will be passed on to the consumer. In all of the Government's actions, it has done nothing to serve the people. I support our Bill from last night and the Independent Technical Group's motion today but I guarantee the Government will support neither because it is not on the proper planet.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: I have said in this House a number of times, before the people, that the Irish Government is not responsible for global events precipitating global energy price hikes. However, people look to their government to insulate them from the worst impacts and the Government continues to fail on that account. Why can it not help struggling families to heat their homes? People are crying out for help and the Government has the power. Why is it waiting? There is a behavioural tax on homes right across the country and in my own constituency of Cavan-Monaghan. The changed behaviour for many, especially among the most vulnerable in our communities, this winter will be that they go cold because the Government is wed to the nonsensical, unjustifiable and completely unnecessary carbon tax on home heating oil. Sinn Féin has now come before the Dáil eight times to seek the removal of carbon tax from home heating oil. At every opportunity, the Minister of State's Government has said "No." In essence, the Government believes people should suck it up and pay the increased costs. If they go cold, that is not governance. It is simply callous. People have struggled enough to pay electricity bills and to pay the tax on petrol and diesel for their cars. They are paying to send their children to school and college. They have had enough without the Government tinkering around the edges. I ask the Minister of State to please support the Sinn Féin legislation. Let us put a little warmth back in people's homes this winter.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Many have said it before; we all accept that Government is not responsible for what has happened with the war in Iran. Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu are responsible and we are all suffering as a result. However, let us be absolutely clear. There are things the Government can do. It did reduce the cost of petrol and diesel when it was forced to.

11 o'clock

We all know an insufficient amount was done in relation to that. How do we know that? We know that because we can look at the forecourts at the minute. We are looking at €2.20 per litre of diesel and costs that we could not have expected. In the long term, we know it has also failed in relation to delivering on wind power and alternatives.

We have a real problem, particularly when we are talking about home heating oil and the 700,000 households that have no choice but to use home heating oil. The carbon tax is not

going to allow them, facilitate them or force them into using something else. They have no choice. I was on *cheapestoil.ie*. The average price of heating oil in County Louth today is €1,605.97 for 1,000 litres. The cheapest is €1,559 for 1,000 litres. That is phenomenal. The price last year was in and around €900. We are talking about removing the carbon tax on that in order to mitigate at least some of the pain. We are talking about €183 - something that could be done today that could impact on people's lives tomorrow. There are many who are waiting because they have heard kites flown that something may be done in relation to home heating oil. It needs to be done now. It needs to be done straight away.

Today, the Irish Cancer Society revealed that cancer patients are losing an average of €16,200 in annual income. If we get into that, they face monthly travel-associated-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: -----costs of up to €300 a month. Some of that is fuel. We need help on that as well. Some of that is heating.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): The Deputy should conclude.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We need to get serious. Regarding the cost of disability payment that the Government took away, we need to ensure that is delivered. We have a lot of people under pressure, and the Government could help a lot of them now.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: As a country, Ireland has never been as wealthy. We have never had so many resources available to us to support people and to make this country even better than it is, yet we still have so many people who feel completely left behind by this Government and the previous Government. They are struggling to keep their heads above water and really cannot see a future for themselves. We saw a report yesterday about the number of young people who are planning on emigrating. We have sort of turned into a country of contradictions. Some people are doing incredibly well, but there is a huge number of people who are struggling and finding it very difficult. There are 324,000 households in this country in arrears on their electricity bills. There are 188,000 in arrears on their gas bills. These are the highest figures ever. Those people are not doing that by choice. They are in arrears because they are unable to pay the extortionate energy prices that we have seen over the past number of years. For people who are filling their cars at the moment with a 60-litre fill of petrol, it is costing €6.60 more for a fill than it did in February and for diesel it is €9.60 more than it was in February. We can see how people are really struggling.

Ireland is a small country and economy and we have been repeatedly hit over the years with these global crises that have caused huge challenges, problems and difficulties in this country. We have had the war in Ukraine and now the war in Iran. While it is clear - I think everyone would agree - that Ireland did not play a part in causing any of those wars, the Government had to rally and come up with emergency measures to deal with them. What we have not seen from this Government is a move from emergency, temporary and incredibly costly measures to actually making our homes, households and businesses more resilient to those kinds of energy shocks. Yes, those temporary measures were needed, but where is the long-term planning from this Government? Where is the strategic thinking?

The incredible amount of corporation taxes coming into this country have resulted in a very lazy Government - a Government that has no vision for the future and is quite happy to throw money at problems and situations but not actually put any long-term thinking into how to deal with these issues on a long-term basis. That is costing us a fortune. In March 2026, there was €250 million on a package of temporary fuel tax reduction supports. In April 2026, there was €505 million. Post-Ukraine, we had a €2.7 billion package in mid-2022 to tackle rising energy costs. The lump sum energy payments that were made in 2022 cost €1.3 billion. These were untargeted measures. I repeatedly was very critical of the untargeted approach that the previous Government took, essentially putting something like €100 million into the electricity meters of holiday homes. The then Government gave people who already had two homes €100 million in taxpayers' money. In 2023, those energy payments cost over €1 billion. In 2024, it was €500 million. Billions have been spent post-Ukraine on short-term relief. We are now seeing billions being spent post-Iran.

What the Government needed to do at that time post-Ukraine was not just hand over public money as an emergency measure. Rather, it needed to look at the country as a whole and ask, "How do we make ourselves more resilient?" The global energy shocks will continue and we are far from immune. We are incredibly reliant on fossil fuels and the global energy market. What the Government never said was, "How can we actually move away from fossil fuels? How can we make our homes resilient? How can we make sure that if something happens in the Middle East or in Ukraine, it is not a household in Portumna or Rathdrum that is paying for it? How can we ensure that our communities are protected?"

The Social Democrats have continually called for longer-term focus from the Government. We have our solar for all plan. One million homes in Ireland are suitable for solar panels. If those homes had solar panels, they could reduce their energy cost by €400 or €500 per year. That would be game-changing for so many households. We have repeatedly called for more grants and better supports because solar panels are still far too costly for far too many people. In fact, I first raised this in 2022 after the war in Ukraine. I asked the then Government to, please, focus on solar. I could not understand why that Government was so blind to the financial, climate and societal benefits of solar panels and making sure that houses were resilient. Yet it did nothing. In fact, it was pulling grants from people. It took away the battery storage grants that were available. It pulled support from people. That is why we are in the situation we are in now. We have a Government that has far too much money and is wasting it and is not thinking through. It seems not to care about the next five and ten years. It is just throwing money at problems. I remind the Government that it is not its money; it is the public's money. People expect it to be prudent with that money and to use it in a responsible manner, but the Government is not doing that.

There are many measures, such as the solar plan the Social Democrats have come up with, that would support people, but the Government is ignoring them. We have called for an energy windfall tax similar to what was implemented after the Ukraine war but I cannot see any advocacy for that at a European level. There are alternatives to the home heating oil crisis that people are facing at the moment. There are alternative technologies that could be utilised.

However, the Government is moving so slowly on them, allowing people to face extortionate rises in prices. The Government has no vision and is completely tone deaf to what is going on in people's lives.

I want to make a point about the cost-of-living crisis that people are facing at the moment and how tone deaf the Government is. It put forward this €100 voucher for 16-year-olds. That is simply a public relations stunt. That is all that is. A woman with four children contacted me yesterday. Both she and her husband work. However, like many people in this country who work really hard, they are finding it very difficult to keep their heads above water. She texted me and asked, "Are they actually serious about this credit?" Her daughter has teeth erupting from the roof of her mouth. She is in constant daily pain with it and it will be three years before she sees an orthodontist or else this family can fork out €5,500 to get it done privately. The Government is completely tone deaf and does not understand the struggles that people are facing. It does not seem to understand where it is wasting money. It is not acceptable to have a teenager in daily pain because dental services are not being provided in her in her locality. What family has €5,500 to fork out on orthodontics? That is an incredible amount of money. I ask the Minister of State to bring this message back to the Government. The money it is wasting now it is not its money; it is public money and we need it to support communities, support people and spend it wisely.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I thank the Deputies from Independent Ireland for bringing this motion forward today. Everyone in this House knows and agrees that we are going through a severe and extended cost-of-living crisis. We all want to do everything in our power to protect people most at risk from energy poverty. Many people in the country are struggling now. However, the vast majority of us in this House, in opposition at least, agree on the reasons for the cost-of-energy crisis and the long-term solutions. The climate crisis is not mentioned once in this motion. That is just wild. Where is the acknowledgement in this motion that the current energy crisis has been directly caused by Donald Trump? Where is the acknowledgement that Trump, whom Independent Ireland welcomed with open arms to this country a week ago in the Phoenix Park, whose politics some of the Deputies here try to ape and assimilate, is the direct reason that energy bills are high here and across the world? Trump's illegal, reckless and pointless war on Iran has brought us here, not the carbon tax. Donald Trump, Mark Zuckerberg and their billionaire class are the only economic migrants into this country who are actually responsible for our problems, but Independent Ireland Deputies cannot find it within themselves to criticise them. Independent Ireland cannot punch down on them.

Where in this motion are the proposals for a tax on excess profits of energy companies? Where is the support for a moratorium on data centres which are adding to household bills and being built to placate tech billionaires? There are none, because these are the guys Independent Ireland Deputies want to cosy up to. Where have they been while we have been protesting against the hikes in public transport fares that are facing commuters, students, people with disabilities and people who cannot afford cars? They say they are concerned with transport costs but, just like the Government, only for certain cohorts.

We can absolutely agree that there is no question that households and small businesses across Ireland have faced extraordinary pressure from energy costs. Families have seen electricity and heating bills rise, motorists have faced much higher costs at the pump, and many people have been left with difficult choices between heating their homes, travelling to work and meeting other essential household expenses. Such is the scale of the energy crisis and the cost-of-living crisis more broadly that we now have more than half a million gas and electricity

accounts in arrears. The pressures are very real and any serious discussion of energy policy or climate policy has to begin by recognising them.

An equally important point needs to be made: those pressures are being exacerbated and prolonged by Ireland's continued dependence on fossil fuels, which the Deputies are seeking to subsidise indefinitely in this motion. The existence of a cost-of-living crisis does not remove the need to address Ireland's dependence on fossil fuels. The experience of recent years has demonstrated why reducing that dependence should be an economic and social priority as well as an environmental one. Our over-reliance on imported fossil fuels means that we are massively over-exposed to international energy markets and geopolitical shocks, as we have seen following Trump's and Netanyahu's misadventures in the Middle East.

The Minister has pointed out previously that our dependence on imported fossil fuels is a vulnerability, including the fact that approximately 80% of our gas is imported from our nearest neighbour. We urgently need to reduce that dependence and the carbon tax has an important role to play in that. What is important is the policy framework we put around it, how the proceeds are used, and whether we give people realistic and affordable alternatives.

This motion notes that for a lot of people in rural areas, and notwithstanding the progress that has been made with respect to the Local Link in recent years, there is still a lack of alternatives to private cars or fossil fuel-powered home-heating systems, and I agree with that. We need to go further and faster in rolling out supports and incentives to allow people to wean themselves off fossil fuels. We need to make EV grants, heat pumps, insulation, solar panels, batteries and so on more accessible to larger cohorts of the population, particularly people in rural communities and low-income households.

However, we will not be able to do that if we do away with the mechanism designed to fund those supports. Labour's position has always been that carbon tax should form part of a just transition rather than being considered in isolation from household incomes and energy affordability. To be fair, we have supported increases in carbon tax while arguing for a refundable carbon-tax credit for low- and middle-income households. That distinction is important. Carbon tax is intended to reflect, through the price of fossil fuels, some of the environmental cost associated with their use. Yes, it is also designed to incentivise the move towards lower-carbon alternatives.

Carbon tax detractors often claim that it is a regressive form of taxation, but I do not believe that. In last year's budget, over €1 billion raised through the carbon tax was allocated to alleviating fuel poverty and reducing our dependency on fossil fuels, thus protecting those who need it most from inflationary shocks. The largest stream of ring-fenced funding went to retrofitting, social protection, and - the Independent Ireland Deputies might be surprised to learn - farmers, through the agri-climate rural environment scheme, ACRES. The evidence has shown for years that carbon tax is a progressive measure and that our most vulnerable households are better off as a result of it.

Of course, the precise treatment of revenues from it should be transparent and must be scrutinised but the underlying principle is straightforward: if the State asks people to change how they heat their homes, how they travel and how they consume energy, the State must invest in making those changes possible. That sentiment is somewhat reflected in the motion, but the proposal seems to lean more towards the State just ceasing to ask people to make those changes.

I would lean the other direction; we must continue to encourage people to transition towards cleaner energy, but crucially we have to support them in doing so and protect those who are not yet capable of doing so. The unfortunate reality for some Deputies in this House is that climate change is real and it is accelerating. We have just emerged from a summer of extreme weather events both at home and abroad. We need immediate, targeted protection for households under pressure but we also need sustained investment that reduces the underlying need for that protection. Scrapping the carbon tax would be catastrophic in both respects.

Let us look again at the figures from last year's budget. Some €558 million, the largest stream of ring-fenced carbon tax funding, went to retrofitting, including the warmer homes scheme which gives grants to low-income households to improve the energy efficiency of their homes. That funding is helping struggling families to keep their homes warm and lowering their bills.

The second largest stream of funding, €350 million, went to social protection payments to help alleviate poverty and protect people from the cost-of-living increases. These payments were chosen on the basis of research by the ESRI which focused specifically on determining how to make the carbon tax progressive and to ensure that the most vulnerable were not worse off as a result.

If we are going to be in the business of making policy here, we have to ensure it is evidence based. Contrary to proclamations that the carbon tax is regressive, the opposite is in fact true. This tax helps us to alleviate poverty. It particularly targets groups known to be at greater risk of energy poverty - low-income families and single adults living alone, exactly the people most in need of support at the moment.

Will the Deputies who are advocating for cuts to the carbon tax go back to their constituencies and gleefully tell pensioners on fuel allowance the good news that they will not be getting any further increases because they have successfully got the carbon tax slashed? Delaying the increase in carbon tax costs the Government millions that would otherwise go to targeted supports for those who need them most - low-income households, single pensioners and farmers.

In budget 2026, there was €163 million more in ring-fenced funding from carbon tax than there was in budget 2025. However, because of the suspension of the carbon tax increase, there will be no such additional funding for just transition measures next year.

It is also worth noting in all of this that some sectors, including heavy industry, haulage and farming, are already eligible for partial or even full reliefs from the tax. Of course, the Government has utterly failed to make clear the value and purpose of the carbon tax, how it works and who it helps. None of this is to say that I or the Labour Party do not have issues with certain aspects of the carbon tax. For example, the first €20 per tonne of the tax is not ring-fenced for just transition measures. I think it should be. However, this motion amounts to simply prolonging our dependence on and subsidisation of fossil fuels, leaving all of us - farmers and hauliers included - exposed to international price shocks like the ones we are experiencing at the moment, as well as defunding the supports available to help people wean themselves off fossil fuels.

We need a two-pronged approach - one that protects the most vulnerable in the immediate term, while also supporting people to reduce their dependence in the longer term. That is what

a just transition should be. We in Labour have consistently called for targeted energy credits to help households struggling with bills and, at the same time, we want to see far greater investment in retrofitting schemes so that more households can improve their energy efficiency and bring those bills down in the first place. A temporary reduction in the price of petrol or diesel might bring the price down for a few weeks until Trump decides to, in his words, annihilate another country, but it does not reduce our dependence on oil. A retrofit does reduce that dependence, as do renewable energy, public transport and EVs. That is why Labour has consistently put these measures at the centre of our climate proposals. Not only are they climate measures in their own right, they will also help with the cost of living not just today or for this electoral cycle, but in the long term.

Households that are given the right supports can afford to retrofit their homes today and can reduce their energy consumption and lower their bills tomorrow. Those supports are funded by the carbon tax. This motion presents a false choice between helping people and tackling climate change.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I move amendment No. 1 to amendment No. 1:

To delete all words from "notes that the Government:" to "will seek to address this as part of Budget 2027" and substitute the following:

"recognises that:

— working people, families, students, households and pensioners are facing renewed and significant increases in the cost of fuel and energy, as well as increases in public transport fares, adding further pressure to an already severe cost-of-living crisis; and

— the Government is directly contributing to this cost-of-living crisis by refusing to introduce price controls on fuel, energy or groceries, abolishing energy credits, enabling data centres to push up energy prices, gutting rent controls, underfunding retrofitting and solar panels for low- and middle-income households and imposing a regressive carbon tax;

calls on the Government to:

— impose strict price controls on fuel, energy and groceries and abolish standing charges for electricity and gas;

— stop the planned increases in public transport fares and introduce free public transport to incentivise public transport use;

— introduce a €500 energy credit in the Budget, to be funded by an energy levy on data centres;

— abolish the carbon tax and replace it with higher taxes on big business and the wealthy, including a new multimillionaire's tax on wealth, that will also fund a massive expansion of retrofitting grants and free, frequent and expanded public transport; and

— freeze and cut rents."

This morning, I went to a briefing in the audiovisual room by the Irish Lung Fibrosis Association. There, we heard about the financial impact of suffering from lung fibrosis or pulmonary fibrosis. For some people, it is €5,000, which is a third of their State pension. It is

no surprise that more than one in two said that as a result of having this disease and the cost of living crisis, there had been a moderate or severe impact on the financial situation of their family. There were also lots of very reasonable demands, which we of course support. To be honest, what struck me was how on earth, in 2026 in one of the richest countries in the world, with a massive budget surplus, we have the spectacle of groups of people who are suffering like that having to come in here to beg for small amounts of money in order to avoid being put in an even worse situation of poverty. That is a result of the political choices this Government has made in respect of particular groups, but also, in general, its choice not to protect people from the cost-of-living crisis.

I welcome some measures proposed in this motion, such as maintaining the excise cuts on petrol and diesel and not further increasing the carbon tax, but the truth is this motion does not go nearly far enough to protect people from this crisis. The crisis is getting worse and all the indications are it is going to continue to worsen. Why? Because of Trump's imperialist war on Iran, which continued with new threats last night. The Deputies in question obviously welcomed Donald Trump to Ireland. It is because of the Government's refusal to tackle the housing crisis or to stop the runaway growth of data centres from driving up energy prices, of which there is more and more evidence every single day. To really protect people, we need price caps not just on petrol and diesel, but also on electricity, gas, groceries and public transport fares. When prices keep rising, excise and VAT reductions are not enough. Even after the reductions, we are already back over €2 per litre of diesel, which is the level that prompted the fuel protests. Yesterday, we heard wholesale electricity prices are up 77%. We need price caps to give people security.

We also need to abolish the carbon tax. The Independent Ireland motion proposes scrapping the extra increases but the continuation of the carbon tax. We need to abolish the carbon tax entirely. People Before Profit has always said it is the big polluters who should pay, not ordinary people. All the evidence shows it is big business and the wealthy who have caused the climate crisis. Some 80% of emissions are coming from just 57 companies. Here in Ireland, it is big agrifood companies and big livestock farmers that are increasingly joined by big tech in terms of their data centres. They are the ones causing and profiting from the climate crisis.

However, we also need to get off our addiction to fossil fuels. We need to get people to switch to cleaner and cheaper renewable energy as quickly as possible and to use public transport or active travel. That cannot happen overnight, which is why we need price caps on fuel and energy. We need to massively increase the grants and pace of retrofitting and public transport roll-out. Every household that needs it should be getting free retrofitting and solar panels provided directly by the State. Instead of public transport fares going up, they should be going down and we should have free, green and frequent public transport.

Deputy Seamus Healy: Carbon tax is just another unfair tax heaped on families already reeling from a cost-of-living crisis and it must be abolished. It unfairly penalises working people rather than the big corporate polluters and drives families and vulnerable people deeper into fuel and energy poverty. The major polluters must be made to pay, including the big oil companies that are making obscene profits. The eight biggest companies have made \$93 billion in profit in just three months.

Of course, most ordinary families will never benefit from the carbon tax. Retrofitting of council houses is almost non-existent. A recent report on local authorities shows that only 2,671 were retrofitted in 2025, 37 more than in 2024. Middle-income families already under huge financial pressure cannot raise the funds to cover the grant shortfall. This is called the green divide. Is it not contradictory that although we have a carbon tax, we continue to increase the cost of public transport, thereby forcing people back into their cars? A 15% increase was announced recently and there is more to come, as we were told at a recent Oireachtas meeting by the deputy chief executive of the National Transport Authority.

Petrol and diesel are essential rather than discretionary for hundreds of thousands of people, especially in rural Ireland where access to public transport is either very limited or non-existent. People in my constituency in south Tipperary have very limited public transport and therefore have no practical alternative to using a car. If you live in south Tipperary and work in Clonmel - in Abbott Vascular, Boston Scientific, Tipperary University Hospital, MSD, Medite, Tipperary County Council or any of the other businesses in the town - you must use a car. If you attend university in Clonmel, you must use a car. If you shop in Clonmel, you must use a car. If you attend college out of the county, in Waterford or Limerick, for example, you must use a car. Of course, farmers, agricultural contractors, haulage companies, small businesses and the self-employed have no alternative but to use petrol or diesel. The supports that are already in place must be retained and increased.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I welcome the fact that the Deputies have given us an opportunity to discuss the cost of living crisis and the energy price hikes, but I will repeat what I said last night: shame on Deputies, some of whom have put forward this motion, for expressing support for Donald Trump and his rotten agenda, which is directly responsible for the energy and fuel price hikes inflicting misery on hundreds of thousands of people, leaving hundreds of thousands of people in arrears and unable to pay their gas and electricity bills or crippled with the high price of home heating oil, fuel or diesel. Trump did that and the people who express support for him should be embarrassed by their support for that agenda and the misery it inflicts on people.

Of course, it is better than nothing to do as their motion does, which is to suggest we should defer further increases. However, what is actually necessary is imposing price controls on gas, electricity, petrol, diesel, home heating oil and all the things that have spiked as a result of Trump's war for oil.

It has also, more importantly, imposed death and destruction on the people of Palestine, the Middle East, Venezuela and so on. It is a war for oil which has now driven up the price of energy and fuel for people across the world, including in this country. We need to control the prices that he has driven up by imposing price controls to make things affordable and making those who are profiteering from the cost-of-living misery pay for it, which is also completely absent from the Deputies' motion and the Government's thinking or amendment.

We can protect people from the cost-of-living misery if we look at the massive profits of those who provide home heating oil, the cost of which went up again last year. The electricity and energy providers, oil companies, data centres and their billionaire owners have seen their profits go through the roof. Tax these people and make them pay their fair share of tax. Of course, we do not want to talk about that. We do not want to talk about the gross wealth and

income inequality and the fact that there is a minority of people who are profiteering from the cost of living and housing misery that is being inflicted on others.

I hope and expect, although I say that half sarcastically, that the Deputies will be enthusiastic in supporting the public sector workers who are balloting for industrial action and demanding decent pay increases because of the rising cost of living and inflation caused by Trump's warmongering and the misguided priorities of this Government, which is always looking after the rich, the billionaires and the corporations that are doing so well while ordinary workers suffer. We intend to go much further in our amendment, by imposing price controls, introducing free and frequent public transport, and taxing the data centres in order to pay for real relief, to give people an energy credit, give people with disabilities support and to support workers balloting for decent pay.

Deputy Michael Cahill: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion on fuel, energy and carbon tax relief. This issue matters enormously to people in my constituency of Kerry and across rural Ireland. When we talk about energy prices in this House, we have to remember that behind every statistic is a family, an individual trying to heat his or her home, a person trying to get to work or a small business trying to keep its doors open. In Kerry, many households are particularly exposed to the cost of home heating oil. For those families, filling an oil tank can mean a significant one-off expense. It is very different from receiving a monthly electricity bill and for many people it can create a serious cashflow challenge.

Energy arrears remain at historically high levels. The Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, reported earlier this year that 316,000 domestic electricity customers and 179,000 domestic gas customers were in arrears, with average debts of €492 and €207 respectively. There is absolutely no question that affordability remains a serious issue but we also need to be honest about what Government can and cannot control. Energy prices are heavily influenced by international wholesale markets and geopolitical developments. The State cannot determine the international price of oil or gas and Mr. Trump has made hundreds of thousands of lives here at home and throughout the globe an absolute misery, of that there is no doubt.

What can Government do to protect households from these pressures? There has already been a very significant response. We have strengthened supports for people on lower incomes, including through the fuel allowance, and we have invested substantially in energy efficiency and retrofitting. Those measures are important because we should not simply be dealing with high energy bills year after year. We also need to reduce the amount of energy that households need to purchase in the first place. There are also measures taking effect in the electricity market. From October, the public service obligation levy is being reduced by 66%, while the CRU has reviewed network charges to limit the impact on customers. That is the type of practical intervention that can make a real difference to household bills.

On the motion before us, budget 2027 is just two weeks away. That is the appropriate point at which to consider the full package of measures, including taxation, energy costs, income supports and the cost-of-living crisis. We should look at the evidence and ensure that whatever measures are introduced are targeted towards the people who are experiencing the greatest pressure, including people in Kerry who are dependent on home heating oil. I will certainly be looking at what the forthcoming budget does to address these pressures. We should continue

to invest in retrofitting and energy efficiency because making a home warmer and more efficient provides a longer-term benefit to the family than simply responding to a price spike. The CRU has also highlighted that suppliers have obligations to work with customers experiencing payment difficulties, including affordable repayment arrangements and protections against disconnection where customers are engaging with their supplier.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I thank the Deputies for bringing this forward. I really love talking about energy and savings. Last year, the Minister of State confirmed an underspend of €120 million. I understand that since then the SEAI has been spending it. The Minister of State will have no doubt heard me talk about plug-in solar. I want to imagine how that €120 million could be used immediately for the Irish public. Let us take a ballpark figure - back-of-the-envelope stuff - of €120 million. If we could bulk buy plug-in solar systems, which are on average €500 per unit on the German market, through a Government scheme and could get a reduced price of, say, €400 per unit, which could immediately be plugged in, that €120 million would mean 300,000 plug-in solar systems. That is 300,000 households, including apartments and properties on which solar systems cannot be on the roof, which would immediately start seeing savings.

Plug-in solar systems do not work like the ones on the roof. Electricity goes towards the path of least resistance, so it is for a fridge, washing machine or any appliance that is drawing electricity where one will see the savings. It is not like another system. At current electricity prices per kilowatt hour, and based on the UK savings of €230 per year - it legalised plug-in solar systems on 27 August - in the first year, from that €120 million, Irish households would see up to €70 million in savings. These plug-in solar systems last ten years. The payback and the return on investment is huge. I urge the Government to examine this. I know the Independents have been pushing it and supporting me on it.

We need to examine every assessment, the BER requirements, and the simpler retrofit system. I understand we cannot print money out of nowhere and I understand the carbon tax provides for these systems of retrofitting but I would love the money to be spent more efficiently. We should ensure people get the benefits, and not through a BER system or through someone who knows they have a grant, so they will increase the price of a system because they know they have a Government grant. We saw it with the cycle to work scheme. Some bikes suddenly had a higher price because the seller knew people were getting a grant. We see it with the solar schemes and with the retrofit scheme with the council where people put the price up because there is a council grant. That price gouging and gazumping needs to be examined. SEAI approval for solar system grants needs to be examined so the benefit goes to the people, not the people installing the systems.

We need to use infrastructure much more effectively, which is why I introduced to this House the Electricity Regulation (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill 2026. I look forward to people on all sides of the House supporting that. I have introduced it and I look forward to debating it in this House. With the private wire system, if we have a large-scale energy user, it should be easier for them to create on-site renewable energy and reduce costs.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank Deputy Michael Collins and Independent Ireland for giving us this opportunity to talk about these important issues. The carbon tax has to be got rid of.

Fuel is dear enough. The purpose it was brought in for in the first place does not exist now.

I want to talk about people in Kerry who use heating oil or kerosene. The cost of it has come up from 90 cent to €1.68 this week. People just cannot afford that. They will only be able to purchase far less than what they need to keep themselves warm for the winter. It is the same with green diesel. Some people were not included in the packages given out in May. The agricultural contractors and farmers were given packages at that time to help them to reduce the cost of the green diesel. Many of them could not draw it down because they had infringements for spreading slurry outside of the time. Maybe some of them were not up to date with Revenue. They were not eligible. That is why the Government has some money left over. I am asking the Minister of State to check with the people who were refused and give it to them forthwith.

Another sector was left out completely. The Taoiseach was sitting where the Minister of State is now and said construction vehicles would be included. He said that sometime around 5 May. That has not happened. The construction sector has not been included at all. I raised with the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, last week, and he said that he was beginning to work on it now. I asked who the Minister in charge was. He did not know. He was not the Minister in charge. The Minister, Deputy Heydon, is not the Minister in charge of it. Is any Minister responsible to help the people with construction vehicles, whether it is diggers, rollers, cranes, or teleports? They are all the different vehicles that use green diesel to keep them rolling in the construction and civil sector. They do maintenance along our roads, repair our water breaks and all those things. Quarries were meant to have been included. Those people did not get a bob. The Tánaiste said that they were going to be covered. He said it to the media around that time. If a person does not have their word, they have nothing at all. The Taoiseach said in this Chamber that construction vehicles would be covered. They are not. It has gone from 90 cent up to €1.68 since. How long will it be before these vehicles grind to a halt? A lot of these contractors have entered into fixed contracts.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): The Deputy is over time.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: They are losing money, hand over fist.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Deputy, you are way over time.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am asking the Government to come out and do something about it.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan): As the Minister of State, Deputy Collins, said earlier, I reiterate that the Government is moving a counter-motion in respect of the Deputies' Private Members' motion. I fully appreciate the Deputies' concerns raised here this morning. As a Government, we do not control the wholesale price of oil but we have acted in a significant way to assist households and businesses with the real impacts of this energy crisis.

As I have stated already, the Deputy's Private Members' motion does not fully reflect the considerable supports, which have been implemented by this Government. These are supports

have been designed to share the burden of the conflict in the Middle East with households, farmers, agricultural contractors, hauliers, tradespeople and businesses. The motion also fails to take into account obligations set out in EU legislation in relation to fuel taxation, to which the Government must adhere, including Ireland's obligation in respect of the emissions trading system for buildings, road transport and additional sectors. The motion does not reflect that the reality of global commodity markets or recognise that the drivers of energy inflation are global in nature. Consequently, it is not possible for the State to fully absorb all of these costs. Government policy must be considered and measured.

To date, this Government has delivered one of the largest support packages in the EU *per capita*. In doing so, we have deferred the 1 May carbon tax increase on home heating fuels; reduced excise duty on diesel, petrol and green diesel; enhanced the diesel rebate scheme for hauliers and passenger transport operators, mitigating price increases in these sectors and the associated knock-on effects they have on food and passenger transport prices. We have funded payments to road transport operators under the road transport support scheme. We have funded payments to farmers, farm contractors and the fishing sector under the fuel income support scheme. We have reduced the NORA levy. We also extended the winter heating season by four weeks, increasing the total yearly payment to €1,216.

The Government recognises the exceptional pressure that rising fuel costs have placed on our farmers and farm contractors, and worked intensively with the representative stakeholder groups, with a view to providing adequate and targeted supports. The Government reduced the tax on MGO by 5.4 cent a litre, and the NORA levy by another 2 cent per litre. On top of that, the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine implemented a comprehensive €100 million fuel income support scheme to assist farmers, agricultural contractors and the fishing sector facing unprecedented increases in fuel costs, which gave a support rate equivalent to approximately 20 cent per litre of green diesel. This Government has been doing its best for farmers and the agricultural sector. I have no doubt that it will continue to do so.

As regards rural Ireland, I know better than most the impact that the fuel crisis is having on households in my constituency and others. I appreciate that people living in rural Ireland are twice as likely to use home heating oil as their main heating fuel. In fact, according to the latest CSO figures, around 26% of households in Ireland use it as their main heating fuel, which is around 500,000 households. This Government understands that these are disproportionately older, rural, and, in a lot of cases, lower income households. Many of these households would be eligible for the aforementioned fuel allowance. The Government is also very conscious of those who use home heating oil but do not qualify for that payment. That is why the upcoming budget will also deliver for middle-income families. The facts are that this Government has acted time and again to provide for households at risk of fuel poverty, and to ease the burden on all households impacted by the crisis.

The upcoming budget will build on the work of budget 2026 to protect households from rising energy costs. Budget 2026 provided an extension until 2030 of the 9% VAT rate currently applied to gas and electricity bills. It provided for enhanced social protection payments, including an increase to the fuel allowance rate. As mentioned, there was an expansion in the fuel allowance eligibility rules, benefiting approximately 50,000 households. It provided the €400 income tax disregard for households involved in microgeneration, which was extended for a further three years to the end of 2028. While no Government can fully shield households

from all the impacts of this crisis, this Government has acted to mitigate the impacts of the crisis time and again. We have acted to support households, farmers, agricultural contractors, hauliers, tradespeople and businesses. This Government will continue to take action in budget 2027. For the reasons stated earlier, I reiterate the Government's countermotion.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I will cover some of the comments those on my right made. They talked about Donald Trump coming to the country and said that some people went to meet him. I have no problem meeting Donald Trump. As a public representative, I would meet him because of 300,000 jobs in this country. If you multiple that by two or three, up to 1 million people are employed in this country as a result of American investment. That is why I would meet him. Do I agree with what is happening in the Middle East? I 100% do not. I am sitting here with some people to my right, or far right, and I do not agree with them but I acknowledge them the same as I would Trump. I will sit here and talk to the Deputies. It does not mean I like them or their policies but I will sit down in this Chamber and talk to them.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Deputy O'Flynn explicitly supported the kidnapping in Venezuela.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: The Deputy has had his time.

The Cathaoirleach Gníomhach's party had a good old swing at us as well, so I will comment on it and its support of carbon tax. His colleague spoke a while ago. When the Labour Party was in government, it introduced water charges and property tax. It then cut child benefit, rent allowance and fuel grants and supported the USC. These are the same people who are trying to lecture me here today.

We will go back to the motion at hand. The Minister of State and the Department might just listen to this. I might be able to educate them today. The Government does not import fuel into this country. It has nothing to do with importing fuel into this country. Let us tell the public today that these are the facts. What the Government is responsible for is putting the taxation on the fuel when it lands here. I will tell everyone here today, including the people in the Gallery, who are all welcome, to please listen.

Fuel is brought into this country by the likes of Fuels for Ireland. It arrives and then all the taxes that the Government puts on it are collected at the port. It is then sent to distributors, who add the VAT for the local filling station. The local filling station then puts on three or four cent of its own. This Government has nothing to do with bringing fuel into this country. All it does is put tax on it.

I will simplify matters. If a litre of fuel comes into this country at €1, the Government puts tax of €1 on it. People in this country work and pay tax at 20% and 40%. I want everyone in this country to know that when they or their parents collect their children, when they go to hospital appointments, when they go to hurling matches and when they go to work to, for example, feed the vulnerable in this country, for every €1 of fuel they put into their cars at the pump the Government takes a €1 in tax. So, it is taking €5 in tax in every €10. People have voted Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and others into power. Those people have allowed them to do this every time. I would say to the people of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, for their children's sake or their grandchildren's sake, that we need to get rid of these people in government.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: The Deputy has a microphone.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: All they are good at is taxation. They talked about electric vehicles and that we need to change to them. They never mention that electric vehicles are twice as heavy on tyres as normal cars and twice as heavy on road surfaces. If you replace a battery in an electric vehicle, it will cost you €20,000 to do so when it has been driven for 200,000 km. They never mentioned about the cobalt that goes into these batteries. They mentioned that this year one in four cars sold were EVs, so that is 25% this year. They forgot to mention that EVs count for 4% of vehicles in this country and that 96% of people drive fossil fuel vehicles. It is those people work in this country and who look after other people every day that the Government is taxing, despite the fact that they pay tax at work. That is what the Government represents.

As a businessman, I would tell the Government to cap the tax on fuel. Take the tax up to a certain amount and the Government would have the same amount of tax - it would not be down 1 cent - but when the price of fuel increases, we will pay the increased tax without the 50% tax or a 100% tax on top of that. This is what we are asking. That is a business approach. Those in government would know nothing about that because they are not in business. Civil servants all the way up; never had to worry about putting food on the table for other employees. That is what is wrong with those in government. They came through the Civil Service and they knows nothing other than taking money off the hard-working people of Ireland.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: The Deputy is taking a swipe at the civil servants.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): I call Deputy Fitzmaurice.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: On behalf of Independent Ireland, whether you agree or disagree with the motion, I want to say thanks to each speaker for making the effort. We respect democracy and we respect different views. People are entitled to their views.

There are a few things that need clarification. We have always put forward an option if people wanted to find the money. Some 340,000 or 350,000 flights come into Ireland, and people have a choice to fly or go on holiday. However, they do not have a choice about driving between 20 and 80 miles to work. The carbon tax is affecting that. We want solutions, but the problem is that the Government's masters in Europe will not allow it to do implement solutions at the moment. You can fly wherever you want on a holiday and not pay carbon tax. When you have to go to work, however, you pay carbon tax. Something just does not add up.

Retrofitting has been good. No one is against retrofitting - we are all for it – but a few things need to be made very clear. With the warmer homes scheme, if an engineer comes out and sees that someone has PVC windows and insulation on the walls, they will say “Bye, bye. No more. That is it”. That is the box ticked. Let no one cod themselves about what has been done. Second, if someone has a dormer house, the engineer will run away. They will not do insulation on dormer houses. Those things need to be made very clear.

We in the Dáil need to get a grip of ourselves. If we have more electric vehicles and there is more help for people, we are not opposed to that. Let us look at the statistics and the facts, however. Most cars bought in Ireland this year and last year are in the €10,000 to €15,000

bracket. You cannot buy a new electric car for that amount. That is what people can afford. We have to deal with the cards we have been dealt. No one has anything against giving more grants for EVs or whatever if the Government wants to do that, but this is the reality.

In addition, we just think we can run out of this room, flick a switch and go into a new world of wind, solar and whatever. Solar is very good in houses - there is no problem with it – but have a look at the TAMS grants. The system is now done on a points basis and farmers who wanted to get these grants are being refused them. That is the madness, and I smile about it at times.

On wind, more turbines have been put up around the country. However, there is a reality here. Look at the amount of wind in July. It is nearly as if people would deprive us of a bit of sun or the good summer we had this year. When we got a bit of fine weather and the turbines did not move, we were down to 22% for the month of July. That is the reality. What do we do when that happens? Do we say that we are going to live in this fancy, lovely world and knock off the lights for 80% of the people and leave them high and dry?

We need to focus on what we have. There are fossil fuels. Those fuels are going to be needed. If we move to other ways of doing things, that is fine. Provided it all adds up. If it does not add up, you do not make the decision. The one part that does not add up is for someone to tell people like those of us in the agricultural sector that carbon tax is a great thing and that it goes back to agriculture. In the past under REPS, when there was no carbon tax, farmers got nearly €1,000 more under their environmental payments. Those are the facts. They cannot be proved wrong. Show me why someone who does not have an alternative to using a harvester of 900 or 1,000 horsepower and who has to cut silage in one window of a particular month has to pay carbon tax when an alternative machine, whether electric or whatever, that can be used to do that work has not yet been made.

If we want to live in the perfect world, there is a thing called hydrotreated vegetable oil, HVO. The latter would reduce someone's emissions by something like 90%. Why are all the taxes on that if you want to tick the box? HVO, with modifications to a boiler, could be used in place of home heating oil and in diesel cars and tractors if it was made attractive to use. We put constructive proposals forward for the simple reason that we have to live realistically. We have to listen to the people. At the moment, people are hurting and when you are hurting you try and solve it and try and help them. That is our job collectively. It is not a case of "Me better than you" or anyone better than anyone else. We will disagree and have different viewpoints. Ultimately, however, people in each constituency voted for us to make their lives better. That is why I am asking the Minister of State to take that-----

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: Deputy Fitzmaurice is proof that you can make valid points without bursting our ear drums, screaming across the room and putting our hearing at risk?

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I thank the Minister of State.

Amendment to amendment put.

An Ceann Comhairle: In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time this evening. The Minister of State's point is taken. To be fair, there are microphones. For staff and all Members in the Chamber, it should be considered that the microphones are on and everyone can hear you.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: Some of us have deeper voices than others.

An Ceann Comhairle: I understand, but the staff have to be considered.

12 o'clock

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Léiríonn an tuairisc a d'fhoilsigh Bonkers.ie inniu go mbeadh aon socair a chuirfear ar fáil sa bhuiséad slogtha suas ag arduithe praghsanna. Tá go leor daoine óga ag smaoineamh ar imeacht thar lear ar thóir saol agus todhchaí níos fearr. Is í an cheist mhór ná cad a dhéanfaidh an Rialtas sa bhuiséad chun an saol a dhéanamh níos inacmhainne?

We are now less than two weeks to budget day. The main thing on people's minds is the runaway cost of living, and the big question is what the Government will do to get costs under control and help households keep their heads above water. Prices keep going up, the bills keep coming in and people are really sick of being ripped off. This morning we hear that the pressure on workers and families is set to increase in the next few weeks. An analysis published by Bonkers.ie shows that households will have to pay out over €1,000 just to cover the list of price hikes that have already been announced. I refer to hikes in gas and electricity costs, health insurance, PRSI, mortgage repayments and streaming services. The Minister, Deputy Chambers, and Simon Harris therefore simply cannot come in here on 6 October and roll out yet another budget that fails to tackle the cost of living and leaves working people behind.

To be clear, the Government's failure to tackle the affordability crisis has real consequences. Yesterday, the National Youth Council of Ireland published a startling report. It revealed that seven in ten of our young people are considering leaving Ireland. The biggest factor driving this sentiment among our young people is their inability to live an affordable life here. That is a damning indictment of more than a decade of Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael partnership Governments - budget after budget, decision after decision, short-changing working people and short-changing our young people. Young people have had it with being left at the back of the queue because our young people are smart and they get it. They hear from the Government that the economy is strong and the surpluses are large, yet they cannot get their start. They know also that while they are losing out, people at the very top are benefiting. They need to know that things can be different, that this is where they belong, that this is their country, that this is their home and that things can be better. Life can be affordable in Ireland, and this has to start with the budget.

The Government is floating and leaking a lot, but last night, in real terms, it faced its first test. It had the chance to back a Sinn Féin proposal to cut the cost of home heating oil by removing carbon taxes but it blocked that proposal and it failed that first test. It chose instead to let 700,000 households keep taking the pain.

Does the Minister accept or even recognise that the Government's policies have left young people behind? Does he accept or even recognise that its decisions leave working people behind? Does he accept or even recognise that households simply cannot afford another Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael budget that delivers simply more of the same?

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Jack Chambers): I completely reject the Deputy's constant failed state narrative, which Sinn Féin has been propagating for years now, from trying to break the State to then propagating a narrative that we have a failed State.

Deputy Martin Kenny: A failed Government.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I reject that in the hardest terms. We have a country of full employment-----

Deputy Cathy Bennett: There are 17,000 people homeless.

Deputy Jack Chambers: -----with continued resilience of our economy, despite the multiple shocks of recent years, and a Government that is motivated to give young people hope when it comes to housing, when it comes to their future and in terms of their employment and their wages. That is our central motivation as part of budget 2027. It is to drive better affordability in our economy and, yes, to respond to the serious pressures that we recognise many families and households face when it comes to the cost of living.

That is why there will be a targeted income tax package prioritising low- and middle-income workers to reward work in our economy and give them a break. It is why we want to make significant interventions and further progress when it comes to housing and delivering greater housing supply across our economy because, yes, the challenges and the pressures faced by young people are concentrated in affordability of homes and of rent. That is why areas like the renter's tax credit are under further consideration by the Government. Third, it is about ensuring we build a country that continues the levels of employment we have and continues to attract jobs and grow our economy into the medium term. While Sinn Féin just attacks the Government two weeks out from the budget, we are preparing a sensible, responsible and affordable budget that we can sustain into the medium to long term. Sinn Féin makes commitments and promises that would break our economy and undermine the public finances. That is the challenge with Sinn Féin. It proposes higher taxes and massive increases in expenditure. That does not give young people the longer term hope or prospects to live and build a life here. Everything we are doing is to protect capital investment in housing and infrastructure, so we prioritise investment in transport infrastructure, reduce congestion and build the social infrastructure and the communities that are required right across the country.

Let me be absolutely clear: the central objective of this Government is to respond to that immediate pressure. That is why we will take further decisions when it comes to the pricing of energy in our economy on budget day. It is why we will respond to affordability challenges

that young couples with children face when it comes to progress on childcare, for example. We want to ensure that the sentiment of young people is responded to in this budget with, again, improved housing supply and further progress in the delivery of social and affordable homes in 2027. That is the central motivation of the Government. Instead of just criticising, attacking and continuing with its negative dialogue day in, day out, Sinn Féin should come up with some suggestions or solutions for once-----

(Interruptions)

An Ceann Comhairle: Please allow the Minister to answer.

Deputy Jack Chambers: -----that would actually build hope in our economy, because all young people hear from Sinn Féin is higher taxes on work. How will that work for young people? They hear higher taxes on businesses that employ young people. How would that work for young people? How does that give them a greater prospect of a job in the medium term? There is also a level of objectionism to housing supply, which would not help housing supply in our economy. How would that help young people who need homes and want to buy homes across communities in our country?

We will respond to the issues with the cost of living, but we also need to be mindful that we are living with multiple conflicts internationally, a significant level of uncertainty in terms of the geopolitical position with the conflicts in the Middle East and elsewhere. I think people understand that that is impacting pricing in our economy and that the Government can insulate to some extent but cannot insulate all elements of how pricing is changing. That is reflected not only in Ireland but also internationally. We will prioritise interventions to help people. That is the focus of the next few weeks.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: There are absolutely solutions to all this. There is a constructive way forward. There is absolutely hope, especially for our phenomenal young people and for working families everywhere. Last night, we brought forward just one of those solutions, which could have had an immediate effect for 700,000 households, a solution to remove carbon taxes and make home heating oil in some way affordable for those families that were struggling. We will never apologise for shouting out for working people right across this land and for our young people, who have to be listened to, who have to be given hope and who have to see the solutions in concrete terms. That means a Government making the right choices. We need to choose working families, we need to choose our young people and we need to choose hope in the future and not to continue with the Government's track, which is to look after the better-off and the developers and not to upset the banks. That is what will give people hope, those concrete choices. Last night, the Government made its position clear. It chose not to intervene and not to support our solution.

Deputy Jack Chambers: We did not acquiesce with Sinn Féin's classic political opportunism, which they repeat here every week. They are all about shouting out and giving no solutions to anybody. The higher level of tax they would impose across our economy would break it and it would not be able to accommodate half of the spending demands they continually repeat here. We did not agree to the Bill because we have a budget in two weeks. We have a budget that will help working people and reward work but also address some of the cost

pressures families face, specifically with home heating oil. We have been clear that is a specific consideration in our tax policy measures and will be considered, as well as further deferral of excise on petrol and diesel.

(Interruptions)

An Ceann Comhairle: Your leader was not interrupted.

Deputy Jack Chambers: We will use our budget with the Tánaiste, specifically focusing on the energy issues families are facing. Sinn Féin is just seeking to bring that forward and score political points. That is not a solution or a constructive-type of opposition when we have a global conflict and significant international uncertainty. It is just populism, opportunism and a reckless imposition of taxes.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Minister. I call Deputy Cian O'Callaghan.

Deputy Jack Chambers: It is the Sinn Féin approach. It does not work. It would break our economy, and it will give no hope to young people who want that certainty into the long term.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Minister, time is up. I call Deputy O'Callaghan.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Says the party that broke our economy, the actual party that broke our economy.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy O'Callaghan is on his feet.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Honest to God, the Deputy has got a brass neck.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Minister-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Fianna Fail actually broke the economy.

An Ceann Comhairle: Excuse me. The Deputy is on his feet. Can we have some courtesy please?

Deputy Pearse Doherty: There is only party in here-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Doherty, please.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: -----that broke the economy, and it is over there on the other side of the Chamber.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: No pointing fingers now, Pearse.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, look here, can we all exercise some decorum? This has to run efficiently. Deputy O'Callaghan is on his feet.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: This morning, I spoke with a mother about her 13-year-old son. He is autistic and non-verbal. In July he was told he had a place in Belmayne special school. I am sure the Minister can imagine the sheer relief and excitement of hearing that news. Starting a new school is a huge moment. One can imagine the logistics, planning and emotional preparation. Now, I want the Minister to imagine what it must feel like to be told you will be starting school in September, only for September to roll around and you are still stuck at home. When I spoke to this child's mother this morning she was at her wits' end. She told me her child is now going backwards. He is not sleeping. He woke four times last night. She spoke of her utter heartbreak watching children walk by the front window on their way to school while her child languishes at home with no solution in sight. This Government claims disability services are a priority. However, despite all of its pre-election commitments and promises, disabled people and their families continue to be failed. Every day they must battle with a State that is supposed to be there to help them just to get the bare minimum. Every day they learn that is too much to ask. The Taoiseach, Micheál Martin, has been a champion of special schools. He has called them "the future" but he has not been so vocal on the serious issues these schools and their pupils are grappling with, even though it is in the Government's gift to resolve them. These schools need proper staffing levels, proper resources and multi-disciplinary teams.

I know some families watching this have children who do not have a school place. There are others attending special schools who are provided with just a few hours per day. Their children are denied the support they need to make their education a success. I want to be clear that these issues are not the fault of the staff, who are trying their best in difficult circumstances. The fault lies with the Minister's Government. It is only too happy to get the positive media coverage when announcing these new schools but behind the scenes it is failing to resource them with the staffing levels they need. Behind these headlines are young children sitting at home while their peers move on with their lives.

I have two simple questions. Does the Minister think any of this is acceptable, and when will the children promised a start in school this September, actually be able to take up a school place?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Deputy. As a constituency TD like him, I regularly deal with many children who have in some instances not gotten a place. To be fair to the work of the Minister, Deputy Naughton, and the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, that has improved significantly at the start of September this year compared with previous years. I do not have the specific case details of the child in Belmayne the Deputy mentioned and I regret they do not have a place. We will take that up with the Department of education and the NCSC afterwards. Every child should have their educational rights vindicated in this State, including children who have special educational needs. What we have sought to do over the past number of years is to respond to the level of demand we have seen increase for special education across our State. We have 34,000 children who will be enrolled in special classes and special schools

in this school year, which is an 86 % increase since 2020. In fairness to the NCSC and the Department of education, they have responded to that level of demand. Most children are being accommodated in special classes, and we have ramped up provision of special schools as well.

On the parent and child the Deputy is speaking about, that step change in investment, staffing and provision has not delivered for them. I will ask the different arms of the Department of education and others to respond to that. We have prioritised our wider budgetary provision on special education, which we have also engaged on at the Oireachtas committee. There is a €3 billion investment in special education for 2026, the highest annual provision in the history of the State and a 58% increase since 2020. You can see the front-line delivery of that. Special classes have increased by more than 136% since 2020 with more than 4,000 classes supporting more than 34,000 students.

I turn to the Deputy's question on staffing and supports. SNA numbers have increased by 45% with 26,000 SNAs expected to be working in schools by the year end. There will be 22,500 special education teachers in place by the year end. We have sought to prioritise this area because as constituency TDs we all recognise that no child should be at home when they should be in a school place, in a special class or a special school. The position and work of the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, and the Minister, Deputy Naughton, have improved that with the portal established to give much better forward planning 12 months ahead of schedule, so there is better ability for the NCSC to plan and respond to that demand. I will ask the respective State agencies to respond to the Deputy's specific case.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Minister.

Deputy Jack Chambers: The motivation of Government for next year-----

An Ceann Comhairle: You will have a response.

Deputy Jack Chambers: -----is to continue to resource special education in a way that meets the level of demand that is there.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Every child has a right to an education, and this Government is failing to deliver on their rights. As we speak there are children sitting at home without a school place. I have raised with the Minister that this is not isolated. There are children who were given school places and who were meant to start in September. They and their families were told at the beginning of July that they had a school place in September. At the end of August, after they kept chasing and chasing, they found out that the place they had been given and promised does not actually seem to exist at the moment. Why is that happening? Why are families being put through the trauma and stress of being promised a place and told their child has a place, and yet here they are coming towards the end of September, and the child is sitting at home regressing? The Government has promised them a place. Why are they at home? Why are they not in school? When is the Minister going to give these families some certainty about when their children can start school? They have been given no information at all - nothing. When is the Minister going to give them answers?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Deputy. I just spoke with the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, about this issue. He said he will follow up on this particular case. The cohort of children who may be waiting this year is far smaller than in previous years because of the level of investment. However, it is incumbent to the Deputy's point that the NCSC and the Department of education ensure that where a commitment is made, it is delivered on. From my perspective, we have provided a prioritisation of this in our budgetary process to vindicate every person's educational rights, as should be the case. It is important that the respective bodies and structures there to deliver that do so for the children involved. In my constituency in previous years there was acute pressure in September of any given year and that has been reduced significantly in 2026 compared with previous years through the success of the portal and the forward planning structure.

Obviously, in the case the Deputy raised, that has not worked for them thus far. We will take up the case with the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, and engage directly with the Deputy about it.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: The whole country owes a debt of gratitude to Nikita Hand. We thank Nikita for the bravery she has shown. So many other people have felt emboldened to speak up about abuse they have experienced because Nikita's courage gave them courage. Speaking about her new book in recent days, Nikita Hand has talked with extraordinary dignity about suffering the trauma of rape and sexual violence. She has also spoken about the long-term impacts on her: PTSD; hours-long panic attacks; and experiencing her own body - in her words - being "turned into a crime scene". As she said, powerfully: "You do lose a huge part of yourself when something so traumatic happens to you after being raped, or sexually assaulted". The multimillionaire sportsperson who was found liable in a civil court is responsible for causing this loss to Nikita Hand, and his violation has continued long after the assault was over. Nikita should be, and is, the national treasure, not him. As a Dáil, we have responsibility to show perpetrators that we reject them and their horrific conduct - that they are to blame.

But this is not Nikita Hand's ordeal alone. Tragically, there is an epidemic of sexual, domestic and gender-based violence in our society, and a culture of misogyny, which feeds the proclivities of perpetrators, who, frighteningly, walk among us every day. The Government's policy on gender-based violence is described as one of no tolerance but that zero-tolerance approach still sees parts of Irish society and the State tolerating the intolerable. Why should a victim be made to feel responsible for the reputation of the perpetrator or the well-being of his family? Why is it that domestic abusers can still use our courts system to wage further torment on the people to whom they cause such suffering? Why is it that, in just six months, nearly 2,000 women were turned away from domestic violence services due to a lack of State-funded beds?

For that matter, why is it that victims, usually women and children, still have to leave their own homes to seek safety? Why does the abuser get to stay in the family home? That is still the reality all too often. The stakes are high. Women's Aid records that nine women have been killed this year, already more than the total number of femicide victims last year. A quick escape can make the difference between a life saved and a life lost but, sadly, the difference between escape and remaining trapped can be heartbreakingly mundane: money for a taxi, a deposit for a flat or a new phone. That is why the Labour Party has proposed the safe fund - a three-year, €3 million, non-means-tested fund for immediate financial support to survivors of

domestic violence when they need it, to be administered by Women's Aid, which I met recently to discuss this.

The Taoiseach has previously expressed warm words about our proposal, but the budget is in just two weeks and we have heard nothing from the Minister. He controls the purse strings. I have a simple question for him: will he commit today to save lives and fund the safe fund in budget 2027?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank Deputy Bacik for raising this important issue. I echo what she said about the bravery, courage and leadership of Nikita Hand, who has done the State some service in her wider leadership over the last number of months. From all of what she has said, we must ensure that we continue to support many victims of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. The Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, has led a number of initiatives in this area through some of his legislative reforms across the last 12 months. As Deputy Bacik said, the Government is taking a zero-tolerance approach to this and to ensuring that survivors can access the support, protection and justice that they need. Any such behaviour has no place in a modern society. To repeat, those engaged in domestic violence will be investigated and prosecuted. The work of the previous Minister, Deputy McEntee, and the Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, over the last number of years has shown that we are taking an unprecedented whole-of-government approach to the scourge of violence, which we are seeing too often in our communities. That was reflected in unprecedented funding of €80 million across the range of service provision in budget 2026.

To speak to the delivery of some of the accommodation, we are accelerating delivery of safe accommodation with a commitment to provide 287 safe spaces by the end of 2026, significantly strengthening capacity. As the Deputy knows, the Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, has progressed Jennie's Law, Valerie's Law and other important initiatives and has prioritised this in the context of the EU Presidency overall.

In response to Deputy Bacik's point on the budget, we will obviously continue our engagements as part of the Estimates process. We need to continue to make further progress in this area around the funding of the different initiatives that are involved, including accommodation, which is essential in communities where in some instances there is the gap that the Deputy referenced. We will continue to work to support Cuan, which provides leadership, oversight and accountability for delivery as well. We will consider that in the Estimates process overall. It will be a priority for the Government to continue supporting the co-ordinated response across many of the strategies that have been published and to make further progress in this area; that victims be supported not only at the point of crisis, but right the way through the justice system; and the different parts of the State are there to support them and have the respective funding streams to continue making progress in 2027.

We will consider the Deputy's specific suggestion. I appreciate her raising this important issue today.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I thank the Minister for his positive words. As he says, Nikita Hand has indeed done the State some service in speaking out and I acknowledge the progress that has been made, but there are still far too many gaps in provision for victims and survivors, as I think the Minister has acknowledged. Clearly, there are still serious gaps in the provision of

refuge spaces. This is something we in the Labour Party have been speaking out on for many years now. We need to see that addressed urgently. The proposal we make - I will supply the Minister with more information on it - is a very practical one to address another very practical gap in support. To be clear, we believe that perpetrators should be the ones removed from a violent home, but so long as that is not always the case, State inertia is currently making it really difficult and sometimes impossible for those who experience domestic abuse to escape from violence, which puts lives in danger. Where do survivors go if they have no money? How do they get the immediate funds necessary to resource that escape, often with small children and sometimes in the middle of the night, as Women's Aid will tell the Minister and anyone who listens. That is why we have proposed the safe fund. It is a simple, straightforward proposal. It has been done elsewhere. We appeal again to the Minister to introduce the safe fund in this budget.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am sorry. There is a malfunction in the clock but I am watching the time on the screen.

Deputy Jack Chambers: You will hold us to account on the time, a Cheann Comhairle.

I appreciate Deputy Bacik raising this. We will consider that with the Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, in the context of the Estimates. I know he is keen to ensure that there is further progress in 2027. We obviously want to give effect to the wider recommendations in the O'Malley review, which is all about seeking to supporting the victim's journey right through the criminal justice system and from the point of crisis right the way through. That speaks to the further progress we have to make with Cuan and the different State bodies and agencies that co-ordinate the response. We will give consideration to that. It is important as well to ensure that the broader State agencies are prioritising this in how we fund them, and that is something we want to continue to make progress on. The Minister is working on a new five-year strategy from 2027 to 2031 in terms of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, which is to give further progress and momentum to this area and to develop that across the coming years.

Deputy Michael Collins: I beg your indulgence, a Cheann Comhairle, for a few seconds to welcome all the councillors from Independent Ireland, from all over the country, that have come up to the Dáil today, especially Councillor Mark Casey, who is joining Independent Ireland. He is our 27th councillor. We welcome him.

I want to talk about what is happening to families all over the country when it comes to the debacle that is school transport, because you could not make some of this up even if you tried. I will give the Minister a sample of the thousands of school bus ticket problems throughout Ireland. We have children who have held concessionary school bus tickets for the last number of years. Their paperwork describes them as priority concessionary applicants. This year, they have no seats on the bus, yet we are dealing with cases where people who have applied more recently for concessionary places have received tickets on the same buses. Will the Minister explain to me what "priority" means if a family that has held those seats for years suddenly loses them while fewer applicants are accommodated? We have students waiting for concessionary tickets yet we are informed that there are ten empty seats on the bus. These children have no proper way of getting to school while the bus is passing their door with empty

seats. Then we have another young family who made the major decision recently to return home from Australia with their children. Their children are eligible for school transport, yet because of the timing of their application, they have been told their request will not be reviewed now. They may be accommodated in the 2027-28 school year, but even that is not guaranteed.

What are they supposed to do? Is one parent to give up work? Is that how we welcome a young Irish family back to rural Ireland? Then there is communication with Bus Éireann. Parents become desperate and frustrated. They come to our offices because they cannot get an answer. The public representatives themselves are then left waiting far too long for responses. I also want transparency on the allocation of concessionary tickets where a lottery or random selection process is used. Who conducts this? Who oversees it? How is it recorded? How can parents be satisfied that the system is fair?

The 2020 programme for Government committed to reviewing the school transport scheme to achieve better outcomes and reduce car journeys. The review was done. At the Fianna Fáil Ard-Fheis in 2024 the then Minister for Education, Deputy Foley, stated the Government was going to reduce the distance rule to 1 km for primary schools and 2 km for post-primary school so that more children could gain access. She also stated the Government was going to introduce a system whereby the nearest school rule would be removed to give greater choice and greater flexibility. Why has the Government not delivered? Why are children being left on the side of the road? Why are parents stressed out of their minds trying to get their kids to school? Parents are trying to get out to work in a cost-of-living crisis so why is the Government not delivering on the promises it made in 2024?

Fianna Fáil went into the 2024 general election promising 100,000 additional students on school transport by 2030. Similar promises were made in the 2025 programme for Government. What is the Government waiting for? When will the Government implement the school transport review it has already committed to? Does the Government still stand over the commitment made by the then Minister, Deputy Foley, to reduce the distance criteria to 1 km for primary pupils and 2 km for post-primary pupils? Will the Government remove the nearest school rule?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank Deputy Collins. As he knows, the wider organisation and the operation of it is managed by Bus Éireann and the Department of Education and Youth sets the wider policy and the funding profile. To answer the question, if we stand back and look at the funding of the school transport scheme from 2019 or 2020 to this year, it has expanded significantly. We had 120,000 children using the service in 2019 and this number is now at over 180,000 pupils in 2026. This is a 50% growth in a very short number of years. This speaks to a Government that has prioritised this and is funding it at a greater level. The funding for school transport in 2019 was approximately €219 million and this will rise to more than €600 million this year. This is a scheme that is heavily subsidised, and rightly so, and supports many families throughout the country.

With this level of growth there are certain constraints in areas where the demand has risen. This is managed, as Deputy Collins knows, by Bus Éireann and the current terms of the scheme are continuing to apply for the 2026-2027 school year. This means children are eligible for transport at primary level where they reside not less than 3.2 km from and attend their nearest

school and at post-primary level where they reside not less than 4.8 km and attend the nearest school.

As eligible children have to be facilitated in the first instance, the available of concessionary transport varies from year to year and cannot be guaranteed for the duration of the child's time at a particular school. Bus Éireann has always arranged for the service to be full based on the capacity of the vehicle and there can be instances where a given bus may have empty seats. As we know, some people do not always use their ticket for various reasons during a particular year. Bus Éireann can only reallocate tickets that have been handed back by a family.

We have the Estimates process upcoming. What we have had to do over the past 12 months in particular is to manage a level of demand that has increased significantly to absorb it with additional capacity. Every year we have to assess what the projected demand will be in the next school year and what the capacity constraints are in the system to deliver against this. This will be the same for this year. Obviously we want to see more children using school transport. This speaks to the level of funding, which we have increased in the last number of years. Any further changes to be considered as part of the Estimates process will come down to the extent to which the funding support can grow, the demands projected by the Department of education and Bus Éireann's capacity to put it into operation.

Deputy Michael Collins: I thank the Minister. The school transport scheme has been reviewed and promises have been made yet children are still being left behind. This is the major issue we have. How can a child have no transport while a bus passes their door with ten empty seats? Why are priority concessionary pupils receiving no apparent priority? When will the nearest school restriction, and this is a very serious question on which the Government has promised but not delivered, be changed? Have the promised 100,000 additional places been delivered? The Minister has said that 60,000 or 70,000 have. When will extra buses be rolled out for children who need to go to school?

We also need a fair electronic system to detect non-use and to reallocate seats that are persistently unused to children who desperately need them. Basically it should be a case of use it or lose it. These are children trying to get to school. They are not numbers on a spreadsheet. If Bus Éireann and the Department cannot administer the scheme properly and make sensible use of empty seats, is it time to hand its administration to somebody who can?

Deputy Jack Chambers: The challenge is that if we were to follow through on Deputy Collins's suggestion and remove the system we have today, it would be far more challenging for many of the pupils and students who use it. It is a very complex system built up over many years, which has significant organisation to it across many parts of rural Ireland. If we were to follow through on what Deputy Collins suggested, we would have significant disruption to service capacity right across the country and we need to be cognisant of that.

What we will seek to do in the budget is, obviously, to assess the wider demand projection for 2027-28. Also, we know there is increased demand, particularly at second level, which has to be accommodated and obviously different distances are required there. We will assess that. What we are saying is that we will have to assess the demand profile and what the consequences are in terms of what is required in direct Exchequer funding. That is our wider assessment around how we would phase any changes to the existing criteria, to answer Deputy Collins's

question. We will continue to keep this under review as we assess the wider dynamics of school transport.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Seán Kyne: I wish to raise the future of Galway Port with the Minister this morning. I believe he has an important role to play, as Minister for Public expenditure and due to his previous role as Minister of State at the Department of Transport who had responsibility for ports and who visited and engaged with Galway Port CEOs, the harbourmaster and the chairs of the Galway Port company over the years.

Under the national ports policy 2013 Galway Harbour Company transferred ownership to Galway City Council. The transfer changed the shareholder but did not resolve Galway Port's long-term place in the national port system. This year Galway Port received planning permission for its ambitious but realistic extension and relocation plans, which will include a rail link and will cater for larger cargo ships, including naval berth, allow for easier and safer access for cruise ships, free up land for housing in the inner harbour, provide additional leisure and recreational land, have a positive impact on the city council's rates base and protect the city from flooding surges. I am sure the Minister will agree that all of these are positive.

However, the draft ports policy, which ended its public consultation at the end of August, continues to include Galway Port as a port of regional significance only. Why is Galway the exception among Ireland's port cities? Dublin, Cork and Waterford are included as national ports, as is Limerick via Foynes. What is the funding route for Galway Harbour Company's extension shortfall? It has its own resources and it can sell land and draw down a loan, but there will be a shortfall as the Minister is aware. Will the ports policy accept that Galway has huge international demand from cruise ships, with bookings extending into 2033?

In its submission Galway City Council stated local authority-owned ports should have equal access to State, EU and blended funding where projects satisfy transparent criteria and deliver national, regional or public value. Equal access does not mean that every project should be funded but it means that projects should be assessed on their own merits rather than excluded because of ownership, in this case local authority ownership, or port classification, in this case as a regional port.

Galway Port is, since the last ports policy, part of the EU TEN-T comprehensive network and this recognition should have practical consequences in national investment planning, infrastructure development and access to appropriate funding. Galway City Council's request is that the final ports policy should explicitly state the future role of Galway Port in the national commercial port and TEN-T networks.

The policy should also confirm that all ports within its scope, including local authority-owned ports and TEN-T ports, that are not ports of national significance, may access Exchequer, European and blended finance through transparent project-based criteria. This must include an Exchequer funding route for maritime safety, access and resilience infrastructure where the wider public benefits cannot be funded from port revenues only.

Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Jack Chambers): I thank Deputy Kyne for raising this important issue. I am very familiar with the Port of Galway, having visited it many times in my role as a Minister of State at the Department of Transport. I know the ambition in the port to grow, as well as the Deputy's wider work in Galway West over the last number of years to bring that to fruition.

As the Deputy knows, the draft revision of the national ports policy, for which the second public consultation period ended on 28 August, confirms the importance of the Galway Harbour Company and other ports of regional significance to their immediate hinterlands and, crucially, to supporting balanced regional development. It is supportive of all ports of national and regional significance in maximising their contribution to meeting the needs of the State. The wider programme for Government commits to supporting investment in our commercial and passenger port infrastructure through that national ports policy.

We approved that new policy as a Government on 16 June and it encourages all ports with commercial activity not only to contribute to the facilitation of trade but also to support renewable energy, energy security, climate adaptation and decarbonisation goals, both within their regions and across the State as a whole. In this context, I welcome An Coimisiún Pleanála's decision in April of this year to grant planning permission for the extension of the Port of Galway, marking a significant infrastructural milestone for Galway city and the wider west of Ireland. To the Deputy's point, this project represents a very positive example of ambition and growth and the necessity for balanced regional development.

The Minister for Transport has advised me, though, that 91 written submissions were made during the recent consultation on the draft revision of the national ports policy, including from the Galway Harbour Company, Galway City Council and Galway County Council. These are currently being assessed by the Department of Transport. It is the intention of the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, to submit a final draft of the policy to the Government by the end of the year.

With our new national ports policy, we are trying to ensure that our ports are that growth centre for renewable energy and the intensification of housing supply and to ensure that we build that regeneration, which is possible. Obviously, there will have to be choices around how we allocate capital to that, which is something for the Government to consider when the new national ports policy is developed. It has much more ambition than where the national ports policy sits today. I know it was significantly constraining, particularly for regional ports across our country. They may not have been able to develop in line with their wider ambition up to now. I think the new ports policy will be a catalyst for much greater economic development for ports of regional significance. We will have to make choices on what the funding for that will be, but, between the continued work to get planning permission in respect of development and the finalisation of the new national ports policy, it will represent an important ability to follow through on that wider ambition for the Port of Galway.

Deputy Seán Kyne: I thank the Minister for his response. He spoke about renewable energy. The Port of Galway presently handles about 20% of Ireland's onshore wind development components. Unfortunately, the Port of Galway has been judged by its existing tonnage capability rather than what it can achieve and will achieve in its new port extension. It was a different world and a different era back in 2013. Many people, including members of the

Minister's own party, quite rightly criticised that ports policy, but it is continuing now in the draft policy. That mistake is continuing on now in the draft policy. My request to the Minister, the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste, the Minister for Transport and the Minister of State with responsibility for ports in the Department of Transport, is that it be ensured that the next and final policy delivers for the Port of Galway and for Galway city. It has to deliver for the Port of Galway and for Galway city.

Deputy Jack Chambers: In the first instance, the ports policy is seeking to prioritise the commercial aspect of each port of national or regional significance. That is an important principle and discipline across how we manage all our ports. It also speaks to wider that ambition which may not have been reflected previously and the potential of ports around renewable energy, energy security and other issues, which may not have been assessed to the same extent at the time of the previous ports policy.

This is why the further consultation was ongoing and why we want to continue that engagement on the draft ports policy. It still has to come back to the Government for a final decision by the end of the year. As per the programme for Government and the commitment to develop a new national ports policy, we are clear that we do want to ensure that the momentum in infrastructural development and balanced regional development happens in the Port of Galway and across the west of Ireland, with its huge potential for renewable energy. We want to fulfil that ambition through this ports policy.

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

Deputy Joanna Byrne: This week, our national football team looks set to line out against the terrorist State of Israel in the Nations League. The Government has been completely devoid of leadership and humanity on this issue and its inaction and reluctance to intervene or enable the FAI to withdraw from fixtures will be a lasting stain on our nation.

Sporting infrastructure and stadiums have been obliterated and 75,000 Palestinians have been murdered. This includes 566 footballers, 100 of whom are children, who have been murdered. The Government has chosen to sit on its hands and make Ireland complicit in sportswashing genocide. In referencing genocide yesterday, the Taoiseach himself stated that Israel cannot continue denying what the world knows. We now need action to back up the Government's words and soundbites when it comes to challenging Israel on its ethnic cleansing mission in Palestine. What is it to be: 90 minutes of football and six points or 75,000 lives? What matters more? The Government and the FAI have left our footballers exposed and hung out to dry. They should never have had to shoulder this burden. I am asking the Government, once again, to intervene to stop these games.

Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Jack Chambers): We heard the Taoiseach's remarks yesterday and we saw the personalised comments directed by the Israeli FA at Heimur Hallgrímsson, which were completely inappropriate. We have been clear in all of what we have said on this and other matters relating to Israel, Gaza and the shocking actions of Israel. We have been consistent on this. The only place where we get criticism of it is in this House. There is a very strong view

across the Government of complete solidarity with the people of Palestine and regarding the genocide which is occurring in Palestine. There is total solidarity in the House here with the people of Palestine. The Deputy knows as well as everybody else that the Government does not control what fixtures are fulfilled. The FAI has articulated the reasons for which it is continuing with that particular fixture, over which we do not have control. We have to respect the FAI in respect of running games.

Deputy Liam Quaide: Imagine a new mother in acute psychological distress being told that to get the inpatient care she needs she must be separated from her baby. This is still the reality in Ireland because, nine years after it was recommended, we still do not have a specialist mother and baby unit. This is highlighted today on *thejournal.ie*. The Irish Association for Infant Mental Health, I-AIMH, is clear that women and babies should be supported together. We know this in our bones. A mother and her baby should not be separated. That early bond is foundational and separation can worsen the mental health difficulty itself.

This sits against the gravest possible backdrop. Suicide is the leading cause of pregnancy-related deaths between six weeks and one year after birth. Ireland, of all countries, should understand the consequences of separating mothers and babies. We have a painful history of doing exactly that. A modern health service should never recreate that separation. After nine years, what is holding this unit up and when exactly will it open?

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): Perinatal mental healthcare has been transformed over the past ten years. We now have six consultant-led multidisciplinary teams in our major maternity hospitals and specialist perinatal midwives providing targeted supports in a further 13 hospitals. This means that perinatal mental health services are now available in all 19 maternity hospitals. The demand has been huge. Nearly one in five of all pregnant mothers has looked for support. Some need more support than others. In budget 2026, I funded a further consultant psychiatrist to work in two of the main teams in Dublin, at the Rotunda and the Coombe.

In relation to the specific question from the Deputy, St. Vincent's University Hospital has been selected as the location for Ireland's first perinatal mother and baby unit. The Department of Health continues to progress this plan as part of the wider capital plan.

I have secured up to €470 million for mental health capital spending up to 2030. I hope to progress this project as quickly as possible.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: The Minister, Deputy Chambers, spoke about solidarity with the people of Palestine but it is appalling to see the Government refusing visas for students from Gaza who are fleeing a genocide and have already secured funded scholarships in Irish universities. There is an ongoing case involving nearly 30 such students, which the Government is fighting in the courts. From what we know of the reasons given for visa refusals, the grounds seem really spurious, including an inability to supply original documents from banks and post offices that have been bombed to dust in Gaza. One engineering student literally risked his life crossing the Gaza Strip to do a required English proficiency test, which he passed with flying colours, only then to be refused a visa to come here to take up his place. Serious contradictions in Government policy have emerged. The Department of further

education encourages students from Gaza to apply for scholarships here, while the Department of justice condemns them to remain in a war zone by refusing visas. How can the Government stand over such a cruel policy? The justice and further education Ministries are held by Fianna Fáil. The Minister, Deputy Chambers, and his colleagues could address this issue by granting visas.

Deputy Jack Chambers: The Government is deeply conscious of the humanitarian crisis facing Palestinians. Ireland has consistently stood in solidarity with the Palestinian people, including by supporting access to higher education opportunities in this State. Since the outbreak of the war in 2023, 90 students have been awarded Government-funded scholarships to study here. In addition, approximately 60 Gazan students have come here to study in that period through scholarships offered directly by higher education institutions. For the 2026-27 academic year, data from the Department of justice tells us that 50 student visas have been granted to students from Gaza. The Ministers, Deputies Lawless and Jim O'Callaghan, are now engaging directly with higher education representative bodies to progress a clear pathway for eligible students for the next academic year. We all are in solidarity with Palestinians. We all want to see these scholarships awarded and visas facilitated. It is a matter then of each individual application being assessed.

Deputy Paul Murphy: It is almost two years since Dr. Abu Safiyya was detained by the Israeli occupying forces. His crime was to not abandon his hospital in Gaza. He is being held in solitary confinement. He is being kicked, beaten and tortured every single day. He has not been charged with any crimes. He is just one of hundreds of thousands of victims of Israel's genocide, brutality and occupation. It is scandalous that the Minister stands in this Chamber again and again to talk about genocide but he will not say that our football team should not be normalising the genocidal Israeli state by playing football against its team. It is absolutely scandalous. I appeal to the Ireland players to do the right thing. The Government and the FAI are not brave enough to say we should not play football against baby killers. Unfortunately, it is now in the hands of the players to do the right thing, shame the Government and show the whole world where the support of the Irish people lies.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I reiterate our position of total solidarity with the Palestinian people.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Do something then.

Deputy Jack Chambers: There is a collective view in this House on the shocking genocide that has occurred. As I have said to the Deputy's colleagues, the Government does not and cannot decide whether a fixture will be fulfilled. The FAI has set out its reasoning for fulfilling this particular fixture. We have heard the comments by the Irish manager, Heimir Hallgrímsson, who, like his players, is in total solidarity with the Palestinian people. The FAI has engaged with UEFA as part of addressing its concerns regarding this particular fixture. The Government has no role in organising fixtures or deciding whether they are played.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: It has been reported to me by a worker in the national children's hospital that there are major problems with 400 bathrooms in the new hospital in terms of the insulation that was used. I have been told there will be massive delays while the defective bathrooms are being fixed and this will cost the taxpayer dearly. As we know, portions of the insulation used previously at the hospital were similar to those involved in the fatal 2017 Grenfell Tower fire. Another worker has told me the ventilation system in the hospital is still not up to clinical standard. Approximately 5,000 rooms are involved. At the latest count, some 100,000 defects have been identified in the hospital, there were 20 missed deadlines and the construction cost has ballooned to €2.24 billion. The facility was supposed to open six years ago. Will the Minister tell the Dáil today when those 400 bathrooms will be fixed, at what cost to the taxpayer and who will be held to account? When will the incineration of taxpayers' money end?

Deputy Jack Chambers: We are all agreed on the need to ensure lessons are learned from that particular contract. We have had independent evaluations of what occurred and they absolutely will inform future contracts, whether in health infrastructure or in other areas. That is well documented and has been well debated here and at Oireachtas committees. I do not have to hand the specific detail on the issues the Deputy has raised. No hospital should open unless it meets regulatory standards for patient safety.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Will the Minister come back to me with specific details?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I will ask the Minister for Health or Children's Health Ireland to respond to the specific concerns expressed by particular workers and raised by the Deputy today.

Deputy James O'Connor: An important survey done by the National Youth Council of Ireland shows that seven in ten young adults have considered leaving this country to go abroad for a better quality of life. As a young person in politics supporting the Government, I want to ask the youngest member of the Cabinet how the Government feels about this specific issue. We know the economy is in a sound and solid position but people are not feeling that in their ordinary lives, particularly the young people who want to access housing and a better quality of life. Is there more the Government needs to do to respond to the sentiment expressed by young people that democracy in Ireland is not working out for them and their families?

Deputy Jack Chambers: The sentiment of young people is absolutely essential in how we frame and decide different policies. The single biggest priority of the Government is ensuring supply and affordability of housing. We want to ensure young people have the prospect of owning or getting a home and that there is rent affordability. To give balance to the survey the Deputy mentioned, many young people are coming back to live in Ireland and are getting jobs here. Of course, I am as concerned as anybody by the sentiment reflected in the National Youth Council of Ireland survey. Our central focus in the budget will be on the cost of living, affordability in people's day-to-day lives and, most importantly, improving housing supply, including by building social infrastructure and homes in communities right across the country. The central issue feeding the sentiment expressed in the survey is the need to address affordable housing and wider housing supply.

Deputy David Maxwell: My question concerns the inadequate school transport services this year and every year for rural families. We see countless families who have paid on time for the tickets they applied for, only to be told there is no place on the bus. Some children, having used a bus for a number of years, were advised this summer that there is no room for holders of concessionary tickets. Parents tell me they see school buses passing down their road with empty seats. Will funding be approved in the budget to allow for the upgrading of buses, including, for example, from a 20-odd-seater to accommodate a greater number? There are options to tackle this problem. I am making the case for more funding for school transport to allow children to travel to school without this major headache for parents next year.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I know people in some rural communities, where there is a certain level of demand, do not have a ticket or have had issues with the organisation or operation of this service. It is important to stand back and look at overall Government investment in the service. As I have said previously in the House, it has increased exponentially. The funding of the school transport system must be sustainable and must fit within our broader medium-term plan for growth and expenditure in the economy. The funding has gone from €219 million in 2019 to more than €600 million this year. The future profile of that funding must be sustainable and must fit within our broader plans. We want to support improved capacity. We have seen the level of demand increase from 120,000 children in 2019 to 180,000 in 2026. That represents such positive use of the service but, obviously, it has presented some capacity constraints. We will work with the Minister for education to ensure we continue to improve the service in the months ahead.

1 o'clock

Deputy Louis O'Hara: I have been contacted by a group of midwives in Galway who have completed their internships. They are fully qualified but have been informed that there is currently a recruitment freeze in the health service and positions will not be offered to them. This is despite the fact that the director of midwifery at University Hospital Galway has confirmed to them that there are currently 23 vacant midwifery posts across the Galway University Hospitals. These midwives have spent years in education, training and gaining clinical experience in order to qualify. We know that there are significant staffing pressures in our hospitals. It is totally unacceptable that they would not be employed within our public health service. This is a direct result of Government policy, which has imposed unrealistic budgets and which has restricted hospitals from directly recruiting the essential staff they need. These talented people who have worked hard to qualify as midwives deserve to be employed by the HSE. These vacant posts should be filled in order that these midwives can provide care to women and families and not be lost to countries abroad. I want the Minister to give a commitment that this will happen.

Deputy Jack Chambers: Budget 2026 allocated €27.4 billion in funding for the health system in 2026, which is a record allocation of current expenditure and an increase of 6.2% on 2025. We stood up a structure of regional executives that were given an employment allocation in the context of the record budget we introduced. In some instances, those executives recruited in excess of that. It is matter for those executives, in conjunction with the HSE and the

Department of Health, to ensure that we absolutely prioritise clinical staff, nurses and the front-line interface of patient services.

I reject the suggestion that we have an underfunded health service. We have a health service that has been funded to an exceptional level over the past number of years, rightly so, and that has been underpinned by Sláintecare and so on. We also need to ensure we prioritise how we recruit.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: What about the recruitment of these midwives?

An Ceann Comhairle: I am sorry Deputy, time is up. I call Deputy Darren O'Rourke.

Deputy Jack Chambers: It is a matter for the HSE-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Minister, time is up.

Deputy Jack Chambers: -----and the Department of Health to prioritise any further recruitment in line with the budget we have provided.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I wish to raise the school transport scheme. Thousands of children across the State have been left without places on school buses. Scores of children in my county of Meath, including at least 23 in north Meath who attend to O'Carolan College in Nobber, have been affected. The Government conducted a review of the scheme. It emerged that what locks many people out are the eligibility criteria. People who qualify for concessionary tickets are being left off school buses. Bus Éireann says that it cannot sanction extra places for concessionary pupils without getting the okay from the Minister. I am looking for the Minister to okay those additional places. When will the eligibility criteria be changed in line with the Government's review? Will the Government introduce a monitoring system in respect of the actual usage of the tickets? This is a significant issue. Tickets are allocated but many are not used on a daily basis.

Deputy Jack Chambers: This has been a big priority for Government over the past number of years. That is reflected in how we have budgeted for this and how we expanded the scheme. There has been a 50% increase in pupils utilising school transport this year compared with 2019. That has been reflected in how we are supporting it. I accept that there are particular issues in feedback from local communities where a ticket is given and not utilised and where another pupil who requires a ticket is not given one. There should probably be better monitoring by Bus Éireann and the Department of education in order to ensure that we ensure that we maximise capacity. That is a frustration for parents and children. I will reflect the feedback from the Deputy to the Department of education. This is something that should happen. It should be a use-it-or-lose-it policy rather than a ticket being bought or a concessionary ticket being given and then not being utilised throughout the year to the detriment of someone who would use it. We can better manage current capacity within that.

Deputy Brian Stanley: While there have been some moves in regard to e-bikes in the context people being obliged to wear high-vis vests and helmets and a bans for under-18s, all of which

are welcome, the number of serious injuries and fatalities continues to increase. In 2021, there were 173 hospital presentations and 309 in 2025. The signs are that it will be worse this year. Existing laws, including the new ones, are not being enforced. People continue to ride on footpaths and are not wearing helmets or high-vis vests. Those under 18 also continue to ride these scooters. Pedestrians are being put at risk. Gardaí say they cannot pursue those involved. One garda has already been in court in Dublin over this. The situation needs to be fixed.

I am not in favour of a ban. E-scooters are a cheap and eco-friendly way for people to get around, particularly for people getting to work. It is not a case of banning them; it is a case of enforcement. The enforcement of existing rules, along with new laws requiring registration, insurance and a basic driver's licence, are needed. Government promised a lot of action over the summer. That action was needed yesterday and it is needed now. Will the Government legislate to have these scooters registered and introduce a requirement for the people who ride them to have insurance and licences? Will it bring in legislation to enable gardaí to enforce the rules, particularly in relation to pursuit?

Deputy Jack Chambers: When canvassing over the summer, this was one of the major issues reflected in many estates right across my community. There is serious concern about the misuse of e-scooters and scramblers. We have taken action in the context of the existing laws. The Minister of State, Deputy Canney, has signed some of the regulations around this that are being introduced. We need to listen to the feedback of the clinicians appearing before the Oireachtas committee this week about further actions that may be required. We also need to be open to further legislative intervention if this continues to be a serious issue in communities across the country.

To be fair to An Garda Síochána, it has significantly increased its enforcement activity in this area. The Garda authorities report that there were 1,412 incidents in which e-scooters were seized in the first half of this year. That compares with 931 such incidents in the whole of 2025. The force has significantly improved the level of enforcement activity, but we do need to keep the legislation under review to ensure that we drive greater enforcement in this area.

Deputy Brian Stanley: They have to be able to pursue them.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Michael Collins is on his feet.

Deputy Michael Collins: I wish to raise the completely unacceptable situation facing families on Cape Clear Island off west Cork. One family who contacted me is caring for an elderly mother who has a progressive neurological condition and who requires 24-hour care. Her 81-year-old husband and daughter are doing everything they possibly can but they cannot replace a proper health service. The facts are stark. Cape Clear had no nursing cover whatsoever for the entire month of July. A nurse was present for only five days in August. Across the period of 20 months examined, there was no full nursing cover over half of all days. This island is located 12 km off the coast of west Cork. When something goes wrong, people cannot simply drive to the emergency department. The community reports 13 medical evacuations since January, including five in just ten days in August. This situation cannot continue. I ask for three commitments, namely: restore consistent full-time public health nurse

cover on Cape Clear; put guaranteed replacement cover in place when that nurse is unavailable; and restore proper home help and home support services for vulnerable islanders.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank Deputy Collins for raising this important issue. I acknowledge the concerns raised by residents and by the Deputy relating to nursing services on Cape Clear. HSE South West has acknowledged challenges in the recruitment of nursing staff to Cape Clear in recent years. Notwithstanding these challenges, the HSE has advised that a regular nursing service continues to be provided on the island in line with population needs. A registered general nurse is based on Cape Clear from Monday to Friday and on alternate weekends. A public health nurse, based in Skibbereen, supports the service as well through the provision of specialist-based nursing services and by attending the island as required. Additional nursing supports, I am informed, are being provided from Skibbereen during periods of leave or absence. Contingency arrangements are also in place during periods when a nurse is not expected on the island due to unexpected leave, including prioritisation of urgent cases. It is important, as the Deputy said, that the people of Cape Clear have confidence in safe and appropriate nursing services. I will reflect the Deputy's concerns to the Minister.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: Ba mhaith liom labhairt inniu maidir le cúrsaí a bhaineann leis an gceadúnas tiomána. I ask for some common-sense interventions with regard to certain categories of driver licensing that we have in the country. Two issues have been raised with me by constituents regarding the removal of code 78, which restricts a licence holder from operating a manual vehicle if he or she demonstrated proficiency in an automatic vehicle. An arbitrary line has been drawn whereby anyone who qualified to drive before November 2013 has to have that restriction on their licence. I ask that this be reviewed.

The second issue relates to category BE, which permits people to tow a trailer while driving a jeep or car. In order to attain a category BE on your licence to drive a trailer attached to your jeep, you have to have spent two years under the mentorship of a qualified BE driver. There is a very limited pool of people who have that qualification and who can mentor others. Will the Minister support a review of these two requirements and apply a common-sense solution in respect of both, while also ensuring that road safety is maintained?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank Deputy Moynihan for raising this important issue. I will raise it with the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, regarding the particular interpretation taken by the Road Safety Authority in respect of licence renewals.

I am not familiar with the technical aspects the Deputy referenced. The Minister and Minister of State will need to evaluate the matter in line with what he said. I will ask them to respond to him directly.

Deputy Joe Neville: The issue I want to raise is dereliction and, more importantly, how we can rejuvenate our towns and villages. Coincidentally, in recent days I was contacted by representatives from two different towns in north Kildare who were looking to meet up to discuss what we could do. A huge number of people, such as those involved in Tidy Towns, are doing great work in trying to revitalise our town centres. However, their efforts are being held back by issues relating to derelict properties. We need to check what powers are in place for local authorities. We may need to move those powers to Revenue in order to enable it to

get those properties. Ultimately, many of our towns have growing communities, growing populations and growing needs. We need more childcare facilities and new family resource centres. If our towns and villages are going to be emptier, we need to put in place facilities in these properties. Some of that could be done by way of Government-led projects. We have a dereliction tax. There is talk about setting the rate at 7%. Can we look at putting it at 10% in order to really incentivise business owners to get things moving?

Deputy Jack Chambers: The Deputy is correct. There are too many derelict properties in towns and villages across the country. We need to use all levers of Government to incentivise their use for community infrastructure or for enterprise. The Minister, Deputy Browne, has brought in a series of grants to help bridge the gap for different communities and for people interested in investing and turning properties around. The Tánaiste and the former Minister, Paschal Donohoe, have done work on moving this tax to Revenue, which will have a significant effect.

I will reflect on the position the Deputy set out in respect of a higher rate of tax and whether that would be a better stick as regards the utilisation of properties. We need to see properties that have been derelict for decades moving back into use. We need the right mix of incentives and the stick, that is, taxation. We are all trying to move towards that. I appreciate the Deputy raising the issue.

Deputy Edward Timmins: As the Minister will know, we will take in approximately €17.5 billion in windfall corporation taxes this year. Our budget surplus of €8 billion looks great but without these windfall corporation taxes, our finances would be in deficit to the tune of €8 billion or €9 billion, which is concerning. It is moving in the wrong direction. I know the Minister is aware of this. Would he consider doing something like what is done in Norway, namely ring-fencing these windfall corporation taxes, or a large proportion of them, and not allowing them to be used for current expenditure? Only what is earned from the fund in which they are held would be used for current expenditure. This would be a way of being fiscally prudent and planning for our future.

Deputy Jack Chambers: The Deputy and I have engaged at meetings of Oireachtas committees on following through on that and moderating the growth rate of current expenditure from 9%, the average over the past five years, to 6%, the rate we have set in the medium-term fiscal and structural plan. Part of driving that involves ensuring we are much more effective in driving efficiencies in the existing base spend, achieving much better value for money for taxpayers and continuing to commit to the two structural funds we have established, namely the Future Ireland Fund and the Infrastructure, Climate and Nature Fund, which have been welcomed by international markets. We are due to have €25 billion set aside by the end of this year. That will grow to a figure in excess of €30 billion next year. That provides a strong anchor of fiscal discipline whereby, by means of legislation, we are putting a lot of the windfall receipts aside. On the Deputy's point as to whether we should put even more aside if there are further windfall receipts, what anchors us in moderating day-to-day expenditure, which we are committing to, is our medium-term structural and fiscal plan.

Deputy George Lawlor: I want to speak about the ongoing crisis in GP services across the country. I refer to access to GP services for both private patients and medical card holders. In my town of Wexford, it is virtually impossible for medical card holders to access a GP. It is heading in the same direction for private patients. Only last week, I was contacted by a family of two adults and three children who had relocated to Wexford. They are private patients and they were rejected by four GPs. We are now looking to other towns in the county to try to get them facilitated. As the Minister will know, this is an ongoing crisis. The Minister for Health has given commitments in the past but the problem is getting worse. We really do need radical intervention in this area. I have spoken to my colleagues and I know that towns across the country are suffering greatly in this regard. I would appreciate some type of intervention.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I regret that this has been the direct experience of many people in Wexford. The most appropriate structural intervention to improve provision of GP services across our State has been what we have done on the graduate side of things. The number of postgraduate places for general practice has massively expanded in the past number of years. That pipeline of graduates is now coming through the system. We should see the benefit of that in different communities. The HSE has also worked to address some of the deficits in particular areas of population growth. I will ask the Minister for Health to respond to the particular acute issue in Wexford to which the Deputy refers. This will improve as that pipeline of graduates is seen throughout the country. We are already seeing many of them conclude their general practice training.

An Ceann Comhairle: There are three Deputies outside the timeline. I ask them to be brief. I will give them 30 seconds with a further 30 seconds for a response. It is a 15-Member slot. The Members chosen have been taken. I am doing this at my own discretion.

Deputy Michael Murphy: Back in March, I wrote to the Ministers for agriculture, justice and Transport on the issue of sulky racing and general sulky use. It is extraordinary to think that sulky racing is permitted under the Roads Act 1993. This issue crosses all three Departments. I ask that the working group look at welfare, enforcement, legislative reform, minimum ages, and a licensing and regulatory framework. It is extraordinary that the racing of sulkies is permitted. Is there any update from the working group? Does the Minister support an outright ban?

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon): I thank Deputy Murphy for raising this matter, for his ongoing work as chair of the Oireachtas Committee on Transport and for his personal interest in the issue of sulky racing, which he has been raising for some time. As Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, I am responsible for animal welfare. The question of who is permitted to operate on roads is a matter for the Department of Transport and enforcement in respect of any breaches of the rules is a matter for the Department of justice. I wrote to my colleagues in those Departments to ask them to nominate people for a working group. That working group has held an initial meeting. I understand that more meetings are planned for the future.

Deputy Duncan Smith: The Minister may have read in the *Irish Independent* this week that the remains of a body found in Galway in 1995 went missing from a HSE mortuary. There are

51 sets of unidentified remains on the Government database. In three of those cases, the remains or parts of the remains have gone missing. These include a skull found in north County Dublin in 2006 and partial remains found in Wexford in 1995. It is hoped that modern technology will allow these remains to be matched with missing people, allowing them to be identified. However, through carelessness, neglect or poor processes, this has not happened. I ask for a proper audit and for solid processes to be put in place in order that these unidentified remains can be cared for and comfort can be given to families in these tragic cases.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I did not see the specific report in the *Irish Independent*. Following through on this is obviously a joint competence of the Departments of Health and Justice. We will ask that confidence in further co-ordination be ensured, particularly for families who have particular concerns. I will ask both Departments to respond to that issue.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I very much welcome the Government's intention to proceed with a youth culture card, as committed to in our manifesto and in the programme for Government. This will help to build youth audiences for the arts. I would be grateful if the Minister could outline the timeframe for the introduction of the youth culture card and when applications will open for the proposed arts capital programme.

Deputy Jack Chambers: The Deputy may have read news reports, but such reports do not supersede discussions on the Estimates. Nothing has been agreed on any matter relating to the budget yet. We will have to consider all matters in the context of what is available for 2027. The arts capital programme was referenced in the sectoral investment plan that we published. It is also reflected in the programme for Government. I will ask the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, to set out a timeline in that regard. A decision on what is possible for 2027 is still subject to discussions on the Estimates. I am being consistent on that in the context of budget 2027.

Withdrawal of the State from the Migration and Asylum Pact of the European Union Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy Peadar Kirby: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to provide for the withdrawal of the State from European Union legislative measures comprised in the Migration and Asylum Pact of the European Union; and to provide for related matters.

Six years ago, we in Aontú, called for a proper debate on the issue of immigration. We were the first party to do so in this House. We said very clearly that if there is not a debate that the issue will not go away. It will be pushed underground. It will be used by ne'er-do-wells to cause trouble in the country. We were attacked at that time by pretty much every single political party. Now, most of the parties have moved onto the same ground as ourselves but there are still major differences. The EU migration pact is one of them. The EU migration pact hands over Irish sovereignty on a key issue to the EU. The EU will determine in future the numbers of people who will come to Ireland, the number people we must accept through the asylum process, and it allows Brussels to determine the money that we must pay in lieu of accepting

those same applicants. Already the Government is putting away €9 million for fines that it expects next year as a result of that pact.

We have received legal advice from the Office of Parliamentary Legal Advisors and the European Commission that it may not be possible to withdraw from the opt-in. However, we have also received different legal opinions. We know that if there are future changes to the EU migration pact and how it is run we still a constitutional right to opt-out. We also know that countries like Poland, for example, have been given exemptions in relation to that pact. The reason that this Bill is being proposed by ourselves today on the floor of the Dáil is that we want to challenge and test the full limits of what this country has a right to do. Poland receives an exemption from the pacts because it has accepted 1 million Ukrainian people. Ireland currently has 1.2 million immigrants living in the State. A total of 23% of the population are from outside of the country. Ireland is an outlier in those terms.

No other major European country has figures next nor near that. The only countries that come close are microstates where they have small populations and where small numbers can change the proportion significantly. Many of these people are living integrated and cohesively in this country. Many are working positively and putting their shoulder to the wheel. However, it is also putting significant pressure on the housing crisis. It is a foundation of economics. The supply and demand determine the price and availability. The Government has not been able to supply housing over the past number of years. By increasing the number of people coming into the country, we are pushing up prices currently. Incredibly, 42% of people on the Dublin housing waiting list are foreign born. That is making it harder for them and also for locals to be able to get a house. I urge the Government to accept this Bill.

Deputy Paul Lawless: It is an honour to introduce this Bill before the House to remove Ireland from the EU migration pact to restore Irish sovereignty over its borders. The decision to opt into the EU migration pact by this Government or the previous Government was reckless. The idea that the Government is unable to determine the future cost in terms of fines is incredible. Ireland has unique challenges in sharing a border with a non-EU country. It is extraordinary that this has never been addressed in relation to this pact. When the EU migration pact passed in the Dáil, it did so by a narrow majority. By my calculation, 59 of the TDs who voted that day are no longer TDs. They either retired or lost their seats. Newly elected TDs like myself have never had the opportunity to have our say in relation to the EU migration pact. The Irish people have never had a say either. We are the ones who are mandated by the sovereign people of Ireland. The previous Government seeded sovereignty in relation to our borders even though the Government is unable to tell us through parliamentary questions how much it will cost us in terms of fines. That is why we in Aontú are tabling this Bill to try to reverse that decision and return decisions over migration and our borders to the democratically elected Dáil.

As Deputy Tóibín mentioned, Poland was given exemptions in relation to the migration pact. Those exemptions were necessary because of the extreme pressures that Poland was and is experiencing in relation to Ukrainian refugees. However, Ireland is experiencing very acute challenges as well, such as the fact that 23% of the population of this country are foreign born, that we have such an immense housing crisis and that the services in terms of education and health are at capacity. These are factors that should be accounted for. I refer the EU migration pact-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Paul Lawless: -----and the primary criteria in terms of GDP, which is incredibly-----
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An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy's time is up.

Deputy Paul Lawless: -----inflated in this country.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill being opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Mary Butler): Not opposed.

Question put and agreed to.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Seller's Legal Pack for Property Buyers Bill 2021: Order for Committee Stage

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Justice, Home Affairs and Migration pursuant to Standing Order 187.

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.26 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.27 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.26 p.m. and resumed at 2.27 p.m.

Disability (Amendment) Bill 2026: Second Stage

Minister for Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Norma Foley): I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

As Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, I am pleased to introduce to the House today the Disability (Amendment) Bill 2026. This Bill is the first legislative reform of the assessment of need process since it was established in the Disability Act 2005, over 20 years ago. This Bill is an acknowledgement by Government that the current assessment of need process has to become a source of deep frustration for applicants, both children and young adults, and indeed for their families. The Government is particularly mindful that long waiting times for assessment of need are causing uncertainty and distress to families who may already

be under considerable pressure as they try to ensure their family member receives the supports and services they need in order to fully develop and thrive.

In my statement today I will set out section by section the proposed changes being introduced by this Bill and how these legislative reforms aim to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the assessment of need system. Section 1 of the Disability (Amendment) Bill 2026 defines the Disability Act 2005 as the principal Act. The Bill which comprises a total of eight sections only makes very specific and targeted changes to Part 2 of the Disability Act which describes and sets out the legislative basis for the assessment of need process.

Section 2 of the Bill makes specific and targeted changes section 7 of the principal Act which sets out interpretations of terms used within Part 2. In particular, the Bill strengthens the definition of "assessment" in section 7(1) to clearly identify the determination of disability as a distinct part of the assessment process. It seeks to make explicit what was previously implicit in the principal Act, notably the requirement for HSE assessment officers to make the determination of disability before identifying the health and education needed the applicant.

Additionally, section 2 amends the definition of substantial restriction in section 7(2) of the principal Act. Specifically, the Bill replaces the word "disability" with the word "restriction", placing greater emphasis on the need of the individual arising from the restrictions they face in daily life. It brings the legislation more in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, focusing on the person's needs rather than their disability.

Section 3 of the Bill makes amendments to section 8 of the principal Act. The Bill clarifies that a request by a HSE assessment officer to the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, for assistance in relation to the need for an education service as part of the overall assessment process, should be made once a determination of disability has been established. Section 3 also clarifies that the assessment report prepared and issued by the HSE assessment officer will include a statement on the substantial restriction that the applicant is subject to. This new provision replaces a requirement for an assessment report to include "a statement of the nature and extent of the [person's] disability", moving away from a focus on diagnosis. This will help to ensure the focus is on the restrictions experienced by the person and their needs arising from those restrictions, rather than on a specific impairment or diagnosis.

Section 4 inserts an entirely new set of provisions to section 9 of the principal Act. These new provisions provide for the withdrawal, closure and reinstatement, where required, of applications for an assessment of need, AON. These provisions address a gap in the existing legislation, which does not provide for the closure of applications. They also aim to provide a degree of flexibility to applicants and their families who may not wish to continue with their application due to personal circumstances or may not be in a position to engage with the process at that point in time. This should also provide for improved case management by the HSE, allowing for the closure of dormant or inactive applications currently in the system. As I will explain, substantial protections will also be in place at all times for every applicant so that this provision operates in everyone's best interest.

The Disability (Amendment) Bill provides for two types of withdrawal. The first is a voluntary withdrawal mechanism whereby the applicant voluntarily chooses to withdraw their application from the assessment of need process. The applicant can withdraw their application at any stage throughout the assessment process up to the point at which a service statement is

issued and the applicant must inform the HSE in writing of their intent to withdraw. The voluntary withdrawal will take effect on the date at which the HSE receives this notice from the applicant.

The second type of withdrawal mechanism is termed a "deemed withdrawal" and will only occur when it is no longer possible to progress the assessment process. Regulations, which are at an advanced stage of development, will set out very clearly the conditions under which the HSE can act upon a deemed withdrawal. These will include, for example, where the applicant is deceased, has permanently moved outside the jurisdiction or fails to provide the necessary information over a six-month period despite repeated efforts by the assessment officer to progress the assessment process. The deemed withdrawal would take effect on the date at which the HSE notified the applicant.

Importantly, the Bill also has regard to the potential vulnerability of families and provides that there is an option to reinstate applications to the AON process for both voluntary and deemed withdrawals, even in those cases where attempts to elicit information over a six-month period have failed. In each withdrawal case, a request for reinstatement can be made by the applicant within 12 months of the date of withdrawal. This allows applicants who may have disengaged from the process for personal reasons to re-engage and have their original applications assessed. The Bill sets out how applications will be treated once they have been reinstated, especially in relation to steps that had already been taken to process the application at the time of withdrawal.

In all, these new provisions for withdrawal, closure and reinstatement will apply to both existing and new applications to the assessment of need process and will ensure greater flexibility in how applications are managed across the system.

Section 5 of the Bill makes changes to section 21 of the principal Act. Section 5 provides the Minister for Children, Disability, and Equality with regulation-making powers in relation to the provision for the withdrawal, closure and reinstatement of applications to the assessment of need process. The regulations, which are in development, specify the conditions under which withdrawals, closures and reinstatements can take place, enhancing protections for applicants to ensure that this provision is grounded in legislation and does not exceed the limits of the principal Act. Section 5 also makes an amendment to section 21(a)(v) of the principal Act around requests for assistance from the NCSE. This is to reflect the changes made to section 3 of the Bill whereby a request to the NCSE for assistance should be made once a determination of disability has been established

Section 6 provides the Minister for Children, Disability, and Equality with the powers to request the HSE to develop a set of statutory guidelines setting out the assessment of need process. It is intended that the statutory guidelines will support HSE assessment officers and liaison officers to deliver a consistent and uniform approach to the processing of assessment applications across all six health regions, promoting greater fairness and transparency. The guidelines also ensure that the overall assessment process is grounded in legislation and does not exceed legislative parameters. The guidelines, which are currently at an advanced stage of development, are procedural in nature. They will cover all aspects of the assessment process from an administrative perspective. This includes the initial processing of new applications right through to how the withdrawal and reinstatement of applications should be conducted by assessment officers. Over time, it is expected that a standardised process for the delivery of

assessments of need will make the system more efficient and effective, helping to reduce processing times. The guidelines will also provide greater clarity about the assessment of need process for applicants and their families so that they can better understand what happens when they make an application.

Section 7 provides for the transitional arrangements to address the changes introduced in the Bill and how they will apply to new and existing applications. Applications received by the HSE on or after the date at which the new Act commences will be processed under the new legislation. Applications received by the HSE before the date of commencement of the new Act, where no steps have yet been taken to carry out the assessment, will also be processed under the new legislation. Meanwhile, applications on hand with the HSE on the date of commencement of the new Act, where steps have been taken by the HSE before that date, will be processed in line with the existing legislation set out in Part 2 of the principal Act. This means that the HSE will be required to administer two systems for the processing of assessments of need until such time as all applications received prior to the commencement of the new Act are completed. These two systems will be similar in many aspects, other than those set out in the Bill. However, as I mentioned previously, an exception to the transitional provisions will be the provisions for the withdrawal, closure and reinstatement of applications. These provisions will apply to all new and existing assessment of need applications, giving all applicants the right to withdraw, close and reinstate their applications as per the new Act and regulations.

Section 8 of the Bill is the Short Title and addresses commencement.

I recognise that many families turn towards an assessment of need at a vulnerable time in a child or young adult's life, as they seek to identify their needs and the services that may be available to meet those needs. However, I must emphasise that an assessment of need is not required to access services and I highlight that a person seeking services, whether for themselves or their child, can apply directly to the HSE for those services without an AON. Nevertheless, the statutory right to an assessment of need as set out in the Disability Act 2005 remains absolutely unchanged. The legislation I have presented today showcases the Government's commitment to improving the assessment of need experience for those who seek an assessment of need. Of course, legislative reform should only be one aspect of our focus, and I am committed as Minister to working with my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, and across Government on improving access to services for some of our most vulnerable children.

I commend the Bill to the House.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: On some level, this is a technical Bill, but because it deals with assessment of need, the Minister will understand that there is a huge level of trepidation and worry out there about the delivery of a service that has seen abject failure over many years.

We know that the reason this is being tackled is because, at last count at the end of June, we had 23,282 children on the waiting list for an assessment of need. That was 1,286 in Louth. That is a phenomenal amount of families. We all know that even those who have got an assessment of need do not necessarily get the service plan in the time required, nor do they receive the therapies and supports, which is the biggest issue that remains for families. I would

like to think when we are introducing legislation on assessment of need that there would be some glimpse of light in terms of how we are going to deliver.

Regarding this legislation, there are a number of questions. When the Minister refers to withdrawal from the list, we would all like to know what the interaction is going to be. We understand removing someone because they are deceased or are outside the State and enough interaction has been had with them to ensure that that is definite.

However, where further information is being looked for over the six-month period, we would like clarity about the interaction. Too many times as constituency TDs, we have seen families where there is an element of chaos, even dysfunction, and other things happening in life, meaning they have missed appointments and are then dropped off some of these services. We need to make sure that we are not allowing for something like that. I would request that.

We need to know about the statutory guidelines and when we will see them, and ensure there is a consistent, streamlined approach. We all want to see that. The consistent approach would be the best approach. We have all spoken before about the entire process, from assessment to therapies, that we would like to see streamlined. I request that that information come as soon as possible. I know Deputy Quinlivan as Chair of the disability committee has requested a briefing and I believe it is to happen next Tuesday. It is vital that we have that level of information.

I get fed up at this stage having a conversation about the size of the AON list. Particularly when dealing with constituents and families who are going through absolute anguish at times and do not necessarily have a child who is having difficulties in school but cannot get the very obvious therapies that he or she needs, all I want is for there to be somebody to talk to about this entire process. I heard Mr. Bernard Gloster say that before.

This is being done alongside the idea of the autism intervention protocol and assessment service. I accept what the Minister says, in that there is no removal of the six-month right, because that is one of the few rights that people have and they do not want to let it go. There should be an assessment of need within six months. I do not think anyone would have an issue if someone who was deemed to need an autism assessment would have that, as long as we are talking about something that improves the service that they are going to get and that he or she actually gets the therapies that are required. Unfortunately, across all of this, we do not see anything about an increase in the number of occupational therapists, speech and language therapists, psychologists and physiotherapists, who are absolutely necessary.

In-reach teams are to be filled at this point in time. When will we see that service up and running? I have always thought it would be incredibly difficult to see delivery on the numbers that are missing from primary care and children's disability network teams, CDNTs, while also trying to fill this third stratum to deal with the autism assessments. I would like to make sure that we have whatever detail is needed for this legislation. We will need further detail about what can be provided. In conversations like this, I often think of my own son, Toirleach, who is autistic. I think of the over and back that my wife would have had. He was in with the early intervention team, which later became the CDNT. He was in primary care, then back into the CDNT. I have said before that St. Joseph's National School and Ó Fiaich College have been his saviours.

I will always believe in in-school therapies. I would like for us to have a more fundamental conversation about the Disability Act. We were talking to those occupational therapists, speech and language therapists, physiotherapists and psychologists about how to deliver a system and a service that worked. There are an awful lot of questions to answer, but at the minute, we are talking about breaking the law and failure to deliver.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: For years, disabled children and their families have been failed by successive Governments. They have been promised rights, supports and services, but too often those promises have not been delivered. Families have been left waiting for assessments, therapies, school supports and basic services. They have been forced to fight the State for what should already be available to them as a matter of law and dignity. This is not a new failure. Governments have published strategies, made announcements and offered warm words, but families cannot raise their children on warm words. While Governments make announcements, children are waiting. While Ministers make promises, parents are fighting for assessments.

While the State is legally required to provide an assessment of need within six months, the HSE said earlier this year that 21,782 children were overdue for an assessment, and there are more than that on the list itself. Behind every number is a child waiting for answers, a parent trying to understand what their child needs, and a family trying to access therapies and educational supports. These are not statistics. These are children and families who have been failed by the State. I have rightly highlighted this failure before, including the fact that the children in Limerick are waiting beyond the statutory timeline. The Government has been in daily breach of its own laws. This is the reality we are dealing with. Families cannot wait years for an assessment that the law says should be completed within six months. We all agree that the assessment of need process needs to reform, but reform must not mean reducing the right. It must mean making that right real, enforceable and deliverable.

The Disability Act 2005, read together with the 2007 regulations, provides a framework in which an assessment must commence within three months and must be completed within a further three months, subject to limited exceptional circumstances. The six-month timeframe must be protected. If the Government tells us the proposed legislation does not remove the six-month statutory timeframe, which I think the Minister is saying, I welcome that commitment. We need an ironclad commitment and we need to have protection made absolutely clear in legislation. Six months must remain six months or sooner. We should be working to complete assessments within six months or sooner. The timeframe must not be an aspiration but an enforceable legal obligation. It must not be restarted because an assessment moves from one stage to another. It must not be extended indefinitely because the State has failed to provide the staff and expertise needed to deliver the service.

The proposed legislation introduces a significant change in the structures of the assessment of needs process. The existing framework is intended to provide a comprehensive assessment of the nature and extent of a child's disability, the child's health and educational needs, the service required and the timeframe in which these services should ideally be provided. Under the proposed legislation, greater emphasis is placed on an initial determination of whether a person has a disability before the assessment process of his or her detailed health and educational needs. That is a significant change. We must streamline the process without narrowing the entitlement. We must make the system work better without making the rights smaller.

That brings me to the role of the assessment officer. Under the proposed reforms, an assessment officer may determine whether a child has a disability before the full consideration of his or her health and educational needs proceeds. This is a significant responsibility to give to somebody, so we need to ask what qualifications, expertise, experience and skills the person must have before he or she can make the determination. The regulation requires appropriate qualifications, knowledge, competence and training, but the legislation does not clearly prescribe the professional qualifications and competencies required of an assessment officer. That needs to change. An assessment officer should be properly qualified, properly trained, experienced in disability matters, competent in applying the legislation and capable of a co-ordinated and genuinely multidisciplinary assessment. Assessment officers should not replace clinical, psychological, educational or therapeutic professionals. The role should be clearly defined in law to co-ordinate the process, gather and evaluate the relevant evidence, ensure the statutory requirements are met, and make decisions within the limits of their training, expertise, and legal authority.

Where specialist evidence is required, the officer must have timely access to the appropriate professionals. This is particularly important when an officer is considering a "no disability" determination. That decision must be based on sufficient evidence, properly recorded reasons and appropriate professional support. The child and his or her parents must understand how the decision was reached and be clearly informed of the review and appeal rights. This is not about creating another bureaucratic hurdle. It is about getting the decisions right, and the concern is not theoretical. The HSE has warned that the proposed sequencing of the process could create delays in obtaining educational reports and completing the assessment of need within six months. That is a serious concern.

If the new legislation requires a disability determination before the education component can proceed, the Government must ensure that this additional stage does not stop or reset the clock or delay access to the full assessment. The six-month period must run from the date when the valid application is received. It must not begin when the assessment moves from the disability determination stage to the health or educational needs stage. If the State has failed to meet its legal obligations, the answer cannot be to change the rules for the family who have already been waiting. We need both things at the same time: a properly qualified assessment officer and a genuinely multidisciplinary assessment process. We should not streamline the system by removing expertise from it. We should streamline it by ensuring the right expertise is there.

For too long, disabled children and their families have been asked to wait for an assessment, therapy, school supports and the Government to act. Families have waited enough.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I could not agree more with an Teachta Quinlivan. Families are sick of waiting, and they have waited long enough.

I will say to the Minister what I always say when we have a debate like this, that being, persons with disabilities are not disabled or restricted by their own bodies or intellectual capacity. Rather, they are disabled, or restricted, if you will, by an ableist world full of hostile architecture. They are restricted by systems designed to exclude them and they are gravely and seriously disabled by a Government that refuses to listen to them.

It is very welcome that we have the chance to discuss the AON. However, this Bill will not provide for one single solitary speech and language therapist, occupational therapist or special education place more. Without those services, all the chat in this House is not going to make any difference to people's lived reality.

I was looking back through my emails. A woman whom I have met contacted my office recently looking for assistance with an urgent issue affecting her youngest son and her family. She was at pains to point out that when these delays happened, it was catastrophic for the child. Of course it is. That has a knock-on impact on every single person in the family. Effectively, they all wait and they are all locked out. Her youngest child is now facing significant delays and barriers in accessing support at a critical stage of his development. In late 2024, this child was referred by the area medical officer to several services, including a neurodevelopmental clinic. The mother was asked to complete the assessment of need forms and return them to the doctor so that he could add the notes and submit the application. She did this. She delivered them in an addressed envelope to the reception at the doctor's office. Assuming the application had been submitted, the child's mam waited the statutory six months before contacting the assessment of need office to inquire on the progress.

After several weeks of follow-up and being informed that the systems were down, the mam was eventually told that no record of his application could be found. She contacted the area medical office in May 2025. During that phone call, she was informed that there was no AON application on file. She was told not to submit another form because the doctor had no supporting notes, that no supporting notes would be provided and that the office would not support any request to backdate to 2024. She wrote to me to say that her youngest child's needs had continued to escalate significantly. He presents with severe impulsivity, a complete lack of safety awareness, physical aggression and significant behavioural challenges. Unfortunately, because his assessment of need form was never submitted, they are back at the beginning of the process. It fell to me to tell her that her son would now join a list that had 23,282 children on it. This is further compounded by the fact that she now has to start applying for schools, but she has no assessment of need.

This mother has done everything right. She has given up work in order to be able to attend to the needs of her child because the State is not stepping in. Her child is being treated less favourably than other children, but his mam is doing her very best. Access to services that do not exist and being left lying on waiting lists and forgotten about are not good enough. I would not want it for one of my children. I do not think anybody would. It is not fair. In the coming weeks, we will hear the Minister's colleagues talking in the House about the budget and giving themselves a pat on the back for how well they are doing. The Minister should judge it by how long kids are waiting.

Deputy David Cullinane: The most important issue here is the rights of children with disabilities. Any objective review of this Government and, in fact, previous Governments over a long number of years would show a poor record. In many areas, it would show a disgraceful record. In 2005, the Government at the time - the Minister's party was in government - put in place an Act that provided rights for children with disabilities, including the right to an assessment of need. Every year since, the Government has utterly failed. What we have seen is children waiting far too long for an assessment. In many cases, they are not getting it. Worse than that, however, is that parents have had to go to court daily to demand that the State

implement what it is legally obliged to do. Hundreds of cases - thousands over the years - have happened.

The Government then tried to pull a fast one. It brought in a new standard operating procedure. It tried to pawn off what was not an assessment of need as an assessment of need. Parents brought the Government to court. The High Court agreed with the parents that it was not an assessment of need. It was set aside. Since then, the waiting list has increased massively. In fact, it has multiplied by a factor of six, seven or more. We have far too many children waiting for an assessment.

Children cannot get access to services. What is really appalling and upsetting for parents, who have to battle for services, is that the assessment does not come and they are told they do not need an assessment to access services, as if the services are there. They then try to access services, sign up with a CDNT, and are put on a waiting list for an assessment or a service to be given to their child.

I raised last week in this House an issue in relation to the Waterford south city children's disability network team because I had met a group of parents. I have done far too many of these meetings, where, unfortunately, the same pattern or story is being told of parents stressed and unable to access the services and children not getting the developmental supports that they need. They were telling me that there was no point of contact for over a year for parents in relation to the CDNT. There was no nurse. Even trying to get incontinence pads for children who needed them was an impossibility. There was only one occupational therapist and no psychologist. As a result, children were left without supports. Children need multidisciplinary supports, including occupational therapy, speech and language, and psychology. It is all part of the team that is required, yet across many of these CDNTs, we do not have the staff.

We can bring in legislation and tinker with the system, but the issue is capacity. The only thing that will resolve this issue for parents and children is if we have the staff and capacity to ensure, on the one hand, that children get timely access to an assessment and, on the other hand, they actually get the services they need.

In the context of the Bill, there needs to be a discussion about the role of the assessment officers. I know this was dealt with during pre-legislative scrutiny at the relevant committee. It is something that needs to be teased out further on Committee Stage. I know a number of concerns have been raised. No impediment can be put in the way. There can be no three-card trick employed by the Government to in any way deny a child access to an assessment of need. It was enshrined in law. Children are legally entitled to this assessment. They are also entitled, I would argue as a matter of right, to appropriate services. For far too many children, they are not getting it. There are many missed opportunities for those children. If we are going to have a fresh start, that fresh start has to be about capacity and making sure that children have better access.

Deputy Liam Quaide: The central problem with this legislation is that it changes the assessment of need process without addressing the issue at play here, namely, the chronic under-resourcing of our services, compounded by the recruitment embargo in 2023, followed by the pay and numbers strategy, which was another form of recruitment restriction. We can change the eligibility for an assessment of need and we can change procedures or produce new guidelines, but if a child who does not proceed through the full statutory assessment of need

process is then directed toward primary care, child and adolescent mental health services, CAMHS, or a CDNT that cannot see them for months or years, we have not solved the problem. We have simply moved that family into another form of purgatory. That is not simply my assessment. The report of the disability matters committee from the pre-legislative scrutiny process stated very clearly: "Across virtually every submission and hearing, the strongest operational theme was that delay and dysfunction in the AON system are inseparable from workforce service-capacity problems." That is the kernel of the issue.

The Psychological Society of Ireland said that legislative reform alone could not resolve these delays without investment in staffing and retention across primary care, CAMHS and disability services. We heard the same critical message from professional bodies, disability organisations and service providers that the AON crisis cannot be separated from chronic workforce shortages and inadequate service capacity. They are different organisations with different professional perspectives, but they had essentially the same message, namely, you cannot legislate your way out of a capacity crisis.

3 o'clock

That is why our committee recommended that implementation of this legislation would have to be accompanied by a funded workforce and service-capacity plan, including multidisciplinary staffing, so that legislative reform is actually matched by operational capacity. Yet the Government is determined not to look at the elephant in the room. Where is that plan? By that plan I mean a credible, funded, multi-annual plan setting out the staffing that primary care, CDNTs and CAMHS actually require; what number of whole-time-equivalents are currently in post; where the shortfalls are; and when those posts will be filled.

The Government repeatedly makes the point that a child does not need an assessment of need in order to access health services. Formally, that is the case as a child can be referred directly to those services but there is an enormous difference between having a pathway by which somebody can be referred to a service and actually being able to get assessed and receive an intervention from that service within a reasonable period.

I have expended an extraordinary amount of effort over the past year trying to establish the true extent of waiting lists in primary care services for young people. Frankly, it should not have required the volume of parliamentary questions or hounding of the HSE that it did. I had to repeatedly ask not simply for broad waiting time categories of over 52 weeks, which is what the HSE kept giving me, but for the longest actual waits, and the numbers of people waiting more than two years, three years, four years, etc., because broad national figures can completely obscure the experience of the children at the far end of these waiting lists. What eventually emerged was jaw-dropping. In July of last year, a child on a primary care psychology list had been waiting 13.5 years. In June of this year, almost a year on, the longest wait for psychology was still over ten years. Also, this year, a child waiting for an occupational therapy assessment had been waiting 509 weeks - almost ten years. The longest physiotherapy assessment wait was 346 weeks - more than six and a half years. These are for very short blocks of intervention. This is not wrap-around supports over the long term.

Given that primary care is supposed to provide early intervention, these waits would be farcical if they were not so consequential for the young people left waiting. Therefore, when we say to families, "You do not need an assessment of need to access services," we need to ask

a much more important question: when will their child actually get the service? That is one of the reasons families pursue an assessment of need in the first place. For many, it is not simply because they have some particular attachment to a statutory assessment process; it is about pursuing the only part of a fragmented system where there is a clearly defined legal entitlement.

That reality came through repeatedly during our committee meetings and it is against that background that we have to look at what this Bill is changing. The legislation makes clear that an assessment officer will first determine whether the applicant meets the statutory definition of disability. Where the determination is that they do not, they do not proceed to the subsequent part of the process assessing the health and education needs arising from a disability. That is a hugely consequential decision and my particular concern is about the child on the other side of a "no disability" determination. That child may still have very significant needs. Where do they go? Who has clinical responsibility for working with the family? How quickly are they going to be seen? Who makes sure that they have not simply disappeared from the statutory AON process into another queue that could last years? Our committee specifically recommended that the Government publish data not simply on AON waiting times but on no-disability outcomes, closure decisions, reviews and the impact of implementation. We need to know what happens to these children afterwards.

There is then the very significant question of who makes that initial disability determination. Some assessment officers have clinical backgrounds and considerable relevant experience but the Bill does not require an assessment officer to have relevant clinical qualifications or clinical experience before making this determination. This issue was examined in detail by our committee. Department officials told us that the assessment officer role is currently an administrative role, that the work at this stage is typically desk-based and that assessment officers are not operating in a clinical capacity, yet they are making clinical decisions. A survey of 22 assessment officers found that 59% had a clinical background. That also means that a substantial minority do not. This was not just an Opposition concern. A Fine Gael Deputy, Micheál Carrigy, questioned how somebody without a clinical background could make such a significant early determination before a clinical assessment had taken place. His Fine Gael colleague Deputy Keira Keogh rightly asked the very basic question of whether there would actually be eyes on the child before a decision was made not to proceed further. This is why the committee recommended minimum qualification, competence and experience requirements for assessment officers, including relevant clinical qualifications. It said that where an assessment officer is making a determination that someone does not meet the statutory threshold for disability, that should either be underpinned by relevant clinical qualifications or be subject to review or sign-off by an appropriately qualified clinician. That is a sensible safeguard. Why is it not provided for in the Bill?

The Government may say that clinical advice will be available and point to the development of in-reach teams but access to clinical advice is not the same thing as a requirement for clinical oversight of a decision which can stop a child proceeding through the statutory assessment process. We need to bear in mind that these assessment officers will be under enormous political pressure in an overstretched system to reduce referrals for assessment of need.

I also want to address the single point of access initiative. I fully support the principle behind it. Families should not need to understand the internal architecture of the HSE before their child can get help. They should not be passed between primary care, CDNTs and

CAMHS, with one service saying the child belongs somewhere else and the next service sending them back again. A genuine no-wrong-door approach would be a significant improvement. However, the single point of access does not resolve the underlying problem which is the failure to adequately staff services. A more efficient referral pathway into a ten-year waiting list is still effectively referring a child into a phantom service. I am hearing varying reports from around the country about how single point of access is functioning in practice.

There is also a serious unresolved issue around contested cases. What happens where primary care believes a child requires CAMHS? What happens where CAMHS believes that child is more appropriately supported through a CDNT? Who adjudicates that? From what I am hearing among clinicians around the country, psychiatry is not fully signed up to how these contested cases will be resolved. This is not some peripheral concern of mine. The final report of the Committee on Disability Matters specifically identifies "the absence of a clear and timely HSE mechanism for adjudicating on contested referrals or service-boundary disputes". It says disputes over whether primary care, CDNTs or CAMHS should take responsibility can leave children and families without a clear service response. This has to be resolved because a single point of access is only a meaningful reform if there is also a clear point of responsibility.

These safeguards are particularly important when we are making changes to the point at which somebody can be stopped from proceeding further through the statutory process. The deeper point remains: the assessment of need crisis cannot be separated from the crisis in the services surrounding it. If primary care were properly staffed, if CDNTs had the multidisciplinary teams they require, if CAMHS and CAMHS-ID had sufficient capacity and if single point of access genuinely meant that children could no longer fall between services, then families would have far less reason to pursue an assessment of need simply to get their child assessed. If those services remain severely underinvested in, changing the statutory process risks changing where children wait rather than ending the waiting.

Therefore, I want the Minister to address four fundamental questions to bear in mind as we proceed with this Bill. Where is the funded workforce and service capacity plan recommended by the committee, particularly for primary care? Why has the committee's recommendation on clinical qualifications, experience or clinical sign-off for assessment officers not been provided for? What is the final national mechanism for adjudicating contested single point of access cases and are all of the relevant clinical disciplines fully signed up to it? What happens to the child who receives a no-disability determination? Who follows that child through the system and establishes whether they actually receive the assessment and intervention they need?

The measure of these reforms cannot simply be whether the AON waiting list becomes shorter. We need to know what happens to these children. Were they assessed? Did they receive therapy? Did they receive the right service? Most importantly, did they get that help while it could still make the greatest difference to their development and well-being?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Before we continue with Deputy Cummins I want to welcome the Granagh Ladies Club to the Public Gallery. They are here with Richard O'Donoghue. I understand it has two male members as well. They are all very welcome. I hope they enjoy their day with Richard. We will return to the debate now with Deputy Cummins.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I welcome the effort to streamline things for children with disabilities but I have a number of concerns. It starts from when a child is born. In my own constituency of Dublin South-Central there is a lack of public health nurses so developmental checks that take place at zero to six months, six to 12 months, one to two years and three to five years and so on are not happening in my constituency. There is not enough staffing. The challenge parents have is that they might get their zero to six month check when the child is six months.

They are often given a tick-box checklist: "These are the things you should look out for." Early intervention and identification of developmental delays at that age are essential and are connected to assessments of need, AONs, because if we are not able to get an assessment of need, if a child is on a waiting list for an average of 27 months, how will they know what that is? I know this legislation is an effort to streamline things. Even when a child does get an assessment of need, where are the services? The reality is that so many children do not get the services. As education spokesperson for my party, my huge concern is the fact that the assessment of need is no longer needed for provision in a special class or a special school place.

How will the school know what the child's needs are without suitable documentation? There are concerns among education unions that they were not consulted when this announcement was made earlier in the year. How exactly will this work in practice? Deputy Quaide has spent so many months and years looking into this and identifying where the challenges are. From an education perspective, we see even today, in this House, that we have two special schools in respect of which the parents are begging us to facilitate what is needed in those schools even more. We are constantly playing catch-up for children with disabilities and adults with disabilities. I am so concerned that this system is so confusing, is so hard to navigate and is understaffed.

My other concern is that those children who did not get a public health nurse visit or an assessment of need on time - now they do not need one - are not getting this service in the CDNT or primary care and not getting an appropriate school place. What does that say to a child? They were failed by the health system and then they will be failed by the education system. We are failing them. I have massive concerns that this is a way of just getting rid of those over 20,000 children who are waiting over six months and the €23 million the State has spent to defend that delay.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I welcome the opportunity to comment on today's Bill. I have three key points to deal with: first, fragmentation of services; then the suitability of the people making assessments; and, finally, the root causes of these issues.

First, accessing services is fragmented, difficult and plagued with delays. This Bill and this Government, instead of ensuring that children are not waiting ten years for primary care psychology or speech and language therapy, are simply moving the goalposts and creating a new system which fails to guarantee children and their families the supports they need. Pressure on the assessment of need system does not justify gatekeeping access. While it may massage the numbers, the reality is that it will leave thousands of children uncounted and unsupported.

These are not just my words and my views, and I thank the parents who told me and my office about their experiences. A mother of three children with additional needs told my colleague:

Children will not be appropriately identified, and it places teachers and parents in a very difficult situation. Is this just Government trying to cover over the extent to which they continue to fail our children?

We need to treat children with disabilities equally, as full people. They may have educational needs, health needs and social needs just like the rest of us. Our systems should move to recognise the whole person, not further silo off support and leave parents going from pillar to post, from waiting list to waiting list, all while struggling to give their children the best support they can.

My second point is that this system means that people who are not qualified to assess children are put in a position of deciding what level of support they need. This Bill does not require the assessment officers to have relevant clinical qualifications or experience, so the gatekeeper of the proposed system does not necessarily need to have any clinical expertise. Another parent in my constituency shared her experience with me, and it shows just what we risk when we do not have properly qualified people conducting assessments:

My daughter was just diagnosed Autistic last year while trying to transition to secondary school and dealing with puberty. At all parent teacher meetings at primary level we asked how she was socially as I had always had a feeling she faced additional challenges. We were mostly reassured that she was fine, even though she had very few friends. This is not to blame the school. The primary school is amazing but they just don't know what they don't know.

My final point is that we need to address the root causes of waiting lists and service delays, not treat the symptoms by trying to lessen the number of people who can access the system. Our disability services are plagued by underinvestment, huge workloads and a poor or non-existent referral system. These are not just numbers on a spreadsheet. These are real children and real families and they deserve real support, not moving goalposts.

Deputy Rory Hearne: There is extreme concern, as my colleagues have expressed, that really what is going on here is the Government trying to hide the scale of need that it is not meeting and that this is not ultimately about delivering services but about trying to take the political pressure off. It is disgraceful when we look at the waiting lists. Of course, that is the power of the waiting lists. They reveal the level of need that is there. The waiting lists that were released as a result of the great work by my colleague, Deputy Quaide, show that, for example, 3,500 children between zero and four years of age are waiting for psychology. These children are at the most important stage of their development. There are 1,000 children waiting over a year. That is the figure only for those between zero and four years of age. Of those, 464 are in my constituency.

Another area is speech and language therapy. These are children awaiting initial therapy. Let us say you get the assessment or you are passed on. How long do you wait for the actual therapy? There are 6,500 children across this country waiting for initial therapy. There are 680 waiting more than two years, and two thirds of those are in my constituency and the Dublin north area.

These waiting lists are absolutely unacceptable. There is an inequality as well in all this because we know from talking to parents that many of them are forced to pay privately to try

to access the various services. What that means for those on lower incomes is that they are pushed. We saw the research from Barnardos showing that two out of every ten families literally cannot put food on the table. Part of the reason is that families are squeezed to try to pay for services the State should provide. The Government says that it is about cherishing all children equally and that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are about giving every child the same opportunity, while these children whose families cannot afford to pay to access services do not have the same opportunity. They are stuck on waiting lists for basic services that should give them equal chances in life but they are not getting them. We have a deeply unequal society. The Government talks about all the gains it is making and all the changes it makes, but these children whose families cannot afford to go private and who are stuck on waiting lists are being developmentally delayed and being denied basic opportunities and supports. The minimum we should have is a public primary care system that meets every child's needs regardless of the ability of the family to pay for them.

Deputy Michael Cahill: This is a very important Bill. As the Minister is aware, disability services in Kerry face huge challenges, including staffing shortages, long waiting lists for children's assessments, respite for children and a lack of adult residential and respite care. There is a huge backlog in relation to assessments of need and huge issues with services, accessing services and staffing. As the Minister is aware, the HSE and Kerry Parents and Friends Association have struggled with recruitment, which has severely impacted all services, including residential and respite care for both adults and children in our county. There are massive issues and gaping gaps for children with profound disabilities when they reach 18 years of age and transition out of child services. Parents and their families are on their knees. They are at the end of their tether and genuinely face burn-out when it comes to services, respite and residential shortages right across the county. At this stage I would say they are burnt out from fighting on behalf of their loved ones and lobbying us politicians for what should be a basic human right.

We are coming from a very low ebb when it comes to disability services. We are still in the dark ages. I have met many of the families in County Kerry and their loved ones. I have met many of their mothers.

What these wonderful families have been put through is absolutely heartbreaking. They are providing the State with a massive service with little or no help. They are caring for their loved ones on a 24 hour per day basis, seven days per week, all year round. They have no choice but to carry out their duties, more often than not without a wink of sleep. Many of these families in our county have not received a night's respite in seven or eight months. Many have had to forego important family events because they cannot get respite. If anyone believes this is acceptable, they are living in cloud-cuckoo-land. This is appalling. It is an absolute disgrace, and it has to be changed. It is at crisis point and has been for many years. We consistently hear about the huge budget for disability services. There is no real evidence of this on the ground so far. The families who are directly involved do not see it and those at the coalface do not see it. There is an urgent need for a cost-of-disability payment. Individuals and families are facing savage financial pressures from trying to deal with their disability, especially now with energy costs like gas, oil and electricity at an all-time high. The Government must introduce a cost-of-disability payment in the budget in two weeks' time.

The Minister is aware of the Before We Die campaign. Parents are extremely concerned about what will become of their loved ones when they themselves pass away. This is a real concern and a real issue. I received a reply to a parliamentary question recently which stated there were 500 qualified housing applicants and a mere 12 properties available. As the Minister is aware, I have raised the issue of St. Mary of the Angels in Beaufort, which is a fabulous residential facility and campus, along with St. Francis Special School. I am aware that Crowe consultancy group is looking into the future of St. Mary of the Angels. There is massive potential for this campus. Outside of the buildings there is a school, a special swimming pool and lovely gardens. There are approximately 15 acres of prime development land. It is an ideal location in the heart of our county, in mid-Kerry, with many services already being provided. It is the ideal location for a centre of excellence for people with a disability, for day services, day respite, night-time respite and residential care. It will be a missed opportunity if we do not grab this once in a lifetime opportunity to do something big and great that will serve the most vulnerable in society for decades to come, especially in our own county. I plead with the Minister to do everything in her power to give hope to the many families in our county who have been deprived of services they deserve for far too long. It would be sinful if the opportunity were missed. I was obviously delighted to invite an Taoiseach to St. Mary of the Angels recently to meet with the staff, and the staff in St. Francis Special School, to see for himself this fabulous campus and the opportunities that are there.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Mark O'Shea in the Public Gallery is 95. He has been looking forward to this day. I hope he enjoys it. He is a guest of Deputy Richard O'Donoghue.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I share the Minister's ambition that this should be the best country in the world in which to be a child. That should apply to every child and they should be able to access whatever services are needed as quickly as possible. I disagree with some of the arguments being put forward about a Government effort to massage figures. If we look at the figures, which are widely available, the scale of need has grown. When the current model for assessment of need applications first opened in 2008, there were 2,535 applications. There were 13,186 last year. We are seeing a dramatic increase in the number of applications. It is important to acknowledge, particularly in work done by the Department of further and higher education, the increase in the number of places on medicine and allied related courses. In 2025, there was a total of 320 additional places in occupational therapy, speech and language therapy and dietetics, and an extra 141 places on third level courses in those areas starting in the 2026-27 year. The Minister has been open and honest in acknowledging the scale of the challenge. I also welcome Government moves in providing additional higher education course places in these specific areas.

That said, like all of my colleagues, I am concerned about how long it is taking to access services. There should be no wrong door. There should be a possibility that a child in need of an assessment has it done as quickly as possible and that they can have access to the necessary services. I was concerned when I found out at the end of last year that for County Wexford there were 261 assessments of need overdue for completion, based on the Department's own figures. In other words, those application assessments had not been completed within six months. There were 261 in Wexford, but in County Wicklow it was 1,194. Those statistics are individuals. They are families, as Deputy Cahill talked about. It is all-embracing, not just for the individual young child or young person concerned, but for their whole family. It is

something that is of deep concern. We need to develop and provide certainty to all of the CDNT teams around the country and ensure they have access to a psychologist, a speech and language therapist, an occupational therapist and the necessary admin support to do their work. That is not the case around the country and many of the CDNT teams are not working in ideal conditions.

In that regard, I instance the one in my home town of Gorey, where there has been a continued problem because where the CDNT is operating at present is not up to scratch for a modern clinical team. The intention was to move it to the new Gorey primary care centre whenever it was built. However, the HSE has taken 16 years before it made any decision with regard to that primary care centre. I am appealing to the Minister. Part of the problem with some of the decisions being made is that many areas of Government are not talking to each other. People working in the CDNT are not necessarily engaging as fully as they should with the HSE. There is often a similar challenge with regard to CAMHS. Many of these organisations are operating in silos.

I also touch on an issue I have raised before about CORU and the recognition of overseas qualifications. It is completely bizarre that people are able to acquire good qualifications in medicine and medical-related areas, including speech and language and occupational therapy, but CORU delays their recognition for month after month. We have vacancies that need to be filled. If people want to come into this country to work in those specific areas, we need to fast-track recognition of their qualifications. It should not be a case that a regulatory agency is holding up the recognition of those qualifications.

It is absolutely essential that we place far more emphasis on school-based therapy services to provide as many supports as possible within schools in all of our communities. When Anne Rabbitte was Minister of State with responsibility for disability, there had been a difficulty with a special school in County Wexford about the appointment of a speech and language therapist and occupational therapist. They had been back and forth with the HSE. In fairness to the then Minister of State, she told the special school to go ahead and hire them and she would make sure the HSE paid them the money. There needs to be far more partnership with some schools to ensure that what we have is a child-centred approach in the delivery of all of these services.

I know the Minister is deeply committed on a personal level to reform this and to ensure that assessments of need happen as quickly as possible. However, it is not just about the assessment, but that the necessary support services are put in place. I believe we need to address the costs through some form of cost-of-disability payment in the budget, as has been outlined. I come back to my central point. We want this to be the best country in the world in which to be a child.

There should be no wrong door for any child or their family when it comes to seeking the supports they need. I support the moves being made in this legislation, but it is how it will be implemented and the impact it will have that will make a real difference.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The test of any disability Bill is very simple. Will it deliver better outcomes for children with disabilities and their families? Those families have heard enough about reforms, reviews and new processes. What they need has been stated many times. They need assessments and they need services. What I want to know is if this legislation will improve the scandalous situation affecting children with disabilities and their families in

Monaghan and Cavan. There are 794 children in my constituency waiting for assessments of need. Virtually none of them will receive it within the statutory six-month period. Each one of that number is a child. Each one represents a family that has been fighting a system that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have allowed to fail them.

The Government response is to introduce a new Bill at a time when it is breaking the law that is already in place. I want to say this clearly: the families of these kids will not accept any attempt to simply streamline children off a waiting list rather than deliver their rights. Changing procedure does not provide a single extra speech and language therapist. It does not provide a single additional occupational therapist, psychologist or special education place. Families in counties like Monaghan and Cavan do not need another Government announcement. They do not need a new law. They need the law that is there to be honoured. They need the staff to be employed to do the work. Above all, they need their children to get the services that they are entitled to when they need them.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Most parents who have children with additional educational needs are very well aware of the context of this legislation. The reality is the Government needs to change the process and the legislation because it cannot abide by its own laws. It is breaking the laws it has set. That is a scandalous situation. There are other issues we could say this about as well, but it is remarkable that there is so little improvement in an issue that has got so much attention and discussion in so many years. In fact, in many respects, things have gotten worse. As things stand, there are almost 2,000 children in the county of Cork who have gone beyond the statutory timeline. About 80% of them are more than three months over the statutory deadline. Even for those in Cork who have an assessment of need, of the 370 reports completed since 2022, only a fraction have service statements to outline what supports and services will follow. Ultimately, the next failing after that is the fact that children who have all the correct documentation, reports and so on are unable to access the services and therapies in an adequate way and on time. That is another issue.

That brings me to access to therapy in special schools. I attended a briefing a short time ago that was also attended by parents of children who attend Carrigaline Community Special School and a special school in Belmayne. Some of the stories told were simply unacceptable. There is a particular issue with ETB schools and the fact that there are not enough therapists attached to the multidisciplinary team. There are also issues with respite. They also raised a lot of other good points about the standardisation of policies and procedures across special schools and training in special education for teachers. Children in Carrigaline Community Special School, in other ETB schools and in all kinds of schools across the State are being failed because there are not adequate therapies available.

I know that this has already crossed the Minister's desk. I urge her to ensure that in schools such as this – it is not about any one patron, it is about schools as a whole – get the therapies they need for the children that attend them.

Deputy Mark Wall: I welcome the Minister. I also welcome the intent she has displayed in bringing this Bill forward to make changes to the process relating to assessments of need. While I agree that legislative reform is necessary, I am of the view that the proposed changes presented in this Bill do not address the key issues of resourcing and funding. The needs of children should be met by the State through the provision of well-resourced public health and

education services. We all know that early intervention is vital but, shamefully, far too many young children are failed by an under-resourced and overstretched system for assessment and in the context of the provision of essential supports and therapies once diagnosis is secured.

At the end of last year the Government promised targeted reforms to the assessment of need, with the Minister for Education and Youth stating that the system is no longer fit for purpose. This Bill is not the targeted reform parents and their children need. This Bill is short-termist, with piecemeal changes that will have absolutely no real or tangible impact on children and their families.

Every day of the week I try to support families who are being failed by the Government because they cannot get access to the essential therapies they need and deserve. Some 90% of children are not seen within the six-month limit, as required under the Disability Act. The average waiting times have now stretched to more than two years. We have a system that is unable to cope with the demand and it is shortly going to implode.

Only this week, I have been supporting multiple families who cannot get an assessment of need or access to vital therapies. I will give an example from one constituent in Kildare South. It states:

We applied for the Assessment of Need in May 2023, we were advised that an assessment would be completed no later than November 2023, as per the legal requirements. However, this did not happen and I went through the complaints procedure, and received further notification that an assessment would be completed no later than September 2024.

The person involved stated that another two years have passed since the previous deadline and that it has been almost three years since the initial application, which is far too long when it concerns the well-being of her daughter.

Another family of a young child I am working with in Newbridge has been waiting over a year and, equally as important, that child is still without a special school place. That is the harsh reality for many families I am working with throughout Kildare South, as are many of my colleagues in the Labour Party. I have had families tell me that they are forking thousands of euro on services that should be and must be delivered by the State. They are eating into savings and college funds and taking out loans and going to credit unions just to get access for their children to the services they need.

The Minister previously announced the 11 new in-reach teams to provide clinical guidance and support for clinicians performing assessments. The Government can barely staff the CDNT teams throughout the country. Only recently I received a reply from the HSE west and central Kildare area that they are still recruiting for an assessment officer. The most recent figures available to me also show that, as of October 2025, there was an 18% vacancy rate across positions in CDNTs, with over 450 positions unfilled. Vacancies include those key and vital therapies, with 27% of occupational therapies and 44% of clinical psychologists unfilled. Will the Minister provide an update to the House today on the actions her Department is taking to address the workforce challenges we are all seeing right across the State in every area.

As well as that, the reply to the parliamentary question also informed me that they are relying on private providers to increase the capacity of assessments and decrease waiting times. I believe every resource of the State should be used to tackle these issues. However, could the

Minister clarify how much the State is paying to private providers at this time? This is an issue across the health sector whereby the State is outsourcing healthcare, and where the Government is not doing enough to prevent long waiting lists and vacancies.

Under the current Act, the statutory timeline for an assessment of need is six months. In the HSE Dublin and Midlands area, there were more than 6,500 children overdue completed assessment of need reports. Nationally, the figure is over 20,000. Figures from the HSE also show that 8,200 children were waiting for their first contact from the CDNT at the end of March 2026. More than 5,260 are waiting over 12 months. The regional healthcare area of HSE Dublin and Midlands, which includes my county of Kildare, has the highest waiting list for first contact with a CDNT, and nearly 1,700 children have been waiting for over a year.

We in the Labour Party have raised concerns regarding continued attempts by Departments to pass the buck. When the Minister previously announced the replacement of the existing assessment of need process with a new system, we in the Labour Party raised concerns as the proposals were to replace the requirement of a formal diagnosis when determining access to a special class and special school.

This, as my colleague, Deputy Eoghan Kenny, stated, is a serious development. Such proposals will have profound implications for school teachers and, most importantly, for the children and families who urgently require timely access to specialist support. By replacing diagnostic criteria with an educational assessment, the Government is placing an unreasonable and unsafe burden on school communities.

The Minister has said that children will no longer need an assessment of need to get a school place and that it will be up to education to allocate places. I presume that reference was to the Department of education. Unfortunately this is not happening for those who require a special school place, as I found out recently in my constituency of Kildare South. For so many parents right now, an assessment of need is one of the criteria for the allocation of a special school place. Some of the families I am dealing with are waiting on an updated assessment of need as the one they have for their child is a number of years old. The problem they have is that their child is now older, the disabilities and medical conditions remain the same or, unfortunately, have increased but they are waiting on an updated assessment of need or an interim report to try to secure a special school place for their loved one. Time is, unfortunately, against them.

I am sure the Minister is aware of statements made by the INTO calling this a profound breach of trust, a sentiment we in the Labour Party continue to echo. The Taoiseach even said that assessment teams would be carrying out such work. I ask the Minister to clarify which assessment teams will actually end up doing this work. This situation is leaving parents with two parallel pathways, with one to get the therapies the child needs and another to get a diagnosis and a school place for the child. The Government's solution is to place more pressure on teachers who are already, as we all know, stretched to their limit. They cannot be expected to pick up the slack from Departments and they cannot take the responsibility for the failure in addressing the huge waiting times. It is a system not based on lived reality.

Only recently my Labour Party colleague, Councillor Ali Field, brought a petition to the European Parliament to fight the case of her family and other families regarding the long waits for an assessment of need. At that time she said:

My son James who has severe autism and is totally nonverbal has been failed by our state on so many levels. James was deprived of essential early intervention help while he was left waiting on a list for almost two years for an Assessment of Needs and diagnosis.

I have been banging this drum for many years now, as have so many parents and advocates. But our government are not listening. They do not seem to realise that they have a duty of care to all children including the children with the highest support needs.

Another mother who signed the petition, Vivienne Sullivan from Kildare, said:

My son Isaac was on the AON list from 2017 to 2025. His file was lost twice, and on another occasion, he was recorded as having been seen when he had not.

We rang weekly and, in the end, daily. Often the phone was unanswered. He finally had an assessment in March 2025, but he still has no access to services. Isaac is 14 now and has been waiting since he was 5. It's not acceptable.

Following this petition I am pleased to see the European Parliament Committee on Petitions has sought a report from the Department on the Government's continued breach of children's rights. I hope that today the Minister will acknowledge this and provide an update to the House on the publication of the report.

In the Labour Party's alternative budget of 2026 we set out how we would urgently invest in tackling what has happened with the Government and how it has added to the growing waiting lists. The Labour Party would have an initial additional allocation of €15 million under the waiting list initiative to outsource assessments of need for the 5,000 children waiting longest while capacity is built up in the public service. We also need to see urgent action to train more therapists and specialists along with ring-fenced funding to hire future staff. There is also a real question regarding the Government's proposals as to how these new assessment teams will be staffed. Access to an assessment of need has become a major barrier for many families of children with additional needs throughout Ireland. There is an element of short-termism in the Bill as it does nothing to address the long waiting times for assessments of need and does not support timely access to services needed by so many of our children.

I also want to raise concerns about the fact that the Bill will give powers to issue statutory guidelines when the Dáil has not seen sight of those guidelines. As have others, I ask the Minister to confirm the proposed guidelines. What is the timeline for these publications? Has the Minister seen these guidelines? These are critical questions that must be addressed by the Minister and the Department before the House can give any consideration to, or have confidence in, the changes we have been presented with here today. What parents and their children actually need from the Government is a clear and immediate action plan that gets to grips with the growing waiting lists. The workforce challenges in vital services like speech and language, occupational therapy and physiotherapy must all be properly resourced. Children must have access to special schools and school places in their local community. Families need certainty from the Government that their child can access an assessment of need and the services they so desperately need so the constant battle can eventually stop. The Government must give a clear commitment to families on when it will finally comply with its own legal obligation to the assessment of need process under the Disability Act 2025.

I will share another story before I finish, and take young Padraig Creaney from my home town of Athy as an example of the issues and problems I deal with on a daily basis. Padraig got an assessment of need when he was 12 years of age but despite his family continuing to seek a new assessment to cover his additional and, unfortunately, growing needs, it has not been forthcoming for more than 12 years. The family simply does not know where to go next. As it is for the Creaney family in Athy, every day is a fight for these families and their children. They are fighting for basic services. There is a fight for an assessment, a fight for therapies and a fight for a school place. When will the Government finally support these families and actually make a real dent in the waiting times and lists for access to an assessment of need and the vital therapies that the children of this State deserve and have a right to?

Deputy Keira Keogh: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Disability (Amendment) Bill 2026. For me, disability advocacy is not only a policy area but really personal because for 19 years prior to becoming a TD I worked in the disability sector. I specialised in supporting mainly neurodiverse children at an early intervention level alongside their families and their schools. I know this area really well.

I worked in private practice as a choice because my counterparts and colleagues in the HSE tended to have huge caseloads that yielded a lot of stress and overwhelm. I was able to keep my caseload at a manageable low level and see clients and families on a weekly basis, which often yielded very good results and achievements. I know first-hand the struggles that families with disabilities or suspected diagnoses face. Over many years I referred many families to get an assessment of need, mainly to access home tuition at the crucial and very influential early intervention ages, with regard to ten hours of tuition between the ages of two-and-a-half years and three years and 20 hours between three years of age and preschool.

As a member of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Disability Matters I have had the opportunity to hear detailed evidence from stakeholders, service providers, advocacy groups, parents and, most importantly, people with disabilities themselves for whom we cannot and should not make decisions without their input. In my previous role, my role as a member of the committee and my role as a Mayo TD, one message has come through clearly again and again and it is one that we all know. It is that the current assessment of need system is under huge strain and needs reform. This is something we all agree on. The committee on disability matters has heard repeated evidence of long waiting lists, significant demand, staffing pressures and the frustration and upset experienced by families trying to navigate a system that is really complex and difficult to access in a timely manner.

As we know, data from 2025 showed that 87% of children in Ireland did not receive their assessment of need within the legally required six-month timeframe. This statistic is deeply concerning because behind every one of these figures is not just a number; a delayed assessment is a child or a family waiting for answers and crying out for support or information. These are real children and families who need to access supports to meet their needs. I know, and it will be said again and again, that people can access primary care without a diagnosis and can access a CDNT without a diagnosis but because there is pressure on these services some people turn to an assessment of need thinking it is a faster pathway to services.

Others will definitely still want an assessment of need to understand their diagnoses. As I said, there is then that cohort that wants the diagnosis because, as matters stand, they need it

for home tuition or access to an autism class or a special class. I understand from parents that the frustration rarely stems from the assessment itself but, rather, from the delays experienced.

Many families, including those living in rural parts of County Mayo, face long delays for specialist appointments and that can delay access to crucial early intervention that would yield some of the most significant developments in the early years of a child's life. Families really want to have a system that is fair, transparent, responsive and focused on identifying the supports their child needs as quickly as possible. On that basis, there are positive aspects to this Bill. A key aim of the Bill is getting the therapists back doing more therapy rather than spending more of their time carrying out assessments. As this new system is introduced, we must ensure that there are always eyes on the child. That is one of my concerns. I want to ensure that at all points there are eyes on the child and that the assessment officer has the necessary expertise to make the crucial decisions. Where a child is found not to meet the disability threshold, that decision should be issued in writing and with clear reasons provided to the family. The parents must also have access to a review and appeals mechanism, because these decisions do have life-changing consequences and families need all possible transparency and fairness and to have confidence in the process.

One of the most important changes is the emphasis on a needs-based approach. We all agree that the assessment of needs process should be focused on identifying and understanding a child's needs rather than being consumed by unnecessary bureaucracy and administrative difficulty. In my view, a needs-based approach has the potential to allow professionals to focus their expertise where it matters most: on developing appropriate plans and supporting children to access therapies and services sooner.

For families in County Mayo and throughout rural and urban Ireland, outcomes matter. Parents want their child's needs identified early and accurately in order that appropriate health and educational supports can be put in place. It is in this vein that I also welcome the provisions regarding the development of the national statutory guidelines. Families should have confidence that the process is being applied fairly regardless of where they live in the country.

I also welcome the provisions in the Bill relating to the withdrawal, closure and reinstatement of applications. It may be the case that this is a practical response to a reality that many families experience, as individual circumstances can change and families might experience illnesses or a need to move, and under the current legislation there is no clear mechanism to facilitate those situations, which can leave applications inactive within the system for extended periods.

I am nearly out of time, so I will cut to the end and welcome the legislation. I hope it streamlines the process and clears the backlogs, but I do want to make sure that there are eyes on the child as well during the making of these crucial decisions.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I welcome the debate on this Bill. Parents who have contacted me about assessments of need consistently raise three points, namely timely appointments, clear answers and a straightforward path that supports their child's development. We know the current system is not delivering that. In 2008, the HSE received 2,535 applications. Last year, that figure grew to 13,186. By the end of June of this year, 23,282 were overdue. In the first quarter of this year, only one in ten was completed on time. Behind each figure, of course, is a child waiting and a family losing time they cannot get back.

This Bill makes three practical changes. It focuses the assessment on what a child needs rather than on a lengthy diagnostic report, which is in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, UNCRPD. It puts statutory guidelines in place so that a family in my constituency of Dún Laoghaire, or a family in Donegal and elsewhere, can expect the same process. It allows applications to be closed where a family has withdrawn or moved abroad, with a right to reinstate within 12 months. What the Bill does not change matters just as much. The six-month statutory timeline stays, the right to apply stays and the definition of disability stays.

I ask the Minister for one assurance regarding Committee Stage. The Joint Committee on Disability Matters raised concerns about the qualifications of the assessment officers who will decide in the first instance whether a child has a disability. Families need confidence in that decision. I would welcome the Minister setting out how it will be provided. Equally, an assessment records a need. It does not meet it. The 11 new in-reach teams, the therapists now in our special schools and continued recruitment are what will turn this Bill into real help.

This Bill deals with the start of the journey. I want to use my remaining time to comment on the other end of it. In recent weeks, I have heard from parents in my constituency who are part of the Before We Die campaign. I thank them for making their views known. They are asking for progress, and they are right to ask for it. Their question is one that no parent should have to carry into old age: who will care for their son or daughter when they are gone? The evidence supports them.

The latest figures from the Health Research Board, HRB, show more than 2,100 adults using disability services whose main carer is aged 70 or over, and 516 whose carer is over 80. They show that 2,197 people needed residential places, with nearly three in four needing one now. I welcome the acknowledgment by the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, on Monday that too many families reach crisis point before a residential place is available.

I know the Government has begun to respond. The Taoiseach met the campaign and put the issue on the agenda of the Cabinet committee on disability. This year's disability budget is a record €3.8 billion and will be used to fund 152 new residential placements. This week, the Government confirmed that every council will set targets for housing people with disabilities from 2027 to 2030. I will work with my colleagues Councillors Moylan and Clark to make sure that Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown's target matches that need.

I recognise the providers who carry out this work every day. In Dún Laoghaire, there are many providers, but I focus on one, namely the team at St. John of God Services, which has provided generations of people with outstanding support from Dunmore House. Carmona Services supports 750 children and adults with intellectual disabilities, from early years through to day services, respite, residential homes and independent living. Its staff, and the families who fundraise alongside them, are a credit to the community. Even with services of that quality, Carmona has to tell families that they have to wait for a residential place for too long, and that matters to them. The problem is not the people doing the work. It is the number of places available, and we need to see more progress here.

I have two specific requests to make of the Minister. First, that the successor to the action plan for disability services, due from 2027, guarantee a funded future plan for every adult whose main carer is over 70, agreed with the family before a crisis and not after it. Second,

that the Department establish the national register of need these parents have called for, so that every family knows where it stands and the State can plan ahead.

Every family deserves timely assessments and a clear path to services that work for them right through the person's life. I look forward to working with the Minister and her officials as she continues to make progress on these issues.

Deputy Mark Ward: Parents being left waiting for assessments of need for their children is a huge issue in my area. To me, what the Government is trying to do here today is typical smoke and mirrors. It is going back to its usual three-card trick by moving children from list to list without them getting the proper therapies that they need at the end of it. I represent the same constituency as the Minister of State with special responsibility for disability, Deputy Emer Higgins. We both represent children who are a waiting list for assessments of need. In our area, as we speak today, over 2,000 children have been waiting for more than six months for an assessment of need. The Government is breaking the law by not providing these assessments under the Disability Act 2005. Last year, instead of providing resources for therapies, the Government spent €7.2 million fighting these desperate parents in court. These are parents who just want their children to reach their full potential. There is no greater crime than this.

In our area of Palmerstown, 154 children are waiting for an appointment with a physiotherapist. Will the Minister guess how many of these children have been waiting for more than a year for appointments? The answer is that every one of them. This Bill that we are speaking about today does not provide for one additional physiotherapist. In the children's disability network team, CDNT, in Rossecourt, which serves Adamstown, Lucan and Balgaddy, we have only 43% of the number of psychologists that we need in our area. The Clondalkin CDNT is housed in a lovely, brand-new building.

4 o'clock

There is no point in having a brand-new building if we do not have the staff to provide therapies there. We have no occupational therapist and no speech and language therapist, and this Bill does not make provision for those posts. I cannot see anything in it that will help the parents who contact me desperately trying to get the therapies their children need in a timely manner. The Government really needs to buck up its ideas and get this sorted.

Deputy Thomas Gould: It is unbelievable that we have to come in here every year to talk about the issues with services for children with additional needs and children awaiting an assessment of need. The average waiting time in Cork at the moment is 27 months, notwithstanding the legal requirement that all children should receive their assessments of need within six months. I spoke to a woman yesterday who had received a letter stating that her child would be waiting 36 months for assessment, which is six times longer than the legally permitted time.

Government members come into this Chamber trying to cod the people. They are trying to cod the parents who have to fight every day for their children with additional needs or disabilities. The Minister needs to do her job and address this issue. I have a list in my hand of children with additional needs, special needs and disabilities who are not in school right now

because they have no school transport. I spoke to a grandparent yesterday who was driving his grandson to school from Blarney Street in Cork city to Fermoy three days a week. School starts at 9 a.m. and this grandfather waits three hours in Fermoy before collecting the boy at noon and driving him home. How can anyone be expected to do that every day? That child misses two days of school a week. I know of other children who are at home because there is no school transport.

Where are the extra resources? Where are the occupational therapists, speech and language therapists, psychologists, psychiatrists and SNAs people need? Where are the school places and the school transport? Children are being sent from Ballincollig out to Boherbue and Macroom. Children from Knocknaheeny and Mayfield are being sent down to Rochestown. Children from the northside of Cork city are being sent to Fermoy, which is a 40-minute drive. Why are places and services not being provided in communities for the children who need them? It is not right.

Deputy Paul Murphy: This Bill sums up everything that is wrong with the Government's approach to disability services in this country. We have a crisis, with families crying out for help, and here we have a Bill that is not about investing in the health and education professionals needed to operate a properly functioning system. The Bill is not about addressing that in Chamber House CDNT, where well over 1,000 files simply have not been opened, there is a vacancy rate of more than 50% in some professions and a rate of one third across the board. In Tymon CDNT, also in my constituency, the situation is similar. This Bill is not about providing resources. Instead, it is about looking for shortcuts. Rather than putting the resources in place to meet the goals, it is about shifting the goalposts.

The Government has been under massive pressure on this issue. That is a testament to all the campaigners, parents and families who fought for years to put it on the agenda. Cara Darmody has been outside Leinster House again and again. The campaigners have demanded action on assessment of need and provision of the therapies that must flow from that. The Government is feeling the pressure. At the end of June, 23,000 assessments of need were overdue, with assessment taking an average of two years and two months to complete. That has created a problem for the Government. One of the good things in the law is that assessment of need must take place within six months. That is clear. When people come to me looking for support for their children, the first question I ask is whether they have applied for an assessment of need and, if so, how long they have been waiting. If it is more than six months, the advice we give them is obvious and, I presume, is the same as that given by lots of other TDs. We tell them they should ask a solicitor to assist them to take the State to court. Obviously, it is ridiculous that people must do that. Of course, once the assessment of need is done, children just move onto other waiting lists for necessary therapies. Unfortunately, there is no legal right in terms of timeframes for access to therapy.

The Government has a problem with the law that requires an assessment of need to happen within six months. Instead of the State's approach being to provide the resources to ensure people get an assessment of need within the timeframe and that the State stops breaking its own law, what we are seeing, in effect, are attempts to water down the law to reduce the legal liability on the State. In reality, we should be expanding that liability by introducing timeframes in respect of therapies as well as for assessments of need. Instead, the Government would like to water down its liability.

The pre-legislative scrutiny of this Bill by the committee reported that any reforms to the AON process should not restrict access for children and families and should provide clear and robust procedural safeguards. Witnesses warned that if the legislation resulted in a higher threshold for determining disability before a fuller assessment of need can be carried out, children with complex, fluctuating or less visible needs could be screened out of having those needs assessed at all. It seems none of those concerns has been heeded in the Bill.

What we are getting is a new system that will enable the HSE to unilaterally withdraw assessment of need applications without seeking parents' consent. The conditions under which the HSE can do this are not specified in the Bill. Instead, section 5 provides that this will be worked out in ministerial regulations. That means we will not get a chance to debate, amend or vote on them in the Dáil. It is fundamentally undemocratic. We are expected to take the Minister's word for it that the conditions for withdrawing parents' applications will be fair and reasonable and that the HSE's desire to cut waiting lists will not be a factor. We have seen this previously with other waiting lists, such as for social housing, with people arbitrarily bumped off the list because the State claimed their needs had been met through the housing assistance payment, HAP, or there was no response to a letter.

The power of the HSE to withdraw applications and bump applicants off waiting lists is all the more worrying because there is no requirement first to get parents' consent. The withdrawal is to happen instantly once the HSE decides to issue a withdrawal notice. The parents can challenge it and request a reinstatement but the application will only be reinstated from the date of that request and will not include the time between the notice being issued and the reinstatement request. That could encourage further massaging of waiting lists. What happens if the parents do not get the withdrawal notice because they have moved house? What happens if they have been made homeless? Many parents are going to be in that situation. They will get 12 months to request reinstatement but with the process currently taking two years and two months, lots of parents will not realise they have been taken off the list.

What the Government is trying to do with this Bill is extremely concerning. It should invest in providing assessments and services rather than trying to fiddle the figures like this.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Bringing this Bill before us is an admission by the Government that it has failed, and is failing, tens of thousands of the most vulnerable children in our society. Introducing the Bill, the Minister indicated she was mindful of that failure by referring to the unacceptable waiting lists for assessment of need. She talked about the frustration felt by parents and families and the impact on children. However, the Bill she has put forward does absolutely nothing to address that. She did not even bother to explain what the purpose of the Bill was and how it would impact on the problem she briefly and half-heartedly acknowledged, namely, the unacceptable failure by the State to provide the most vulnerable in our society with the necessary assessment of need. Some 28,000 vulnerable children with special needs and disabilities have not received an assessment. When people finally do get an assessment after a long wait, they cannot access the services they need.

The Government's Bill looks designed to cull the lists. It certainly will not deal with the fundamental problem, which is that the CDNTs are massively understaffed.

The Government has failed to recruit the people necessary to staff the CDNTs to be able to do the assessments, and more important, to provide the services, supports and resources

children need, which are critical and which their parents are up the wall about because they know they will have a lifelong impact on their children. The failure to get a diagnosis can compound situations in terms of mental health problems the children suffer from, getting bounced between CDNTs and CAMHS.

The change in definition from disability to substantial restriction is very concerning. What does that mean? What defines "substantial"? Why does a change in definition address the problem? It is difficult not to suspect that what is happening is that the Government is reducing eligibility, that it is raising the bar to make it more difficult for people to get the services and supports they need, rather than addressing the fundamental problem. It has the right to take people off the list because when people are waiting this long, many people are forced to go private. Where have we seen that story? We have seen it in every public service situation. Long waiting lists force people to go private, leaving the poorest, the least well-off, on the lists and they can be taken off if they do not reply to letters. People who are the most vulnerable and most stressed with housing situations - and often housing crisis situations overlap with children with these sorts of needs - might not reply to letters. They get taken off a list. They realise they have been taken off the list and seek reinstatement but are put at the bottom of the list again. It is unbelievable and it looks, unless the Government can tell us otherwise, like this about culling the list and reducing eligibility for the things that are necessary.

Section 6 gives power to the Minister for statutory guidelines. We do not know what they are. We already have assessment of need guidelines. Why does the Minister need this new power? We are being asked to pass legislation, when we already have guidelines, that gives the Minister the power to pass new guidelines, which we have not been told about and we do not know what they are. It stinks and it certainly will not address the problem. It looks like culling the list.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The current situation regarding assessments of need cannot be allowed to continue. It is a national scandal. Children with special needs who are vulnerable cannot even get assessed to get proper services. Some 23,000 assessments of need are overdue, having exceeded the statutory timeline. The average duration it takes to get an assessment of need is 27 months. That is the average. Some people wait up to three years. That is not acceptable.

In Laois-Offaly, the figure averages in the region of 900 overdue assessments of need. Laois-Offaly in particular continues to be a blackspot but there are several blackspots in the country. Key to this is the staffing of the HSE. There are not enough clinicians to do the assessments. Getting the assessment is only the first battle in the difficulties for families in Laois-Offaly. The fact is that the CDNTs, in Laois in particular, do not have the required number of staff to provide the therapies and services. That is the real problem. The most recent HSE staffing figures I have are that in network 11, which covers the north of the county, no dedicated occupational therapists have been assigned to date, there are no psychologists and no social workers have been approved. That is network 11. I will move on to network 12 which covers the other two thirds of Laois. Three OT posts and two speech and language posts are vacant and no social workers have been allocated. They are the HSE figures, not mine.

People therefore finish up having to pay for assessments of need privately. Many cannot afford to. It works out at between €1,000 and €2,000. Then they have to start paying for

occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, psychology and so on. This is putting huge strain on the majority of middle and low-income households. Organisations, such as Laois Offaly Families for Autism, provide support including counselling services and therapies, but they are made up of volunteers. Are we going to load all this on volunteers? These are typically mothers and fathers who have children with special needs and have to raise money to try to provide the services. The legislation brought forward by the Minister could help to speed up the AON process, if it is done correctly, but staffing is the key. Without the staff, the legislation will mean nothing. They are the facts.

I am seriously concerned about the power being given to the Minister and the HSE in section 5 to remove applications. It presents a real danger and the Government has not explained this properly. There is real concern about this and it is deemed an opt-out clause.

Statutory guidelines are promised as part of the Bill. If they were proper guidelines they would be required but it has already been pointed out that there are guidelines in place. There needs to be consistency with standard procedures and transparency. The assessment of need has to be about establishing what the child's needs are. Early intervention at a crucial stage of a child's development is simply not happening. This is the sad thing about all this in many cases. We know the importance of having timely interventions at the point children are at in their development.

What is the update on the 150 additional staff that were promised for CDNTs? In her closing remarks, the Minister of State might give us those figures. They are just to replace the people we are losing from the CDNTs. We need to accelerate that. Will there be enough assessors? I note that 11 clinician guidance teams are promised in the Bill but will there be enough assessors in place to carry out the assessments of need? That is a key issue that needs to be dealt with. The Government needs to make it a national priority to fill the gaps in the CDNTs properly. In Laois-Offaly and a lot of other counties, but Laois-Offaly is a particular blackspot, that means filling the wide gaps in occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, psychology, social work and other therapies. Anything else is simply window dressing. That is the fundamental point. Resources are needed. Streamline it but do not streamline it in such a way to get people off waiting lists who need to be on them, children who need to be seen, looked after properly and assessed and given the services they require.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Before I speaking on this Bill today, I got the views of a solicitor who takes many cases on behalf of parents. This is their initial perception.

This Bill amounts to a significant watering down of the rights of children with a disability. The assessment report under the 2005 Act has been described by the courts as the gold standard. It is supposed to be comprehensive and evidence based and set out the child's needs and the services required to meet these needs if costs were not an issue at all. Under the 2005 Act, an assessment report had to include a statement of the nature and extent of the disability. This was hugely important to families as the report set out the extent of the child's need. Now, all that will be provided is "a statement of the substantial restriction to which the applicant is subject".

The Minister of State will agree that is a huge difference. We need to break the news to families, disability organisations and advocates that they need to get agitated about this. In recent years, one of the biggest features of society has been the activism of disabled people and

their carers. There was the Green Paper that had to be withdrawn by the previous Government. The care referendum was rejected because of issues around disability rights and there have been campaigns all around the country for school places appropriate to children's needs, by parents, mainly mothers.

It seems that the assessments of need rule really bothers the Government because it gives parents the right to have it done within six months.

We all know that 90% of these assessments are not done within six months, leaving the Government looking really terrible. In introducing this, the Government is now trying to create a new avenue that would get rid of that terrible vista. These assessment reports will be much less comprehensive and less thorough. They are clearly designed to reduce the waiting lists but what will they actually deliver? As has been said, there are huge concerns about people not being classified as disabled in the first place under this legislation. The six-month rule definitely galls and pains the Government.

Some 9,300 children currently await a first appointment with a CDNT. The number has fallen but it is still very high. In Dublin 15, which makes up most of the Dublin West constituency, a task force on special education had to be set up. One of the findings of that task force was that 40% of referrals to the CDNT were still just that - referrals. I heard another TD talk about the waiting list in Cork. I do not mean to make comparisons or to have a poverty competition but in one of the CDNTs in Dublin 15, as of last year, the waiting list was up to seven years long. It is one of the highest by far because of the youthful population. The other one was better.

How is this going to be addressed? The crux of this is that the Government is not able to recruit the professionals who are needed. The reason it cannot do so is that they have fled to the private sector. That is where most of the people are. What is ironic is that they are actually doing these assessments of need privately and parents are paying for them. They have also fled the country because they cannot afford to live here because of the chronic housing crisis that this Government and previous governments have not dealt with. They cannot afford to have a decent life here. Until that is addressed, the CDNT lists are just going to keep on increasing.

I have a million pages of notes here that I wanted to bring in but I will just say that this is an attack on children's rights. Who are these assessment officers? I do not have time to develop that point but perhaps the Minister of State would answer that question because it is not stated in the legislation who the people who are going to do these assessments are.

Deputy Barry Ward: I broadly welcome the Bill. It is not a very long Bill but it is important insofar as it sets out important minimum standards. One thing on which we can all agree is that we must make this process easier for the people who need assistance. We must make it easier for people to get the assessments and to get help in place so that they can then reap the benefits of that assistance. We know that there are people the length and breadth of this country who need assistance and who, in reality, are not getting it or not getting it in sufficient quantities or in a timely manner. We can all get behind the idea that the purpose of this Bill has to be to make it easier for people who have additional needs and who need the support of the State.

I might start by making a point about the drafting. This is something I say about all amending legislation like this Bill. The 2005 Act is the principal Act, the Act that is being

amended, but it is impossible to know what this Bill, which will be an Act, does without having a copy of the 2005 Act next to you. Because sections 2, 3, 4 and 5 amend provisions of the 2005 Act, it is impossible to know what they are actually changing unless you have the 2005 Act present. This is a point I make quite a lot. When we are amending legislation, we should consolidate that legislation. Instead of amending specific provisions within a section, we should repeal that section and restate it in the amending Bill because that would make it much more accessible for everyone. This is part of what I am talking about, the need for it to be more easily accessible. You should not need to have two pieces of legislation to understand what one of them does. In general, we should be moving towards simply restating the law, making it available in one place rather than in two. That is a technical issue more than anything else.

With regard to what this Bill does, the specific and targeted amendments I have mentioned relate to certain aspects of the existing assessment of need process and aim to make the system more effective and efficient. However, I do not believe that legislation alone is actually going to do that. It may well be a tool that is required to achieve it but what the people who need disability assistance and various services want to know is whether this legislation will actually change the landscape for them in real terms. Are they actually going to be able to access the services they need in a timely and efficient manner? The review of the 2005 Act, which is being led by the Department of children, is obviously welcome. The notion of nationwide statutory guidelines to standardise how the HSE carries out assessments and consistency across geographic regions of the country are very important. However, we already have targets that have never really been achieved, including the six-month deadline which has been breached time and time again.

Perhaps the Minister of State will have an opportunity to address this in what she has to say but, however necessary this legislation might be, it is not clear to me how it guarantees in any real way that those targets will be reached. That is a question I am asked all the time by people in Dún Laoghaire. They want to know how we are actually going to change this system so that it works for the people who need those services. Even though the statutory six-month deadline for assessments of need exists in law, every one of us in this Chamber has spoken to constituents. I do not want to say that deadline has been disregarded because I do not think there is anybody out there who is not trying to meet it but we have not managed to deliver on it. We have to be able to deliver if anybody is to have confidence that we are reforming this system in a way that will actually make a difference.

The approach of this legislation has to be about making it easier and more accessible for families. We must ensure the staff are in place to operate this system. If there are vacancies, that needs to be addressed. Most of us will have heard stories of gaps that are there and situations that have not been filled. That creates delays and knock-on effects for families and people with disabilities. That has to be addressed. I sometimes despair at the slow pace of progress. Again, I do not think anybody is deliberately frustrating progress but, as legislators, it is our job not only to put in place measures requiring progress but also to put in place mechanisms to support delivery.

I support the provision of the 11 new inreach teams, which will be available to provide clinical guidance and support for clinicians performing assessments of need and the assessments informed by the new autism access assessment protocol. I note that each team will include a psychologist, a speech and language therapist, an occupational therapist and an

administrator. That is welcome because that is the kind of thing you can point to when dealing with constituents. It allows you to say that concrete things are being done to ease the process and to grease the wheels in a way that will actually have a tangible effect on the ground. I welcome the fact that these teams are being put in place.

The Bill is quite short containing not very many amendments. I hope the Minister of State will be able to give us a commitment that the effect of the realisation of these amendments on the ground will be to create greater, more efficient and faster access for people with additional needs, people with disabilities, their families and their parents so that they can get what they need and to deliver for those people. That is what everyone in here wants. That is what we are all waiting for.

Deputy John McGuinness: What every parent wants to know is whether this legislation will deal with the issues and the specific timelines that will be put in place. Will it make the assessment better? Based on this legislation, I cannot tell them. I am happy to support any legislation that will in any way deal with the waiting times for families and the other issues they face in relation to assessments and access to therapists, including occupational therapists, speech and language therapists and physiotherapists but I do not see that in this Bill. Let us not pretend that this Bill is going to fix everything as regards the care of those who need it. It is not. If it is not going to, we have to ask where are the professionals we need to deliver the services, to carry out the assessments and to put in place all of the supports individuals require. There are many other players out there in the delivery of services who are doing it to the best of their ability but whom the Department is not looking at to see if it could learn from them.

I will give the example of SOS Kilkenny. The principal individual there is Francis Coughlan. He has put forward his budgets year in and year out. He has been left short. He is trying to innovate and move the services on within the community. He is trying to support the families. It is an excellent organisation. Every single year, however, he, the families he represents and the individuals for whom he provides the services are being challenged by the State in terms of the delivery of the services that they need. It is the State that is letting them down because it is not planning for the professionals to be employed and to be maintained in their jobs. What they need is the pay that will keep them there and the structure that will allow them to work freely within the HSE or any other organisation. They are not getting that. That is, perhaps, why they are leaving the country and going elsewhere.

I can point the Minister of State to St. Patrick's special school, which is again delivering services way beyond what it should be doing and way beyond what it is being paid for doing. It is not being acknowledged. I encourage the Minister of State to visit the likes of those services and to go to Jonah Special School in Slieverue and see what they are trying to do with limited resources, and very successfully doing it, but they require the State to intervene to support them and give them money to develop a modern state-of-the-art service housed in buildings that can accommodate the needs of those children. We are not learning from those at the coalface who are doing this for individual children. Kingsriver Community in my constituency is another project that is doing fantastic work. It is being treated very badly by the HSE. There is no planning in terms of the financing of capital programmes or the financing of the services that they are delivering. The staff are giving more and more of their time - they are not being paid for it - just to make sure their services are being delivered to the clients they have. How bad is that in terms of the reflection on the State? It is absolutely scandalous.

The CDNTs, CAMHS and all those organisations that children get referred to are under enormous pressure. As a result of that, children and families are being pushed from pillar to post. They are not getting the type of assessment that is required or the supports that are needed in a structure that is heavily bureaucratic and is interested in nothing other than fulfilling a timeframe or a limited scope in terms of the treatment of all these cases. Neither do I see a plan in place to look after children as they go through their teenage years and become young adults and to support the families in question. What is going to happen when parents die and move on? What is going to happen to those children? What plan is in place to look after them? Where are the services that are defined that they will need? They are not there. As I worked with the Down's syndrome organisation in Kilkenny, I have seen where they too cannot get services from the HSE. When they get their funding, however, which the Minister of State kindly assisted them with, they are able to buy the services privately. It is the bureaucratic nature or set-up the HSE that causes people to look beyond that service. They can deliver a more streamlined service without the hindrance of the reporting mechanisms that are all there. We should not try to hide the fact that we are failing children and forcing them and their families into the courts. We should not be doing that. Every single cent of funding should go directly to organisations that are successfully delivering the type of therapies and support services that are needed, not just for the individual concerned but for the family also. I have heard these debates over and over again and there are no results. I am deeply disappointed with the system and that there is not more in this Bill.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: There are many issues with this Bill. What I wish to focus on is if it is successful in its content as assessment of need is often only the first step in a long and arduous journey towards seeing these needs met. As Teachtaí McGuinness and Ward stated, this Bill will not provide a single additional speech and language or occupational therapist. It will not provide additional special education places in our schools. It will not address the failures in workforce planning that allow vacancies to persist for far too long. In response to a recent parliamentary question, the Minister highlighted to me the supposed progress made nationally in delivering these reports. However, in my constituency of Cavan-Monaghan, there is no such supposed boom in care for our children. In fact, in half a year just 18 assessment of need reports were completed. This was nearly one third less than in 2024. There were 18 assessments out of 800 applicants. How can the Minister of State stand over this? We are nowhere near addressing this for the people of Cavan and Monaghan. Just one report was completed within the statutory timeframe. There were zero in the previous year. This is an abject failure and an utterly shameful and contemptible failure on the part of the Minister of State and her predecessors. My challenge to the Minister of State is that as the Government looks to progress this Bill through the Houses over the coming weeks or months, she should see how many assessments of need she can oversee the completion of in Cavan and Monaghan in that period. Can the Government deliver one single report within that timeline that it is legally obliged to meet?

Deputy Pa Daly: When we strip away all of the legislative jargon and the Government's spin surrounding this Bill, one question remains: is it going to get additional services for the children who need it? That is not just a concern that has been expressed on these benches. Even some of the Government's own representatives have questioned whether this is going to happen. The answer, unfortunately, is "No". The Bill is being presented as a solution to the assessments of

need crisis, but the same Government that has presided over the collapse of the assessments of need system is now introducing the legislation that appears designed just to make the waiting lists look smaller on paper. At the end of June, there were 23,000 children waiting beyond the statutory timeframe for an assessment of need and 20,000 waiting more than three months beyond the legal deadline. Those are children whose development is being delayed. Families are living in uncertainty. Parents are forced to fight the State for years to get the services that they are entitled to receive.

The crisis cannot be resolved through administrative changes like the Government is seeking to do. It requires investment and leadership and that is what the Government has failed to provide. Year after year, governments arrive with a Bill that seeks to streamline the process, but who are they streamlining it for? There is no assurance that families will find themselves removed from waiting lists through bureaucratic processes that they do not fully understand. There is no confidence that children who are taken off lists will be quickly reinstated when circumstances prevent attendance at appointments. Parents have every reason to be worried because this Bill does not address the real crisis. There is not one additional speech and language therapist. There is not one additional occupational therapist. There is not one additional psychologist and no additional special education place. There is no guarantee that any child who receives an assessment of need will actually receive the therapies they deserve.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I welcome aspects of the Disability (Amendment) Bill 2026. The Minister of State can argue that it is absolutely required, but in another way it is just a reflection of ongoing State failure. For over 20 years, it could be argued that the State has breached its own laws under the Disability Act 2005, which has left so many thousands of vulnerable children without access to services. In this context, we could call any sort of move towards a needs-based approach a positive step because a child should not need a complex medical label just to get their basic speech and language therapy sessions.

Giving the HSE the power to get rid of the defunct applications from the list will give a more accurate picture of the backlog and will reduce the backlog to a degree but the backlog will still be massive. This Bill does not address the actual historical lack of services. The law stipulates that an assessment must take place within six months and yet the reality on the ground, as others have mentioned, is different. Groups are saying different things but the statistics indicate a wait of about 24 to 27 months and in some cases three to five years in individual worst cases. As others have said, it has been estimated that roughly 21,000 children are overdue assessments in the country.

I acknowledge that the State has spent a lot of money on services but the State has also spent about €23 million on legal fees fighting parents in courts and that money could have been put into the front-line services. Groups like Inclusion Ireland and AsIAM have repeatedly pointed out that the change in the rules does not mean anything when we still have a 30% vacancy rate across the children's disability network teams. Those teams need to be filled.

Deputy Seán Crowe raised an issue in this Chamber relating to one particular area in Tallaght in CHO 7. The constituency I share with the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, including areas like Saggart, Rathcoole, Lucan, Palmerstown and Clondalkin, has one of the worst bottlenecks in the State. I believe it was Chamber House that Deputy Crowe referenced which had a 53% staff vacancy rate, which means a lot of families were left absolutely stranded.

Thousands of families have been told that a child is a so-called "open case" but they have never received a first contact from a therapist. The definition changes here will not create those speech and language therapists. We want to see real investment in staff. I know sometimes in other areas of the health and family support services it has been difficult to actually get to that. I acknowledge there is a challenge. This legislation will not get any educational psychologists or other psychologists for families in Newcastle or Rathcoole.

Others might argue that this Bill is purely a cynical exercise in legal risk management, a way to stop parents from suing the State by lowering the bar in terms of what constitutes an assessment. I do not believe that but the Government will be open to accusations unless it backs up some of the measures in this legislation with increased staffing levels so that we can see the number of people on the waiting list coming down.

Deputy Michael Collins: Independent Ireland will support measures that generally speed up assessments for children with disabilities. However, let us be very clear that speeding up paperwork is not the same as speeding up care. I have repeatedly raised the waiting times for assessment of need. Families are waiting far beyond what is acceptable. Parents are exhausted, fighting the system while vital years in their children's development are passing by. These are not statistics; these are families. I know of a five-year-old child referred for an assessment of need on 29 May 2026. The family was later told that the child was being placed on a waiting list for a private provider and that this could take another seven months. Families are being told about timelines, stages and processes. What they want is an assessment and the help that their child needs.

Another young man from Bandon was referred for an assessment of need when he was four years old. He is now 12 and still waiting. His family moved address within the same area and informed the HSE but his assessment was never followed up. How can we possibly defend that? Another 11-year-old boy waited 18 months to be seen by the west Cork children's disability network. He was then told he did not meet the criteria and was referred to the primary care for speech and language therapy, and psychology. After waiting 18 months he was simply moved from one waiting list to another. That is not a joined-up disability service.

This problem does not end with children. A 47-year-old woman with an intellectual disability has been waiting for two years for a place with CoAction Skibbereen. She is at home for 24 hours a day with her elderly father without the stimulation and socialising she needs. She has been assessed as suitable for the service but still has no place. She should not be facing another winter sitting at home simply because the services are not available.

We also deal every year with parents desperately trying to find special class places for children with autism. Children reach school-going to age without their families knowing whether their child will have an appropriate school place. The same uncertainty happens year after year. That is unacceptable. The same applies with SNAs. Principals across Cork South-West tell me they need greater SNA support. The system must recognise the needs that exist in the classroom.

There were also serious problems with this year's summer programme with late planning, portal problems and delayed approvals. Schools need adequate notice so that they can recruit to teachers and SNAs, and properly plan for vulnerable children. One principal in Cork South-West told me about a child who had received additional staffing and had successfully attended

the summer programme for the previous two years. This year, the additional staffing was refused. The principal faced a choice of telling the child he could no longer attend or somehow make the programme work. She refused to turn the child away and instead she gave up her own paid role and worked without remuneration so that another staff member would be paid and the programme could operate safely. No principal should have to work for nothing to plug a hole created by the State.

Early intervention is supposed to be the cornerstone of our disability services but early intervention is meaningless if a child spends years waiting for an assessment and then joins another queue for speech and language therapy, occupational therapy or psychology. I agree that we should speed up assessments but above all we need to put the staff and services behind those assessments.

I have been involved in many of the meetings that have taken place over the past 12 months or so. The problem for children with intellectual disabilities is that they have no voice. If their parents are not strong enough to be the voice for them, they are left out in the cold. I know of a child in Castletownbere who cannot get transport services. That child is currently at home sitting with her dog every day of the week. That is no place for that girl to be. She is an intelligent child. She needs to be respected but she cannot because there are no services. There are no transport services. The whole system is broken from start to the finish.

There are 85-, 90- and 95-year-old parents trying to drive children for intellectual disabilities services which sometimes are not there. Even if they are there, the elderly parents are no longer able to do it. They are not getting the help that is needed. A very serious issue that needs to be looked at is the transport service for people with intellectual disabilities. The Before We Die campaign is trying to fight to give their children a right to have a home. Many of them can live independently as we have proved in a project we did in Schull, where there are two children with intellectual disability.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: We can pass whatever legislation we like in this Dáil but first we need to have the people to carry out the assessments to support the legislation we are putting through. We are able to bring in all this different legislation but we are not able to follow through on it, which is disappointing. We have the housing crisis. Students are qualifying in different fields within medicine and then have to leave the country because they see no future here. It is down to supply and demand. We have fantastic skilled workers here in various different fields.

I spoke to a woman last week who had completed her qualifications and was going into the health service. She has done four years and was about to do a further year in the area she wanted to cover. She looked at it on the basis of how much it was going to cost her even though she was trying to further her education to help people. She decided she had enough and was going to head off. I met her parents who were devastated that she had to leave the country. This is a young person aged 24, not long out of college and she wanted to further her education. She said to me that she had no future in Ireland. She said, "I want to stay near my family. I want to work within disability. I have no future. My only future is to leave this country."

We have inflation issues, over taxation of people who are working and over taxation of fuel for cars which are necessary for people to go to work.

Every young person who wants to stay here is given no option but to leave. Who is going to suffer only the people on the waiting lists and the people from disability sectors who need help? That, to me, it is a failure for the Government not to see it has to make sure everyone in this country who wants to stay here is given the right to do so and can see a future and raise a family here, if they so wish. Looking at the statistics, the age of couples who want to settle down to have a family, compared to one decade back, has changed and gone forward ten years. I know people who are settling down at 35, 36 or 37. I was married at 26. That is the difference today. Even those couples who do not want to get married are not settling down until closer to their forties and possibly having only one child.

When we go forward two or three decades from now, we will be looking for people to look after us, but they will not be there. What are we doing? We are driving them out of this country because we are not putting in the proper supports for them so they can care for others. That is the sad thing about this. We can make legislation, but it is only a piece of paper. It is no good unless you can actually put the proper infrastructure behind it to make sure it happens. The infrastructure in this case is to give all the young people qualifying in this country the opportunity to stay here. We have to keep them here. This has to come through not just in the disability or health sectors but also in the housing sector and ensure there is viability so that they can see a future. If you cannot achieve that, you will not achieve anything.

We are going to have to work together. I ask the Government to listen to reason. The budget is coming up. It could do one thing in this budget to help everyone in this country and give them a small piece to ensure they have some bit of money left in their pockets at the end of the week. I have said already and will say again that there is only one piece Government has got to do that will have a knock-on effect across everything, and that is a cap on the taxation of fuel in this country. Fuel can keep rising but increasing the fuel cost and increasing the taxes on people we want to keep here will drive them out of the country all the time.

On the other side of that, you have people protesting. People in this country cannot afford to protest and do not want to protest. They are not going out and jumping up and down just for the sake of it; they see no other option. They are not criminals and they should not be put down as that. They are people who see no other option and they are standing up for people from the disability sector, the vulnerable and children. They stand up for all those sectors. The Government has a chance in this budget to give a small lifeline to people to make sure we can hold them in this country.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: This Bill is a three-card trick. It is dressed up as an effort to help people with disabilities and special needs but it is little more than a press statement in the form of legislation. It costs very little to produce and draft a Bill, but there is a cost to providing services and to providing the professionals needed to be able to deliver those services. The assessment of need system is under enormous strain. More than 20,000 assessments are overdue and more than 90% of children are not receiving an assessment of need within the statutory six-month timeframe. Applications for assessments of need have risen from approximately 4,700 in 2020 to 13,000 last year. Those figures represent thousands of children and families waiting for answers and supports. The parents who want to spend their energy on helping and raising their children are actually spending all of it on trying to get the services they are entitled to and to negotiate the system that is preventing them from getting the help they need. We heard before at the committee on disability that organisations accept the need

for reform. They accept that the current system is not working well enough. However, they also raise serious questions about this Bill and the fact it does not address the root causes of this problem.

One concern that has been raised repeatedly is that the problem is not simply the assessment process itself but, rather, capacity. Organisations repeatedly pointed to shortages of psychologists, occupational therapists, speech and language therapists and other professionals across the disability sector. They described a system which demanded continuous growth in resources but is not being provided for. During that committee, it was noted that a disability team which originally supported about 121 children with eight staff members was later supporting 628 children with only an additional six staff members. The result was that waiting lists went back years rather than weeks.

I want to reference the work of Cara Darmody, who has been hailed, and rightly so, in this Dáil as a young girl who has probably done more on the whole issue of assessments of need than any TD here. TDs are so fast to get their photographs taken with her but they are not listening to her and that is the key issue. One of her recent proposals was that to fill the gap of professionals and staff needed, it would be logical to try to contract in those resources privately to deliver that work. She made that request to the Tánaiste at least six months ago and made it again recently. I am a great believer in public services but you also need common sense and cop-on. If there are private staff available here or in Britain, they should be used to bring down the current waiting lists.

The evidence points overwhelmingly to a shortage of staff and this Bill will not change that. It changes procedures but it does not change capacity. It does not increase the staffing levels or create an additional entitlement to supports once an assessment has been completed. This is a significant limitation - a life-changing limitation, in reality.

I am also concerned by the introduction of a preliminary determination of disability before full assessments of need take place. Many people simply see this as a trick by the Government to reduce the waiting lists in the future. Assessments of need should be focused primarily on understanding the child's needs and identifying appropriate supports. Care must be taken to ensure additional procedural steps do not create further obstacles for families already navigating complex systems. Careful scrutiny is required regarding the provisions that allow applications to be deemed withdrawn and closed. There will also need to be a process is needed to deal with circumstances where a case can no longer progress. Legislation must also recognise practical circumstances such as communication failures, changes in contact details and family circumstances and simple administrative errors. Strong safeguards are essential.

Another issue that must not be overlooked is what happens after an assessment has been completed. The Disability Act provides a right to an assessment but it does not provide a corresponding right to receive the supports identified during that assessment. For families, that distinction is critical. Receiving confirmation of a need is important but having that need met is what truly matters.

The Bill also gives considerable weight to future guidelines. Greater consistency across the country is a worthwhile objective, but people with disabilities, families and representative organisations should have a meaningful role in shaping the guidelines that will ultimately influence how assessments are conducted and how eligibility is interpreted. Ultimately,

legislation must be judged by outcomes. If waiting lists remain at current levels, children continue to wait for years for assessment and supports remain unavailable after needs have been identified, families will see little practical benefits from procedural reform alone. Reform is necessary, consistency is necessary and clarity is necessary but, most of all, capacity is necessary. Until those reforms are matched by investment in staff, services and supports, we risk changing the process without changing the experience of the child and the families who depend upon it.

Deputy Albert Dolan: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill. Supporting people with disabilities and their families is a priority, particularly for me as a TD for Galway East, to ensure the people of Galway East receive the services they deserve. I want to see a system that supports their needs close to home and gives families confidence for the future.

I start by acknowledging the work Government has been doing.

5 o'clock

It provided €20 million this year for the assessment of need targeted wait list initiative, the development of therapy services in special schools and the work to recruit additional clinicians. All of this is to be welcomed and encouraged. It is a case of building on that. With those measures, we have to be honest about where we are. As of the end of June, more than 23,000 assessment applications were overdue. Behind every one of those applications is a person waiting and a family trying to understand what help is available and when it will arrive. For a parents watching their child struggle, being told the system is under pressure offers very little reassurance. They know that early intervention matters. They need to see that urgency reflected by the system.

This Bill proposes practical changes to make the assessment process more consistent and more focused on a child's needs. I support that direction. Where an appropriate assessment can establish the support a child requires, we should avoid unnecessary duplication that takes clinicians away from providing therapy. I also welcome the retention of the statutory right to apply for an assessment and the existing six-month statutory timeframe. Those protections matter and families must have confidence that reform will strengthen the system. The provisions for closing and reinstating applications must be handled sensitively. A family overwhelmed by caring responsibilities may struggle to respond to correspondence and they need to be given the time to address and deal with it. They must receive clear communication and meaningful support before an application is deemed withdrawn. We must also remember that completing an assessment does not in itself provide a child with therapy. Families need access to speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and the other supports identified. Children who need help must be directed towards appropriate services even when they do not meet the statutory definition of a disability. Our responsibility continues into adulthood. People need suitable day services, respite and residential supports with genuine choices about how and where they live. Families need confidence that those supports will be there as the circumstances of the family change.

I was over the moon last year when I saw that the ring-fenced disability capital budget was going up by €15 million to a total of €43 million. I ask the Minister of State to go back to her Department and get absolute clarity about how that money has been spent this year to date. What capital projects have been delivered in disability this year? Where has the money been

consumed that was ring-fenced for capital budgets? Has it all been consumed by detailed design and tender stages and planning, or have we actually delivered tangible disability projects? I work closely with Corlann, formerly Brothers of Charity, and also Ability West in Galway. They are legacy organisations. They have sites and they have space. Does the Minister of State know what they do not have? They have a huge service-level agreement with the HSE on how to deliver services and they obviously have their negotiations about funding, but they have no provision for capital funding to build the homes themselves that they could staff, man and where they could provide the respite support and the residential care. They then end up taking on more residential units and paying huge rents. Those end up being commercial leases. The people who go into residential care under the commercial lease, and Corlann and Ability West, do not get the same protections as a normal tenant would in a residential dwelling. As a result the organisations that this State is funding are subjected to crazy rent increases. One could not imagine how much residential care homes rents' to landlords, because they are not protected the way a residential lease is, but are under a commercial lease.

If the €43 million in the disability capital budget has been primarily consumed by lengthy planning applications, tender stages and detailed designs but no real delivery, maybe it is time to change the way we do it. In the forthcoming budget, the Government should look at giving a devolved grant to the disability organisations around the country for capital projects exactly the way it works with education. One could say to Corlann or Ability West that we will give them €2 million this year and they can deliver the services. It is like sports capital. When you give it to an organisation with this *modus operandi* and drive, it will do an incredible job at delivering it.

Deputy Martin Daly: I thank the Chair for giving me time to speak on what is an important amendment to the Disability Act. I welcome the amendment to the Disability Act on its narrow basis, which is to streamline the assessment of need process and ensure that assessments of need are not used as a barrier to accessing services. It is clear that the statutory guidelines will be changed, which will standardise the assessment of needs process nationally and provide consistency throughout the country. That is to be welcomed. It is also to be welcomed that the assessments of need will not be used as a barrier to therapies within the HSE or access to special education in future and that there will be other pathways for children who have special and additional needs to have access to those therapies and assessments.

I welcome the 11 new in-reach teams which will include an occupational therapist, speech therapist, psychologist and an administrator to help professionals within the service to carry out these assessments that will allow children to access therapies in a timely way. The Minister and Minister of State have brought considerable focus to trying to streamline access to services like the single point of contact with the HSE. Clinicians and professionals in the community will be able to refer to a single point in the HSE. That decision on whether children are to be seen by primary care, CAMHS or a CDNT will be made in-house and not be sent back to a general practitioner to reapply for that service. The advent of the autism assessment intervention pathways is also to be welcomed and will hopefully take away some of the pressure on the assessment of needs requirement. All of those are welcome developments and the changes that are proposed under this amendment are also welcome.

I have to put this into context as well. I am aware of the focus that has been brought by having the disability unit in the Department of the Taoiseach and of the increased funding of

€3.8 billion this year which came with that. However, it is incumbent on the Government and the Department to ensure that these changes are not perceived to be in some way reducing waiting lists and creating a false narrative around the access to therapy. It is true that we do not have the capacity that we require under all the different services, whether CDNTs, primary care, CAMHS or special education in schools, and that we do not have the capacity to deal with all the young people who require those therapies and interventions. It is really important that the Government recommits to ensuring that the required professionals, both in the community and in the different organisations, are recruited and retained within the system in order to provide these services. If you are telling someone that there is no longer a barrier of having to have an assessment of need in order to gain access to various therapies in circumstances where people can directly access those therapies but where there are no therapists available to provide them, then the Bill will mean nothing.

It is important to point out that the delivery of special classes throughout the country has improved. However, there are companies which provide modular school buildings and which have good records in doing so but which are finding it increasingly difficult to deal with the building unit in the Department of education when it comes to the provision of schools and special classrooms.

I need to put that on the record. We need to streamline our procurement processes to make it easier and to provide more competition within the sector to provide this necessary infrastructure. I will give an example. We have three building companies, modular companies, who have an agreement from the NCAI, which allows them to build these schools. They have track records on that. One of them in particular is precluded from a framework within the Department of education and that is something that is to be regretted.

I am going to come back to personal stories. I received a letter from a paediatrician yesterday who referred a young person who has generalised anxiety to the local CAMHS service in County Galway. That paediatrician received a letter back without the CAMHS service seeing that adolescent and essentially pointed them in a different direction, to counselling services in the community and other such things. That consultant paediatrician had made a clinical assessment of that adolescent and had felt that the young boy deserved an assessment by a CAMHS team but was simply rebuffed by another part of the service. I met a young mother the other day who has an 11-year-old young person with autism and has had a very difficult time in gaining access to services. There is a lack of communication between primary care, CDNT and CAMHS and the only people who suffer in this regard are the children and the parents who are involved.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I hope the Minister of State has listened very carefully to the many speakers in this House. I have sat in for most of the debate and I think it is clear from Members of the Opposition, as well as her own party and Government backbenchers, that this Bill does not actually deal with the nub of the issue. If the issue in terms of assessments of need was that we have far too many children on the waiting list who do not actually need to be on the waiting list and we need to remove them from the waiting list, then this Bill might be in some way useful. That is not the issue, however. Time and again, the actual issue is raised. The issue is that we do not have the workforce or the therapists to meet the needs that are there in terms of children that need supports. The only question that we should be answering in terms of any legislation - whether legislation is actually needed or not in the first place - is how do

we get children who have additional needs the support that they need when they need it, which is now, how do we access those children and how do we ensure the easiest way for them to receive the supports. As my colleague, Deputy Ó Murchú, has said many times, at this stage it probably is the schools. It probably is having the therapies in the school setting and the supports and the services actually going to the children, rather than the other way around.

In Roscommon and Galway, the people whom I represent, are in no way different to many parts of the State; in fact, every single county in the state. We have had a situation in Galway in particular where the number of overdue assessments of need has more than doubled. The average wait time now is 24 months, that is, two years. Looking at the data for quarter 1 of this year, four assessments of need were completed in Galway and eight were completed in that same period in County Roscommon.

There are questions that have been raised here in terms of the guidelines and what those guidelines will look like, as well as assessment officers, who they will be, what their backgrounds will be and whether they will have any clinical expertise. Those questions need to be answered and they should really be answered in legislation like this or at least in this House. For a lot of people out there, this is just going to look like another layer. It is another layer on another layer. We are talking about 11 in-reach teams when we cannot staff our CDNTs in many parts of the country, we cannot staff or retain our primary care therapists, and now we are going to have another layer of more therapists when, in reality, those therapists are not there. That is the nub of the issue and I do not believe that this Bill will deal with the actual issue, which is workforce. That is really concerning.

Issues have been raised in terms of therapists coming home. More can be done on that, particularly those who are educated and receive their professional degrees in England, for example. There have been difficulties in that regard. For parents looking in, however, it is one issue after the other. It is the school place, the SNA, and July provision. As for dental checks, when I was in school, you got two or three dental checks but now a child is lucky to get one. We are going backwards in terms of basic supports and services for children. Again, I come back to the primary question, namely, how do we get children with additional needs the supports that they need when they need them? I do not believe, unfortunately, that this Bill is going to do that.

Deputy Gillian Toole: I will start echoing the sentiment Forest E. Witcraft, who said, 100 years from now it will not matter what his bank account was, the car he drove or what house he lived in, but what will matter is the difference that he made in the life of a child. That is integral to what we are discussing here, namely, meeting the needs and embedding rights into our legislation. I will try to confine my comments to this amendment to the 2005 Act. This came about from a 2023 report by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. It recommended that Ireland should review the relevant legislation, including disability legislation, the EPSEN Act and Equality Acts to bring them in line with a human rights-based approach to disability. I am aware that the six-month right is enshrined. That is not changing; it is its delivery and pivotal to that is reducing waiting times and urgently addressing staff shortages.

I acknowledge the initiatives to extend the third level placements for occupational therapists, speech and language therapists and educational psychologists. I would also like to

commend Dunboyne College of Further Education, which runs gateway courses for speech and language therapy and occupational therapy. I have actually linked Catherine Fox, the principal, with the HSE and the school of nursing in Maynooth. They have that memorandum of understanding already. There are things that can be done proactively.

If we go back to the rights piece, however, that is effectively what we are dealing with here. Next month, I think, Professor Noel Purdy and the inclusive education task force that has been convened will begin their work in earnest. They have a six-month timeframe to work through. That is dealing with the review and the implementation and the action plans from the review of the EPSEN Act. Again, that is feeding into the delivery of services. I do not for one minute deny the fact that recruitment is key to all of this.

In terms of the committee deliberations, I thank the secretariat, the Library and Research Service, the individual parents who wrote into the committee and the 16 different stakeholder groups who put a huge amount of time and effort into the submissions to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Disability Matters. The Minister of State has the report from the committee and its recommendations, particularly the cross-cutting recommendations. In particular, I raise recommendation No. 26 on page 20. Key to that is the recruitment piece and again, every possible opportunity to recruit from abroad to retain the graduates that we train here. Perhaps there is a contractual piece that can be done there whereby we prioritise our graduates to come back after they have travelled abroad. There is another key piece in the report in relation to recommendation No. 29. It calls for a review of the legislation 12 months from commencement, as well as a further review within 24 months. That is pivotal.

Areas that were of concern to me included, I have to admit, section 4 regarding the deemed withdrawal but I am pleased to hear and to read of the reinstatement and the fact that families can reapply within 12 months. That was an area of concern but I am pleased to see that it is proposed to be addressed. In relation to section 6, the Ombudsman for Children's Office had raised concerns. We discussed them at the committee, as well as the statutory guidelines. They are also very welcome.

Last week, I met the Meath disability services team manager and we went through recruitment. We have identified the shortfall in places for OTs, speech and language therapy and child psychology in the Trim area CDNT. That is having a serious knock-on effect. I suggested to her, as I have done with the Minister of State previously, that waiting list initiatives should include access to integrative therapies relating to all the things we included in our inclusive education report, namely art therapy, drama, equine therapy, music, nurture rooms, sensory rooms. We can meet some of the needs of children while the families wait by being creative and by complying with legislation. The Department did it this summer with the alternative respite funding that was made available. I ask that where, in the context of children who are not in special classes or special schools, if a teacher or an early years educator identifies a need - they are professionals after all - the Department should take their word for it and expand the wait list initiative and alternative respite funding. That will allow us to hit the ground running.

There is an excellent service, Ability Equine Assisted Therapy, in north Meath. It is at risk of being wound up. It is a charity and everything is above board, but those involved are so busy trying to meet the needs of families in north Meath that have children who may have

regulation or behavioural issues or occupational therapy issues. There are good people doing good work, and we need to be creative with the framework to support them.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta Toole. Bíonn sí i gcónaí ag teacht isteach sa Teach seo chun solutions a thabhairt. I commend her on her work on the disability committee. I also commend the Minister of State and her staff on the Bill and the sensible measures it contains and on the work that has been done. I will always support anything that makes the process faster, clearer and more consistent for every parent and child across Ireland.

There are definitely good provisions in the Bill. I commend the standardising of the process across the six health regions. If this is done right, it will be life-changing. Giving the families the proper mechanisms to withdraw applications temporarily and reinstate it makes sense. I really welcome that. Some of the parents I have spoken to are happy and feel like they are being listened to. However, there will always be something I will look to add. We need to be clear about the scale of what is involved. There are thousands of overdue applications for assessments of need. I have submitted parliamentary questions on this matter. Changing the process will help, but we cannot just change the process. We must also change capacity and what will happen to the child and their family after they get an assessment. That is what parents keep telling me and that is what I will keep pushing for.

I recently spoke to a mother in Dublin Central - she is watching me right now – about access to her son's OT. I have emailed the Department and all the stakeholders involved. Her point is very straightforward. Families continually hear about increased budgets, new posts and additional investment but this means very little when their child is still waiting for an appointment. There is a huge issue with OTs in Dublin Central. I would love the Department to investigate this and see what can be done. Dublin Central is not my constituency and this is not something I would generally raise, but the woman in question is a very passionate and solution-focused mother and I wanted to raise her case.

There are other things we need to look at. I have raised this with Deputy Carrigy when the Oireachtas committee was focusing on autism with in relation to CORU and the recognition of foreign-qualified practitioners who can help with our waiting lists. The Department responded to some of my parliamentary questions by saying that it will investigate the possibilities in this regard. I am looking for an update on speech and language therapists and OTs who qualified in other EU countries. Sometimes they are missing one qualification that does not allow them to practise here but if they went to the US, Australia or Canada, they could practise. I do not understand when we are in an acute crisis that this is the case.

It is not just a case of how many posts there are. We also really need to look at the regulatory bottlenecks. Another point that coincides with this is one that is not specific to disabilities. I was speaking to people in Athletic Rehabilitation Therapy Ireland, ARTI, about waiting lists for AT. They raised a very reasonable question which underlines my point. If appropriately qualified professionals could assist in reducing pressure on services but the barrier to doing so is regulation and policy, why can we not speed that up? I ask the Minister of State to examine not only ARTI's position but the wider CORU recognition and regulatory process so as to speed up qualification recognition and so reduce waiting lists. The disconnect between the unidentified needs does exist and needs to be addressed.

Going back to my constituency, there is a documentary by Eric Roberts relating to Stapolin Educate Together National School. I have raised this multiple times in the House. The Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, visited the school and was brilliant on site. He has constantly engaged with my office, and I welcome that. I would love for the Minister of State or any of her staff to address this matter too. The school has already been awarded three special classes. It has applied for two additional special needs modular rooms. I was informed by the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, on Friday that the application is currently under consideration. If anything can be done on that, I would really welcome it. This goes back to the point that if we granting assessments, we have the data that the children are there. The school in question is saying it will provide the places. We need to be able to respond quicker to that and to CORU regulations. It is another part of the conversation we cannot ignore.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I welcome the Disability (Amendment) Bill and any improvements it will make to the assessment of needs process relating to children. We have spoken at length here about children with disabilities and adult children with disabilities. In Kerry, their lot has not improved much. I am asking again for the Government to be more meaningful and to mean what it says. There are far too many families with additional needs and disabilities who are waiting far too long for their assessments of needs as well as other appointments of speech and language therapists, occupational therapists or physiotherapists and SNAs. We have been waiting, and there is a serious lack of all those people.

Early intervention is crucial for a child with additional needs. It is shameful to see the length of time children have to wait for an assessment. Many are obliged to wait years. When a baby is born and grows up a little, the parents sometimes find that something is lacking or wrong. They want the best for their child, which is only natural. The cost that they have to bear could be for all their lives as they want to improve the lot of that child. There is a shortage of staff in all these areas, and positions do not seem to be filled when someone is transferred or goes out on leave. It is not fair on these families that they have to wait so long and fight for their children to receive the treatments they need. Many families have no option but to pay out for private assessments or therapies even if they cannot afford it. Many cannot afford it and have to go short on something else. They dearly love their children and they want them to have the best so they will do anything or go short themselves to ensure that they get those things. It is not fair that in many instances the State is leaving these families behind.

Then there are adult children. I have a serious concern about elderly parents caring for elderly adult children who have disabilities and special needs. These parents contact me. Their main concern is what will happen to their adult child should something happen to either one or both of them. That is a serious concern for these people. I worry when I see what these adult parents have gone through all their lives and what they continue to do on a daily basis. They have to bring their children into Killarney to attend day centres.

It is unfair that these elderly parents are not provided with the necessary respite care or options for respite to give family members a well-earned rest. There is a huge shortage of residential care for adults with disabilities.

I again ask that the Government consider St. Mary of the Angels, which has been and continues to be closed by stealth. It is an ideal location that should be considered to provide respite, as it is badly needed. St. Mary of the Angels is in the heart of mid-Kerry, in Beaufort.

It was a farm given free to the health services by the Doyle family, going back in time. It is an ideal place to improve and to have more respite there rather than sending adult children who need respite up the country to Tipperary and, in one case, to County Meath. That is not fair on the people in Kerry who are trying to see after and to mind adult children and to get a break in sending them to respite services. I appeal to the Government. There is a Fianna Fáil Minister in Kerry, and I ask her to do her utmost to ensure that St. Mary of the Angels is opened up properly and developed.

Deputy Carol Nolan: The starting point for any discussion on this Bill must be the reality facing families in Offaly. Last year, I revealed that 525 children across the children's disability networks serving County Offaly were waiting for an assessment of need. Families are entitled to ask why, after years of reviews, strategies and reform programmes, waiting lists remain unacceptably high and legal timelines continue to be breached. The State's first duty must be to ensure that children receive assessments and supports when they need them and not years later. The experience of families across Offaly demonstrates that disability services remain under immense pressure. While the Bill focuses heavily on assessment processes, legislators must be honest about the real issue. The greatest challenge is not paperwork or procedure but the chronic shortage of qualified professionals available to deliver the services that are so badly needed.

Recent information I received from the HSE highlights clearly just how severe the staffing crisis has become. The sole speech and language therapist post serving adults with intellectual disabilities across Laois and Offaly has remained vacant since May 2023, with repeated recruitment efforts unsuccessful and no clear timelines for filling the position. I was appalled to learn that the same strategy - the same recruitment procedure - that had clearly failed was still in place after three years, it appears that this issue was not escalated to senior management of the HSE, and people were expected to wait. I am appalled by this because it is nothing short of neglect. I feel there are solutions. I have mentioned lots of times in this Chamber that therapists need to be redeployed into Offaly from regions where it is not as bad as this. Laois and Offaly are definitely the worst in the State when it comes to the lack of therapists. Of course, I commend the therapists we have, who are trying to hold a broken system together, but they need help. I cannot understand why therapists from the other CHO areas, where there is not a backlog, cannot be brought in in addition to private therapists. People are really being failed, and it is appalling and unfair to continue with such an approach. The fact that a key disability service can remain without a specialist provision for more than three years should be a wake-up call as to how urgent the situation is in County Offaly and County Laois. It raises profound questions about workforce planning, staff retention and the ability of the State to meet even basic standards of care.

Any reform of the assessment of need process will fail if the Government does not address recruitment and retention. Assessments alone do not help children and adults unless the therapists, psychologists and specialists needed to provide services are actually in place and available. Front-line staff continue to work under immense pressure and deserve the recognition for their commitment, as I have previously stated. The failures within disability services stem from systemic workforce shortages, not from the dedication of professionals on the ground.

I ask that Offaly be made a priority because we have too many failures. We have struggled for many years with the lack of speech and language therapists and the lack of occupational therapists. I had a case earlier this year where an elderly gentleman who had worked all his life and paid his taxes was waiting and waiting for a basic assessment to be carried out. Nine medical referrals were sent on his behalf. That is shocking. We need to collaborate and we need to put solutions in place urgently. I call for my county of Offaly to be prioritised with therapists.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Darren O'Rourke): Before we go to the Minister of State, I want to welcome to the Public Gallery a delegation from the European Committee of the Regions. Tá fáilte mhór romhaibh. I hope your visit is an interesting and a fruitful one.

Minister of State at the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Emer Higgins): Tá fáilte rompu.

As Minister of State with responsibility for disability, I am pleased to conclude this Second Stage debate on the Disability (Amendment) Bill 2026. I thank all Deputies for their contributions and their insights, which the Minister, Norma Foley, and I will reflect on as this legislation moves through the next Stage. I also want to take this opportunity to respond to some of the points that have been raised during the debate.

As the Minister outlined, the Bill makes very specific and targeted changes to Part 2 of the Disability Act 2005, which sets out the assessment of need process. Since the principle Act was commenced over 20 years ago, demand for assessments of need has continued to grow, particularly in recent years. There are a number of reasons for this. Our population has grown. There is greater awareness of disability and developmental needs and greater awareness among families of the assessment of need process and the supports available to help children reach their full potential. That is positive but it has also placed very significant additional pressure on a system that was not designed to deal with the level of demand we now see.

The scale of this increase has been significant. Between 2022 and 2025, applications for assessments of need doubled. In the first six months of this year alone, 7,100 applications were made to the HSE. The simple reality is that demand has grown beyond the capacity of the current system to process applications in a timely way, and that has contributed to an unacceptable backlog of overdue applications. When we talk about a backlog, it is really important that we not lose sight of what that means. It means that behind every application is a child or a young person and their family, who have a very reasonable expectation that their application will be processed within the statutory timeframe. Unfortunately, however, that is not the reality for many families today, so there is a clear need to improve how the current system operates.

That is the context in which we bring forward this Bill. It is intended to modernise and strengthen the assessment of need process in order that it can operate more effectively and consistently in the face of growing demand. The changes are specific but important.

The first is to support a more needs-based approach to assessment. The Bill updates a number of terms used within the legislation to place greater emphasis on the restrictions a person experiences in their daily life and the needs arising from those restrictions, rather than

focusing solely on disability as a diagnosis. That is an important shift because it brings our legislation more closely into line with Ireland's commitments under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, CRPD. It also reflects the wider direction in which we are moving across disability, health and education services. Increasingly, the focus is on the individual and on what the person needs in order to participate fully in everyday life.

As this next part was queried by a number of Deputies earlier, I want to be very clear in saying that these changes do not alter a person's rights or entitlements under the Disability Act. What they do is better reflect the broader move towards understanding and responding to a person's individual needs. This change is only one part of improving the process. We also need to look at how the assessment of need process operates in practice and at the people responsible for delivering it.

In that regard, I acknowledge the important work carried out every day by HSE assessment officers and liaison officers. They play a vital role supporting children and families through what can be a complex process. They do that work against a backdrop of significant demand and pressure on the system. Given the scale of that demand, it is important that there are greater clarity and consistency about how the assessment of need process operates in practice for staff delivering it and for families engaging with it. That is why a key element of this Bill is the introduction of statutory guidelines for assessment officers. These guidelines will provide a clear framework for the assessment of need process and support a more consistent approach across the country. They will standardise key aspects of the process across all six health regions and provide greater clarity for assessment officers in carrying out their responsibilities. That consistency also matters for families and children. The experience of applying for assessment of need should not vary significantly depending on where a family needs or where an application is being processed. By providing for the publication of these guidelines by the HSE, the Bill will also give families a clearer understanding of the process, what they can expect from it and how their application will progress.

The Bill also deals with an issue that has become increasingly relevant as the number of applications has grown. Those are applications that are no longer being actively processed. This was raised by a number of Deputies in today's debate so I will elaborate. There can be many reasons that an application is no longer actively progressed. Family circumstances may have changed. They may decide they do not wish to continue with the process. They may simply just not be in a position to engage with it at that particular time. In many cases families may have relocated abroad or returned to their country of origin and are no longer in a position to continue with an assessment of need application in Ireland. The Bill therefore provides a clear basis for the withdrawal and closure of applications but importantly, as Deputy Toole referenced, it allows an application to be reinstated within 12 months. That is important because it is providing flexibility for families. I agree with Deputies who said that a decision to not continue with an assessment at one point in time should not create an unnecessary barrier if circumstances subsequently change. That is why the reinstatement provision is there. It provides a straightforward way back into the process and that is particularly relevant. At the same time, where an application is no longer active, such as where a family has moved abroad, the HSE needs to be able to reflect that accurately in the management of the overall caseload. That is important given the scale of the backlog we are dealing with. I appreciate that a number of Deputies raised concerns about provisions on deemed withdrawal, and I hope that explains the safeguards in place. As the Minister, Deputy Foley, outlined, the related regulations will

set out the conditions that must be met before an application can be deemed to be withdrawn, and they provide for a clear and accessible process for reinstating an application if it is required.

I also want to be clear about what these provisions do not do. They do not remove the right to apply for an assessment of need. They do not remove the statutory timeframe. They do not change the underlying rights provided for in the principal Act. It is really important in understanding the scope of the Bill that we are clear on that. We are making targeted changes to improve the operation of the existing process. We are not suggesting that those changes on their own will address every issue within the Act or the Act more broadly. There are wider questions about the legislation that need to be considered and that work is under way through the broader review of the Disability Act 2005. That review gives us the opportunity to look at the Act as a whole more than 20 years after it was introduced to consider what further changes are required. A great deal has changed in that time and in Ireland's obligations following the ratification of the UNCRPD. This review will allow us to consider those issues properly and to ensure that our legislative framework reflects where we need to go next. Phase 1 of that consultation is open, and it will remain open until 9 October. I encourage people to take the opportunity to contribute. We are particularly interested in hearing from disabled people themselves, families, carers, representative organisations and DPOs.

A further point is important in the context of today's debate. We can improve the legislation around assessment of need, and we can improve the process. We need to do both. Neither of those things on their own answers the wider issue facing families, which is access to supports and services. That was raised by so many Deputies. An assessment of need has an important role but you do not need an assessment of need to access services. Many children are already receiving supports through primary care services, CDNTs or CAMHS while awaiting assessment of need. It is important to state that. It is also equally important that we do not underestimate what an assessment of need means to families. For many parents, it is about much more than completing a statutory process. It can provide clarity about their child's needs. It can provide formal recognition of those needs. After what can sometimes seem like a long period of uncertainty, that recognition matters. When families are waiting beyond the statutory timeframe, of course there is frustration and anxiety. That is why our response has to go further than addressing the assessment of need process alone. The real objective has to be a system where identifying a child's need leads to the right support being available at the right time. That requires progress across disability and health services, and across education. That is what we are committed to doing.

We are continuing to recruit additional staff to our CDNTs. Many Deputies have asked about that. The HSE single point of access model will be rolled out to make the route into services clearer for families, and the autism assessment and intervention pathway protocol will be implemented to support a more consistent and timely approach to autism assessment. There is also a really important piece of work happening in education. We are working with colleagues in the Department of education on a more needs-led approach to educational provision. This is where all the different strands of work come together. The assessment of need process needs to work better. The wider legislative framework needs to be reviewed. Ultimately, families will judge processes by their experience of the system and whether their child can get the support they need. That is the wider programme of reform of which this Bill is a part. I do not want to overstate what this legislation will achieve but I point out that this

wider programme of reform is so important to ensure that we progress this issue for families and their children.

Question put and agreed to.

Disability (Amendment) Bill 2026: Referral to Select Committee

Minister of State at the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Emer Higgins): I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Disability Matters pursuant to Standing Orders 103(2)(b) and 188(1).

Question put and agreed to.

Defective Concrete Blocks Social Homes Scheme 2026: Motion

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy James Browne): I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the following scheme in draft:

Defective Concrete Blocks Social Homes Scheme 2026,

a copy of which has been laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on 7th August, 2026.

I welcome the opportunity to speak this afternoon on what is an important matter. As Deputies are aware, a defective concrete blocks grant scheme was put in place in 2020 to financially support affected homeowners in counties Donegal and Mayo, whose homes were impacted by defective concrete blocks. A number of improvements were brought forward under the Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks Act 2022 and that commenced on 22 June 2023. I brought forward a number of additional significant improvements in 2025 via the amendment Act of 2025, and these included significant changes such as providing an opportunity for certain homeowners to apply for increased grants and the construction of adjacent dwellings in specific circumstances. Measures such as these are having an impact and real progress is being made. As of the end of August this year 604 homes had been remediated with a further 794 homes notifying their relevant designated local authority of the date of commencement of work to remediate their homes. Upon commencement in 2023, the current scheme was open to four local authority areas. As it stands today a further five local authority areas have been designated under the grant scheme, bringing the total number to nine counties, which are Donegal, Mayo, Clare, Limerick, Sligo and parts of the administrative areas of Wexford, Fingal and Meath county councils.

Another particularly important aspect of the 2022 Act is that it allows a scheme to be put in place by the Government to remediate social homes owned by local authorities and approved housing bodies where these homes are located in designated local authority areas. Upon making the scheme designated local authorities and approved housing bodies will be able to

commence work to remediate damage caused to dwellings where the damage has been caused by the use of defective concrete blocks in their construction.

Section 36 of the 2022 Act provides that social homes will receive the same remediation options as those covered under the current defective concrete blocks grant scheme for private housing, and the same grant cap, grant rates and damage threshold requirements, thus any legislative changes to the 2022 Act will apply equally, where appropriate, to social homes affected by defective concrete blocks, as they do to private housing.

Prior to the drafting of the social homes scheme, my Department engaged in extensive consultation with designated local authorities, the Irish Council for Social Housing and a number of approved housing bodies, AHBs. The feedback received through this process helped to inform and shape the development of the draft scheme. Following the drafting of the scheme, my Department continues to have regular engagement with these bodies.

The draft social homes scheme replicates most of the defective concrete blocks grant scheme in its provisions. The scheme, in terms of content, is based on the current scheme for private homeowners, with appropriate amendments where necessary to reflect the slightly different nature of social housing.

There are some areas that differ from the private scheme, and the way the scheme would be operationalised in practice by local authorities has been the subject of careful consideration. The Housing Agency conducts all of the technical work under the current private scheme, but the agency will have no such role in the social scheme. Instead, the designated local authority or approved housing body will arrange the preparation of a building condition assessment report and engage a competent engineer to undertake a report in line with IS 465:2026. Furthermore, the designated local authority or approved housing body will engage a contractor to undertake the remediation works required. The designated local authority or approved housing body will seek recoupment of moneys it expends in remediating a dwelling directly from my Department.

Finally, the designated local authority or approved housing body will be obliged to rehouse tenants where necessary while an affected home is being remediated. This will be funded under the ancillary grant element of the scheme to a maximum amount of €16,500, exactly as per the current scheme. As Members are aware, on 2 June 2026 the new standard, IS 465:2026, was published. This standard replaced the previous standard, IS 465:2018. This publication requires a review of the operation of the Act, which has now been commenced. It is being carried out by my Department with the assistance of external expertise as necessary. Findings from this review may require changes to the current private scheme and any changes may also be brought to the social homes scheme in the future.

In February 2026, the County and City Management Association produced a revised estimate of the number of affected dwellings for private and social homes, and the Irish Council for Social Housing has also provided an estimate for approved housing bodies' dwellings. Using these estimates for the number of potentially impacted dwellings indicates a revised and social homes scheme cost of €3.1 billion, excluding inflation. It is estimated that there are just over 2,400 social housing units likely to be impacted by defective concrete blocks. Based on an average estimated remediation cost per unit of €300,000, the overall cost of the social scheme would be approximately €728 million, excluding inflation.

As Members are aware, a draft scheme was approved by the Government on 22 July 2026 and has since been laid before each House of the Oireachtas. In accordance with the legislative requirements, the scheme cannot be formally approved until a resolution approving the draft has been passed by both Houses. Subject to the approval of the Oireachtas, I intend to bring a memorandum to the Government seeking approval for making of the defective concrete blocks social homes scheme 2026. This will enable the scheme to be formally established and pave the way for the commencement of remediation works on affected social homes. I know that the local authorities have been preparing for some time with the assistance of my Department for what will mark the beginning of an important new phase in the defective concrete blocks remediation scheme. These preparatory works should ensure that works can begin in the coming months. I understand that some of the affected local authorities have already identified a number of specific homes in their housing stock where remediation can begin once the scheme is signed by the Government, allowing procurement to move ahead at pace. This initial batch of homes will then be in progress in 2027 and will allow the sector to learn from experience the optimum way to manage the process in a manner that, first and foremost, benefits their tenants.

The level of commitment shown by this Government to homeowners affected by defective concrete blocks is evident in the significant measures and supports that have been introduced in recent years. In principle, these relate to the funding that we have provided and the way we have extended the scope of the scheme as and when needed. More than €405 million has been spent on the scheme to date. Government funding for this work continues to be provided as and when required on an annual basis, with a record €175 million allocated to fund the scheme in 2026. That is more than double the amount allocated to the scheme last year and reflects an increase in the uptake in this grant scheme. This scheme represents a significant step forward, enabling the remediation of social housing stock impacted by defective concrete blocks, DCB, and allowing these essential works to begin in the near future.

I am anxious to move this programme forward and to see works commence on these homes at the earliest opportunity. I encourage each designated local authority to make full use of the resources available to them to ensure that affected homes are remediated promptly and to the highest possible standards. I would also encourage designated local authorities to co-ordinate their efforts to access other schemes and funding streams that are available and that can support the remediation of social homes. In particular, I urge them to adopt a co-ordinated approach with the Department's energy efficiency retrofit programme for social homes. This approach will help to deliver not only safe and sustainable homes but also long-term benefits for tenants through improved comfort, reduced energy consumption and lower household energy costs. It is now more important than ever that we further invest in a remediation of social housing stock.

I will conclude by thanking the local authorities and the Irish Council for Social Housing for working with officials in my Department in developing this important scheme.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: The tenants in local authority and approved housing bodies social housing stock impacted by defective concrete blocks have been waiting a very long time for this scheme. I have to say that, like its parent scheme, the Minister is making an absolute mess of it. The defective concrete blocks scheme is itself defective. The Minister should talk to homeowners in Donegal, Mayo, Clare and Fingal. They will tell him it is not 100% redress. They will also tell him that they are spending tens upon thousands of euro to fill the gap. In

fact, many people are not applying at all. The latest figures from the Minister's own Department show very clearly that only 604 applicants of the tens of thousands of impacted homeowners have completed remediation works. The idea that he can just incorporate social housing into this defective scheme really shows he does not understand the scale of the problems.

What is worse is that local authorities and approved housing bodies have told the Minister and his officials that they have real concerns about what is in front of us. They are not at all clear about what costs are going to be covered. Will costs incurred to date be covered? Will preventative costs be covered? Will ancillary costs, non-construction costs and disposal costs be covered? The basic principle here is that local authorities should not have to come up with a single cent of money from their own resources to remediate these homes.

What about conjoined buildings? AHBs and local authorities, particularly in Donegal and Mayo, have many buildings attached that are not eligible under the DCB scheme, and there is no certainty here. It is the same with foundations. Again, this matter has not been resolved. Probably the worst element of this scheme is that the Minister is saying to the local authorities that they should rebuild the homes to the old standards. The reason that makes even less sense in a State scheme is because the State will ultimately have to pay additional money to bring those homes up to new standards, including of energy efficiency. If the Minister is going to do this right, and homes have to be demolished and rebuilt, he should build them to modern standards, because the State has to fund this cost anyway. I do not understand why the Minister did not just fund this through the normal social housing capital programme. Incorporating them into a grant scheme is simply ludicrous.

At a minimum, there is a very clear request from the local authorities and the AHBs for a working group comprising departmental officials, local authority officials and elected members from the affected counties. I would add tenants' representative bodies as well. It needs to be set up immediately to manage the scheme's implementation.

The local authorities and AHBs are not satisfied with this. We also need to have more Oireachtas scrutiny. We do not know the full details of what we are being asked to vote on here today, and meanwhile the overall scheme has to be fixed. I welcome the fact that a review has now started but there is no indication of whether there will be a public element to it. Will the public be invited to make submissions? Will there be some transparency around that? I urge the Minister to do that.

While we are not going to stand in the way of this motion today, could the Minister please not take that as endorsing what he is doing? He is making a terrible mess. We are asking him to reconsider and ensure that every local authority and AHB and, crucially, the tenants who live in their homes, have those homes remediated as a matter of urgency without the local authorities having to foot any portion of the bill. If the Minister does not do that, it will disincentivise remediation and homes will be left behind.

6 o'clock

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: The issue is that the Minister has been listening to the wrong people. He has been to Donegal and he has listened to some of the homeowners but he has been listening to the wrong people. I am genuine about this and I ask him to go back and engage with some of the affected homeowner groups and speak to more than just his own party

colleagues in the county. The scheme is leaving huge numbers of people behind. The Minister and I know the reason he has not introduced a fully funded scheme, as he would have with any other local authority or approved housing body project, is because of the failings of the original scheme. The Minister knows that if he publicly announced a fully funded scheme for the local authorities he would expose that the primary scheme does not involve 100% redress.

If we took it as read that Donegal County Council, for example, would have to go ahead with this, the matched funding could potentially be €100 million. This is the reality because of the gap multiplied by the number of houses. The Minister is doing this at a time when we have a new standard. He is telling the local authorities not to test the concrete foundations even though the new standard says they should. He is telling them they could replace the outer leaf when the new standard says they cannot. It is actually in defiance of the science to go ahead with a new scheme based on what looks like the previous standard, which has been discredited.

The Minister has not consulted with the local authorities and approved housing bodies. This does not have their fingerprints on it. It is the Minister trying to match up with the existing scheme. He is making a huge mistake, as my colleague, Deputy Ó Broin, has said. We cannot block this motion going through today as we are not going to stop money going to local authorities to move on with this but it is just wrong.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: We have waited so long for this scheme and people in Mayo who are living in local authority houses desperately need it. They have waited for years for this scheme. This reminds me of when the original scheme came out and the action group sat in Erris and presented 20 things that would make that scheme right, affordable and fit for purpose and would provide 100% for people but the Government did not listen. It is absolutely critical that the Minister listens at this point to get this scheme right. As my colleagues have said, the Minister is speaking to the wrong people, or he certainly has not spoken to the people he needs to in relation to how this can be done and how it needs to be done.

There are issues such as resources. The Minister cannot leave local authorities with big gaps and no funding. There are issues such as how the testing will be done. At present, the testing is taking more than a year. Show us how this can be done in a short period of time. Show us how the builds can be completed to current standards and how they can be energy efficient. Otherwise we are on a hiding to nowhere. We desperately need this scheme but we desperately need to get it right and we need it to be fit for purpose.

We need to have proper accommodation for the tenants who have to move out of their homes. I am asking the Minister to work with us as a party, given all of the years of experience we have with the defective concrete blocks schemes, to at least get this one right. The other one is not 100% and people are being left with huge gaps or are locked out of it because they cannot afford to get into it. Do not keep making the same mistakes. Please do not keep making the same mistakes.

Deputy Rory Hearne: I support what has been said, and the Social Democrats will not be opposing the motion. We will support what has been put forward on the basis that funding is going to local authorities and AHBs but not with regard to the way in which it has been done. There are serious gaps in what has been proposed and this is a pity because there really was an opportunity here to address the significant issues with defective buildings and social housing.

There are also particular issues here. Social housing tenants are particularly vulnerable and we are dealing with a situation whereby local authorities have been absolutely and completely underfunded. Look at the basic maintenance that is not being done in local authority housing. There is a disgraceful situation with Dublin City Council and other councils whereby tenants who are in poverty, living in mould and damp, have been forced to pay ever-higher rents because the Minister has failed to fund local authorities sufficiently to undertake the maintenance that is required. This cannot be an additional cost for local authorities and AHBs. They cannot be left out of pocket in addressing this issue.

Another issue that still has not been addressed is that those who are responsible for this have not been held to account. We still do not have this and it is absolutely incredible that the cost is to the taxpayer and to those people who live in the homes and the State has not actively sought out those responsible and penalised them appropriately. There is this issue of accountability and people being left off the hook. We know that in some situations the same developers are building new homes or engaging in some of the refurbishment that is required because of what happened in the first place. Of course a lack of accountability is a fundamental problem we have in the State when issues happen and the Government does not want to interfere with the market.

The scale of this is quite significant. There could be tens of thousands of social homes affected and local authorities and AHBs will be responsible for undertaking assessments, appointing engineers and rehousing tenants. These are significant tasks that local authorities will have to take on and they will need to be resourced properly. This cannot be taken from existing maintenance budgets. We want this commitment for the scheme.

Earlier the Minister mentioned the scheme being developed in negotiation with the various stakeholders. It is very clear that while he might have met them and spoken with them, he did not listen to them, similar to the rental legislation. The Irish Council for Social Housing, which represents AHBs, sets out clearly that it is very concerned that, for example, group homes are not included. Perhaps the Minister will give clarity on this. Will there be a full and retrospective grants process? Local authorities and AHBs cannot fund any shortfall in the defects remediation, particularly preventative works. What about rehousing tenants? The local authorities and AHBs also point out the need to bring together and co-ordinate the retrofitting programmes, what is being done and, where necessary, the need to rebuild homes. The necessary funding should be provided for this. They are also concerned, as has been raised, about the revised IS 465 standard and, in particular, the issue of addressing the building as a whole rather than simply assessing the above-ground block work. Will the Minister comment on whether this is going to be addressed? There is an issue with remediation being needed in the foundations and not only in the above-ground building itself.

I echo the call for, and ask the Minister to take on, the establishment of a working group comprising full stakeholder representation, including the Department, AHBs and local authorities, as well as engineers, surveyors and architects. This highlights why we should have a State construction company. If the Minister had the vision and courage to set up a State construction company, it could be working to address some of these issues rather than having to go out again to the private sector, which is supposed to be building new homes and will now also have to do this work. We have an issue with capacity and ensuring things are done right and done to a standard whereby we will not repeat these problems. It comes back to the point

that the State has to have a role in directly building homes across this country, particularly social homes, so it can ensure that high-quality homes are delivered and that we can address issues such as retrofitting and defective blocks.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: The Labour Party will not stand in the Minister's way with regard to what he is doing here. The basic principle of what he is trying to do is welcome, in terms of extending this to social homes. The issue I have, as has been alluded to throughout the debate, is with the actual scheme itself. We know that more than 2,400 social homes are estimated to have been affected by defective concrete blocks.

This is an important step, but the issue I have is with the scheme itself, because it is fundamentally defective. It is a yellow-pack scheme. It is slow, bureaucratic and not 100% redress. My concern here is that we are going to have a situation where AHBs and councils are going to be left with significant funding gaps. That is something the Minister is going to have to address.

We have the issue, again, of foundations and foundation costs. The whole idea of potentially forcing a local authority to rebuild or repair a social home on top of a potentially defective, cracked foundation and transferring all that risk onto public infrastructure makes absolutely no sense. In the long term, that represents poor value and something that could potentially come back to haunt the State. I was reading the other day that Donegal County Council was saying it could cost up to €100 million to test, repair and replace the cracked or compromised foundations of 2,400 social homes.

We also have the issue of construction costs and the fact that these are based on information that is now a number of years out of date. We know we have since had inflation, instability and war in the Middle East. The issue I have here, and it goes back to what I was saying about the specifics of the scheme, is that the Minister's Department needs to find a way to guarantee that rent-paying council and AHB tenants will not be trapped for the medium to longer term in crumbling, unsafe housing schemes.

Additionally, when we are talking about this motion here tonight, we need to be aware and cognisant of the lessons learned from the experience of the private scheme. We are all, I think, aware of the problems we have seen there. I am concerned that we could be just transferring those problems onto social tenants.

Why has this taken so long? I ask this because since the initial scheme was introduced three years ago, we have seen a piecemeal approach to tweaking, plugging gaps and addressing issues, and progress has been slow and painful. While, in many ways, the Government is inching in the right direction, it is not moving anywhere near what is actually needed, which is an end-to-end scheme based on the model of the Fingal pyrite scheme. The Government can inch towards it and chip away at this and that, but we will be here twice a year, every year, for eternity, although, please God, I will not be here that long, and we still will not have a scheme that will be fit for purpose. If we look at the figures at the end of August for the private scheme, 604 homes had completed remediation. That is a fraction of the true level of need, and it is an indictment of where the scheme is going wrong.

I also have concerns about whether councils and approved housing bodies will have the funding and the staffing required, as well as the capacity and expertise to administer the

workload that they will be required to carry out under this scheme. If we are talking about 2,400 homes, it is really incumbent on the Government and the Department to make sure that local authorities have the resources to do it properly. The fundamental issue remains with the scheme. The fact of the matter is that the scheme leaves families, and in this case, local authorities as well, carrying the can for the financial and structural risk incurred because homes were built using defective concrete through failures in regulation and failures in oversight.

Local authorities and AHBs are worried that this scheme will leave them to try to carry the can for another mess, one they did not make, and that they will be underfunded in trying to clear the mess up. If that happens, we are going to have social home tenants left in unsafe housing that they fear will fall down around them. It is not acceptable that anyone in a defective home, built using material that they were conned into believing was of an appropriate, safe standard, should be left with their home falling down around them.

The fundamental issue with both the private and the social schemes is that a fully funded way of rebuilding unsafe homes in a timely and effective manner is not provided. I am not going to vote against what the Government is doing tonight because I believe it is better than what it is not doing at the moment. However, I have a number of concerns, as I have outlined, and I am very reluctant to stand here and endorse what is being done because I believe that the scheme, as it stands, is fundamentally defective.

We need a system that guarantees genuine end-to-end redress, gives tenants and homeowners confidence that their homes are safe and does not force traumatised families and communities to keep coming up here, banging on the door and campaigning for their homes to be made safe. We have been here before and we will be here again. We need assurances that the resources, safeguards and ambition required to deliver on this scheme will be put in place.

Deputy Charles Ward: I will be voting for this motion tonight, but I am disappointed with it because there was a chance to get this right. There is a standard currently under review. We could have waited, got everything tied up and got everything out. I know we have it now and we have to go on.

As of April, 3,150 households in Donegal were waiting for social housing. Given the ongoing housing crisis and sustained demand, that number will almost certainly rise in the coming months. At the same time, potentially, 2,400 social homes are affected by defective concrete. I say potentially because I suspect there are a lot more. Thousands are waiting for a home while existing homes are at risk of being lost. This is a contradiction because social housing supply is an issue, and we cannot afford to get this wrong like we have done in the past with the two schemes that have failed.

At a meeting my Oireachtas colleagues and I had with Donegal County Council on Monday, we were told that 174 homes have been completed this year and approximately 260 were completed last year. If we look at those figures, we would be talking about 200 or 300 years to get through this scheme. We need to ramp it up. Otherwise, we are risking creating a second waiting list for people who already have homes and who are watching them crumble and waiting to get out to get them remediated.

Governance is another issue. Who checks those who are fixing the problem? The National Building Control and Market Surveillance Office audited construction products and Donegal

quarries, working with Donegal County Council and Geological Survey Ireland, GSI. In this day and age, the audit identified non-compliance with three quarries. This is a governance issue. Donegal County Council will have to deliver remediation. The Housing Agency has a central technical role to play in this and then the Department sets up the framework. The State cannot mark its own homework here. There must be independent oversight and engineering standards so that conflicts of interest will show up. Quality has to be checked, and that is what the issue will be going forward.

The most important person in this is the tenant. The tenant is central to this. A social tenant may depend on an engineer to engage with this scheme but neither should be expected to second-guess professional advice. A social tenant does not own the property or control what happens but if it is to be vacated, remediated or replaced, they are going to be uprooted, and this is something that they did not cause.

This means there will be an impact on schools, neighbours, family supports and communities built over years. They may not own the house but they own the life that is inside that house. Every affected tenant deserves clear information, a named contact about what is going to happen next and an independent route to raise his or her concerns.

A council house is not as asset for a spreadsheet; it is somebody's home.

Engineering must remain engineering. The draft provides that the Minister will be notified of option one engineering recommendations and may request supporting evidence. If engineering advice supports option one, the engineer must be free to recommend it. There is oversight of the engineer, with someone looking over his or shoulder to make sure he or she does the right thing and gives the right option. In fact, there is only one option: if the house is affected, it should be pulled down. It should be option one all the way. Any review should be clear, with well-defined criteria, a timeframe and recognition of technical bias. Where disputes arise, independent technical reviews should be available. The engineer decides what the building requires, and the funding and framework must be part of that decision. The same principle applies to foundations.

IS 465:2026 has now been published. The Housing Agency has said the revised standard provides a more comprehensive understanding of the affected homes. The Minister has commented on statutory reviews of the standard, yet this is excluded in the social homes scheme. All of this should have been tied up together, as I said, but, instead, we are still waiting. Donegal County Council cannot go ahead with the 80 homes it has because the money is not there to do the foundations. If this were done correctly, the council would be able to proceed.

If an investigation is needed, we must investigate. If remediation is required, the scheme must fund it. The funding rules must focus on the engineer's solution. That is a priority. Concrete does not know who owns a house. The same concrete means the same science, and the response must follow the science.

There is also a professional integrity issue. Ethics concerns have been raised regarding engineers and firms operating in this area. Where an engineering determination affects whether someone remains in his or her home, due diligence must apply. Conflict of interest safeguards, professional accountability and an independent route to challenge determinations are vital as we go forward. Public confidence requires confidence in the system behind an engineering report to ensure that report stands up to scrutiny.

I am asking the Minister for three things. First, there must be independent governance of the social homes scheme, with clear responsibility across the Department, the Housing Agency and local authorities, along with independent scrutiny. The second requirement is protection of engineers' independence. Rules governing option one review must be clear and must not discharge the evidence based on engineers' determinations. Where a determination is disputed, an independent technical review must be available. Third, we need a review of the inclusion of foundations in IS 465:2026. If engineering evidence says foundations associated with ground works are necessary, then a scheme must deliver them.

The thought always must be with the tenant. That is vital into the future. We have 3,150 households waiting on social homes. We have existing tenants waiting to know whether their homes can be made safe. We cannot fail either of those groups, which amount to more than 5,000 households in Donegal. The State owns the building but the tenants own the life that exists inside that building.

We must let the engineer determine what is required and let the funding follow. The engineers should be allowed to get on with their jobs. The process must be overseen by independent governance. When the State tells tenants their home is safe, that assurance must be properly tested. We do not need another waiting list and another waiting game. We have waited long enough. We need the promise of a safe home for people.

More than 50,000 homes will have to be built in Donegal in the next 20 to 30 years. Right now, we are proceeding at less than 2% capacity. We need to look at an OPW model for building homes in Donegal. It would be revolutionary. It can be done but the Government must have belief in it, which it does not right now. It is leaving it to the market, and the market is not doing any favours for homeowners in Donegal. There are contractors doing it right but there also are contractors doing it wrong.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I very much welcome the extension of this support to affected tenants of social housing. I have spoken to constituents in Mayo whose houses are in a shockingly bad state. Having engaged with the council, there really was nothing that could be done because they fell outside the previous scheme. The change is very welcome. There should be no difference in treatment between tenants in social homes and tenants in the private rental sector and, indeed, people who own their home, but it is fair to say there was a difference in treatment for a number of years. I certainly welcome the Minister's proposal but I urge him to prioritise the rehousing of tenants and ensuring they are looked after during this time.

I understand the Housing Agency will not be involved in the scheme. There may be some advantages to that in terms of efficiencies and so on but I have no doubt that will come with some additional burdens for local authorities. Therefore, it is very important that councils' resources are sufficient to deal with the scheme. There are some very good officials in Mayo County Council working very diligently on this, including Ms Clodagh Gleeson in the Swinford office, whose team has done Trojan work. I urge the Minister to make sure the resources are there at local authority level to engage in all the work that has to be done.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I join other speakers in welcoming that 2,400 social housing units are being brought into the scheme. It is an entirely necessary, if somewhat delayed, move. However, as colleagues also mentioned, the proposal, in its current form,

basically creates a two-tier system that again treats social housing tenants as second-class citizens. We saw that in the quality of construction of some social homes, with levels of insulation being historically of inferior construction and design, although that has improved in more recent times. While private homeowners are still not getting the 100% redress they want, they will be able to avail of the independent technical review mechanisms.

However, local authority tenants will not have the same safeguard. Private owners who dispute an engineering assessment have some way of appealing it and challenging decisions. Unfortunately, the poor social housing tenants do not have that ability. While I can see why this would be organised by approved housing body or on an estate-by-estate basis, rather than by individual tenants, the latter should still be able to have a voice. They are living in, or are unable to live in, conditions that are absolutely substandard. If they want to challenge some sort of remediation works that have been outlined, they cannot do so individually. They are supposed to accept whatever the council decides. As I have seen, when planning and rezoning proposals are foisted on people with no infrastructure provision guaranteed, council officials are often inclined not necessarily to do the bidding of the Government but certainly not to be seen to fight back against it, at least not in the public eye. In that context, we need the same type of guaranteed technical oversight for social housing tenants as is proposed for private homeowners. There are only 2,400 social housing units involved at the outset but perhaps there should be a representative expert people can call upon or some other means of giving them a stake in this. The people living in social houses are stakeholders even if they do not have legal ownership rights.

In introducing this scheme, the Government is trying to move towards parity between private owners and social housing tenants. However, as Deputy Charles Ward has said time and again, there is no point in giving redress unless it is 100% redress. Private homeowners are not getting what they absolutely need and people in public sector housing are getting even less.

It is not parity. The situation is that those in private households can possibly better afford top-up loans, whereas people who live in AHB or council homes cannot do that in order to get the final bits done. Will the likes of the county councils in Donegal, Mayo or the other counties where issues have been identified find the requisite additional funding to bridge gaps? That is, of course, if they are in a position to identify those gaps in the first place. This needs to be revisited to make sure that any queries that are genuinely raised by people can and are seen to be addressed.

Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher: I welcome the defective concrete blocks social scheme 2026. This is the first opportunity for those who have been living in affected council houses in recent years. They did not have an opportunity to have remedial works carried out to their houses, so it is a welcome development.

Officials from my county and other counties met the Minister's officials and members of the council in recent months. It is obvious that the views of local authority members and officials were taken into consideration when the scheme was formulated. I have to make it clear that it is my view that these works should be fully funded. Under no circumstances could I accept Donegal County Council having to part- or fully fund these schemes because if they did, it would be an imposition on the ratepayers and the council and other capital schemes that require

co-funding would be affected. In short, it is my strongly held view that the works must be fully funded.

There are approximately 1,900 council houses in Donegal and 80 are shovel ready. I hope work on them will start quickly.

The difference between the other scheme and this one is that the Housing Agency carries out all the technical works under the current private scheme, whereas on this occasion the designated local authority or approved housing body will engage a competent engineer to produce a building condition assessment report. It will be more streamlined.

Unfortunately, time does not permit me to say any more.

An Ceann Comhairle: I appreciate that.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I welcome the motion. For families in Donegal, Mayo and seven other council areas, defective blocks have meant cracked walls, crumbling homes and years of uncertainty. Until now, social housing sat outside the scheme. Council and housing body tenants will now get the same remediation options, the same grant cap and the same grant rates as private owners. That is fair and it is overdue.

As winter approaches, there is a need to highlight the issue of council tenants living in cold homes that need retrofitting. Under the energy efficiency retrofitting programme works, more than 11,000 council homes have been deep retrofitted since 2021, which is welcome. This year, the Minister secured €140 million for 3,500 more, which I welcome. However, it must be noted that the pace is too slow. The target is 36,500 homes by 2030. At this year's rate, we will not reach that target until 2033. In my constituency of Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown, the gap is stark. Much of the council stock was built between the 1930s and the 1980s before the State had national building regulations. As a result, many of those homes were built with no insulation at all. The council got €4.2 million to retrofit 100 homes, but tenants in Sallynoggin, Mounttown, Ballybrack, Loughlinstown and Shankill are told year after year that their homes are not on the list. The council says it depends on central funding. My request of the Minister is that in budget 2027 he increase the allocation to deliver around 5,500 homes per year, which is the pace the 2030 target demands and give councils multi-annual allocations, in order that they can plan to do estates and not operate year by year.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: Many homeowners in County Clare who are affected by defective concrete blocks are looking at us to deliver fairness, clarity and a scheme that fully works for them. While I absolutely welcome the progress made with the new IS 465 standard, which finally allows for the scientific testing of foundations - that was a crucial step - the reality is that testing alone cannot fix a home. Families are currently left in a difficult limbo where science acknowledges that the foundations of their homes are compromised, but the funding legislation has not yet caught up. As the statutory review progresses, we must ensure foundation remediation is fully funded so people are not asked to rebuild on unsafe ground.

I wish to bring to the Minister's attention a frustrating bureaucratic anomaly that is causing genuine distress for families trying to navigate all this process. One arm of the State requires homeowners to provide a full, detailed valuation of their property for the purpose of calculating

local property tax; yet when it comes to the remediation scheme, the parameters are not always factored in for the whole house or the true, comprehensive cost of returning a family to a complete home. We need a joined up approach. If the State looks at the whole value of the house for calculating tax, the remediation scheme should protect the integrity of the whole house as well.

We must look at ultimate financial accountability. In many Dáil debates in the past, it was said the State would take a landmark legal action against the people who manufactured and sold these concrete blocks. We would like to know where that is because this scheme is funded by the taxpayers of Ireland and, ultimately, we need to be going after and penalising those who sold defective blocks.

I am aware of the Minister's commitment to resolving this crisis. He has been forthright about that, which is appreciated. I urge him to use the current review to iron out the anomalies I outlined, including in respect of foundations, and to deliver the comprehensive solution the people in my county, Clare, deserve.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to have the opportunity to talk about this matter, as I have done many times in the past. I welcome that the social houses in Donegal that are damaged will have a scheme to replace them. I cannot understand why it has taken so long and why we are only at this now. Clearly, this must have happened at the same time as the private houses.

Like Deputy Gallagher, I insist that the Department of housing cover the cost in full. It cannot be left to the local authorities to do so. As has been pointed out, they do not have the wherewithal to raise funding to make up any matching difference. There is no question about that. The Government must fund the replacement of these houses in full. I ask the Government to do so in the most expedient way possible to ensure that people will not be upset or disenfranchised in the tumble-down houses they are living in at present. We all remember Bridie Gallagher singing "The Homes of Donegal". It is clear that many people in their homes in Donegal are not happy. We hope that they will be and that it will not take long to address the problem.

Certainly, we are doing a lot of talking here about the defective concrete blocks in Donegal, Mayo and different places. It is time the Government got a handle on and dealt with the matter. The country is awash with money.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: We were able to give €2 billion - to borrow it, in fact - to keep the war between Ukraine and Russia going.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister to respond.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: We borrowed €2 billion for that but we cannot look after the homes in Donegal.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. Minister, please. You might sing the song.

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy James Browne): I thank Deputies across the House for their contributions to this important debate. The motion before the House seeks approval for the social homes scheme for designated local authorities and approved housing bodies affected by defective concrete blocks. To be clear, I acknowledge the pressures Donegal County Council in particular is under regarding this matter. I have committed my Department to working hand in glove with Donegal County Council on it. The Department acknowledges the financial challenges at play, but we will ensure the council is supported as necessary on this matter and will continue to actively engage with it.

This scheme represents a significant investment in supporting the remediation of social homes owned by local authorities and approved housing bodies affected by defective concrete blocks. It is an important step in protecting our social housing stock, supporting tenants and ensuring communities can continue to grow and develop in the future. I understand and appreciate the impact that defective concrete blocks have had on those directly affected. I have heard the very real stories from homeowners, tenants and families living with the challenges caused by this issue. I have been to Donegal, the county most affected, on a number of occasions.

These experiences highlighted the importance of putting in place effective measures to address this issue and to provide the support that is required. As I noted in my opening remarks, the Government remains firmly committed to supporting those affected by defective concrete blocks. We have already provided significant funding through the private housing scheme, demonstrating our determination to assist homeowners. The issue of defective concrete blocks is a complex one that the Government is actively addressing. Through this social homes scheme, we are now building on our commitments to ensure that designated local authorities and approved housing body homes affected by defective concrete blocks can also be remediated and restored. We will continue to work closely with local authorities and stakeholders to ensure that the affected social homes are remediated and that tenants are supported throughout the process. As I mentioned at the outset, it is estimated that just over 2,400 social housing units are likely to be impacted by defective concrete blocks. Each designated local authority will be encouraged to take every appropriate step using all available resources to ensure that affected homes are remediated effectively.

Today, we have an opportunity to take a practical and positive step forward. By supporting this motion, the House can send a clear message that we are committed to introducing a scheme to support the remediation of these homes. I therefore commend the motion to the House and ask Members to support its approval.

Question put and agreed to.

Council of the European Union Decision: Motions

An Ceann Comhairle: Before I call on the Minister to open the debate, I remind Members that there are two separate motions being debated in this slot: the motion regarding the proposed approval by Dáil Éireann for a Council decision on the signing of the agreement between the

European Union and the Republic of Korea; and the motion regarding the 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. The motions will be moved separately but will be debated together. They will be decided by separate questions.

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the exercise by the State of the option or discretion under Protocol No. 21 on the position of the United Kingdom and Ireland in respect of the area of freedom, security and justice annexed to the Treaty on European Union and to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, to take part in the adoption and application of the following proposed measure:

Proposal for a Council Decision on the signing of the Agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Korea on the transfer of Passenger Name Record (PNR) data for the prevention, detection, investigation and prosecution of terrorist offences and serious crime,

a copy of which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 24th August, 2026.

As the Ceann Comhairle indicated, I am seeking the approval of Dáil Éireann to opt into two proposals for Council decisions to sign and conclude an agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Korea, also known as South Korea, on the transfer of passenger name record, PNR, data.

The proposals have two main aims. The first relates to the necessity of ensuring public security by means of exchanging PNR data between the EU and the Republic of Korea. The second relates to the protection of privacy and other fundamental rights and freedoms of individuals. The proposed Council decisions have a Title V legal basis in the area of police co-operation. Their publication on 24 July 2026 started the three-month window for Ireland to exercise an Article 3 opt-in under Protocol 21 annexed to the Lisbon Treaty. This window ends on 24 October 2026.

The collection and analysis of PNR data is a widely used law enforcement tool in the EU and in other countries for the prevention, detection, investigation and prosecution of terrorist offences and serious crime. PNR data is the booking information provided by passengers and collected by air carriers for their own commercial purposes, including names, dates of travel or travel itineraries. The collection and analysis of PNR data can provide the authorities with important elements, allowing them to detect suspicious travel patterns and identify associates of criminals and terrorists, particularly those previously unknown to law enforcement authorities.

The use of PNR data is governed by the EU PNR directive, which was transposed into national law via the European Union (Passenger Name Record) Regulations 2018. The Irish passenger information unit within my Department is the body responsible for processing PNR data in Ireland. No legal or practical impediment precluding Ireland from opting in to these proposals has been identified by the Attorney General's office.

Deputies will recall that the Oireachtas gave approval to an Article 3 opt-in to the negotiation of this agreement in November of last year. Today, I am simply asking them to

approve Ireland's participation in the final negotiated agreement once it enters into operation. Deputies will recall that we have already opted into similar EU PNR agreements with other third countries such as Canada, Australia, the United States and, indeed, the United Kingdom. We have also entered into agreements with Schengen associated countries such as Norway, Iceland and, most recently, Switzerland. In operational and policy terms, it is considered desirable that Ireland exercise an Article 3 opt-in to these proposals, so I commend these proposals to the House to consider the exercise of Ireland's right to opt in under Article 3 of Protocol 21 and seek the approval of the motion to participate in these Council decisions to sign and conclude the agreement. I will conclude by stating that I moved these motions in Seanad Éireann last night, where all parties agreed to support this opt-in.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Cuirim fáilte roimh an deis labhairt ar an tairiscint seo. Ardóidh mé roinnt nithe gaolmhara leis an Aire. As I have stated repeatedly in this House, proposals to opt into measures under Protocol 21 should always be subject to careful consideration. While Sinn Féin is not opposed to this proposal and believes it is appropriate to opt in on this occasion, it is important to recognise that Ireland's national interests must always take precedence over wider EU considerations. In relation to matters governing the areas of freedom, security and justice, Protocol 21 provides Ireland with the important flexibility to opt in or to opt out on the basis of our national interests and the necessity of protecting Irish sovereignty. There should be no dilution of what the protocol represents and there should be no drift towards a position where opting in becomes almost automatic. If that were to happen, it would undermine an important protection that was secured as part of the Lisbon treaty.

Sinn Féin has previously supported motions for Ireland to participate in the adoption and application of passenger name record agreements between the EU and a number of third countries. We also supported Ireland's decisions to opt into negotiations on this agreement with Korea. The sharing of PNR data is an important tool in the prevention, detection, investigation and prosecution of serious crime and terrorist offences, including drug trafficking and human trafficking. It forms part of the broader framework for managing borders. International co-operation in tackling organised crime is essential and the sharing of this information is an important component of that effort.

It would be appropriate and helpful if the Minister could provide an update on whether consideration has been given to extending the PNR requirements to ferry travel, as I have asked for on a number of occasions. Given that the purpose of PNR data sharing is to assist in preventing, detecting, investigating and prosecuting serious crimes and offences, it makes little sense that equivalent requirements do not apply to ferry passengers. It arguably creates a potential gap that may actually encourage those seeking to evade PNR monitoring to opt for ferry travel instead.

I will also take the opportunity afforded by this debate on passenger name recognition data to raise a number of related issues with the Minister. While PNR data is collected, there are significant gaps relevant to the management of migration in terms of entry and exit. Even though PNR data is considered part of the framework of managing borders, particularly in terms of serious crime, the data is not actually used for migration purposes. The reality is that there are huge gaps in terms of publicly available information regarding the information collected. In some cases, data is not collected. In other cases, it is not collated in a way that allows for proper scrutiny. This includes information on those who overstay legal permissions

and accurate data on individuals subject to deportation orders, where assumptions are often made that people have left the State despite no verification whatsoever that this is, in fact, the case.

I have asked the Minister a number of times about how many of those who entered the State legally, whether it be on education, work or tourist permits, subsequently went on to overstay their visas or to make international protection applications. To date, he has not been in a position to provide any information in that regard. Such information is crucial to our understanding of how people who seek international protection enter the State. Equally, we have no way of knowing whether the percentages often cited by Ministers regarding the proportion of international protection applicants who entered the State from Britain via the North are accurate, given that we do not have the detail on those who entered legally and who go on to make applications for international protection. It is clear that the most effective way to manage migration and accurately track entry and exit movements would be on an all-Ireland basis. That is how we can protect our national interests, protect our sovereignty and safeguard the common travel area. This approach would be far more effective than the decision, for example, to sign up to the EU migration and asylum pact in its entirety that takes no account of the fact that the common travel area exists at all or that we have a unique circumstance as an EU member state on an island that is partitioned or that part of the island is operating outside of the EU against the democratic wishes of its people.

As an island, Ireland has unique advantages when it comes to managing migration on a fair and an understandable basis that can build public confidence. However, we are not capitalising on those advantages. I again ask the Minister whether he and his Department have given consideration to moving towards a system of migration management based on monitoring entry and exit to the island of Ireland as a whole, whether his Department has examined the establishment of an island-wide entry and exit system and whether there have been any discussions with the British authorities on this. The logic of that type of approach will make sense to most people. In fact, investment in such a system would make absolute sense in the longer term because an all-Ireland exit and entry registration system modelled on the EU Schengen system to allow for checks on individuals entering and leaving the island at ports and airports would allow for a much better streamlined migration management system. It would ensure that we have improved data collection, as well as allowing both administrations, North and South, and Ireland and Britain to cater for those who are in genuine need of international protection. Does the Minister accept the logic of this approach? It is important that we recognise the potential benefits that it could bring in ensuring that we have an accurate picture at all times as to who is entering and leaving and who is on the island of Ireland.

If the Minister has time, I ask him to provide an update on the progress that has been made regarding a bilateral returns agreement with Britain. I have raised this on a number of occasions. It would be helpful if he could provide an update on any discussions that he has had with his British counterparts.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Our party will support Ireland opting into the Council decision on signing the conclusion of the agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Korea on the transfer of passenger name record data. Co-operation in the fight against serious crime and terrorism is clearly necessary, and we realise the important role that data plays in supporting investigations into serious crime and terrorism. Ireland already participates in

similar PNR agreements with the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia. South Korea has also had an EU data protection adequacy decision since 2021, which is an important consideration when assessing the protections that will apply to European citizens' data. As I have said *ad nauseam* when discussing the PNR arrangements in this House, support for the agreement should not mean that we should not mean that we stop scrutinising how these systems operate. The Government's briefing acknowledges that the transfer and use of PNR data by a third country constitutes an interference with the fundamental rights of EU citizens. That is important to note. We are talking about the large-scale processing and transfer of personal information overwhelmingly to ordinary people who are suspected of absolutely nothing. European courts have repeatedly made clear that systems of this nature must be accompanied by meaningful and enforceable safeguards that should mean limitations around the purposes for which information can be used, proper limits on retention and independent oversight.

I ask the Minister to ensure that Ireland continues to monitor the operation of this agreement and that as these arrangements develop, fundamental rights and data protection remain central to our participation. There is a broader principle here, which brings me to something that relates to the Minister. Safeguards are only meaningful if the institutions responsible for enforcing them can be trusted to do so. In that regard, it has been over a week since the "RTÉ Investigates" programme concerning the treatment of protected disclosures within An Garda Síochána. The Minister spoke on RTÉ 1 earlier. He has not yet addressed the Dáil on the many questions that Members have.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am afraid that it is not relevant to the motions. I am sorry. It is not appropriate for the Minister to comment at this time.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I can explain the relevance.

An Ceann Comhairle: I appreciate that.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I will explain it. In Ireland, PNR data is collected and analysed by the passenger information unit within the Department of justice. This House has been asked to place confidence in systems for handling sensitive information in the interest of policing and public safety and questions about the integrity of those systems, the protection of confidential information and the accountability when safeguards fail are entirely relevant. Within that, safeguards in the Garda protected disclosure unit have clearly failed. I ask the Minister to come before the House and address the various questions that are outstanding. If the Minister could confirm that he is prepared to do that, I would be grateful.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I support the motions. This agreement lets airlines share booking data with the Republic of Korea in order to fight terrorism and serious crime. Korea is the first Asian country to agree such a deal with the European Union. The safeguards are strong. PNR data, as the Minister outlined, is depersonalised after six months, held for five years at most and passed on only with independent approval. Opting in also lets Korea share its findings with our passenger information unit and with Europol. These motions form one part of a wider

effort to secure our borders, and the Minister deserves credit for this. He is extending our own passenger data checks to flights within the EU.

Since 12 June, every new applicant for protection is being screened with identity, security and biometric checks and the law is being enforced. Last year, 4,700 deportation orders were signed - almost double the year before. This year, 3,381 have been signed up to 18 September. The progress on processing has also been sped up. Early last year, a standard case waited a median of 18 months for a first decision. In 2025, the International Protection Office issued more than 20,000 first decisions, up from 13,000 the year before. The new International Protection Act sets six months for a standard case, and three months for accelerated and border cases. Since the pact began, average daily applications have fallen from 53 to 32. Irish people are generous. They want a system that is fair, fast and firm. I welcome the Minister's efforts to deliver progress and, indeed, to reform the system. I also welcome the motions.

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I thank the three Deputies for their contributions. I welcome that all parties in the House are supporting the opt-in to the proposal in terms of the signing and execution of the agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Korea. It is clearly the case that PNR data is extremely important in combating serious crime. When we look at the agreements with third countries that have been opted into by Ireland, we can see that it is effective for us to ensure that we are at the forefront of combating such crime.

Deputy Carthy referred to how what is proposed will apply to ferries. He is correct in stating that it only applies to air travel passengers at present. Obviously, neither I nor Ireland can, of our own accord, decide that we are going to extend it to boats or maritime travel. That requires an agreement by the European Union and a measure being put in place by the European Union. The European Commission has published feasibility studies that examine the possible use of advanced passenger information from land and maritime travel operators. Ireland does not have the applicable long-distance rail or road routes. We will continue to monitor developments on maritime travel arising from these studies. The Commission may make proposals in the future following the evaluation of the current PNR directive. It would be appropriate that we extend it to maritime travel.

7 o'clock

Deputy Carthy also spoke about a PNR not being available for migration. That is correct; it is only available for the investigation of serious offences, terrorist offences. If I was here saying that PNR data was going to be used for the purpose of migration, I suspect it would not have the level of agreement that we have in the House in respect of the PNR data.

I agree with the Deputy that it would be much easier for me, as Minister for justice, to manage migration and immigration into Ireland if we had a united island. The practicality of it is we do not. Because there are two jurisdictions on the island and because we all want there to be an open border between those two jurisdictions, it means that people can come and go freely. That is the way it is and there is nothing that can be done in respect of that. I agree with him that if we had a reunified Ireland, it would be easier for everyone North and South to be able to manage migration in the way that other countries such as Australia are able to manage it.

The Deputy referred to the returns agreement. I will be meeting the British Home Secretary on Saturday. I have spoken to her on many occasions. The issue of returns is an item that will be on the agenda. However, when we look at the statistics that have arisen since we signed up to the International Protection Act which commenced on 12 June, there has been a significant reduction in the number of people claiming asylum in Ireland. I will give the Deputy the statistics. For the first six months of this year, over 1,000 people applied for international protection in Ireland in each month with the exception of March when it was 920. For the other five months it was over 1,000. In July it was 722, in August it was 756 and for this month up to 20 September it is 496. Since the International Protection Act, or the migration pact as the Deputy calls it, commenced on 12 June, the numbers coming in have reduced. It shows that the only way to effectively respond to illegal or irregular migration is through international co-operation.

I also thank Deputy Gannon for his support. I have no difficulty coming into the Dáil to talk about protected disclosures. This has been said. There is Government time and there is Opposition time. If he wants to use Social Democrats time to discuss it, I will be here. I do not know if I will be here on Wednesday and Thursday of next week because I have European commitments. However, if he tables it on Tuesday, I will be here. Part of the issue with projected disclosures is - this is not a makey-uppy issue - section 16 of the Act states that it is a criminal offence for a person to whom a protected disclosure is made to reveal the identity of the person making it. That applies even if the person has decided to reveal their own identity. The only exception is if I have the explicit consent of the individual concerned. That is something I am looking at in light of an interview that took place yesterday. I am seeking legal advice in respect of it. I am happy to give as much information as I can.

Question put and agreed to.

Agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Korea on Passenger Name Record Data: Motion

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the exercise by the State of the option or discretion under Protocol No. 21 on the position of the United Kingdom and Ireland in respect of the area of freedom, security and justice annexed to the Treaty on European Union and to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, to take part in the adoption and application of the following proposed measure:

Proposal for a Council Decision on the conclusion of the Agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Korea on the transfer of Passenger Name Record (PNR) data for the prevention, detection, investigation and prosecution of terrorist offences and serious crime,

a copy of which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 24th August, 2026.

Question put and agreed to.

Waste Management (Single Household Waste Collection Service) Bill 2026: Second Stage (Resumed) [Private Members]

An Ceann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to Second Stage of the Waste Management (Single Household Waste Collection Service) Bill 2026, taken on 16 July 2026. On the question, "That the Bill be now read a Second Time", a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Question put: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time"

The Dáil divided: Tá, 72; Níl, 81; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Ahern, Ciarán.	Aird, William.	
Bacik, Ivana.	Ardagh, Catherine.	
Bennett, Cathy.	Boland, Grace.	
Boyd Barrett, Richard.	Brabazon, Tom.	
Brady, John.	Brennan, Brian.	
Buckley, Pat.	Brennan, Shay.	
Byrne, Joanna.	Brophy, Colm.	
Carthy, Matt.	Browne, James.	
Clarke, Sorca.	Burke, Colm.	
Collins, Michael.	Butler, Mary.	
Conway-Walsh, Rose.	Butterly, Paula.	
Coppinger, Ruth.	Buttimer, Jerry.	
Cronin, Réada.	Byrne, Malcolm.	
Crowe, Seán.	Byrne, Thomas.	
Cullinane, David.	Callaghan, Catherine.	
Cummins, Jen.	Calleary, Dara.	
Daly, Pa.	Canney, Seán.	
Devine, Máire.	Carrigy, Micheál.	
Doherty, Pearse.	Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	
Ellis, Dessie.	Chambers, Jack.	
Ennis, Daniel.	Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	
Farrelly, Aidan.	Clendennen, John.	
Farrell, Mairéad.	Collins, Niall.	
Fitzmaurice, Michael.	Connolly, John.	
Gannon, Gary.	Cooney, Joe.	
Gibney, Sinéad.	Crowe, Cathal.	
Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	Cummins, John.	
Gould, Thomas.	Currie, Emer.	
Graves, Ann.	Daly, Martin.	
Guirke, Johnny.	Dempsey, Aisling.	
Hayes, Eoin.	Devlin, Cormac.	
Healy-Rae, Danny.	Dillon, Alan.	
Healy, Seamus.	Dolan, Albert.	
Kelly, Alan.	Feighan, Frankie.	
Kenny, Eoghan.	Fleming, Sean.	
Kenny, Martin.	Foley, Norma.	

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

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Duncan Smith and Marie Sherlock; Níl, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie.

Question declared lost.

Neutrality and Triple Lock: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]

The following motion was moved by Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire on Wednesday, 16 September 2026:

That Dáil Éireann:

recognises that:

— Ireland's proud tradition of military neutrality, and affirms the State's neutrality and non-alignment with military blocs to be a cornerstone of an independent Irish foreign policy;

— our neutrality, the "Triple Lock" neutrality protection system, have served us well, allowing Ireland to play a constructive role in international affairs, contributing to nuclear non-proliferation, disarmament, humanitarianism and United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions;

— the distinguished service of Irish peacekeepers deployed around the world, and the contribution of every Irish man and woman who has served on such missions throughout the decades; and

— nothing in the "Triple Lock" prevents us from investing properly in our Defence Forces and that it is the decisions of successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Government that has led to the neglect of our Defence Forces;

notes that:

— the destabilising effect of conflicts that are contributing to global and regional instability, including, but not limited to, Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, the continued Israeli occupation of Gaza and settler violence in the West Bank, the US and Israeli war with Iran, the Sudanese war, and urges an end to acts of aggression in all conflicts, and for the primacy of international law to be respected by all nations;

— Ireland's neutrality is an asset in an unpredictable international environment where major powers have undermined and disregarded international law;

— no provision of Ireland's current "Triple Lock" system prevents the evacuation of Irish citizens from conflict-torn regions, participation in appropriate training, and nor does it prevent Ireland's participation in humanitarian missions;

— the failure by successive governments to adequately invest in Ireland's Defence Forces and in our defence capabilities, leaving the State exposed to numerous threats;

— this Government has chosen to make Ireland reliant, and dependent, on foreign militaries to shore up Irish defence vulnerabilities, as seen by recent arrangements relating to security for engagements held as part of Ireland's presidency of the Council of the European Union, including the presence of British ships off the Irish coast;

— concerning reports that the Minister for Defence has directed officials to progress Irish participation in the British-led Joint Expeditionary Force Plus (JEF+), which will mean deeper military alignment with Britain and other NATO states; and

— concerning comments by the Minister for Defence which indicate that Ireland could participate in overseas deployments that do not support a UN resolution, and that she is potentially making arrangements for same; and

agrees that:

— our "Triple Lock" neutrality protection is a core component of Ireland's foreign policy and is underpinned by assurances provided to the Irish people by successive Irish Governments in advance of multiple European referendums, such as the Nice and Lisbon referendums;

— Ireland should be strong on defence and strong on neutrality and that this must be achieved by properly resourcing our Defence Forces, rebuilding our Naval Service, strengthen air and maritime surveillance, and developing radar capabilities;

— participation in the JEF+ would be a departure from the position of military non-alignment and the Government must come clean on what discussions have taken place with the British Government in relation to this;

— Ireland should be open to international co-operation to meet genuine security threats, but that co-operation is not the same thing as military alignment, and that participation in any military alliance, including any British-led military framework, would end our neutrality as we know it;

— Ireland should engage with partners as a militarily neutral state, while investing seriously in our own capacity to defend our airspace, territorial waters and critical infrastructure; and

— any move to alter the "Triple Lock" represents a step towards the complete abandonment of Ireland's policy of military neutrality, and participation in military alliances, as evidenced by the Government's intention to participate in the JEF+; and

calls on the Government:

— not to become a party to the British-led JEF+ military partnership;

— to call a referendum on its proposals to scrap the "Triple Lock"; and

— to accept that the "Triple Lock" is a core component of Ireland's independent foreign policy and is underpinned by assurances provided to the Irish people by successive Irish Governments in advance of multiple European referendums, such as the Nice and Lisbon referendums.

Debates resumed on amendment No. 1:

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

notes that:

— the Government reiterates Ireland's longstanding policy of military neutrality;

— Ireland's policy of military neutrality is characterised by non-membership of military alliances or common or mutual defence arrangements, and this policy choice has been practised by successive Governments since the Second World War;

— the Government reaffirms its commitment to this policy and reiterates that it has no plans to either join a military alliance or enter into a mutual defence arrangement;

— in light of the above commitment, the Government does not believe a national referendum on enshrining neutrality into the Constitution is necessary; and

— amending the Triple Lock legislation in relation to the deployment of our Defence Forces to peacekeeping missions will have no impact on this policy of military neutrality, and that no other European Union (EU) Member State, including other neutral Member States, allow permanent Security Council members to bind their hands in the way that the Triple Lock effectively does for Ireland;

recognises that:

— Ireland's long-standing policy of military neutrality, and our strong tradition of participation in international peace support and crisis management operations over many decades;

— members of Ireland's Defence Forces continue to contribute bravely to peacekeeping and crisis management efforts, particularly in the Middle East, as well as elsewhere in the world;

— the multilateral system remains our strongest protection and the State's most important security asset;

— Ireland's contributions to conflict resolution and peacebuilding, and work for human rights and development, and our efforts to promote disarmament and the elimination of weapons of mass destruction, are internationally renowned;

— nevertheless, as a highly globalised country, Ireland cannot rely on our geographic isolation for our security, nor isolate ourselves from world events and should co-operate with neighbours on matters of security including in the maritime domain;

— the importance of parliamentary safeguards and national oversight in ensuring Irish military deployments are in line with our policy of military neutrality, and that they are decided solely by the elected representatives of the people of Ireland; and

— the Government is committed to continued increased investment in defence, with a view to achieving a significantly enhanced capability by 2028, and that the Government has already significantly increased our national defence spending in the past few years, by 43 per cent since 2020, marking the largest increase in Defence funding in the history of the Irish State;

acknowledges that:

— the Government is committed to supporting the global multilateral system, to vocally defending international law, particularly international humanitarian law, and human rights;

— in common with other partners in Europe, Ireland finds itself in an increasingly contested, dynamic and volatile international security environment, marked by violence and conflict

in our immediate neighbourhood, including Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine, and conflicts in the Middle East and Africa;

— Ireland needs to be agile in how we respond to the new geopolitical environment that we find ourselves in;

— Ireland should be open to international co-operation to meet genuine security threats and learning from other countries to counter these threats;

— Ireland, therefore, should not find itself unable to respond to Peace Support and Crisis Management Operations that align with the United Nations (UN) Charter and International Law, due to a veto by permanent member(s) of the UN Security Council; and

— this legislation will remove the power of UN Security Council permanent members to veto our national sovereign decisions regarding our participation in peace keeping missions organised by reputable organisations such as the EU and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) which will also allow for the deployment of Defence Forces personnel overseas in other overseas roles such as the crisis management evacuation of Irish citizens.

- (Minister for Defence)

An Ceann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to the motion regarding neutrality and triple lock. On Wednesday, 16 September 2026, on the question, "That the amendment to the motion be agreed to", a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 81; Níl, 73; 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.	
Butler, Mary.	Collins, Michael.	
Butterly, Paula.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Cronin, Réada.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Crowe, Seán.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Cullinane, David.	
Calleary, Dara.	Cummins, Jen.	
Canney, Seán.	Daly, Pa.	
Carrigy, Mícheál.	Devine, Máire.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Doherty, Pearse.	

Chambers, Jack.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Ennis, Daniel.	
Clendennen, John.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Collins, Niall.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Connolly, John.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gannon, Gary.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Cummins, John.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Currie, Emer.	Gould, Thomas.	
Daly, Martin.	Graves, Ann.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Dillon, Alan.	Healy-Rae, Danny.	
Dolan, Albert.	Healy, Seamus.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Hearne, Rory.	
Fleming, Sean.	Kelly, Alan.	
Foley, Norma.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	Kenny, Martin.	
Geoghegan, James.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Grealish, Noel.	Lawless, Paul.	
Harkin, Marian.	Lawlor, George.	
Heneghan, Barry.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Heydon, Martin.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Higgins, Emer.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Keogh, Keira.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Kyne, Seán.	Murphy, Paul.	
Lahart, John.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Lowry, Michael.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Maxwell, David.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	Nolan, Carol.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
McGrath, Séamus.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
McGreehan, Erin.	O'Hara, Louis.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Murphy, Michael.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Naughton, Hildegard.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Neville, Joe.	Quaide, Liam.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Rice, Pádraig.	
O'Connor, James.	Sheehan, Conor.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Sherlock, Marie.	
O'Gorman, Roderic.	Smith, Duncan.	

O'Meara, Ryan.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Shea, John Paul.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
O'Sullivan, Christopher.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	Ward, Charles.	
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	Ward, Mark.	
Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
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 Denise Mitchell.

Amendment declared carried.

Question put: "That the motion, as amended, be agreed to"

The Dáil divided: Tá, 80; Níl, 74; 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.	
Butler, Mary.	Collins, Michael.	
Butterly, Paula.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Cronin, Réada.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Crowe, Seán.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Cullinane, David.	
Calleary, Dara.	Cummins, Jen.	
Canney, Seán.	Daly, Pa.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Devine, Máire.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Chambers, Jack.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Ennis, Daniel.	
Clendennen, John.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Collins, Niall.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Connolly, John.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gannon, Gary.	

Crowe, Cathal.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Cummins, John.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Currie, Emer.	Gould, Thomas.	
Daly, Martin.	Graves, Ann.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Dillon, Alan.	Healy-Rae, Danny.	
Dolan, Albert.	Healy, Seamus.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Hearne, Rory.	
Fleming, Sean.	Kelly, Alan.	
Foley, Norma.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	Kenny, Martin.	
Geoghegan, James.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Grealish, Noel.	Lawless, Paul.	
Harkin, Marian.	Lawlor, George.	
Heneghan, Barry.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Heydon, Martin.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Higgins, Emer.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Keogh, Keira.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Kyne, Seán.	Murphy, Paul.	
Lahart, John.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Lowry, Michael.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Maxwell, David.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	Nolan, Carol.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
McGrath, Séamus.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
McGreehan, Erin.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	O'Hara, Louis.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
Moynihan, Michael.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
Murphy, Michael.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Naughton, Hildegard.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Neville, Joe.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Quaide, Liam.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
O'Connor, James.	Rice, Pádraig.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Sheehan, Conor.	
O'Meara, Ryan.	Sherlock, Marie.	
O'Shea, John Paul.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Sullivan, Christopher.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	Wall, Mark.	
Ó Fearghail, Seán.	Ward, Charles.	
Ó Muirí, Naoise.	Ward, Mark.	

Roche, Peter.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
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 Denise Mitchell.

Question declared carried.

Energy Policy: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]

The following motion was moved by Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett on Thursday, 17 September 2026:

That Dáil Éireann notes:

- in 2025, data centres consumed 23 per cent of electricity and this is projected to increase to 30 per cent by 2030, far in excess of the three per cent of electricity consumed by data centres in Europe;
- data centres account for 88 per cent of increased demand for electricity since 2015 and now consume almost as much electricity as every home in the state;
- over 120 data centres are operating in the state, a concentration that is at least 10 times higher than the European per capita average;
- a United Nations report published in June stated "Ireland offers a cautionary example of local grid stress from concentrated digital infrastructure";
- data centres also consume large quantities of water and their water consumption increased during the recent period of hot weather while households faced restrictions on water use as supplies ran low;
- data centre development globally is producing massive increases in greenhouse gas emissions and accelerating global temperature rise towards imminent breach of the dangerous 1.5 degrees celsius above preindustrial level;
- an immediate ban on new data centres is essential, in Ireland and globally to stop further increases in their consumption of our energy, their greenhouse gas emissions and their other extremely damaging environmental impacts;
- one in seven households could not afford adequate warmth or pay their energy bills in full in 2024, and over 322,000 households were in electricity arrears in July this year, with average arrears of €509;
- Friends of the Earth estimate that the average household paid an estimated additional €263 for their electricity in the 2021 to 2023 period "due to the intensity of data centre

presence on the Irish Single Electricity Market (ISEM) grid putting upward pressure on prices", and during the height of the 2022 energy crisis, the "data centre price cost effect" accounted for the equivalent of about 8.5 per cent of average household electricity bills;

— Budget 2025 provided a €250 energy credit to households, paid between November 2024 and February 2025, but this was not renewed in Budget 2026;

— up to the end of the 1990s, the Electricity Supply Board (ESB) was a world class energy company, delivering low-cost energy, governed by a not-for-profit mandate, but that mandate was replaced with a commercial mandate in 2001;

— households in Ireland now pay the highest electricity prices in the European Union (EU), 38 per cent higher than the EU average;

— returning the ESB to a not-for-profit state company, with sole responsibility for power generation and distribution, and coupled with energy price caps, can deliver affordable electricity for all and be central to the achievement of a fossil fuel-free economy and society;

— People Before Profit-Solidarity's Emergency Price Controls Bill 2024, introduced in the Dáil at First Stage in May 2024, calls for electricity prices to be capped for households at €0.25 per kilowatt hour (KWh);

— a €500 annual electricity credit for every household would cost an estimated €1 billion per year;

— an additional €500 electricity credit for households with people in receipt of Illness Benefit, Disability Allowance, Invalidity Pension or carer's payments would cost an estimated €250 million per year;

— data centres pay approximately €0.20 per KWh for electricity, half the €0.40 average price paid by households; and

— an electricity consumption levy of €0.20 per KWh on data centres would equalise their electricity unit costs with those paid by households and would raise approximately €1.5 billion per year;

calls on the Government to:

— include an annual €500 electricity credit for every household in Budget 2027;

— include a budget provision for an annual additional €500 electricity credit for households with a person(s) in receipt of Illness Benefit, Disability Allowance, Invalidity Pension or carer's payments; and

— introduce an electricity consumption levy on data centres of €0.20 per KWh, to equalise their electricity unit costs with those paid by households and thereby raise €1.5 billion to fund €500 energy credits for households.

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

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

"the Government:

- remains deeply concerned about the conflict in the Middle East and its impact on energy prices;

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

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

- affirms that energy affordability is a priority for this Government with the Energy Affordability Action Plan to be submitted to Government in the coming weeks and consideration ongoing of supports for household;

notes that:

- the ongoing conflict in the Middle East has caused international wholesale gas prices to increase which has a significant knock-on impact on retail electricity prices;

- supplier hedging strategies have and are continuing to help cushion households from the full volatility in international wholesale energy markets;

- price setting by electricity suppliers, including standing charges is a commercial and operational matter for the companies concerned and each such company has its own different approach to pricing decisions over time, in accordance with factors such as their overall company strategic direction and costs such as staffing, tax, infrastructure;

- Government understands that any price increase can be a challenge for households and businesses;

- for that reason, the Government has taken action to help households and businesses with the cost of fuel and energy;

- extensions to the package of temporary fuel supports have brought the total cost of these measures to over €1.4 billion and are helping to reduce the cost burden at the petrol pump;

- successive Budgets have provided targeted support to help households with energy costs;

- in Budget 2026, key measures included an extension until 2030 of the nine per cent Value Added Tax (VAT) rate currently applied to gas and electricity bills, enhanced social protection payments, including an increase to the Fuel Allowance weekly rate and an expansion in the eligibility rules, and a record allocation of €640 million for SEAI retrofit schemes;

- at the same time, additional retrofitting supports have been rolled out to further help households, capital expenditure of over €2 billion has delivered over 287,000 home energy upgrades from 2019 to the end of August 2026, including over 39,500 fully funded upgrades for households at risk of energy poverty under the Warmer Homes Scheme;

- in January this year we expanded and reformed retrofitting schemes to ensure more homeowners can receive grants, the new measures included increased attic and wall

insulation supports, an increased grant of €12,500 for heat pump installation, and new grants for windows and doors;

— almost 89,000 applications have been processed to the end of August 2026, an increase of 116 per cent on the same period last year;

— this year to the end of August 2026, almost 42,000 homes have been upgraded through SEAI schemes, including over 6,800 homes at risk of energy poverty under the Warmer Homes Scheme;

— the latest Eurostat report (comparing electricity prices across the EU) outlines that Ireland had the fifth highest household electricity prices in the second half of 2025 when adjusted to take account of the "Purchasing Power Standard" (i.e. practical affordability, taking account of household income);

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

— switching energy supplier or plan could save the average electricity and gas customers up to €700 and €400 (respectively) annually;

— protections are in place for customers experiencing difficulties in paying their bills and households struggling with their bill are strongly encouraged to engage with their supplier;

— the Department of Social Protection can also provide support through the Additional Needs Payment to help households meet expenses, including difficulties with fuel bills;

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

— the NEAT continues to work intensively on an Energy Affordability Action Plan to be submitted to Government in the coming weeks;

— the range of supports that were included in Budget 2026 are in line with the movement away from one-off measures, towards permanent supports with funding also provided to address structural issues such as retrofit and infrastructure;

— the Government will continue to monitor and assess the situation in relation to energy costs; and

— the Government will also make a range of relevant decisions as part of Budget 2027;

further notes that:

— data centres represent critical digital infrastructure that are central to Ireland's modern economy;

— they strengthen Ireland's position as a strategic knowledge intensive regional hub for the Information and Communications Technology sector and also support broader retention and expansion of existing investment that support billions in annual economic value for Ireland via high-wage employment, tax receipts and supplier ecosystems;

- when considering the impact of data centres, we must also weigh wider economic benefits — tax revenues, employment, broader digital infrastructure value and significant support and linkages provided to other high value sectors of the economy;
- currently the industry employs 19,500 directly, in addition, Ireland's technology sector, underpinned by digital infrastructure in data centres, accounted for employment of 182,900 people in Q4 2024, equivalent to seven per cent of Ireland's total workforce;
- while data centres are large energy users, unlike other European countries that have heavy-industry bases, Ireland's industrial electricity demand is primarily concentrated in our digital economy, this is our core energy-intensive industry;
- comparing total non-residential electricity consumption, which includes industry and data centres, Ireland's consumption is in line with Frankfurt, London, Amsterdam, Paris, and Dublin, (FLAP-D) and other European markets, which represent the tier-one, foundational hubs of Europe's digital infrastructure;
- the Government has for a long time recognised that data centres and their energy consumption need to be managed and planned appropriately and we are taking the regulatory, policy and investment measures to deliver on this;
- the Government is committed to delivering a balanced approach to facilitate sustainable data centre demand while also ensuring overall energy security and affordability for consumers and businesses;
- the Government's Large Energy User (LEU) Action Plan, published in January 2026, sets out a 'plan-led' approach for very large and energy intensive investments, which due to their scale and energy consumption benefit from co-ordinated national infrastructure planning;
- the Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU) LEU connection policy, published in December 2025, establishes a pathway for new data centres to seek connection to the electricity system, that addresses security of electricity supply risks, system constraints and promotes renewable energy targets;
- the CRU is responsible for electricity connection policy and the economic regulation of the electricity system operators ESB Networks and EirGrid;
- Electricity Network Tariffs Structure Review, are set every year by the CRU to recover the costs of developing, operating, and maintaining the electricity grid, they fund a grid that is more resilient to storms and supplies electricity to a growing population, new housing and expanding businesses;
- extra-large energy users, like data centres, have in recent years seen large increases in network costs, with average increase of 175 per cent compared with a 45 per cent increase for domestic customers during 2020-2026;
- the United Nations (UN) university report referenced Ireland as 'a cautionary example of local grid stress from concentrated digital infrastructure', however, it should be noted that though referenced, Ireland was not a central tenet to the study but rather a brief paragraph in a much wider report;

- data centres are not a major driver of demand on the public water supply network, accounting for less than 0.3 per cent of the water supplied by Uisce Eireann;
- in addition, not all data centres use water from the Uisce Eireann network, with a number of them having their own wells or utilising rainwater harvesting and on-site storage;
- the CRU's LEU connection policy supports Government renewable energy targets, as data centres above certain thresholds will be required to meet at least 80 per cent of their annual demand with new additional renewable electricity generated in the Republic of Ireland; and
- according to the Environmental Protection Agency's Greenhouse Gas Emissions data for 2025, Ireland now has the lowest level of greenhouse gas emissions in 36 years, including a 7.1 per cent reduction in energy industries, to an all-time low, this demonstrates that economic growth has been definitively decoupled from greenhouse gas emissions;
- the Friends of the Earth report referenced makes particular assumptions about how the electricity market works and the authors acknowledge that the modelling used in the report has limitations;
- consistent with the Government's position, a recent Friends of the Earth report underlines the importance of deploying even more renewable electricity to remove gas related cost effect driving energy prices', both Government LEAP policy and CRU LEU Connection Decision recognise and support sustainable LEU development ensuring renewables are a key component in any development going forward;
- the Government is committed to delivering a balanced approach to facilitate sustainable data centre developments, which operate within the boundaries of our climate legislation and targets and are associated with strong economic activity and employment, support our society, and make efficient use of our electricity grid."

- (Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment)

An Ceann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to the motion regarding energy policy. On Thursday, 17 September 2026, , on the question, "That the amendment to the motion be agreed to", a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 81; Níl, 74; 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.	

Butler, Mary.	Collins, Michael.	
Butterly, Paula.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Cronin, Réada.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Crowe, Seán.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Cullinane, David.	
Calleary, Dara.	Cummins, Jen.	
Canney, Seán.	Daly, Pa.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Devine, Máire.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Chambers, Jack.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Ennis, Daniel.	
Clendennen, John.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Collins, Niall.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Connolly, John.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gannon, Gary.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Cummins, John.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Currie, Emer.	Gould, Thomas.	
Daly, Martin.	Graves, Ann.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Dillon, Alan.	Healy-Rae, Danny.	
Dolan, Albert.	Healy, Seamus.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Hearne, Rory.	
Fleming, Sean.	Kelly, Alan.	
Foley, Norma.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	Kenny, Martin.	
Geoghegan, James.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Grealish, Noel.	Lawless, Paul.	
Harkin, Marian.	Lawlor, George.	
Harris, Simon.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Heneghan, Barry.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Heydon, Martin.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Higgins, Emer.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Keogh, Keira.	Murphy, Paul.	
Kyne, Seán.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Lahart, John.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Lowry, Michael.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Maxwell, David.	Nolan, Carol.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
McGrath, Séamus.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
McGreehan, Erin.	O'Hara, Louis.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	O'Rourke, Darren.	

Moynihan, Michael.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Murphy, Michael.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Naughton, Hildegard.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Neville, Joe.	Quaide, Liam.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Rice, Pádraig.	
O'Connor, James.	Sheehan, Conor.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Sherlock, Marie.	
O'Meara, Ryan.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Shea, John Paul.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Sullivan, Christopher.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	Wall, Mark.	
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	Ward, Charles.	
Ó Fearghail, Seán.	Ward, Mark.	
Ó Muirí, Naoise.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Richard Boyd Barrett and Paul Murphy.

Amendment declared carried.

Question put: "That the motion, as amended, be agreed to."

The Dáil divided: Tá, 81; Níl, 74; 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.	
Butler, Mary.	Collins, Michael.	
Butterly, Paula.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Cronin, Réada.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Crowe, Seán.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Cullinane, David.	

Calleary, Dara.	Cummins, Jen.	
Canney, Seán.	Daly, Pa.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Devine, Máire.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Chambers, Jack.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Ennis, Daniel.	
Clendennen, John.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Collins, Niall.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Connolly, John.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gannon, Gary.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Cummins, John.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Currie, Emer.	Gould, Thomas.	
Daly, Martin.	Graves, Ann.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Dillon, Alan.	Healy-Rae, Danny.	
Dolan, Albert.	Healy, Seamus.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Hearne, Rory.	
Fleming, Sean.	Kelly, Alan.	
Foley, Norma.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	Kenny, Martin.	
Geoghegan, James.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Grealish, Noel.	Lawless, Paul.	
Harkin, Marian.	Lawlor, George.	
Harris, Simon.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Heneghan, Barry.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Heydon, Martin.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Higgins, Emer.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Keogh, Keira.	Murphy, Paul.	
Kyne, Seán.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Lahart, John.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Lowry, Michael.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Maxwell, David.	Nolan, Carol.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
McGrath, Séamus.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
McGreehan, Erin.	O'Hara, Louis.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Murphy, Michael.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Naughton, Hildegard.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Neville, Joe.	Quaide, Liam.	

O'Callaghan, Jim.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Rice, Pádraig.	
O'Connor, James.	Sheehan, Conor.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Sherlock, Marie.	
O'Meara, Ryan.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Shea, John Paul.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Sullivan, Christopher.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	Wall, Mark.	
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	Ward, Charles.	
Ó Fearghail, Seán.	Ward, Mark.	
Ó Muirí, Naoise.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Richard Boyd Barrett and Paul Murphy.

Question declared carried.

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

An Ceann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to Second Stage of the Home Heating Oil (Emergency Mineral Oil Tax Reduction) Bill 2026, taken on 22 September 2026. On the question, "That the amendment to the motion now be agreed to", a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 81; Níl, 73; Staon, 1.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	O'Gorman, Roderic.
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.	
Butler, Mary.	Collins, Michael.	
Butterly, Paula.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	

Buttimer, Jerry.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Cronin, Réada.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Crowe, Seán.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Cullinane, David.	
Calleary, Dara.	Cummins, Jen.	
Canney, Seán.	Daly, Pa.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Devine, Máire.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Chambers, Jack.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Ennis, Daniel.	
Clendennen, John.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Collins, Niall.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Connolly, John.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gannon, Gary.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Cummins, John.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Currie, Emer.	Gould, Thomas.	
Daly, Martin.	Graves, Ann.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Dillon, Alan.	Healy-Rae, Danny.	
Dolan, Albert.	Healy, Seamus.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Hearne, Rory.	
Fleming, Sean.	Kelly, Alan.	
Foley, Norma.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	Kenny, Martin.	
Geoghegan, James.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Grealish, Noel.	Lawless, Paul.	
Harkin, Marian.	Lawlor, George.	
Harris, Simon.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Heneghan, Barry.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Heydon, Martin.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Higgins, Emer.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Keogh, Keira.	Murphy, Paul.	
Kyne, Seán.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Lahart, John.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Lowry, Michael.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Maxwell, David.	Nolan, Carol.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
McGrath, Séamus.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McGreehan, Erin.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	

Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Murphy, Michael.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Naughton, Hildegard.	Quaide, Liam.	
Neville, Joe.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Rice, Pádraig.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Sheehan, Conor.	
O'Connor, James.	Sherlock, Marie.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Meara, Ryan.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Shea, John Paul.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
O'Sullivan, Christopher.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	Ward, Charles.	
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	Ward, Mark.	
Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
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 Denise Mitchell.

Amendment declared carried.

Question put: "That the motion, as amended, be agreed to."

The Dáil divided: Tá, 81; Níl, 74; 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.	
Butler, Mary.	Collins, Michael.	
Butterly, Paula.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Cronin, Réada.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Crowe, Seán.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Cullinane, David.	
Calleary, Dara.	Cummins, Jen.	
Canney, Seán.	Daly, Pa.	

Carrigy, Micheál.	Devine, Máire.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Chambers, Jack.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Ennis, Daniel.	
Clendennen, John.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Collins, Niall.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Connolly, John.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gannon, Gary.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Cummins, John.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Currie, Emer.	Gould, Thomas.	
Daly, Martin.	Graves, Ann.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Dillon, Alan.	Healy-Rae, Danny.	
Dolan, Albert.	Healy, Seamus.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Hearne, Rory.	
Fleming, Sean.	Kelly, Alan.	
Foley, Norma.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	Kenny, Martin.	
Geoghegan, James.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Grealish, Noel.	Lawless, Paul.	
Harkin, Marian.	Lawlor, George.	
Harris, Simon.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Heneghan, Barry.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Heydon, Martin.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Higgins, Emer.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Keogh, Keira.	Murphy, Paul.	
Kyne, Seán.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Lahart, John.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Lowry, Michael.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Maxwell, David.	Nolan, Carol.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
McGrath, Séamus.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
McGreehan, Erin.	O'Hara, Louis.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Murphy, Michael.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Naughton, Hildegard.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Neville, Joe.	Quaide, Liam.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Rice, Pádraig.	

O'Connor, James.	Sheehan, Conor.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Sherlock, Marie.	
O'Meara, Ryan.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Shea, John Paul.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Sullivan, Christopher.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	Wall, Mark.	
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	Ward, Charles.	
Ó Feargháil, Seán.	Ward, Mark.	
Ó Muirí, Naoise.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
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 Denise Mitchell.

Question declared carried.

Fuel, Energy and Carbon Tax Relief: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]

The following motion was moved by Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice on Wednesday, 23 September 2026:

That Dáil Éireann:

recognises that:

- households, farmers, agricultural contractors, hauliers, tradespeople and businesses are facing renewed and significant increases in the cost of fuel and energy, adding further pressure to an already severe cost-of-living crisis;
- petrol and diesel are essential rather than discretionary expenses for hundreds of thousands of people, particularly in rural Ireland where access to adequate public transport and viable alternatives to private vehicles remains limited or non-existent;
- farmers and agricultural contractors have no practical alternative to diesel for the operation of tractors, harvesters and other essential agricultural machinery, and that rapidly increasing marked gas oil, or green diesel, prices represent a direct threat to the viability of primary production and agricultural contracting;
- increasing fuel costs have consequences extending far beyond the individual fuel user, increasing the cost of producing and transporting food, construction materials and other goods and ultimately increasing prices for consumers;

— households dependent on kerosene and other home-heating fuels, particularly throughout rural Ireland, face significant additional costs as the winter period approaches and frequently have no immediately available or affordable alternative heating source;

— businesses which manufacture, produce or supply goods and transport those goods using their own vehicles make an important contribution to employment and economic activity but can be excluded from existing fuel rebate arrangements because of requirements relating to haulage licensing;

— the Government has made approximately €85 million available for fuel support for farmers and agricultural contractors, but only approximately €26 million of this allocation has been claimed to date, leaving substantial funding available which should continue to be used for the purpose for which it was allocated;

— approximately €15 million in European Union (EU) assistance towards increased agricultural input and fertiliser costs is insufficient to meet the scale of the additional costs currently being experienced by Irish farmers;

— carbon taxation has a disproportionate impact on people who have no realistic ability to reduce their reliance on fossil fuels, including rural commuters, farmers, contractors, hauliers and households dependent on oil heating;

— further increases in carbon tax are already provided for under existing legislation and will further increase the cost of transport and home heating unless those increases are abolished;

— Dáil Éireann was recently recalled to prevent increases in fuel taxation from taking effect, demonstrating that Government can intervene where taxation would otherwise add further to exceptional fuel costs; and

— comments suggesting that diesel prices in excess of €2 per litre could become a "new normal" are deeply concerning and that the role of Government must instead be to use the measures available to it to protect households and businesses from exceptional energy costs;

further recognises that:

— international conflict, geopolitical instability and volatility in global energy markets are outside the direct control of the State, but decisions relating to domestic taxation, expenditure and targeted supports remain within the control of the Government;

— taxation intended to encourage behavioural change cannot achieve that objective where reasonable and affordable alternatives are not available;

— rural communities should not be disproportionately penalised because successive Governments have failed to provide adequate public transport, alternative heating systems and other infrastructure necessary to reduce dependence on fossil fuels;

— maintaining the viability of farmers, agricultural contractors, hauliers and other businesses is essential to Ireland's food security, employment, rural economy and national supply chains; and

— exceptional additional Exchequer revenues arising during periods of elevated prices should, where appropriate, be used to protect households and productive sectors of the economy from exceptional cost increases; and

calls on the Government to:

— abolish all further scheduled increases in the carbon tax, rather than merely postponing those increases, and ensure that households, motorists, farmers and businesses are not subjected to further automatic increases in carbon taxation;

— maintain appropriate reductions and reliefs in excise duties applying to petrol and diesel for as long as exceptional fuel-price pressures persist, and use the taxation measures available to the State to ensure that increases in international oil prices are not unnecessarily compounded by domestic taxation;

— explicitly reject the proposition that diesel prices in excess of €2 per litre should be accepted as a "new normal", and commit to using all reasonable taxation, expenditure and policy measures available to Government to reduce the impact of exceptional fuel prices on families and businesses;

— ring-fence the full €85 million allocated for agricultural fuel support, ensure that any portion not initially claimed is not surrendered to the Exchequer or redirected away from fuel assistance, and use the remaining allocation to extend fuel support for farmers and agricultural contractors for a further five months;

— recognise the exceptional impact of marked gas oil prices approaching €1.50 per litre on farmers and agricultural contractors and ensure that future agricultural fuel supports properly reflect the actual additional costs being incurred by those sectors;

— provide additional Exchequer funding in Budget 2027 for farmers facing exceptional fertiliser and agricultural input costs, over and above the approximately €15 million being provided through EU support, and ensure that this constitutes additional funding rather than the reallocation of existing agricultural programmes;

— introduce targeted measures, in advance of the winter period, to protect households from exceptional increases in the cost of kerosene and other home-heating fuels, with particular regard to older people, low-income households and households in rural areas with limited alternative heating options;

— urgently review the eligibility criteria applying to fuel rebate and support schemes for the haulage and commercial transport sectors, with a view to ensuring that legitimate businesses which transport their own goods as an integral part of their business are not unfairly excluded from support solely because they do not hold a particular category of haulage licence;

— require a rural impact assessment to be carried out before any future increase in taxation on transport fuels or household energy, including an assessment of the availability, affordability and practicality of alternative transport and heating options;

— publish, on an annual basis, a clear account of the total revenue raised through carbon taxation, the amounts allocated to individual programmes, the amounts actually expended, and any unspent, surrendered or carried-forward balances;

- ensure that future energy and taxation policy gives appropriate and balanced consideration to affordability, energy security, food security, economic competitiveness and the particular circumstances of rural Ireland, alongside the State's environmental and emissions-reduction objectives; and

- commit that the State's response to exceptional international energy-price increases will be based on actively protecting households, farmers, contractors and businesses from costs beyond their control, rather than accepting permanently higher fuel prices as inevitable or as a "new normal".

The following amendment No. 1 was moved by the Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy Niall Collins:

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

"notes that the Government:

- remains deeply concerned about the ongoing conflict in the Middle East and Gulf;

- recognises and understands the pressures that have arisen due to rising fuel costs as a result of the conflict in the Middle East for all families and businesses, in particular for sectors most reliant on fossil fuels;

- highlights that successive Budgets have provided targeted support to help households with cost-of-living pressures and re-affirms that energy affordability is a priority for this Government; and

- remains committed to decarbonising our society, increasing investment in renewable energy sources and recycling carbon tax revenues to protect those most vulnerable to fuel poverty through targeted welfare interventions;

recognises that:

- this Government has delivered one of the largest support packages in the European Union (EU) per head capita which has included:

- excise duty reductions on diesel, petrol and 'green diesel';

- an enhanced Diesel Rebate Scheme for the entirety of 2026;

- the deferral of the 1st May Carbon Tax increase;

- the extension of the fuel allowance for one month;

- funds made available for payments to road transport operators under the Road Transporters Support Scheme;

- funds made available for payments to farmers, farm contractors and fishers under the Fuel Income Support Scheme; and

- a reduction in the National Oil Reserves Agency (NORA) Levy;

- it is not possible to offset all of the increases in energy prices, which are driven by market factors, using the tax system;

further recognises that, in the long run the best way to protect Ireland from the impact of international fossil fuel prices is to reduce our dependence on fossil fuel imports, which we will achieve through the progressive decarbonisation of the Irish economy and society and through the steps that will be taken to meet the Government's commitment to reach net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050;

further notes that:

— current support measures instigated by this Government are estimated to cost over €1.3 billion from March 2026 to the end of February 2027 and have provided significant relief for households and businesses across the country;

— the Government has responded and will continue to respond in a way that protects those most vulnerable to fuel poverty; and

highlights that, the Government remains cognisant of the pressures faced by households and businesses as a result of increased fuel prices owing to the conflict in the Middle East and will seek to address this as part of Budget 2027."

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1 to amendment No. 1:

To delete all words from "notes that the Government:" to "will seek to address this as part of Budget 2027" and substitute the following:

"recognises that:

— working people, families, students, households and pensioners are facing renewed and significant increases in the cost of fuel and energy, as well as increases in public transport fares, adding further pressure to an already severe cost-of-living crisis; and

— the Government is directly contributing to this cost-of-living crisis by refusing to introduce price controls on fuel, energy or groceries, abolishing energy credits, enabling data centres to push up energy prices, gutting rent controls, underfunding retrofitting and solar panels for low- and middle-income households and imposing a regressive carbon tax;

calls on the Government to:

— impose strict price controls on fuel, energy and groceries and abolish standing charges for electricity and gas;

— stop the planned increases in public transport fares and introduce free public transport to incentivise public transport use;

— introduce a €500 energy credit in the Budget, to be funded by an energy levy on data centres;

— abolish the carbon tax and replace it with higher taxes on big business and the wealthy, including a new multimillionaire's tax on wealth, that will also fund a massive expansion of retrofitting grants and free, frequent and expanded public transport; and

— freeze and cut rents."

- (Deputy Paul Murphy)

Amendment to amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 52; Níl, 103; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Bennett, Cathy.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Boyd Barrett, Richard.	Aird, William.	
Brady, John.	Ardagh, Catherine.	
Buckley, Pat.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Byrne, Joanna.	Boland, Grace.	
Carthy, Matt.	Brabazon, Tom.	
Clarke, Sorca.	Brennan, Brian.	
Collins, Michael.	Brennan, Shay.	
Conway-Walsh, Rose.	Brophy, Colm.	
Coppinger, Ruth.	Browne, James.	
Cronin, Réada.	Burke, Colm.	
Crowe, Seán.	Butler, Mary.	
Cullinane, David.	Butterly, Paula.	
Daly, Pa.	Buttimer, Jerry.	
Devine, Máire.	Byrne, Malcolm.	
Doherty, Pearse.	Byrne, Thomas.	
Ellis, Dessie.	Callaghan, Catherine.	
Farrell, Mairéad.	Calleary, Dara.	
Fitzmaurice, Michael.	Canney, Seán.	
Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	Carrigy, Micheál.	
Gould, Thomas.	Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	
Graves, Ann.	Chambers, Jack.	
Guirke, Johnny.	Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	
Healy-Rae, Danny.	Clendennen, John.	
Healy, Seamus.	Collins, Niall.	
Kenny, Martin.	Connolly, John.	
Kerrane, Claire.	Cooney, Joe.	
Lawless, Paul.	Crowe, Cathal.	
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	Cummins, Jen.	
McGettigan, Donna.	Cummins, John.	
McGuinness, Conor D.	Currie, Emer.	
Mitchell, Denise.	Daly, Martin.	
Murphy, Paul.	Dempsey, Aisling.	
Mythen, Johnny.	Devlin, Cormac.	
Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	Dillon, Alan.	
Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	Dolan, Albert.	
Nolan, Carol.	Ennis, Daniel.	
O'Donoghue, Richard.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
O'Flynn, Ken.	Feighan, Frankie.	
O'Hara, Louis.	Fleming, Sean.	
O'Reilly, Louise.	Foley, Norma.	
O'Rourke, Darren.	Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	
Ó Broin, Eoin.	Gannon, Gary.	
Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	Geoghegan, James.	
Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	Gibney, Sinéad.	

Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	Grealish, Noel.	
Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	Harkin, Marian.	
Quinlivan, Maurice.	Harris, Simon.	
Stanley, Brian.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Tóibín, Peadar.	Hearne, Rory.	
Ward, Charles.	Heneghan, Barry.	
Ward, Mark.	Heydon, Martin.	
	Higgins, Emer.	
	Kelly, Alan.	
	Kenny, Eoghan.	
	Keogh, Keira.	
	Kyne, Seán.	
	Lahart, John.	
	Lawlor, George.	
	Lowry, Michael.	
	Maxwell, David.	
	McAuliffe, Paul.	
	McCarthy, Noel.	
	McConalogue, Charlie.	
	McCormack, Tony.	
	McGrath, Séamus.	
	McGreehan, Erin.	
	Moran, Kevin Boxer.	
	Moynihan, Aindrias.	
	Moynihan, Michael.	
	Moynihan, Shane.	
	Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	
	Murphy, Michael.	
	Naughton, Hildegard.	
	Neville, Joe.	
	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
	O'Callaghan, Jim.	
	O'Connell, Maeve.	
	O'Connor, James.	
	O'Donnell, Kieran.	
	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
	O'Meara, Ryan.	
	O'Shea, John Paul.	
	O'Sullivan, Christopher.	
	O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	
	Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	
	Ó Fearghail, Seán.	
	Ó Muirí, Naoise.	
	Quaide, Liam.	
	Rice, Pádraig.	
	Roche, Peter.	
	Scanlon, Eamon.	

	Sheehan, Conor.	
	Sherlock, Marie.	
	Smith, Brendan.	
	Smith, Duncan.	
	Smyth, Niamh.	
	Timmins, Edward.	
	Toole, Gillian.	
	Wall, Mark.	
	Ward, Barry.	
	Whitmore, Jennifer.	

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Richard Boyd Barrett and Paul Murphy; Níl, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie.

Amendment to amendment declared lost.

Amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 81; Níl, 74; 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.	
Butler, Mary.	Collins, Michael.	
Butterly, Paula.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Cronin, Réada.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Crowe, Seán.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Cullinane, David.	
Calleary, Dara.	Cummins, Jen.	
Canney, Seán.	Daly, Pa.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Devine, Máire.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Chambers, Jack.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Ennis, Daniel.	
Clendennen, John.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Collins, Niall.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Connolly, John.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gannon, Gary.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Cummins, John.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Currie, Emer.	Gould, Thomas.	
Daly, Martin.	Graves, Ann.	

Dempsey, Aisling.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Dillon, Alan.	Healy-Rae, Danny.	
Dolan, Albert.	Healy, Seamus.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Hearne, Rory.	
Fleming, Sean.	Kelly, Alan.	
Foley, Norma.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	Kenny, Martin.	
Geoghegan, James.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Grealish, Noel.	Lawless, Paul.	
Harkin, Marian.	Lawlor, George.	
Harris, Simon.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Heneghan, Barry.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Heydon, Martin.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Higgins, Emer.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Keogh, Keira.	Murphy, Paul.	
Kyne, Seán.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Lahart, John.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Lowry, Michael.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Maxwell, David.	Nolan, Carol.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
McGrath, Séamus.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
McGreehan, Erin.	O'Hara, Louis.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Murphy, Michael.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Naughton, Hildegard.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Neville, Joe.	Quaide, Liam.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Rice, Pádraig.	
O'Connor, James.	Sheehan, Conor.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Sherlock, Marie.	
O'Meara, Ryan.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Shea, John Paul.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Sullivan, Christopher.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	Wall, Mark.	
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	Ward, Charles.	
Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.	Ward, Mark.	
Ó Muirí, Naoise.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		

Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Michael Fitzmaurice and Michael Collins.

Amendment declared carried.

Question put: "That the motion, as amended, be agreed to."

The Dáil divided: Tá, 81; Níl, 74; 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.	
Butler, Mary.	Collins, Michael.	
Butterly, Paula.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Cronin, Réada.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Crowe, Seán.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Cullinane, David.	
Calleary, Dara.	Cummins, Jen.	
Canney, Seán.	Daly, Pa.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Devine, Máire.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Chambers, Jack.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Ennis, Daniel.	
Clendennen, John.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Collins, Niall.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Connolly, John.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gannon, Gary.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Cummins, John.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Currie, Emer.	Gould, Thomas.	
Daly, Martin.	Graves, Ann.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Dillon, Alan.	Healy-Rae, Danny.	
Dolan, Albert.	Healy, Seamus.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Hearne, Rory.	
Fleming, Sean.	Kelly, Alan.	

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

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Michael Fitzmaurice and Michael Collins.

Question declared carried.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 8.12 p.m. go dtí 8.47 a.m., Déardaoin, an 24 Meán Fómhair 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 8.12 p.m. until 8.47 a.m. on Thursday, 24 September 2026.