



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoín, 24 Meán Fómhair 2026

Thursday, 24 September 2026

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

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Social Welfare Appeals

1. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Social Protection the action he is taking to improve the quality and consistency of first-instance decisions on social welfare applications, particularly where a significant proportion of decisions are subsequently overturned on appeal; whether his Department has reviewed the reasons for those decisions being overturned; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [67551/26]

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Mine is a fairly straightforward question. I need to understand what the Minister is doing to improve the quality and consistency of first-instance decisions. The reason I ask is partly due to the fact that I am tracking the figures but also due to what I see coming into my constituency office. I ask the Minister to refer, if he could, to the domiciliary care allowance application process.

That is the one that, anecdotally and according to the figures, seems to be the most problematic.

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Dara Calleary): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta as an gceist seo. As she knows, we in the Department are committed to ensuring that decisions on social welfare applications are of consistently high quality and in accordance with legislative provisions and the general principles of fair procedures and natural justice.

Proportionally, the number of appeals received equates to about 1% of all decisions that are made by the Department. In 2024, the Department reported 3.4 million decisions and the appeals office reviewed 40,684 appeals. In 2025, the Department made almost 3.6 million decisions. The number of appeals received was lower at 39,642.

We have worked hard to improve the appeals service. In 2025, a total of 51,638 appeals were finalised. Of these, 24% were revised by the scheme area of the Department without

having to be considered by an appeals officer. This means that the decision was revised at the earliest part of the review or appeals process. Some 21% were allowed or partially allowed by an appeals officer and 46% were disallowed. The remaining appeals cases were withdrawn.

It is important to note that where an appeal is allowed or partially allowed or a decision is reversed, this does not necessarily indicate that the original decision was incorrect. In many cases, an appellant submits additional information or evidence during the review or appeals process that was not available to the deciding officer. That is where I am going to focus. I will focus on getting that information and encouraging the provision of that information at the beginning.

I thank the appeals office, which is doing extraordinary work at the moment. It significantly reduced the number of appeals awaiting decision in 2025. Appeals on hand reduced from 21,629 at the beginning of 2025 to 9,633 at the end of the year, which was a 55% reduction. That movement has continued throughout 2026. At the end of June, we had 6,695.

The waiting list for domiciliary care allowance appeals is just over nine weeks at the moment. We are at all times focused on bringing that down.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The domiciliary care allowance and disability allowance are particular concerns for me. I have spoken previously about the issues. It is rough on the families. They have to write about their children on their worst days and about all the bad things that they do to the family. That is not where people want to be. Considerable work could be done by the Minister's Department in advance of that.

Notwithstanding that, for 60% of domiciliary care allowance applications, the original decision is overturned on appeal. The Minister is telling us that 45% of appeals are upheld and 24% of them are upheld without having to go to a higher officer. That is not a case of more information being added. That points to something being missed in the first instance.

I want to convey to the Minister on behalf of my constituents and the multiple people who have contacted me about the issue that the appeals process is very rough for those people who are going through it. When their circumstances do not change, their appeals are being overturned. I understand that there is sometimes new evidence but sometimes there is none, and that is a problem.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I assure the Deputy that we do not want it to be that way. Way back in the spring of last year, our first Question Time focused on the domiciliary care allowance. I thank the Deputy for her interest. We have worked hard to try to make it as easy as possible. We introduced online applications. We are introducing an online appeals office, which gives people time in their own space to do that. We are constantly working to make it as easy as possible. The applications process is now online. Since it went online, just over 45% of applications have come in online, which probably gives an idea of the profile of the demographic applying. I am constantly focused on the issue. As I said, the waiting period for the domiciliary care allowance is 9.2 weeks for appeals. That was considerably higher prior to the focus that the appeals office has been putting on it. We had discussions last week at management board level as to how we could make the appeals process tighter for disability allowance, in particular. The amount of information that can come in on an appeal is quite

extensive. That changes a lot decisions. To go through that information takes time. We are looking at how we can use our best processes to manage that.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: An overturn rate of 60% points to a problem. I also thank the people in the appeals office. We deal with them on a regular basis and I know they are doing their best. Having said that, there is an issue. I cannot think of any other instance where there would be a 60% overturn rate. That kind of rate is a structural failure. I am not necessarily calling it an "error rate", but the original decisions are not good and that is why they are overturned. In the intervening time, families are left without money. I welcome the fact that the waiting time is coming down, but it is still nine weeks that people will be left without money and there will then be more time required to process that. There is only so much that people can do while they are waiting. There is a toll on families.

I welcome the focus on the appeals process. I would welcome and appreciate it were the committee to get regular updates on what is happening and if things are going in the right direction. Sometimes, the anecdotal evidence takes a while to catch up, and that is fine and I am perfectly willing to accept it. For the moment, however, I see from the people coming into my office and from people contacting me from outside my constituency that the 60% figure is a worry.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I would not say that 60% of decisions are overturned. That figure means that extra information was supplied during the appeal or review. That information might not have been available originally and would have changed the outcome.

I will certainly give an update. We will try to give a regular update to the committee. It would be of use to me, too, so we can look to see where there are pressure points. I thank the chief appeals officer and her staff. They have put significant work and investment into dealing with this issue. They constantly show their empathetic natures and understand the need to guide people and mind them through the appeals process. People are under considerable pressure and the appeals office is attuned to that. We are more than happy to deal with any specific case that the Deputy has in mind.

Social Welfare Payments

2. **Deputy Eoin Hayes** asked the Minister for Social Protection the work his Department is undertaking to increase uptake of the working family payment. [67508/26]

Deputy Eoin Hayes: My question is about the uptake of the working family payment. As the Minister knows, child poverty is one of the priorities for the Government and a major scourge within our society. I would like to hear how the Government is focusing on getting families who need that payment and would do very well with it to take it up.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy for his question. As he knows, reducing poverty and supporting families begins with ensuring that people are aware of the assistance available to them. The working family payment is a weekly, tax-free payment for employees on low earnings who have children. Evidence shows that it is an effective means of targeting support towards vulnerable working families and reducing their risk of poverty. This Government has

therefore increased the working family payment income thresholds in successive budgets, enabling more families to qualify.

My Department promotes the scheme across the year through information campaigns, engagement with stakeholders, direct communications, information on our website and through social media. We have amended the application process to make it as clear and straightforward as possible. We have also introduced an online application process through *mywelfare.ie*.

The budget process always raises awareness of the working family payment. As part of budget 2026, we increased the working family income threshold by €60 for every family size. I also increased eligibility for the fuel allowance to include working family payment recipients. That had a significant impact on the amount of applications we received. The number of families receiving the working family payment has increased from 47,000 in 2023 to more than 56,000 in 2026, which is an increase of almost 20%.

My Department and I are focused on continuing to improve awareness of all of our schemes, improve accessibility to the understanding of those schemes and to improve the uptake of those schemes. When we complete the current budget process with whatever changes are made, we will once again renew promotional campaigns and awareness-building campaigns. We will also work with various employer groups to ensure they are aware that their employees could be entitled to this payment.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: I thank the Minister for his reply. On Committee Stage, the assistant secretary general shared the information that, as the Minister said, there would be 56,000 recipients in 2026. However, the Department estimates a 53% uptake among those who are eligible, which means that approximately 50,000 people who would get that payment were they to apply for it are not getting it. That is a big problem. What comes to mind for me is the fact that the Government was able to work with Revenue to identify all recipients of carer's allowance and target them in quite a negative way in terms of tax bands.

It seems the Minister is not doing the positive side of that story, which is working with other agencies to target the families who need support, reach out to them, send the community welfare officers out, send officials from the Department out or whatever it is. For some reason, the Minister is not focusing on these neediest families. I ask him to consider how he can work to identify these families and reach out to them proactively rather than relying solely on an application process.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The 50% figure is based on a 2023 paper by the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI. Since then, as I said, we have increased the number of families by 20% and that continues to increase. The working family payment, because it is connected to earnings, is complicated and complex. That earning profile can change depending on work patterns so it is not a direct correlation in terms of it. Certainly, however, I will ask my officials to pursue if there will be information available through working with Revenue. We had a debate in this Chamber on Tuesday evening about not sharing information. We also have to be very careful in relation to that. I have to say that I think the Deputy will see greater uptake. The alignment of the fuel allowance payment to the working family payment did more to raise awareness of the working family payment than a lot of things. I think the 2026 figures will show growth. The working family payment is one of the most important payments in the

Department. It encourages people to go out to work. It acknowledges that there is an expense in going to work. I will be doing my utmost to promote its availability and accessibility but also to ensure people know they may or may not qualify for it. That is the biggest challenge with the working family payment.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: I accept that. I appreciate anything the Minister and his officials do in that regard. It is important to acknowledge that consistent child poverty is at 8%, so it is double what it was before. When we take housing into account, it is about 10%. It is about 26.6% for families whose youngest child is between the ages of zero and five. Working families really do need this kind of support.

Child poverty is something that comes up in the context of the budget every year. Last year, the Taoiseach said he wanted a second tier of child benefit. The Minister said he wanted a second tier of child benefit; he did not deliver it. This year, the Minister said he would like to deliver a second tier of child benefit but he cannot deliver it in this budget. It would, therefore, be helpful to know what he thinks about reforming the working family payment and this question of second tier of child benefit. What is the plan over the course of the Government? Will the Minister introduce it over the coming years? Why not this year? Importantly, I spoke to a paediatrician recently. I was expecting her to talk about healthcare or the HSE. The thing she focused on was child poverty and this question of a second tier of child benefit. I would be really interested to know how the Minister is actually going to tackle this problem, including the housing costs that are plunging people into poverty.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I assure the Deputy that we are very focused on child poverty. I am not just waiting; we are doing a lot of consultation on what a second tier of child payment might look like. One of the models that is most quoted would result in potentially thousands of families getting lower income on that model, so it is important that we review all the options.

We moved last year in budget 2026 to increase the child support payment by €16 and €8. That was a record increase. We are negotiating with the Department of public expenditure in relation to the child support payment for this year. That goes directly to the lowest income families. As I said, we also increased the threshold for the working family payment last year and we added the fuel allowance to the working family payment. It was first time people who were in work were able to access the fuel allowance. That was worth, given the extended season, about €1,100 per year to those working families.

We are doing the work on what a second tier of payment might look like but we are also ensuring those families are getting payments and support when they need it most. We will continue the work. I do not want a situation where, potentially, up to 100,000 families are worse-off because we introduced a second tier of child payment. That is not going to happen. In the meantime, we are supplementing their working incomes as well.

Child Poverty

3. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Social Protection the assessment he has made of the recent findings on child poverty (details supplied); whether he considers that the current system of income supports is sufficiently targeted at families experiencing poverty and

deprivation; the changes he believes are necessary to ensure that children in the most disadvantaged households benefit from rising household incomes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [67549/26]

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The ESRI findings on child poverty are a pretty damning indictment of the statements the Minister and the Government make. I think we will find it very hard to disagree with that. I am interested to know whether the Minister accepts the ESRI findings and its statement that "the Government is very far from meeting its target with regard to reducing child poverty". Rhetoric is one thing, and to be fair to the Minister's boss he is very big on that, but actual delivery is another. The statistics do not bear out what the Minister says in this Chamber. It does not seem to be translating. I want to know specifically whether the Minister accepts the ESRI findings. Does he accept that child poverty is rising?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy. I welcome the publication of the ESRI report and the focus it puts on child poverty. The focus is very much aligned with mine and the Government's, including my boss, which includes the reduction in child poverty as one of his top priorities. Our determination to deliver this priority has been reflected in a number of major measures, which I have just discussed with Deputy Hayes but I will reiterate them for the House. We have significant increases in the targeted payments, namely, the working family payment and child support payment. That includes 26% in the over-12 child support payment in 2026, which followed on from a 15% increase in the 2025 payment. We have made successive increases of €60 per week in the working family payment threshold and, as I said, we have expanded access to the fuel allowance for nearly 50,000 families who are in receipt of the payment. These increases are in addition to the expansion of the hot school meals programme, the introduction of the free school books programme and the provision of free GP care for children.

In the context of my Department, the total value in budget 2026 alone was €320 million. Many of these measures have not yet been reflected in the survey on income and living conditions, SILC, data on which much of the ESRI report is based. However, I note that while there has been an increase in the number of people living at home at risk of poverty, the core measure for consistent poverty, which is favoured by many advocacy groups, has improved. It was at 7.8% in 2025, down from 8.5% in 2024. That is too high and I am focused on driving that down.

There are a number of proposals within the ESRI report. The proposal for a two-tier payment, which we just discussed, differs from the proposal contained in the 2025 edition of the report. That indicates that this is a complex challenge. It is complex to get a new payment structure that reaches more families at risk of poverty without disadvantaging those who are already in receipt of existing claims. We had 270 submissions in response to our public consultation and we will be including the work of the ESRI. We will be engaging with the committee in relation to this. My most important work here is to ensure that we do not disadvantage families by moving to a different model.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I do not think the measure the Government uses for poverty will in any way interfere with the people who are living with material deprivation. I genuinely think they do not care what metric the Government chooses to measure it by because they are in

poverty. The ESRI tells us very clearly that there is a rise. Some 17.4% of children are living below the poverty line. After housing costs, that goes to 22.7%. In fact, we are going in the wrong direction when it comes to child poverty. That is not a failure of the systems that are used to measure it. With the greatest of respect, that is a failure of the Government and the gap between what the Minister says he wants to do and what he actually does. The Minister has spoken repeatedly about a second tier of child benefit. That is something he should look at because the families of those children living in those homes need in-cash transfers to be able to get themselves out of poverty. Rather than quibble about those figures from the ESRI, the trend, no matter what way we measure it, is only going in one direction. That speaks to the fact that there is a gap between what the Minister said and what the reality is and that gap is widening, not closing.

Deputy Dara Calleary: We also look at the measurement of consistent poverty. That is taken from the Central Statistics Office's, CSO's, indicator of consistent poverty. Our child poverty target is based on the CSO figures. The CSO's Survey on Income and Living Conditions, SILC, 2025 showed a decrease in consistent poverty from 8.5% to 7.8%. It also showed an increase in children experiencing enforced deprivation from 21.2% in 2024 to 19.6% in 2025. The social protection measures in budget 2025 and budget 2026 are not captured in those figures because there is a lag in terms of how those figures are measured. We are again in negotiations with the Department of public expenditure for a substantial child poverty package in the context of budget 2027.

They are in addition to the school meals programme - which, for a family with up to two children, can save up to €1,100 per year - the schools books programme and various other initiatives that are under way under other Departments.

We are very focused on this. We are seeing progress. Is it quick enough? No, absolutely not. The second-tier payment will be part of that. I reiterate that some of those who are promoting models that are being discussed and endorsed at the moment would leave families on lower incomes worse off. We cannot allow that situation.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I do not think the Minister is in any danger of leaving people worse off just because he thinks the measurement might be off. With the greatest of respect, I think that is a bit of a nonsense argument. The Minister can see the trend and what way it is going. I do not want to get into an argument because there are people at home who, God love them, might be watching this wondering what we are talking about. This is about child poverty, yet they would see the Minister and me arguing about the figures. The measurement the ESRI gives us is a very important one, as is the fact that it gives its own narrative opinion, which is that the Government is very far from meeting its target. This is a fact. The ESRI is a very respected institution. Its estimation of what the Government and the Minister's Department are doing is that they are very far from meeting their target. There seems to be a huge gap between talking about an additional rate of child benefit and doing it. I sincerely hope the Minister does not wait until just before the next election before rolling out a package because people, and children in particular, need that support now.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I can assure the Deputy that we are not just talking. I reiterate the changes in last year's budget in the context of the child support payment, which included a

record increase, particularly for over-12s, the full expansion of the hot schools meals programme and the expansion of the fuel allowance to working family payment recipients, with 50,000 extra families entitled to the fuel allowance. They will all make a difference on those figures. Yes, the ESRI is respected. I listen to it and I value its opinion but when I look at the figures from the Central Statistics Offices, CSO, which has access to live figures and detailed information, they are showing us going in the right direction in terms of a reduction from 8.5% to 7.8%, and from 21.2% in 2024 with regard to children in forced deprivation to 19.6%. All of that is happening in the context of a growing population. Is it fast enough? Absolutely not. That is why we continue to direct resources and time and inject energy into this. The consultation in relation to the second-tier payment has given us a lot of food for thought, with over 220 submissions that will be seriously considered. I will engage with the joint committee on these and we will bring clarity to this a lot quicker than the timeline I just outlined.

State Pensions

5. Deputy Paula Butterly asked the Minister for Social Protection the changes he proposes to introduce to support women of older generations who are not eligible for a contributory State pension despite having made PRSI contributions through employment during their working lives but who do not have a sufficient contribution record to qualify for a pension at pensionable age; whether he is considering any further measures to recognise periods spent out of the workforce due to caring or family responsibilities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [67756/26]

Deputy Paula Butterly: There is still a significant amount of women of older generations who are not eligible for State contributory pensions despite having made PSRI contributions through employment during their working lives but who do not have a sufficient contribution record to qualify for a pension when they come of pensionable age. Is the Minister considering any further measures to recognise these periods spent outside of the workforce due to family responsibilities or a caring role?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank Deputy Butterly for her question. As the Deputy knows, the State contributory pension is financed through the Social Insurance Fund, with entitlement based on a person's social insurance record. To qualify, a person must generally have at least 520 paid contributions, which is equivalent to ten years of contributions. This requirement maintains the contributory nature of the scheme. It ensures a sufficient connection with the social insurance system.

The system makes significant provisions for gaps in a person's contribution record arising from caring responsibilities. Up to 20 years of home caring periods or homemaking disregards may be included when calculating a person's rate of contributory State pension, subject to the relevant conditions. These periods can improve the rate of pension payable but they do not satisfy the minimum requirement of 520 paid contributions.

Further, where a person has provided full-time care to an incapacitated person for a total of at least 20 years, long-term carer's contributions may be awarded. These are treated in the same

manner as paid contributions for the contributory pension. This can enable a long-term carer to qualify even where they do not otherwise have the 520 paid contributions.

For those who do not qualify for a contributory State pension or who qualify for a reduced rate, they can apply for the means-tested non-contributory pension, which provides an important pension safety net subject to the relevant means, habitual residence and other qualifying conditions. Alternatively, as the Deputy will be aware, where a person is receiving a contributory State pension, an increase for a qualified adult may be payable in respect of their spouse or partner, subject to an assessment of the qualified adult's means. We hope that these measures mean that no one with a financial need is excluded from a payment in their old age.

In its 2021 report, the Commission on Pensions strongly supported the minimum requirement of 520 paid contributions. Any future changes to that would have to be considered in the context of the sustainability of the State pension fund and the Social Insurance Fund going forward.

Deputy Paula Butterly: I acknowledge the measures that have been introduced over recent years, including the homemakers scheme, home caring periods and long-term carer's contributions. They are positive developments and help to ensure that caring work receives greater recognition within the pension scheme. However, some women from older generations are not benefiting fully from these reforms because they had already reached the pension age before many of these measures were introduced or because they do not have the minimum level of paid contributions needed to access the contributory pension scheme. A concern for me, particularly in my constituency in County Louth, relates to women whose caring years took place largely before 1994. While home caring periods and other reforms have improved recognition of caring responsibilities, many women feel they have received little recognition for years spent raising families at a time when pensions supports for carers were far less developed. Many of these women made contributions during their working lives.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The Social Welfare Act 1997 legislated for changes in the minimum number of paid contributions. The number increased to 520 in April 2012. The homemakers scheme allowed time spent caring for children under 12 since 1994 to be disregarded in the divisor of the yearly average method of calculation. Home caring periods were introduced for those who reached State pension age after September 2012. They can be awarded from any time, including pre-1994. Each of the pension caring supports is specific to the method of calculation but we have to ensure equality, and there is a concern that if pre-2012 pensioners were also allowed to avail of the total contributions approach, including home caring periods, their arrangements would be significantly more generous than those of post-2012 pensioners. I am happy to engage with the Deputy if she has specific cases, so we can give her a more detailed response. We are very focused on the sustainability of the pension fund going forward but we do want to acknowledge those who spent time away from the workforce in a caring capacity. I am anxious, within the context of sustainability, that people do not lose out and about the need for fairness for every pensioner.

Deputy Paula Butterly: I thank the Minister for offering to look at this in more detail, including specific cases. These women, for decades, did everything that society asked them to do. They worked, stayed at home and took care of their children and other family members. It

is really important because it is that cohort of older women, who in many cases could be our own mothers, who do not have their own financial independence. It is maybe means-tested or linked to their spouses' entitlements. That is really unfair and when we talk about equality, we have to give women the recognition for the work they have done inside and outside the home down through the decades. We are in modern times and we keep saying there is more equality but where is the equality for that cohort of women? The only options they had back in the day was the famous pin money or runaway money. Let us give them that comfort.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I will engage with the Deputy because that is also the cohort of women that was forced to give up work when they got married, by law. My own mother was one of those. We will certainly engage with the Deputy but it is important that we have that concept of fairness across the system. We also have to keep a very firm eye on sustainability, as we are all getting older. The Deputy is right in regard to those people who made caring their priority and had no other choice. We will engage with her in that space.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): With the permission of the House I will go back to question No. 4.

Social Welfare Code

4. **Deputy Mark Wall** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he is considering extending the age for domiciliary care allowance from 16 to 18 in budget 2027. [67640/26]

Deputy Mark Wall: Thank you very much, a Chathaoirligh. I thank the Minister for taking the question. Is he considering extending the age of domiciliary care allowance from its current position of 16 years of age to 18 years in the upcoming budget?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy for his ongoing interest in that. The domiciliary care allowance, DCA, is payable to a parent or guardian in respect of a child under 16 who has a severe disability and requires continuous care and attention. There are currently 65,950 families receiving this allowance in respect of approximately 75,500 children at an investment of almost €359 million in 2026. DCA stops being paid when a child turns 16. That aligns with the age disability allowance becomes available. If the young person has a disability that significantly impacts their daily living activities, they can then apply for a disability allowance payment in their own right of €254 per week, subject to satisfying the qualifying conditions for that scheme. That compares with a monthly payment of €380 under DCA.

I have no plans at this point to extend the age of entitlement for DCA. My focus in relation to carers remains the process of phasing out the means test for carer's allowance, which is consistent with the policy approach advocated in the programme for Government and by family carer organisations. As the Deputy knows, significant improvements have been made in this area over the last number of years. Where a parent or guardian in receipt of DCA is also receiving carer's allowance or carer's benefit, those payments may continue after their child turns 16 where the qualifying conditions are met. There is also the carer's support grant which is payable where full-time care continues.

I am absolutely focused on keeping the range of supports under review. This has been examined and predecessors in the Department tried to make movement on this some time ago but there is considerable debate within communities about this. I am happy to engage with Deputy Wall on how we could do it. We might get a chance with the next question to go through some of the concerns people have in this space.

Deputy Mark Wall: I thank the Minister. I have been on this for six years now and I spoke to his predecessor about it. She made attempts to raise this from 16 to 18 as well. The Minister has continued on that and we have had a number of conversations on it.

Recently we conducted a survey of almost 1,000 people and well over 900 of them wanted this increase. They wanted it because they are finding it very difficult to prove, in their opinion, that their child who continues to have the disability qualifies for disability allowance. Disability allowance is in essence a job-seeking payment and that is the problem here. When you have a child who is 16 and going to a special school or a mainstream one, it is so difficult to prove that child is not fit for work, basically. That is what the vast majority of parents we dealt with in that survey have said and it is why they are looking for this extension.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I am happy to engage with the Deputy on the survey and the feedback on it. DCA is not means-tested or taxable. We discussed with Deputy O'Reilly earlier that we have done a lot of work to try to reduce the burden of the application process and the appeal waiting times. The number of families in receipt of DCA has increased by 41% in the last five years and more than doubled in the last ten. The number of children for whom a DCA is paid has increased by an even further amount.

I will certainly engage with the Deputy on it. I have looked at this since he began raising it with me and gone through previous files. There are very differing opinions even with some of the disability groups on it. It would be a worthwhile discussion at the committee - I see the Chairman is here - to engage with this and understand where people's feelings are strongest on this and why in particular there is a lot of opposition to it. I would like to engage with the Deputy on the survey and go through it. I can see Deputy Boyd Barrett looking at me as well. I would like to engage on what this change would mean and what the drawbacks of it are. We have to go through those drawbacks, which have been outlined by a number of groups in recent years.

Deputy Mark Wall: The Minister has thoroughly engaged with me on this matter but the issue is the latest figures we have from his Department show nearly 16% of children were refused disability allowance when coming from DCA. That is almost 1,300 children who now have no payment. As the parents of those children regularly tell me, and I am sure other Members, their child's disability has not gone away. It is just they have been unable to prove and qualify for disability allowance. The disabilities their child and loved one has remain and they are still paying for it. They are paying for private services, as we know, though I am not going to go into that today. The problem we have is what to do for those 1,300 children and their families who are now without a payment. As the Minister said, there are more people entitled to DCA and that is good but the figure is only going to grow, so it is a debate we need to have. The vast majority of respondents to our survey said they wished for the age limit to be extended. I hope we can have further discussions on it.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Let us do that and let us bring this to a head. It will not be in advance of this budget but let us bring it to a head over the course of the next number of months and try to get an understanding on some sort of agreed way forward. Previous Ministers tried to change this and they had to stop. We will certainly look at the Deputy's survey, engage with the committee and get a number of different perspectives on that. Ultimately, it is those children and their parents we need to keep our focus on so we do not have that cliff-edge at such an early stage in life. I am happy to engage and will get my office to follow up on that.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Budget 2027

6. **Deputy John Paul O'Shea** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he will increase support for carers as part of budget 2027. [66996/26]

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I agree with Deputy Wall on the domiciliary care allowance. We agreed at the committee yesterday to block off a bit of time to discuss that and prepare a report for the Minister.

I take this opportunity to recognise the extraordinary contribution made by family carers across the country. Every day, carers provide love, support and care to family members who depend on them. They allow people to remain at home and part of their communities to live life with dignity. I am asking whether the Minister will increase support for carers in budget 2027.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy. The Government recognises the invaluable contribution made by carers and we have prioritised improvements in supports for carers in recent budgets. We have provided over €2.2 billion for caring income supports in 2026. That included a €10 increase in the maximum personal rate of carer's allowance and carer's benefit to €270 and €271, respectively, for carers under 66. For carers aged 66 and over the maximum weekly rate increased to €308. For carers with children the weekly rates of the child support payment increased by €16 to €78 for children aged 12 and over and by €8 to €58 for under-12s from January 2026. This was the largest child support payment increase in the history of the State.

In budget 2026, the weekly income disregards for carer's allowance were increased significantly to €1,000 for a single person and €2,000 for a couple, which built on significant improvements introduced in recent budgets. As a result, a carer in a two-adult household with an income of €110,000 will retain their full carer's allowance payment and receive a partial payment with a household income up to €138,000. This means virtually all those receiving carer's allowance are now receiving the maximum rate. The Government has also provided a range of other supports, including the payment of the carer's support grant, and the €20 increase to domiciliary care allowance.

We are engaging with the Department of public expenditure on potential budget measures. Discussions are still going on and the Ministers for Finance and public expenditure will reveal

the budget on 6 October. I assure the Deputy we are very committed to moving forward on our shared programme for Government commitments to carers and to supporting them and I am continuing to focus on that.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I thank the Minister. The contribution carers make cannot be measured simply in financial terms but we should recognise the work of family carers also represents an enormous contribution to the State and to our public services. I also acknowledge the progress the Government has made in supporting carers. In particular I welcome the very significant increase in the income disregards for carer's allowance introduced last year. That was an important step in recognising the people should not be forced to choose between caring for a loved one and having the opportunity to work and earn an income.

I believe we should go further so my ask for budget 2027 is that we increase those income disregards again. We should continue on the path we have started. The ultimate objective should be to move towards removing the means test for the carer's allowance altogether. A person who is providing substantial care to a loved one should not feel that he or she is being penalised because he or she has some income of his or her own. We should be encouraging carers who can work to remain connected to the workforce rather than creating barriers for them.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I agree with the Deputy regarding the focus we need to put on carers. We also need to mind existing carers as well. We will see through our commitment regarding abolishing the means test over the lifetime of the Government but I am also focused on existing carers. That is why over the past number of years, we have continued to increase the weekly rate of carer's allowance, which is now at €270. In January 2022, it was €224. We have expanded eligibility for the carer's support grant and are consistently engaging with carers' organisations. We hold a carers forum in the Department every May where representatives of young carers, Care Alliance Ireland and Family Carers Ireland come together - not just officials but carers from across the country - and we engage with them and bring in other Departments. It is not just about the Department of Social Protection. We also bring in representatives from the Departments of Health and public expenditure in a cross-government initiative so we can assist them. I will be meeting Family Carers Ireland this weekend ahead of the budget to discuss its priorities.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I recently met Family Carers Ireland at its regional meeting in Cork. I know that Members right across this House have met many family carers and associations associated with caring in recent weeks. We should recognise that caring in itself is a hugely valuable contribution to society. I commend the Minister and the Government on the progress they made last year but I do not want us to stop here. Let us use budget 2027 to take another significant step forward by increasing the income disregards again and let us set ourselves the longer-term ambition of moving away from the means test model. Our family carers do an extraordinary job for their loved ones and for our country. They deserve our recognition but, more importantly, they deserve a system that supports them rather than one that puts unnecessary barriers in their way, so I hope, from his contribution this morning, the Minister will continue to support carers in budget 2027. Will he make that journey?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I assure the Deputy we have very strong and ambitious commitments relating to carers in the programme for Government and I will see them through. I also want to ensure that we focus on existing carers but also on young carers. The young carers who attended the carers forum made a huge impression on me in terms of their daily lives, what they are doing for their loved ones while continuing education and work and the pressures of it places on them. I will work with other colleagues in government in terms of specific supports for young carers. I will work with the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, and the Minister for Health on how we mind all carers but particularly that cohort of young carers. I will be engaging with Family Carers Ireland at this weekend. We have ongoing engagement with it. I thank it and Care Alliance Ireland. I also thank the Deputies who really focus on the work of carers. Collectively, we very much appreciate the work they are doing but appreciation will not put lights on in a house. We have to show real cause and this Government is showing real cause.

Social Welfare Payments

7. **Deputy Seamus Healy** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he will increase the annual carer's support grant. [67666/26]

Deputy Seamus Healy: Will the Minister will increase the carer's support grant in the forthcoming budget in two weeks' time?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I acknowledge the Deputy as one who has constantly and consistently championed this issue. As I said, we have consistently improved our support for carers and €2.2 billion will be provided for carer's income supports in 2026. The carer's allowance is the main income support payment for family carers. Over 111,000 people are receiving the payment at an estimated cost of more than €1.4 billion. The carer's support grant is automatically paid to people in receipt of carer's allowance, carer's benefit and domiciliary care allowance. Other carers who are not in receipt of a carer's payment may also be eligible for the grant. A separate grant is paid for each person being cared for. The grant was increased by €150 to €2,000 in June 2025, which is the highest ever level. In June of this year, over 147,000 carers perceived the grant. The grant is not means-tested and is non-taxable. The estimated investment in the grant in 2026 was over €364 million. We are continuing to accept applications for the grant so anyone who may have an entitlement can make an application through his or her local office or through *mywelfare.ie*. In the context of budget 2027, we are continuing to negotiate our budget with the Department of public expenditure. We will have a package for carers within that programme but we have not finalised our discussions yet. They will be announced on budget day on 6 October.

Deputy Seamus Healy: As the Minister knows, caring is a very onerous responsibility. It is often a 24-7, 365-day-a-year operation. Surveys by carers have shown that 75% of carers receive no respite whatsoever and the grant itself has been eaten up by inflation not to mention the cost of living over the past number of years. If we look at the past number of years from 2021, we can see that there has only been one year of an increase in the carer's support grant and that was €150 in 2025 and was, of course, in advance of the general election in November 2024. There was no increase in the grant in 2026. Family Carers Ireland is looking for an

increase of €150, which is a very modest increase that, in fact, does not keep up with inflation and does not take into account the cost of living. It is a very modest request and I ask the Minister to include it in the budget.

Deputy Dara Calleary: We are engaging around it. Given that the carer's support grant is not means-tested and is non-taxable, it is very important signal. That grant has increased by €300 since 2021. If we look at the rates of change in carer's benefit and carer's allowance in January 2022, we can see that carer's allowance was €224 a week in January 2022 and went to €270 and that carer's benefit has gone from €225 to €271. We are also investing considerably in the weekly payment that is given to carers. There have been a lot of changes in the carer's support grant over a number of years and we will continue to focus on it. The current rate is the highest rate ever and I think the highest number of people are in receipt of that payment. What I would say to all Deputies is that there is no closing date for applications for it and if there are people engaging with their offices, who are not getting it, please put them in contact with us. Over 147,000 carers have received the carer's support grant to date in 2026 out of an investment over €364 million. It was paid on 4 June and since that date, over 5,000 people have actually applied and qualified for the grant.

Deputy Seamus Healy: The Minister is not giving away much in his reply. The request by Family Carers Ireland is very modest. It certainly does not keep up with inflation and it certainly does not take the cost-of-living crisis into account. An increase of €150 on €2,000 is not a big request. For a very small amount of money, it does a particular amount of good and gives carers the opportunity to have a slight rest and a recharge of their batteries, so I hope that the Minister would see a way to do that in the budget.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I assure the Deputy that we are very much focused on carers. If he thinks I am not giving away much, he should talk to the Minister for public expenditure. We are working hard in this space. In 2026, we invested €2.2 billion in carer's support payments, which is a really solid indication of where we are going on this. We pay the carer's support grant on 4 June every year, or the first Thursday in June every year. Since then, which is maybe less than three months ago, an additional 5,000 people have come into payment. I will ask my Department to do a bit of awareness-building that this grant is available. A lot of people who may be entitled to it may not realise they can draw it down without a means test. We are going to do some work on that. Most of us in this room would be a very effective channel of communicating that availability to people.

We had a discussion earlier. We need to make more information available to people. We have a lot of schemes, and this is one of them. I am pretty sure we will do that.

Social Welfare Code

8. **Deputy Eoin Hayes** asked the Minister for Social Protection the analysis his Department has carried out on the degree to which income disregards and social welfare payment rates have kept pace with inflation and purchasing power measured against equivalent number of hours worked on minimum wage. [67510/26]

Deputy Eoin Hayes: My question is about the payments and income disregards, how they are adjusted over time to keep up with inflation and the changes to the national minimum wage. As the Minister might be aware, and I am sure many advocacy organisations have said to it to him as they have said it to me, the changes to the minimum wage have implied a certain number of hours that someone can work that puts them over the income disregard threshold. Therefore, if the minimum wage goes up, as it has in the last while, which is very welcome, some people who might have got a payment are no longer eligible. I would like to hear the Minister's thinking on that.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Changes to social welfare rates cannot be just based on trends in prices or wages but must take account of a wider range of factors, including household composition, patterns in the consumption of households and developments in services, including, for example, the expansion of free GP care, school meals and free school books. Accordingly, changes to social welfare rates, including means tests, are based on a wide range of inputs used by my Department, most notably CSO data, including the survey of income and living conditions, SILC, the labour force survey, the monthly CPI releases and the CSO earnings and hours in employment surveys. We also take account of ESRI research, analysis from the minimum essential standard of living studies of the Vincentian Partnership, which are funded by the Department, as well as extensive engagement with stakeholder and advocacy groups across the year, but particularly at our pre-budget forum and the annual social inclusion forum. The Department also undertakes social impact assessments using the SWITCH model developed by the ESRI, a model whose development and maintenance is also funded by the Department. These inputs provide a broader perspective and a deeper understanding.

Based on these inputs, several changes to income disregards have been implemented in recent years, including, for example, changes to means thresholds for the lone parent and disability payments. In June of this year, the income disregard for carer's allowance increased by €375 to €1,000 per week for a single person and by €750 to €2,000 per week for a couple. This increase was far in excess of inflation in 2026. With respect to payment rates, the increase in core rates of €10 per week in 2026 represented an increase of between 3.8% and 4.1% for working-age payments, which was also ahead of inflation. Notably, as we discussed earlier, increases of €8 for those under 12 and €16 for those over 12 in the child support payments represented increases of 16% and 26%, respectively.

We have tried to address many datasets in relation to income adequacy and look at the many supports that are available. We are very focused on this. We will not be found wanting in ensuring that families and welfare are protected from the impact of inflationary measures.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: I completely understand. The Minister trots out this line that he is keeping up with inflation or surpassing inflation. However, all the research would suggest - this is something put out by the European Union and the OECD - that the lower income populations have a higher rate of inflation because, as a proportion of their income or their costs, they often have to pick more expensive options. Whether it is pay-as-you-go electricity meters, not buying food in bulk or otherwise, a lot of things are really hard for those people. The Government is making an argument in the run-up to this budget that there should be indexation of tax measures. I think that is worth considering, but if that is true, we should also be looking at the indexation of other things. We should be looking at the indexation of income

disregards and things like social protection payments. In particular, older people have been calling for a very long time for pensions to be indexed, but it is not something this Government or any previous Government has seriously taken up. I would like the Minister to consider this. If the Government is making an argument about indexation on one side - on tax - should it be making the same argument on social protection?

Deputy Dara Calleary: As I said, we work hard to keep core social welfare rates ahead of inflation. We cannot just identify them in the context of not looking at the other supports that are available. On fuel allowance, we have increased the rate and the eligibility and, this year, we increased the season by an extra four weeks. That is an additional €1,100 of income for those 410,000 people who qualify, and that is on top of their weekly rate. I have referred to a range of other supports across the morning's session in this regard. We are investing €28.9 billion in our social protection system in 2026. There were increases in all of the core weekly rates, in addition to the support payments that are paid.

This budget will be very much focused on how we can target exactly those people discussed by the Deputy, those who are subject to high inflation in the context of fuel, food, children and supports. However, we cannot just look at the weekly rates. We have to look at the other range of supports that we fund, even within our own Department in the context of school meals. In other Departments, there is the example of the free school books scheme. Where the costs are, we have tried to make interventions to assist people.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: There is also the context of housing. We know that poverty is increasing when we take housing into account. I do not lay that at the Minister's door, and I believe it is a whole-of-government problem. The Minister said that he increased the fuel allowance by four weeks this year, and that was a welcome and needed measure. However, it is important for people to understand that it was actually a restoration. Fuel allowance was for 32 weeks before the austerity era. That is core to this whole problem: we do not look at indexation. The back-of-the-envelope calculations that I have done for social protection payments show they were worth more to people before austerity. We still have not closed the book on austerity, and what those payments would look like.

I absolutely welcome the change to the means test for carers. However, the disability allowance and blind pension have not been changed in several years. The jobseeker's transition payment takes account of the minimum wage changes, which puts certain lone parents out of qualifying for the payment because of income disregards. The wage subsidy scheme is also not keeping up with the minimum wage in terms of the number of people it can employ. Therefore, there are real issues relating to indexation. I would encourage the Minister to finally close the book on austerity.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Core rates have increased for all payments, including disability allowance. Core rates in budget 2026 increased by 4.1%, and by 4.8% for some payments. Second, in the so-called noughties, what the Deputy calls pre-austerity, there were no hot school meals going to every primary school in the country. A minimum of 500,000 children are now receiving hot school meals every year. That is an investment of nearly €300 million. It is a cost reduction for families that otherwise would be paying for meals. Every family is getting it. That universality is important because in any given school, you do not know what is

happening with any given child. That is why we went for the universal model. As for the free school books scheme, ten years ago, families would have paid for everything regarding books and school equipment when going back to school. That is now paid for centrally from the Department of Education. There are the weekly rates, but there are also other interventions that are reducing the burden of cost on families, in particular, low-income families.

Budget 2027

9. **Deputy Seamus Healy** asked the Minister for Social Protection to review the carer's allowance and carer's benefit with a view to the abolition of the means test in budget 2027. [67662/26]

Deputy Seamus Healy: I ask the Minister to honour in budget 2027, in two weeks time, the commitment made to abolish the means test for carer's allowance.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Carer's allowance is the main income support for carers. Some 111,000 people are receiving the payment, with an estimated investment of over €1.4 billion this year. Carer's benefit is a weekly social insurance-based payment for those who leave the workforce or reduce their working hours to provide full-time care. At the end of August, there were 5,136 recipients of carer's benefit, with an investment of over €76 million this year.

The programme for Government commits to significantly increasing the income disregard for carer's allowance, with a commitment to phasing out the means test during the lifetime of this Government. It is not possible to do everything we might like to do in one year. Each year, I have to balance the value of any individual measure, no matter how much I support it, against other equally merited measures. However, as the Deputy will agree, the process of addressing the means test for carer's allowance is well under way.

As part of budget 2026, and with effect from July, we increased the weekly income disregard by 60% from €625 to €1,000 for a single person and from €1,250 to €2,000 for carers who are part of a couple. These disregards are now by far the highest in the social welfare system. The changes mean that a carer in a two-adult household with an income of €110,000 can retain their full carer's allowance payment or can receive a partial payment where the household income is up to €138,000. One consequence of this change is that virtually everyone on an existing payment on the scheme is receiving the maximum weekly rate.

In line with the carer's allowance income disregard for a single person, the earnings limit for carer's benefit was also increased in July to €1,000 per week. As discussed earlier, we are involved with budget negotiations. This is a very solid programme for Government commitment which I have made considerable progress on. I am determined to see it through.

Deputy Seamus Healy: In the run-up to general election in 2024, every party in this House, including Fianna Fáil, made a commitment to abolish the means test for carers. It was not to be abolished over the lifetime of the Government or in two, three or four years. The commitment was to abolish the means test. That commitment was broken last year. From what the Minister said, it sounds as if we will have a similar situation this year. The fact is that, as the Minister is aware, the 500,000 carers we have save the State something like €20 billion per

year. They are paid a very low hourly rate. Broken down, it amounts to €1.60 per hour. A survey shows that 75% of carers get no respite, 49% suffer from severe loneliness and 32% suffer from very bad mental health. There were increases in the income limits in this year's budget, and they are welcome, but they do not solve the problem. The moneys needed to do this are not significant. Both the Parliamentary Budget Office and Family Carers Ireland indicate that the sum involved is less than €400 million. I suggest that the Minister should honour the commitment in the forthcoming budget.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The Deputy is very experienced. He knows there is a programme for Government. I hope to be in office for five years, and I will deliver on the commitment. It has to be done on a phased basis. I would love to do it overnight. If did that, however, the Deputy would be criticising me for not doing other things in the Department. We have had record increases. I genuinely think that any payment in respect of which you can have an income of €110,000 and retain the full allowance gives a sense of the direction of travel. In July, the income disregard was increased by 60% for a single person and for a couple. That gives a sense of my determination to drive this through. In addition, the vast majority of existing carers who are receiving a payment are on the maximum rate, which means that we have increased their income as well. I assure the Deputy that we are engaging and working on this in the context of our budget negotiations. We will invest €2.2 billion in supporting carers this year. I very much value their work and the work done on their behalf by Family Carers Ireland, Care Alliance Ireland and, especially, as we said earlier, the young carers' groups. That work is very important.

Deputy Seamus Healy: The Minister's party and every other party in this House made a commitment to the electorate. That commitment has not been honoured. That is a very serious situation because it calls into question people's trust in the democratic process and in politicians. That is serious. The Minister should take what I am saying on board and abolish the means test in the forthcoming budget. There are something like 33,000 carers in receipt of the carer's support grant who are not in receipt of the carer's allowance. That is a significant number. These people do the same work as all other carers. They are under the same pressures as other carers. They feel the same loneliness and have the same lack of respite and mental health difficulties. They should surely be entitled to the carer's allowance. The moneys involved are not significant. The Parliamentary Budget Office has indicated that. This is something which, in the context of the political and democratic processes and in the context of being fair to people, the Minister should introduce in the budget.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Respectfully, I object to the Deputy's assertion that we are not delivering on this. There has been a 60% increase to the income disregard. Somebody on €110,000 can get a full carer's payment. We are working towards the abolition of the means test. I will examine the difference between the number of people receiving the carer's support grant and the number getting the carer's allowance. They may be people who are working and who do not want to get the full payment, but I will examine the position. I reiterate that there has been a 60% increase in the income disregard, which means that somebody on €110,000 can get a full payment. Somebody on €138,000 can get a partial payment. These are not inconsiderable payments, but I want to get to a stage where we abolish the means test in order to acknowledge the work of carers. I absolutely acknowledge it. I also want to make sure that

as we expand it, we protect existing carers. I have to try to allocate my budget in a way that protects existing carers and expands the scheme. I assure the Deputy that if I get five years in this Department - and well before then - by the time we get to the next election, the Deputy and I will be able and say that the means test has been abolished.

Fuel Poverty

10. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Social Protection in view of a recent report (details supplied) that shows that more than 60% of those in fuel poverty are not in receipt of fuel allowance, the measures he will take to address this issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [67336/26]

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is shocking and shameful that in one of the richest countries in the world, one in seven households cannot afford to heat their homes or pay their energy bills. Some 400,000 households went without heating during the past 12 months. Many of those who are struggling with that - it is 64%, according to the ESRI - do not get any assistance at all because they are over the threshold for the fuel allowance. Will the Minister do anything about that to help people who are getting no assistance and who cannot pay their energy bills?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Fuel allowance eligibility encompasses 23 qualifying schemes, demonstrating the comprehensive nature of the supports available to eligible households. In addition to these qualifying schemes, people over the age 66 do not need to be in receipt of a payment from the Department of Social Protection to qualify for fuel allowance, subject to the means test. According to the most recent CSO data, there are just over 1.8 million households in Ireland. Of these, 463,910 are currently eligible for the fuel allowance scheme. That is 26% of all households nationwide.

The report the Deputy is referring to is the Energy Poverty and Affordability in Ireland report. While the report does recommend broadening the eligibility requirement, it highlights that the fuel allowance is a well-targeted policy instrument in our effort to combat energy poverty. It also highlights that the allowance is effective in reducing the likelihood of people experiencing energy poverty. The figures used in the report are based on survey on income and living conditions, SILC, data from 2024. In the two years since, we have expanded the fuel allowance system to include the nearly 50,000 families who were brought into scheme this year by means of the extension of the fuel allowance to recipients of the working family payment. In addition, in the period since the 2024 SILC survey, the allowable means for fuel allowance was increased in 2025 and in 2026 for those aged 66 and over. The allowable means for those aged 66 and over now stands at €534 per week for a single person and up to €1,068 per week for a couple. The amount of savings and investments that are disregarded was also increased for those aged 66 and over, from €20,000 to €50,000. All of these - the rate measures and the one off payments that were made - have resulted in a significant investment in respect of dealing with fuel poverty, but I absolutely acknowledge and am very aware of the challenge that exists. We continue to negotiate our budget package on fuel. Energy is very much at the heart of that package.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Any of the improvements made since 2024 have been wiped out by Trump's warmongering and the profiteering of energy companies. The situation is set to get worse. The proof of that is that more than 500,000 households are currently in arrears on either their gas or electricity bills and that a massive chunk of people, in the region of 60%, who are suffering and will struggle even more this winter than last are not eligible for the fuel allowance.

10 o'clock

Last night, the Government made the shameful decision to vote down our proposal which would have given €500 to every single household and more to those with a disability by taking €1 billion from the billionaire owners of data centres who are getting electricity at half the price of people who are struggling. It voted that down. Does the Minister know what the energy gap, as it is known, is? That is the gap that would take everyone out of energy poverty. It is €480. If the Government is not going to do what we asked last night, will it at least extend eligibility for the fuel allowance to those who need help?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Eligibility for fuel allowance has been extended and has changed extensively over the past number of years. We introduced 50,000 new families into it. It is the first time fuel allowance has been extended to those on working incomes. It is something I want to continue that those in lower-paid jobs get support. Almost €557 million is being invested in the fuel allowance scheme and we are negotiating in the context of budget 2027 a very significant energy package across Government. The fuel allowance will form part of that. I note the Deputy's proposal, and other proposals on how we can target the fuel allowance more to assist people. We engage with families across the country. I thank those in the Money Advice and Budgeting Service, MABS, which engaged with energy companies on people's behalf. The fuel allowance, the Deputy has to admit, is significant and targeted and it is acknowledged as being targeted in the context of the report the Deputy framed his question on.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Yes, but 60% of people suffering energy poverty do not get it and that situation is going to be worse this winter because of Trump's warmongering - the man for whom the Government rolled out the red carpet in the past week or so. While it seems the Government is not willing to extend the fuel allowance to those who need it, it wants to continue to give €1 billion a year to data centres so that they can get energy at half the price of the people who cannot turn on the heating this winter. It is unbelievable. It shows really twisted priorities. The Government will not help people who will literally be shivering with the cold this winter, afraid to turn on electric heaters, but it will give half-price electricity to the billionaire owners of the data centres. The money is there if the Government wants to at least give the fuel allowance to people over that threshold, although we would go further. It is completely unfair. People are going to suffer real hardship this winter unless the Government does something.

Deputy Dara Calleary: We have invested in this. Since 2020, an additional 100,000 households have qualified for the fuel allowance. As I said, we have gone through the extension of means for older people in particular and since 2020, we have invested €290 million in the fuel allowance. In 2026, we will invest €557 million and, subject to the budget negotiations, that will continue and grow. I am going to ensure that every Deputy in the House

gets the 23 schemes available in terms of the fuel allowance and the supports. Some 100,000 additional households qualified for the fuel allowance in 2026 that did not qualify in 2020. We have extended the fuel allowance and the weekly rate of payment. We have made it easier in terms of means for older people who are most at risk of fuel poverty to get access to it as well. That is the trend and path of expansion I will continue and I am determined to negotiate a package in the context of budget 2027.

Care Services

11. **Deputy Aisling Dempsey** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of additional persons who have qualified for carer's allowance since the increase in the weekly income disregard took effect in July 2026 nationally and in Meath West. [67566/26]

Deputy Aisling Dempsey: I ask the Minister about the number of additional persons who have qualified for the carer's allowance since the increase in the weekly income disregard that took effect nationally in July 2026, and more particularly, in Meath West.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The carer's allowance is a means-tested social assistance payment for people who are providing full-time care and attention to a person who requires such care. There are a number of qualifying conditions for carer's allowance. These include conditions relating to the care recipient's need for full-time care and attention, the provision of that care by the applicant, the applicant's employment or education circumstances, residency requirements and satisfaction of the means test.

As part of budget 2026, I announced significant improvements to the carer's allowance means test, which took effect from 2 July 2026. The weekly income disregard increased by 60%, from €625 to €1,000 for a single person and from €1,250 to €2,000 for carers who are part of a couple. The Department does not hold the detailed data on the income of each individual household in the State that would allow it to identify the number of additional people who qualified specifically as a result of the increase in the income disregard. Furthermore, statistics on carer's allowance recipients' are not compiled on a constituency basis and, therefore, I cannot give direct information for Meath West. Information is, however, available on the direct impact of the changes on existing recipients.

Following the increase in the income disregard in July 2026, approximately 2,700 carer's allowance recipients benefited from an increase in the weekly rate of payment. The overall number of people receiving carer's allowance at the end of August 2026 was 110,808. That compared to 97,985 in December 2024, and 104,522 in 2025. Much of that can be attributed to the increase in the means disregard. However, we also have to have an eye to the demographic and care changes in the State. The total number of recipients reflects new claims coming into payment and also claims which are completed or ceased where caring responsibilities may end. Recipient numbers are continuing to increase due to broader demographic and social factors. I assure the Deputy we recognise the invaluable contribution being made by family carers.

Deputy Aisling Dempsey: I thank the Minister for his response. It is unfortunate that we cannot get the figures but I totally understand the reasons behind that. There has been a

significant increase in the number of applications and I am glad to see that. It is a positive and important development for the families across Meath West and nationally who are caring for older people or people with disabilities. I do not want to reduce any of them to numbers or money but we have to recognise - and I know the Minister does - that they are saving the State a huge amount of money by providing vital care for their loved ones. I really feel we are recognising that and we are going to deliver on our commitment in the programme for Government to completely abolish the means test. In the past couple of years we have made significant steps.

Will there be another national social media or media campaign to highlight to the busiest people in our society, these carers who are potentially holding down part-time work and fulfilling other responsibilities, the progress we have made here? I encourage the Minister to keep up the good work in this area.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy. That is a very good suggestion. When we complete our budget negotiations, it would be useful to remind people that a single person working as a carer can have an income of up to €1,000 per week and a couple, €2,000, and still be in receipt of a full carer's payment. In the context of the carer's support grant, I made the point earlier to Deputy Healy that we paid the annual grant as always on the first Thursday of June. It was a record amount this year. In the two or three months since June, an additional 5,000 payments have been made. I had a conversation with Deputy Hayes earlier about awareness-building generally around the accessibility of the social protection system. That is something I am going to be focused on in the winter and as soon as we have clarity around what the budget rates for 2027 will be.

In the context of changing means but also demographic and social changes and the implementation on the ground of more community-based care, there is a lot more interest in the carer's allowance. We will provide people with that necessary information.

Energy Prices

12. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the measures being considered around the electricity allowance provided under the Household Benefits Package; if he will consider increasing the value of this allowance in line with rising unit costs for electricity; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [67565/26]

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: The free electricity allowance remains fixed at €20 a year; exactly the same level since 2013, yet electricity prices have increased substantially in that period, reducing the real value of the support.

This is affecting not only older people but also those who have disabilities and those who are living alone. It is part of the programme for Government to review the household benefits package. What plans does the Minister have to increase the free electricity allowance in order that it better reflects the energy costs households are facing?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta as an gceist thábhachtach seo. Mar is eol dó, the household benefits package is available to those who are aged 70 and over,

regardless of means or household composition. It is also available as a supplementary allowance to those in receipt of about 15 different social protection payments. In total, 561,000 households benefit from the payment. We will invest €317 million this year on household benefit, of which about €231 million is allocated in respect of energy costs. It is an important support to households with energy costs.

When acknowledging the increase in energy costs, we must also acknowledge the volatility in those costs. For example, the price of oil has fluctuated from \$60 a barrel in December 2025 to \$138 a barrel last April. It fell back to \$68 a barrel in July and is now back up to over \$100 a barrel. I need to ensure that any measures I take in that context are targeted and timely and that they hit those who directly need them. Also, we have looked at targeted measures in recent budgets. Looking at the household benefits, we also have to look at the changes in fuel allowance payment, which now support over 463,000 households, over 100,000 more households in recent years.

The fuel allowance has been utilised to respond to spikes in energy costs. We have been able to extend the season. During the course of the period to which the Deputy refers, there were also the one-off payments. We are looking at the fuel allowance and the household benefits in the context of the forthcoming budget package. I also direct the attention of the House to the information campaign we launched last week at the ploughing concerning the eligibility for household benefits and, particularly for those over the age of 70, that it is not means tested. There has been huge interest in that campaign, both at our stand at the ploughing, but also through phone calls and engagements. What we have found in terms of the interest, is that the majority of those contacting us are on the payment. I encourage all Deputies to bring the attention of their constituents to that campaign through my Department's social media channels and through their own information.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: I acknowledge the headway made on the broader household package. I welcome the fact that it is being examined. In particular, I draw the Minister's attention to the electricity allowance. When the allowance was set in 2013 it had the capacity to buy 1,526 units of electricity per year. Today, that same €420 payment covers no more than 450 units of electricity. That is more than a 70% reduction in the capacity of the allowance, which is impacting not only on pensioners but also on people with disabilities and people living alone - people who would have higher energy costs and more challenging household bills. The allowance is frozen, the electricity bills are not and older people, people with disabilities and people living alone are paying the price in the meantime. Do the officials recognise the electricity aspect of the allowance? Can there be a particular focus on it in any review?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I assure the Deputy that we are very focused on all energy costs and on electricity in particular. That is why we have looked at the fuel allowance in particular for the older age cohort in terms of expanding eligibility for it. The allowable means for those aged 66 and over for the fuel allowance is now €534 per week for a single person and €1,068 for a couple. In particular, we have increased the disregard of savings and investments from €20,000 to €50,000 for those aged 66 and over to encourage more eligibility for fuel allowance, which is paid through the fuel allowance season, which for the information of the House, will begin next week, at a time of peak usage. Looking at the energy side of the household benefits, we have increased the resources relating to the fuel allowance. Also, during the period we are

discussing, we had the single energy payments and other supports. I am very focused. The fuel allowance payment has been identified as targeted at those most vulnerable to energy shocks. Within the capacity of the fuel allowance, we have the ability to respond in a dynamic fashion, as we did this year, by extending it for four weeks at a time of unexpected high energy prices.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Making improvements to the overall burden of fuel costs is positive, and the fact that there will be different measures to do that. I want to draw the Minister's attention in particular to the electricity aspect of it because the allowance that was there provided people with the capacity to buy a certain amount of electricity and its value has eroded over time. I will briefly stay focused on the electricity aspect of it. Could that be increased? Could it be linked with a certain number of units of electricity such that people who are on the allowance would have the peace of mind of knowing that if there is an increase or a reduction in the price of electricity in future, they would be somewhat protected because the allowance would cover a certain number of units rather than being at a fixed euro value? That value has eroded significantly in the past ten years or more by 70%.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I see why the Deputy wants to isolate the electricity part in the context of the household benefits package, but we cannot isolate it without looking at the other changes that have been made in the context of additional payments. I focused on the fuel announcement, particularly for the cohort that applied for household benefits - the change in income and in savings and investments, which will allow people to qualify for the fuel allowance. That is why we have 100,000 more people qualifying for the fuel allowance since 2020, never mind since 2013. In the context of the fuel allowance, people are not directed towards one form of energy. This is important to me and the Department. Through the fuel allowance, people have the flexibility to decide their own fuel and their own source of fuel. They are not directed towards any particular kind of fuel. As I said, we are constantly focused on how we can address energy challenges, and looking at the various challenges that exist. The expansion and flexibility of the fuel allowance programme is my best initiative and tool at a time of such volatility in the energy market.

Disability Issues

13. **Deputy Mark Wall** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he plans to include a cost-of-disability payment given the high cost of disability faced by disabled people. [67648/26]

Deputy Mark Wall: Does the Minister plan to introduce a cost of disability payment in the forthcoming budget in light of the high costs faced by people with disabilities?

Deputy Dara Calleary: The Government very much recognises the additional costs that disabled people face in their daily lives and we are committed to improving outcomes for disabled people by introducing permanent measures. This is why, as part of the programme for Government, we have included a commitment to introduce a permanent annual cost-of-disability payment. To that end, the national human rights strategy for disabled people was developed with significant input from disability groups and advocates. It included a commitment to a strategic focus network summit on the cost of disability. A public consultation

process on how a cost-of-disability payment can best be delivered was launched on 20 February and ran for six weeks. It received over 1,100 submissions and culminated with a summit at the Aviva Stadium on 13 May. That summit was attended by the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste, the Minister for children, the Minister of State with responsibility for disability, the Minister of State at the Department of Transport and me.

Arising from the lived experiences shared at the summit, I presented to the delivery and monitoring committee, which is chaired by the Taoiseach, in the middle of July. That meeting was also attended by a number of colleagues and representatives. We will publish the presentation as soon as possible. It is clear that a whole-of-government approach is important in addressing costs. As well as income support, we have to improve delivery and access to key services. One of the themes of the day was that transport is a major challenge.

With particular reference to the cost-of-disability payment, we are currently addressing that in the context of budget discussions. The consultation feedback is that disability groups predominantly want a cost-of-disability payment paid at a basic rate to all qualified recipients. There is a high demand for a graduated payment made as a supplement to some people based on the nature of disability and the costs arising.

However, the main demand was that disabled people and their advocates would be involved in codesign of any detailed scheme, and we are working towards a model in that regard.

Deputy Mark Wall: I thank the Minister. I know he will share with us the amount he will give in the budget in the further reply. He will be aware of the additional costs for those people living with a disability. The Indecon report puts that cost at between €9,000 and €12,000 per year. Indeed, when we were at our Joint Oireachtas Committee on Autism, we saw a number of reports that the cost could be anything up to €30,000 per year. It is a substantial amount for anybody living with a disability. I welcome that the Minister has given a commitment that he is seriously considering a payment.

What the people who are living with disabilities and their advocates want to know is that, in budget 2027, the Government will finally recognise the urgent need for a cost-of-disability payment. I hope the Minister will confirm that all of his conversations with those in the Department of Finance and elsewhere will result in that payment, once and for all. The Disability Federation of Ireland is looking for €55 per week. Will the Minister confirm that that amount will be forthcoming?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Nice try, Deputy. The budget negotiations are ongoing. It is very important, and I very much recognise that the estimates of costs that are there. The first payment will not address all of those. The key issue will be to introduce the permanent disability payment. It will grow, as many other social protection payments have done, but we will begin the work on how we deliver that payment through codesign, partnership and as far as we can with the disabled persons organisations. There are many differing views as to how the payment should be delivered. My first job is to get it introduced and start the process immediately in terms of delivery and how that works. We will revert to the groups and to the submissions as to how we can best do that in a shared way.

In the context of the figures the Deputy mentioned, such as from the Indecon report, we will not be able to get that level in the first year of the payment but I am very aware of the cost. Like many other social protection payments, this payment will increase in the years to come once we have it introduced and the budget for it ring-fenced.

Deputy Mark Wall: I welcome that the Minister has confirmed that there will be a permanent payment. It is important that those who have disabilities can look forward to having something they not only need, but will also help them with the cost-of-living crisis.

I mentioned the heating supplement previously - there is a further question on it that we will not get to - and how there were only 700 people in receipt of it out of 170,000 or more people on the caring supplement. These are the issues that people are facing day in, day out. It is an issue I have asked so as to publicised it again.

On the cost-of-disability payment, we obviously welcome the fact there will be a permanent payment. More importantly, we welcome the continued dialogue with those advocacy groups. It is most important that they get a say in exactly how and when that payment will be delivered and the cost of it. The co-operation with advocacy groups is something we would all welcome in this House. Long may that continue with among Departments.

Deputy Dara Calleary: On the heating supplement, we had a very productive meeting with the Irish Cancer Society yesterday on how we could work with it. I am certainly happy to work with other groups in promoting the heating supplement. As the Deputy said, there is a low uptake. We will engage on that. Generally, we have not finalised our budget at all yet. I know I have the support of the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, as the three leaders of the Government, in introducing this. We will be negotiating very hard over the course of the next ten days in the context of getting it introduced and set up as a permanent payment rather than one that is set from budget to budget and depends on whatever are the priorities of the day.

The most important thing for me is to then get it delivered. There are many differing views. We received 1,000 submissions and there were many hundreds of different views as to how it should be delivered. That will be the discussion we will have with the various organisations. That codesign piece is very important.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): We have now reached the end of the allocated time, but the next Minister has not arrived, so I will allow Deputy Shane Moynihan to ask one question before the Minister arrives.

Social Welfare Payments

14. **Deputy Shane Moynihan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the analysis and consideration that has been given to introducing a second-tier child benefit payment for households, as a taxable payment. [67532/26]

Deputy Shane Moynihan: I appreciate this opportunity from the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach.

Deputy Dara Calleary: We have just completed a public consultation on a second-tier of payment. It concluded on 12 June and we received submissions from representative bodies, advocacy organisations and service providers. We are currently finalising the analysis of that consultation.

On 8 September, the ESRI published its sixth annual report on poverty, income inequality and living standards. The report proposes a version of a second-tier child benefit as a possible mechanism. It was a very different proposal from the one considered by the ESRI in 2025. We are currently looking at that proposal and the differences. However, we acted in budget 2026 by introducing record child support payment increases for over-12s and under-12s and by improving the availability of the fuel allowance for those on the working family payment, which ensured that 50,000 families who previously would not have had access to the fuel allowance would receive it. As the Deputy knows, the working family payment is aligned to the number of children in a family.

We are considering the consultation. We are looking at the ESRI's revised proposals. As we discussed earlier, I will engage with colleagues from across the House through the joint Oireachtas committee on this during the course of the next budget. I can give the Deputy a guarantee that we will have a considerable child poverty package in the context of budget 2027. We are negotiating that as we speak.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: I thank the Minister. I do not for a second doubt his personal commitment, or that of the Taoiseach, to dealing with child poverty. When I look at the taxable payment that has been recommended by the ESRI, it has a lot of things going for it: its effectiveness; it could take up to 20,000 children out of poverty; it could eventually subsume the child support payment; and it could tackle a lot more of the children who are in poverty at the moment. It is simpler to introduce and it is much easier to understand as well.

In the round, as the Minister carries out that engagement with colleagues across the House and, I am sure, the ESRI on those proposals, I encourage him to consider that as a possibility for doing what we all want, namely, to really make a dent in the journey of bringing down child poverty in this country.

Deputy Dara Calleary: We will engage with the ESRI. It was a very different model from the one it proposed previously. We also want to engage with the ESRI on details on income thresholds and what means test it would have in mind. There is quite a lot of work to be done in this space. We want to incorporate the feedback from the consultation process and engage with Members of the Oireachtas on their views in this space.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Deputy Pa Daly: Are we waiting for the Minister to arrive?

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Jerry Buttimer): We are here.

Deputy Pa Daly: I am reluctant to say too much while the Minister himself is not here but there are about 15 Deputies who have submitted questions. They are expecting a response from the Minister. I mean no disrespect to the dream team that has arrived.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Did Kerry win the all-Ireland this year? Is the Deputy still cranky over that?

Deputy Pa Daly: No, I am a bit cranky with the Minister for not turning up. It is not the first time he has not shown up. In all fairness, the Ministers of State are more than capable of deputising.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): We will move on.

Public Transport

118. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Transport further to Parliamentary Question No. 219 of 16 September 2026, the child fares that will be reduced as stated in the response; if he anticipates that the fare hikes on public transport will lead to a reduction in the use of public transport as reported by the National Transport Authority, NTA, at the Oireachtas committee hearing on 16 September 2026; if he has considered reversing these proposed hikes; if there will be any other changes to fares as part of budget 2027; and if he will make a statement on the matter [67278/26]

Deputy Pa Daly: Further to previous parliamentary questions, I want to ask the Minister about the child fares that will be reduced in the upcoming budget. I also ask about the price hikes that have recently been announced. In particular, does the Minister of State have any response to the response of the NTA at the transport committee that these price hikes will inevitably lead to fewer people using public transport? We are in a cost-of-living crisis and I believe it is the wrong approach for the Government to take to allow the increases of 15%.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Seán Canney): I thank the Deputy for the question. As he is aware, the NTA in its capacity as fare regulator, recently announced the revised national fare structure to take effect from January 2027.

While adult fares will increase by an average of 15%, child fares are being reduced in several areas nationally. This represents the first broad adjustment to fares since 2018 and follows a period in which operating costs have risen sharply. In the Dublin commuter zone, in regional cities, in participating towns, and on TFI Local Link services, a new reduced child rate will apply, set at 33% of the equivalent adult fare rate. The determination will also continue to protect existing Government-supported fare initiatives, including the free travel scheme; free travel for children under nine years of age; and free companion travel arrangements for people over the age of 70. The NTA's assessment is that, even with these changes, fares will remain approximately 8% lower in real terms than they were eight years ago. The adjustments to fares are required to help offset the cost increases in recent years. They are also required to improve fare revenue recovery and ensure the sustainability of the public service obligation, PSO, funding.

We recognise that the NTA applies detailed statistical analysis of fare elasticity to assess the impact of fare increases on passenger demand and overall public transport usage. Notwithstanding these considerations, steady passenger growth is expected to continue in 2027, supported by the ongoing expansion and enhancement of services, which are anticipated to attract additional users and further strengthen public transport demand. The NTA will continue to monitor patronage trends closely as the new fare structure is implemented.

Safeguarding the long-term financial sustainability while being responsive to passenger needs remains a central commitment under the programme for Government. Achieving this requires a careful balance between delivering high-quality reliable services and ensuring the network is adequately funded.

Deputy Pa Daly: I thank the Minister of State for the response. Will he please expand on his comment that child fares in several areas will be addressed? We in Sinn Féin believe that fares should be abolished completely for anybody up to 18 years of age. What exact areas does he mean?

The Minister of State also mentioned that, due to inflation, fares were 8% lower in real terms but what he failed to say was that, between 2008 or 2009 and 2016, there was an incremental increase in fares.

Will he give us a guarantee that there will be improved and better services as a result of these fare increases? I do not believe there will be. The fare increases clearly should not go ahead in a cost-of-living crisis. They should be put off for another time. The Government should be investing more in it. There has been a huge decrease in the amount of new services that have been implemented this year compared to last year. The Government did not even have a transport plan published for this year until around this time last year. It shows a lack of enthusiasm, a lack of initiative, and a lack of priority for public transport.

Deputy Seán Canney: I will give the Deputy a few examples of the reduction in the new fares for children. In regional cities like Galway, Cork, Limerick and Waterford, the new reduced fare is 33% of the equivalent fare. In town services like those in Athlone, Balbriggan, Clonmel, Drogheda, Dundalk and Kilkenny, child fares are cut to 50 cent. These are facts. What I said about fares being 8% lower than what they were eight years ago is also a fact.

The Deputy asked about improving services. This year, we have spent €941 million in delivering PSO services. If we look at the increased number of people using public transport, that is because we have been increasing the offer in terms of public transport. Looking at what we will be doing over the next number of years with BusConnects, the all-island rail review extending train services, putting in passing loops to create more frequency, and looking at train stations to be able to take that capacity, we have a very good news story here in public transport and what we are doing with it. What we need to do is continue that trajectory, which we will do.

Deputy Pa Daly: There are very few new services. Look at the number of new services that were delivered this year in BusConnects. It is way below what is acceptable and the progress that had been made up to that. The clock has been turned back.

I am glad the Minister of State mentioned town bus services because I want to bring up the issue of Tralee town bus services. In a recent committee meeting, the NTA said it was going to "look at" the possibility of a town bus service for Tralee, which is one of the largest towns in the country. It was going to "look at" it next year and the year after, so it is guaranteed that there will be no town bus service. I wonder whether this Government has something against the town of Tralee. In the living city initiative, which has been announced for Athlone, Drogheda, Dundalk, Letterkenny and Sligo - all towns of a more or less similar size - Tralee has been completely excluded from the regeneration possibilities that are opened up by it. To hear that, while the Culloty Tralee People's Bus Service has done great work for many years - it is important to work in conjunction with the Culloty family - the Government and the NTA have no interest in putting a new town bus service into the town of Tralee is deeply worrying.

Deputy Seán Canney: Tralee is just one town and the NTA is looking at it. Regarding public transport, 363.6 million passenger journeys were carried out in 2025. It was a record. That was because services were being increased all over the place. Be it rail, bus or Local Link, all of those services are being expanded. However, if we are going to have a sustainable public transport system going forward, we also have to have what I would call a fair revenue, which is a vital component in that funding model. Some €941 million in Exchequer funding has been put into the PSO this year to keep it going. We need to be able to expand the services more. What the Deputy desires for Tralee can and will happen but it will take money to do that, and we need to have a proper PSO to fund it.

Departmental Budgets

119. **Deputy Aidan Farrelly** asked the Minister for Transport if he will detail the way in which he plans to comply with the €18 million levy applied to his Department's Vote for 2027; and if he will ensure that public transport commitments and obligations are fully resourced. [67530/26]

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thank Deputy Farrelly for the question. The application of the €18 million expenditure levy is currently forming part of the 2027 Estimates negotiations process under way with our colleagues in the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation. It is fair to say that it will be challenging to absorb this levy into our current expenditure budget for 2027. The Deputy has been a long-time advocate of increasing services of his area of Kildare. As he knows, the PSO expenditure accounts for around 70% of the current Vote, as the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, has just said. What that means for the House is that reforms in motor tax, modernisations listed in the national vehicle and driver file and the road traffic Bill 2026 will generate some savings. Once the relevant provisions of the Bill are enacted, they will remove the requirement to display a paper motor tax disc, therefore reducing the Department's administrative costs by approximately €8 million per annum.

It is important to say to the House that priority will be given to protecting the PSO funding as part of our budget 2027 negotiations to advance the progress that we have achieved in recent years and to ensure that we deliver a public transport system that is not just sustainable, but also dependable, accessible and affordable.

In response to Deputy Daly, we are ambitious. We want to see services expanded and we want to work with people in all parts of the country and with all colleagues across the House to ensure we deliver for people in terms of accessible public transport.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I thank the Minister of State for that reply. It is a bit of a leap to ask us to accept that it is still part of the negotiations. The Minister of State definitely knows by now where that €18 million shortfall is going to be made up and it is not part of the budgetary process. He could tell us. I have asked him to detail to us what that is going to look like for 2027. He is choosing not, and that is unfortunate. We will see it come out in a couple of weeks and that is fine, but this was an opportunity to outline it. Otherwise, what we are going to see are fare hikes - they are going to be part of that - and a lack of investment in services. The Minister of State is talking to us about ambition, and I accept what he says, but that ambition last year was zero. There were no new services, certainly when it came to buses.

We have an opportunity here to keep the fares as they were and actually look to further reduce them, not increase them. All I can assume is that the likes of the fare increases will go directly towards this €18 million bill that the Department of public expenditure is putting on Departments. Unless the Minister of State can tell me otherwise, what is looking likely for next year is a continued lack of investment in services and further fare increases, which is what the NTA has said, in order to meet what is ultimately other Departments' misexpenditure.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I am not going to have that particular row with the Deputy on the floor of House, but I want to make it quite clear to him that the budgetary negotiations are ongoing. They have not concluded. The budget is on 6 October. We are very much committed to enhancing services, and an unprecedented €940 million allocation for PSO services in the budget of 2026, which was a 43% uplift, is by anyone's standard "ambition". That is called wanting to see an expansion of the services.

It is a challenging period in public transport. We are seeing an increase in passenger numbers. All of us who live in urban areas see the increase in people using it. I will give the Deputy the example of the commuter rail project in my city of Cork. It is a savage success story. More people are using it. The Deputy's colleague, Deputy Quaide in Midleton, will tell him that it is an example. Deputy Kenny in Mallow will tell him that Mallow is full. Midleton is full, as is Cobh. Deputy O'Shea is in that area as well. It is a huge success, and that shows the breadth of our ambition, but I will come back to the Deputy further in the supplementary reply.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: Those policies are working because the fare points are right. We know that increased fares reduce passenger numbers. The Government has made a decision in the last couple of weeks that it knows will be tantamount to a reduced level of service demand at a time when we have climate and affordability crises and at a time when the Department is not rolling out new services. They are facts. Absolutely, there is €900-odd million being allocated and I commend the Department for that, but ultimately it has been levied with a bill by the Department of public expenditure. To me, it is being bullied by that Department into having to pay for the Department of education's overspend.

What I am asking the Minister of State for is not a conversation about a decision that the Government is going to make in the budget. I am asking him to tell us what planning has happened as to where that €18 million will come from. The Department has that decision made already. I have to expect that, given the months the Department has had to plan this - this has been going around an awful long time - the Minister of State knows where this expenditure is going to come from. What I am looking for is detail to ensure that no public transport services suffer, and no further public transport fare increases happen, because of it.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I am smiling because, as the Deputy knows quite well, the budget is on 6 October. Our Department's negotiations with the Department of public expenditure have not concluded. For me, the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, and the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, our priority is very much about service expansion and the delivery of accessible and reliable services to give travelling members of the public certainty.

I want to make the point to the Deputy that we need to have a conversation about how, in the broader thrust of public transport, service expansion is not just about funding. It is also about the availability of mechanics and drivers, as well as being about how we can deliver new services. As the Minister of State for rural transport, I am acutely aware of this. Deputy Daly mentioned Tralee in the context of the new delivery of town services. We will work to deliver new services. With our colleagues in the Department of public expenditure, we will arrive at a budgetary position that will ensure that the PSO gives that uplift for new services. I look forward to working with Deputy Farrelly for the people of Kildare and delivering services for them.

The Deputy's question is a fair point in the context of people's expectations, but €940 million is a significant uplift in public transport funding. I hope that we can deliver more.

Public Transport

120. **Deputy Louis O'Hara** asked the Minister for Transport to provide an update on implementation of the recommendations of the all-island rail review; and his plans to improve capacity on rail services. [67279/26]

Deputy Louis O'Hara: I have raised overcrowding on early morning trains into Galway with the Minister of State a number of times. It has been going on for years on all services, particularly on that train that arrives into Galway at 8.10 a.m. It is at a crisis point now. People are being put in serious danger. I have had a lot of people in touch with me, and I am sure the Minister of State has as well. What is going to be done about this in the short term?

Minister of State at the Department of Transport Deputy Seán Canney: I thank the Deputy. To take forward the implementation of the all-island strategic rail review, my Department published the rail projects prioritisation strategy in December 2025. In the short term, the strategy specifies a number of early interventions, including new passing loops and platforms to boost the rail network's resilience and capacity. These investments are funded to be fully delivered by 2030 under the national development plan. The strategy also identifies major projects to be delivered in the long term, including the reinstatement of the western rail

corridor between Claremorris and Athenry, which I am pleased to say is also funded to commence construction under the national development plan.

To cater for the future demand envisioned under the rail review, we are progressing rail station upgrades across the network, including at Ceannt Station, where improvement works have already increased the number of platforms from two to five. We are also continuing work at Oranmore Station, which will provide an additional platform and a passing loop, increasing capacity on the Galway to Athenry line.

Regarding the Deputy's query on enhancing capacity on the network, Iarnród Éireann's rolling stock is currently fully deployed on services across the network. Notwithstanding this, I am pleased to note that, as part of the DART+ programme, three orders delivering a total of 285 new carriages have been placed so far. When the first and second orders start entering service next year, this will allow for the redeployment of existing intercity and commuter trains to other parts of the rail network experiencing capacity issues. The reason we have the capacity issue is because when we built the line from Athenry to Ennis, we had 132,000 passenger journeys per annum. Last year, we had 750,000 passenger journeys. That is an enormous increase, and it is the fastest growing line now, which is what justifies doing all this other investment. We will continue to do that.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: I raised this with the NTA last week and was told that all available carriages were in use at peak times, but I have a number of questions in relation to this and would appreciate clear answers to them for the people who have to travel on these overcrowded services daily. Why has there been no forward planning and how have we ended up in a situation where we do not have additional rail carriages? When are we going to have additional carriages on the trains going into Galway? I want a clear timeline on this because the Minister of State mentioned that new electric carriages were going to be arriving into Dublin, which would free up existing stock to go out to the regional routes. Is that going to happen in quarter 2 of 2027? Do we have a clear timeline on when that will happen? Has there been engagement with rail operators and departments in other jurisdictions about the possibility of securing stock on a short-term basis to address these capacity issues while we wait for the new stock?

Why has the Government not funded the promised new Athenry bus service? We have been waiting for that for two years. That will take significant pressure off the existing rail services into the city.

These are the questions that I am getting of commuters, and I would appreciate clear answers to them because this is not a sustainable situation and the Government cannot continue to sit on its hands.

Deputy Seán Canney: I want to reiterate that the Government is not sitting on plans. It is very active at the moment, and the Deputy knows that as well. He also well knows that we are preparing to open the line between Athenry and Claremorris, which is something he supports, and we need to get on with that.

Next year, 2027, is when we will have additional carriages becoming available. The NTA is working with Irish Rail and the latter has been looking at other places across the world but it cannot just get carriages from some other place because the railway lines themselves may be

of different configuration. It is not like getting a car from some place and putting it on the line. There is a lot more to it than that and the carriages have to be compatible with what is there at the moment. In fairness, what we have seen here, and it is something that we have to acknowledge, is the biggest growth in public transport in the west of Ireland. We have gone from 132,000 to 750,000 passenger journeys per annum on that line, making it the fastest-growing line. I agree that there is a shortage of carriages on it. We need to put more into it and I am working to make sure it happens next year.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: I just cannot accept the response that nothing is going to be done here in the short term. We are told we have to wait for carriages, with very vague assurances as to when they are going to become available. I have been contacted in relation to people becoming unwell. One woman described getting on the train this week and said that people were pushing and shoving so much that she thought someone could go down the gap between the train and platform. This is the situation on public transport every morning into Galway city.

Can the Minister of State give us a clear timeline as to when the rail services going in and out of Galway specifically, and particularly that one arriving at 8.10 a.m., will have additional carriages? Can we get a clear time on that? How we have ended up in this situation where we do not have additional rail carriages? I appreciate it takes time and we cannot just get them into service within a very short period but how has there not been forward planning such that we are left in this situation? I also want to ask about the Athenry bus service. That has been promised for two years and would make a really significant difference in terms of taking pressure off these services. Why has that not been funded?

Deputy Seán Canney: Just to reiterate, I did say that there will be additional carriages available in 2027. That is the first thing I said to the Deputy.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: For Galway?

Deputy Seán Canney: Yes, for Galway. The second question the Deputy asked was why this has arisen. It has arisen because when one orders new carriages it takes about five years to get them manufactured and delivered to one's specification. That is the timeline. The carriages were ordered four or five years ago and they will be with us next year. I do accept that there has been an underfunding of our service. It has grown over the last five to ten years and that particular line has grown substantially. We need to double-track that line from Athenry into Galway and that is also in the strategy that we have in place. What we need to do first is make sure we can put in the passing loops to get more frequency in and out with the trains we have. I fought hard to make sure that we would retain that early morning train service into Galway, which we have succeeded in doing. As for the bus service, we are working to get that in place as well but we have to make sure that whatever we put in is sustainable. There was a bus service there previously that was not sustainable. That is something we have to be very careful of, that we are not just doing things for the sake of doing them and finding that they are not sustainable. I know that the NTA and Bus Éireann are looking at that at the moment.

Public Transport

121. **Deputy Ciarán Ahern** asked the Minister for Transport if he will provide the €70 million in funding that the NTA says is required to avoid the increase in public transport fares; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [68009/26]

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: This is a simple one for the Minister of State. I am glad to hear from Deputy Buttimer that the budget negotiations with the Department of public expenditure are ongoing because my question is whether the Minister will provide the €70 million in funding that the NTA says is required to avoid the increase in public transport fares.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thank Deputy Ahern for his question. As the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, and I have said, the recently announced change in fares were the first revision in eight years. The change is aimed at supporting not just the continued expansion but also the improvement of public transport, while maintaining affordability. Any overall increase in revenue generated will go straight back into investment in public transport services, delivering better connectivity, capacity and reliability for passengers and commuters. This investment will also form part of the Department's engagements with the Department of public expenditure as part of the annual Estimates process, which has not yet concluded, for next year.

On an overall basis, fare revenue only covers approximately 38% of the cost of operating the PSO services nationally, with the remaining costs funded by the Exchequer. It is, therefore, imperative that there is a rebalancing of the critical equation in how we fund PSO public transport nationally, ensuring that fare revenue continues to make a sustainable contribution alongside significant levels of subsidy, while maintaining the affordability and accessibility of public transport. I would also highlight that this level of fare recovery is largely consistent with European averages, with our actual fares set at much lower rates. I appreciate the concerns expressed by people about the recent fare increase and many of them have contacted me. However, in line with international best practice and to bolster the State's capacity to invest in service expansion, network improvements, and operational resilience to encourage continuous passenger growth, it is essential we prioritise this reinvestment of fare revenue, ensuring that we can maintain a well-funded, reliable system and deliver greater long-term benefit rather than reducing fares to unsustainable levels. It is fair to say that achieving this requires a careful balance between delivering high-quality, reliable services and ensuring the network is adequately resourced to meet growing demand. We saw a record 363.5 million journeys undertaken just last year.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I thank the Minister of State. Often when I ask a question of the Minister for Transport, I am fobbed off to the NTA because I am asking about operational matters but this is a funding matter. It is a hugely disappointing decision from Government and a baffling decision in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis and a climate crisis. The current policy has been working for the Government. It is a really popular policy with the public, it is politically popular and I am baffled as to why the Government is doing this when we know that the low-fares policy is incentivising people to use our public transport. It is just so disappointing and hard to understand. We can support, rightfully, one cohort of transport users, namely people who drive and are reliant on their cars and of course, we should be supporting them with reductions on VAT and excise, but at the same time, we cannot be pitching public

transport users against these other users of transport. We have to be supporting everyone, which is why this decision is so disappointing.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The Deputy and I speak the same language. It has been a success story and to keep it that way, there has to be an honest conversation around fare structures. To be fair, we must consider the volume of people using public transport. I know that some Deputies will dismiss the €940 million but that is a significant investment by Government in public transport. I would make the point that we have maintained a fare freeze for eight years, along with targeted affordability measures of which we are all aware. Those measures compare favourably internationally. I take the point that there are people who are unhappy and who are being affected. They have communicated with all of us and I have met them but it is important to make the point that we have implemented one of the most significant fare reforms in recent decades through the introduction of the 90-minute fare and substantial discounts for young people and students through the young adult card. Our commitment, as a Department and as Ministers, is to ensure that we have a reliable and accessible public transport system.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I certainly will not dismiss the very significant investment in public transport which is really welcome. The problem with the PSO is that it is not keeping pace with the volume of users now and the demands. The Minister of State talked about 38% of the costs of the PSO being covered by fares but public transport pays for itself in other ways through reduced congestion, safer roads and lower carbon emissions. The idea that fares need to cover costs is not entirely correct. Talking about international comparators and Ireland being relatively lower or higher compared to elsewhere does not really butter any parsnips for people who are impacted by these fare increases. AMLÉ, the association of student unions in Ireland, has come out in recent days looking for free fares for everyone under 25. If we are going to be increasing fares elsewhere, I would love to see us focusing on a group like that.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The significant point is that our PSO programme funds public transport services, both bus and rail, and as we know, it is composed of Exchequer funding and fares. The Deputy is right and the priority for us, working with the NTA, is to deliver on BusConnects so that it takes people out of their cars and onto the bus network. I have seen it in my own city of Cork.

11 o'clock

In the past couple of weeks, with colleges and schools back open, there has been an increased volume of traffic on our roads. That emphasises the importance of BusConnects.

The Deputy will agree that we must continue to prioritise public transport, which is what the Government is doing, and the PSO element of that is very important. Discounts for young adults and students are critically important. For my Department, this is an important part of our budget negotiations. As Minister of State with responsibility for rural transport, I am acutely aware of the need to enhance the offering across the whole country. Deputy O'Shea, who is in the Chair, has spoken to me about different bus services in his area, Deputy Pa Daly referenced the town bus in Tralee, and other Members will be speaking this morning about other bus services. We are committed to investing but there is a need for honest conversations.

Road Projects

122. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Transport to rebalance the overall funding for roads in Laois (details supplied). [67753/26]

Deputy Brian Stanley: I am interested in the proportion of funding given for active travel versus the proportion given for rural and local roads. I am in favour of funding active travel but the specifications being given to councils are completely off the wall and are making it more expensive to deliver infrastructure projects of short duration. I have raised this issue previously and the officials have come back with standard answers. This matter needs to be looked at by the Minister or a Minister of State.

Deputy Seán Canney: I thank the Deputy for his question, which concerns an issue he has been raising on an ongoing basis.

In accordance with section 13 of the Roads Act 1993, as amended, the improvement and maintenance of regional and local roads is the statutory responsibility of each local authority. Work on such roads is funded from councils' own resources, supplemented by State road grants. For 2026, €718 million was allocated through the regional and local roads grant programme for the improvement and maintenance of regional and local roads, with approximately 90% of the funding allocated to road maintenance and renewal. This facilitated an increased funding allocation of €26 million this year for road protection and renewal works. That represents an increase of over 25% in funding compared with 2021.

Under the 2026 regional and local roads grant programme, Laois County Council was allocated more than €15 million for the maintenance and improvement of its regional and local roads, which is an increase of nearly €1 million compared with 2025. That funding will support the local authority in carrying out an extensive 2026 programme of maintenance and restoration. In addition, it will support various climate adaptation projects, bridge rehabilitation schemes and safety improvement works.

Within the budget available for the maintenance of regional and local roads, the objective is to allocate funding to eligible local authorities on as equitable a basis as possible, taking the length of the road network into account. The main focus of the grants continues to be the protection and renewal of roads.

In addition to keeping the regional and local roads network in good repair, targeted improvements are also prioritised. All projects put forward must comply with the requirements of the infrastructure guidelines and my Department's appraisal framework. Each project is assessed on a case-by-case basis, keeping available resources in mind. The 2026 allocation to Laois County Council includes funding of €500,000 for specific improvement grant schemes. Furthermore, on 1 July, I announced additional funding of €40 million to address the damage to roads as a result of Storm Chandra. The funding to Laois County Council under this additional package was €1 million.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I thank the Minister of State for his reply. He is correct regarding the allocation to the council but my point is that €3.5 million was given for active travel. I do not have a problem with that allocation; the problem is how it is being spent. He mentioned

the departmental guidelines, which is where the issue arises. The specifications and stipulations set out in those guidelines are completely off the wall.

To give one example, I was calling for action from the council on Triogue Way 25 or 26 years ago. One section of footpath was put in there across Millview car park. It has worked out to be the most expensive car park in the world because of those specifications. The footpath part alone, which is 74 m in length, cost €105,000. Other work was done as well, with the whole project coming in at more than €400,000. That is crazy money. The amount of concrete that went in underneath it would support a section of motorway. An articulated truck could be driven down it. It is over 13 ft wide in places. That is absolutely ridiculous. It is happening because the Department is telling the council it must be done a certain way. Concrete was being poured for months, with a private contractor crew working on it for four months. Meanwhile, overseers and engineers cannot fund even drainage works or basic repairs to rural roads. That needs to be looked at again.

Deputy Seán Canney: I understand the Deputy's frustration. I am sure he will agree that the funding allocation for Laois County Council for local and regional roads is good enough. His frustration seems to be in relation to the €3.5 million allocated to active travel projects. He is of the view that the works are perhaps being over-specified and the standards are too strict. I will take his points back to the Department. When doing this kind of work, we must ensure public money is spent in such a way that we deliver the best outcomes and get as much bang for our buck as possible. I will communicate the Deputy's important feedback to the Department. I do not think anybody is engaged in over-designing. There might be reasons that it looks that way, such as underground structures or whatever. I cannot comment on that. It is just a matter of ensuring we get value for whatever public money is spent. The local authorities want to do that.

Deputy Brian Stanley: On the overall funding, if the Minister of State has more millions of euro, he should send them down to Laois, because they are needed. The cost of repairing roads has been increasing by 15% per annum. I do not have a problem with the €3.5 million for active travel; if he has another €3.5 million, I would welcome it. The problem is the specifications and what we are getting for the money. That is the point I am making.

Does a footpath really need to be 13 ft wide? Ten-wheeler wagons were drawing in concrete at Triogue Way. I know all this because I park in the car park beside it and I saw what was going on every day. The amount of concrete that has gone into it would support a section of motorway, never mind a footpath and cycleway. The good footpath that was already there had to be ripped out because of the Department's specifications. A row of bollards could have been put alongside it in the car park, a perfectly good cycleway could have been installed and the car park resurfaced. Everything would have been fine and dandy.

What is being done is absolutely ridiculous. We need a sense of proportion and we need to be practical. The Minister of State is a practical kind of person. He must speak to officials in the Department about this. We need to get bang for our buck. That is the point I am making. Allowing rural roads to deteriorate to the point they need substantial works will mean spending more money in the longer term. An area office is needed to get work done.

Deputy Seán Canney: I reiterate that any funding we allocate should be spent wisely and in such a way that we get as much out of it as possible for the benefit of the taxpayer. I do not believe anybody is wasting money. It may be that the specifications and design standards need to be looked at, which is something I will take back to the Department. We must get as much done as we can with the money we have. As the Deputy rightly said, costs are increasing. We must be more prudent and agile in how we spend it. I will convey his comments to the officials.

Bus Services

123. **Deputy Emer Currie** asked the Minister for Transport to retain a bus service in Dublin West (details supplied). [67775/26]

Deputy Emer Currie: I want to make a simple, evidence-based case for retaining an all-day direct bus service from Littlepace to Dublin city centre. Under BusConnects, the 70 bus service, which is one of the most popular routes in Dublin West, will be split in two, with a direct service at peak times only and a local service during the day to the Blanchardstown Centre. Having surveyed 1,300 homes in three weeks, I got 978 responses, 98% of which wanted the daytime direct service retained. Will the NTA look again at this proposal?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thank the Deputy for raising this important matter, for her work on the survey she mentioned and for engaging with such large numbers of people. As she said, this is an important service.

The changes proposed for the 70 bus route are part of the wider BusConnects Dublin network redesign. One of the core principles of that work is to provide a more frequent, reliable and better-connected public transport network across the greater Dublin area. The redesign seeks to provide improved service levels and reduced waiting times for all passengers throughout the day.

Under the proposed network, the existing 70 service will be replaced, as the Deputy has said, by two new routes, namely, L64 and P64. The peak-time P64 service will continue to provide direct links between Dunboyne and Dublin city centre. I am told that the L64 will operate between Dunboyne and the Blanchardstown Centre and is currently projected to run every 15 minutes. Both routes will also connect with Dunboyne rail station, providing access to rail services into the city. For journeys to the city centre outside peak periods, passengers can travel to the Blanchardstown Centre using the L64 route and transfer to one of four B spine services, which are expected to operate every four minutes.

The NTA will provide more detailed timetables closer to implementation, taking into account demand levels, operational requirements and available funding. Based on current assessments, approximately five to six direct peak-time services to and from the city centre are envisaged. These changes will also be supported by the 90-minute Leap fare, ensuring that passengers making multi-modal journeys do not incur any additional costs. Furthermore, the planned development of the Blanchardstown to city centre core bus corridor will also reduce journey times and improve interchange facilities.

The benefits of these new services include the introduction of significantly better all-day frequency, not just during peak commuting hours, and better network connectivity options

within the 90-minute Leap fare. I will speak with the Deputy and bring her information from the survey back to the NTA.

Deputy Emer Currie: I thank the Minister of State for that reply. The people of Littlepace know the plans inside out. Some things can look good on paper but are counter-intuitive. Nothing annoys people more than when the NTA, supported by the Government, focuses on fixing something that does not need to be fixed and decides to remove something that is working for them and gets them to work, college or appointments on time during the day.

The Minister of State will recall that I previously highlighted the problems we were having in Dublin West, where popular commuter bus services required more capacity but did not receive adequate investment. He knows that I did a lot of work on the figures behind that to make the argument evidence-based. The 70 was one of those routes. The Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, and the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, ensured that more investment came to that service.

The people who responded to my survey were overwhelmingly regular users. They said that the service is now reliable. Some 93.5% of them said that the service is now reliable. This change seems illogical. We are giving residents something they did not ask for. They just want the 70 to work well.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thank the Deputy and appreciate where she is coming from. I hear the frustration. I appreciate the views of neighbours. As a public representative like the Deputy, I fully understand that sometimes what is proposed does not align with reality. It is important that I, having taken the question this morning, articulate and communicate the Deputy's views and those of residents back to the NTA. I am not obfuscating responsibility but, as the Deputy knows, the NTA is charged with the project. As a Minister and Ministers of State, we do not have any direct, day-to-day engagement. I will sit down with the Deputy to look at the situation and will ask the NTA to do so. If it is not broken, why fix it? We need to ensure that our overarching policy is about an enhanced bus experience. It is about ensuring that bus corridors are brought in, we have a continuous bus lane and improve active travel facilities.

The points made by the Deputy are hard to go against. The travelling public who use the service in a place understand. They use it every day. I will certainly reflect with the Deputy and take her views back to the NTA.

Deputy Emer Currie: I thank the Minister of State. I appreciate it. He will know, having been a public representative for decades, that when you do a survey and get that kind of response, you have to listen to it. Out of 978 people surveyed over a three-week period, only 12 said they would have no issue with having to change buses at the Blanchardstown Centre. Some 99.1% of them described the direct service as either "extremely important" or "very important" to them. Worryingly, 60% of people said that if this change makes their journey longer or less reliable, they are more likely to drive instead. The biggest issue that they identified was increased journey time. Some 80% of people said that was the issue.

I appreciate that the Minister of State will bring this issue to the NTA. I ask the NTA to meet the community. I have sent it this survey. The results speak for themselves. It is important

that the NTA shows it is willing to engage with communities about issues that impact them. Nearly 1,000 people in a three-week period responded to my survey when I only dropped it to 1,300 homes.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: All of us, no matter where we are from, want Bus Connects to succeed. At its core, it is about bringing new service and providing better all-day frequency and more reliability. Every day, we get complaints about the quality of a bus service, whether in Cork city or Dublin. We are not immune. As a Minister and Ministers of State, we are determined to ensure that we can deliver that.

It disappoints me, as a Minister of State and a public representative, that the NTA would not meet residents. Ultimately, the NTA is the solution-maker for any issue. It will be putting the network in place. It has a duty to meet residents, community groups and whoever else in Littlepace, in this case, to sort out the matter, work, listen and have that engagement. Public engagement allows them to be informed. It allows us all to have a better outcome in the end, we hope. I commit to sitting down with the Deputy and articulating with her on behalf of the people she represents. All of us must work together to have a better bus system that will benefit the travelling public who want to use the service.

If I were using a bus, which I do occasionally, and the journey became longer, I would ask whether I wanted to use it. The connectivity piece is important. The success of Local Link has been that A to B connectivity for people.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Questions Nos. 124 and 125 taken with Written Answers.

Rail Accidents

126. **Deputy Paul Lawless** asked the Minister for Transport the number of collisions involving trains in Ireland in each of the past ten years. [67174/26]

Deputy Paul Lawless: On the evening of 3 September, Eoin Doyle, a 12-year-old boy, lost his life when the car he was travelling in was struck by a train in Kiltybo, just outside Ballyhaunis. It is incredibly sad and a devastating loss of life. His family and, indeed, the entire community are still in mourning and grief. I spoke to the family and their wish is that no family in the future will ever go through such a loss and such grief. My question to the Minister of State is what lessons will be learned. How many tragedies have there been on the rail network? How many collisions have there been?

Deputy Seán Canney: Before I commence answering the question, I too extend my sympathy to the bereaved family of the boy and to the community. It is an appalling incident or collision and the consequences are life-changing. On the loss of the young boy, I say to the family, "May he rest in peace."

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Amen.

Deputy Seán Canney: I thank the Deputy for the question. Rail safety is an important priority for me and my Department. The total number of collisions involving heavy rail in Ireland between 2016 and 2025 amounts to 842 according to the 2025 annual report of the Commission for Railway Regulation, CRR, which was published in June. This figure covers a variety of collisions, with the vast majority due to train collisions with large animals on the line or other obstacles on the line.

Train collisions with other vehicles are rare. In 2025, there was one train collision with a motor vehicle. No train-on-train collisions on active rail lines have occurred in the previous ten years. I can provide the Deputy with a table showing a breakdown of the year-on-year collisions and the category of these collisions based on the CRR report.

The CRR is Ireland's independent railway safety regulator and has been a central part of the State's railway safety framework since its establishment under the Railway Safety Act 2005.

Its core mission is to promote, oversee and enforce safety across the rail sector, ensuring that railway operators maintain the highest standards of safety for passengers, workers and the wider public. Through inspections, audits, authorisations, compliance monitoring and enforcement activities, the CRR works to ensure operators meet both national and European safety requirements.

Deputy Paul Lawless: Eoin was a wonderful young boy. He was a very talented Gaelic footballer, soccer player and golfer. He even won an athletics event in the weeks before his passing. He had the opportunity to meet the Mayo team with the Sam Maguire Cup as well. Like his parents, grandparents and wider family, he was very involved in the local community.

I am aware of the crossing where the incident took place. It is extremely rudimentary in nature. Visibility there is poor. Indeed, there was strong mist on the evening as well. The crossing, like many others, is a death trap. Many motorists are completely unaware of such a significant hazard that lies ahead. Since the incident, I have been contacted by many people across County Mayo who have outlined to me the near misses they also had. The technology is available. We need to replace those user-operated crossings with automated barriers and significant warning systems and sirens. The technology is there. It is widely available and is cheap. In fact, it is used across every apartment complex in Dublin and in other cities and car parks across the country.

Deputy Seán Canney: I have given some data on this, and there is more data in the reply, which I will not read out. It is there for the Deputy to read. It is important that I do not comment on a matter that is under investigation. We have to respect the investigations that are ongoing. A preliminary examination by the rail accident investigation unit, which is the independent national investigation body into the accident that occurred at level crossing XM 160, is ongoing. Decisions made by that investigation unit will be based on the outcome of that examination.

The CRR, the independent national safety authority, is also carrying out its initial assessment of the circumstances surrounding the accident. Decisions made by the commission will be based on the outcome of that assessment. As the Deputy will be aware, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding of public transport. The operation, maintenance and renewal of

the rail network and level crossings on the network, including the level crossing referred to, is a matter for Irish Rail in the first instance. I will go back to the basic point that we cannot comment until the investigations are complete.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I appreciate that there is a review under way, how sensitive this topic is and the Minister of State's sincerity. I have read previous reports in relation to other incidents. I am calling for us all to work constructively together. This is above politics. We need to replace user-operated gates with automated gates. This is happening in every car park and apartment complex across this country. The technology is there. It is widely available and it is cheap. The truth is that many of these crossings are on local roads that have high volumes. I ask that lessons be learnt from this incident and that actions be taken in order that no family has to experience a similar loss and grief that comes with it ever again.

Deputy Seán Canney: I agree with the Deputy. I was at the ITS Ireland conference in Limerick yesterday at which I saw the technologies that are available. Irish Rail is working with technologies to improve its lines. However, it is very important that we make sure whatever actions we take in relation to improving are correct and that they actually bring the safety standards up to where they are required.

There are 868 level crossings in Ireland, of which 127 are known as occupation-type crossings. These include user-worked unattended occupational level crossings on private and public roads. Since 2008, and including the most recent accident in Mayo, there have been four fatalities at level crossings. It is important to note that on the day in question there were two accidents. The first took place at a level crossing on the Tullamore line when a train collided with a tractor. We then had the fatal accident as well. Some of the people who were discommoded by being removed from the first train were on the second train. It was just a freak occurrence. Unfortunately, it cost a life. That is why it needs a very serious examination of all of the level crossings. I accept the Deputy's point that the technology is there, but we have to make sure the technology will work and that it will hopefully remove the risk of ever seeing something like this happening again.

Question No. 127 taken with Written Answers.

Public Transport

128. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Transport whether he is aware that two routes in Cork under BusConnects had to be rerouted because a bus cannot traverse Church Hill despite numerous public consultations and millions spent to date. [66853/26]

Deputy Thomas Gould: Is the Minister of State aware that two services relating to BusConnects had to be rerouted because buses cannot traverse Church Hill in Glanmire despite numerous public consultations and millions of euro being spent on it?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thank Deputy Gould for raising this very important matter. As he knows - we are both from Cork city - detailed planning for the implementation of the BusConnects Cork network is under way. I am told by the National Transport Authority, NTA, and Cork City Council that does involve redesign, which is continuing to happen, with the new

network to be rolled out on a phased basis. It is fair to say that we both wish it could happen faster. However, the major public transport investment will increase bus services across Cork city by over 50%, supporting a growing population and encouraging greater use of sustainable transport, which we both want.

I am not fully aware of what is proposed, but I was in Riverstown last weekend and am aware of the proposed routing of services via Church Hill in Glanmire. The Deputy mentioned the public consultation. I am informed by the NTA that following the publication of the redesigned network in 2022, it continued to assess proposed routes to ensure they could be operated effectively. In the case of Church Hill, routes 2a and 14a were subject to further testing and detailed consultation with Cork City Council. While buses were able to travel along the alignment proposed originally, further testing identified significant challenges relating to sightlines, footpath issues and the scale of infrastructure works required to address the junctions of Church Hill and Gleann Caoin. Given the cost of those works, the decision was taken by the NTA to realign routes 2a and 14a. Under the revised arrangement, as the Deputy knows, route 2a will operate in both directions on Barnavara Hill towards Dunkettle and will serve the Ballinglanna development, while route 14a will serve Glanmire Road in both directions. I am told by the NTA that the revised alignment has been successfully tested with appropriate associated infrastructure works being considered along the normal planning routes.

I understand the frustrations and challenges experienced by some residents, which I will come back to in a second, in the changes being proposed. I am told by the NTA that the revised alignment is intended to ensure a safe and effective delivery of the new network to enable the expansion of the services through Cork. However, I am prepared to listen to what the Deputy has to say in terms of the residents, whom he is going to talk about in a second.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Some €85 million has been spent on BusConnects in Cork since 2021. That includes €11 million this year alone. What have we got for it? People in Cork and people I represent will tell the Minister of State we have got nothing for it. Then, after all the consultation - five rounds of consultation - we were told on 27 August that the bus will not be able to serve Church Hill in Glanmire and that there would be no bus stop for people living in Crawford Woods.

People are buying houses, moving into communities and renting while expecting to have a proper bus service. Glanmire is one of the fastest growing areas in the State, with hundreds if not thousands of new houses there. Then we do not have a bus service that delivers. These people expect a bus service. Glanmire was actually in Cork city when the boundary was increased a couple of years ago and now we have a situation where some residents have not got a bus service. Many people in Glanmire are very upset by the standard of bus service they have, with buses not turning up, ghost buses and the app not working. People deserve to have a public transport system they can depend on.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thoroughly support Deputy Gould. I share the same ambition he has and it frustrates all of us that we have issues with the bus service, not just in Cork but across the country. To be fair to the NTA - and I am critical of the NTA, as he knows - we have seen investment by Government through the NTA in the BusConnects Cork network and we will have delivery on the ground. It needs to be expedited but, in fairness, as the Deputy is a long-time member of both Cork City Council and the Oireachtas, he knows to get to the end result

of BusConnects, there has to be planning, preparation and delivery in the context of BusConnects. There have been different approvals by Government in line with our infrastructure guidelines. I look forward to that happening and to the Deputy and me travelling on buses and being able to be positive about BusConnects Cork.

I wish to make a genuine comment to Deputy Gould. I will happily articulate on his behalf and that of the residents he mentioned, who deserve a bus service that is reliable and accessible. I will take up the points regarding the residents of Glanmire because the Deputy is right. It is a fast-growing area. We need to ensure there is no gridlock in Cork. The N40 is jammed every morning. We have seen since the opening of the Munster Technological University, MTU, and University College Cork, UCC, after the summer and the growth of Cork University Hospital that traffic in the western suburbs has grown expeditiously. I will talk to the Deputy afterwards and I will communicate on his behalf, and that of the residents of Glanmire, with the NTA.

As the Deputy knows, this is not an operational matter for me as a Minister of State and for the Department. It is the NTA working with Cork City Council. I will happily come back to Deputy Gould afterwards on that.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I wish to update the Minister of State. This route was supposed to be in place in 2024. We are in 2026 and we are told the route is not feasible. Millions of euro have been spent. Some €85 million has been spent in five years and now we are finding out things cannot be done. How many other routes will this also affect? There are people there at the moment who are experiencing the cost-of-living crisis and are struggling. They are looking at this Government and the NTA burning money. That is what they are doing. They are burning money while people are struggling. The NTA told me that detailed consideration of the scale and cost of the measures has led to a decision not to align this route. Why was that not discovered earlier?

We have a situation in Cork where there is absolute gridlock, no matter which direction you are coming from, whether it is north, south, east or west. That is why we need BusConnects to deliver. What we have is BusConnects not delivering. We have areas like Clogheen, Kerry Pike, Sunday's Well, Upper Glanmire and other areas of Cork that are looking for bus services and were promised them. None of them have been delivered. The other area was Kilcully. All those places are waiting for buses with no sign of them. Actually, it is not that there is no sign of them; they are not coming.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I will pose the question to Deputy Gould: is he for or against BusConnects?

Deputy Thomas Gould: I am for it.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: No, hold on-----

Deputy Thomas Gould: I met with it. I put in submissions.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Yes. The important point is that we have to deliver. The Deputy talks about burning money. Some €940 million of a public service obligation, PSO,

contribution to public transport is a significant amount of money. The Deputy is around a long time and is a clever man. The money we are spending on BusConnects is about delivery and putting the infrastructure and the planning in place so we will have BusConnects. I am absolutely confident that BusConnects will succeed. The Deputy will come into this House and will be lauding BusConnects when it happens. He is right and I completely agree with him; it is not happening fast enough and it is taking far too long. I share his frustration and I understand the upset among people. I deal with it every day. I meet people every day. I use the bus, despite what the Deputy might think. There are ghost buses but, as the Deputy knows, as he talks to people in Bus Éireann, it cannot get mechanics or drivers. It has recruited internationally. We have to address the whole point.

I share the Deputy's ambition. I want it delivered and I will work with him to have BusConnects succeed in Cork. I will take on board the Deputy's views, which are genuine, about the area of Glanmire. Glanmire is one of the fastest growing areas of Cork and it does require a bus service that delivers for people.

Bus Services

129. **Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí** asked the Minister for Transport if he is aware of ongoing capacity issues on the 15 bus route; and the measures that are being taken to ensure that local residents can reliably access the service. [67534/26]

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: Is the Minister for Transport aware of ongoing capacity issues on the north side's 15 bus route and the measures that are being taken to ensure local residents finally get a usable and dependable 15 service?

Deputy Seán Canney: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. Yes, I am aware of concerns regarding capacity and reliability on the route 15 service, which provides an important 24-hour, high-frequency connection between Ballycullen and Clongriffin, serving communities, including Templeogue, Terenure, Rathmines, the city centre, Fairview and Artane.

I understand that the current route 15 timetable is being reviewed by the NTA and the operator, Dublin Bus, with additional running time and an additional bus being incorporated into the schedule. Here, capacity pressures are most likely to occur around peak school travel times. The revised timetable is due to be introduced on 6 December and will provide for an additional 12 drivers, with the aim of improving service reliability and reducing the impact of delays. An additional journey was also introduced in January 2026 to assist with customer loading.

Looking ahead, the BusConnects programme will also bring changes to the route. The current plan, subject to funding discussions, is for the northside of route 15 to transition to the D-spine in quarter 4 of 2027, with the A-spine covering the southside in 2028. These changes are intended to strengthen connectivity and provide improved public transport options for communities along the route.

I, the Minister for Transport and our officials will continue to support the NTA and Dublin Bus in ensuring that the public transport network has the capacity and resources required to

provide reliable services to passengers, particularly where workforce resourcing has been a core concern over the past while. The Department's upcoming public transport workforce task force action plan will play a key role here, looking to facilitate and support the implementation of such critical service changes.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit. The 15 is meant to be a northside workhorse service serving Belmayne, Clongriffin and Clarehall. As Deputy Gould said, Glanmire is a fast-growing area. This is also a fast-growing area on the northside. It is meant to be a 24-hour service. It is meant to be going every five to 12 minutes at peak but the service is just not delivering. Local residents will tell you that if you are getting on at Clarehall, you cannot get on. The bus is full at Clarehall at peak. Clarehall is stop three out of 17 on the northside stops, if you take Connolly Station as the last northside stop. The NTA's own data for the service show that one in five buses are late and it does not seem to even gather the capacity issues I can see. I do not know how it reports or deals with that. There does not seem to be a mechanism to deal with that. As Cathaoirleach of the climate committee, I advocate for people to get out of cars and get into the buses but the 15 "ain't working" and we need to get the NTA to step it up.

Deputy Seán Canney: I hear the Deputy's frustration with this service. I have outlined changes that are going to happen in December with additional drivers and bus runs. It is important. The Deputy says the demand is there so we have to make sure that whatever service we put in place actually meets that demand and is providing a service.

It is a capacity issue. It has been in terms of getting drivers, having the buses, having mechanics to service the buses and all of this. I met with the NTA and Bus Éireann last week in connection with another issue.

These issues are being addressed, but maybe not as quickly as people would like. Like the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, said when talking about Cork, I will be bringing this back to the NTA. It is important that whatever we do with public transport we have to make it a service that people enjoy using and that people can rely on so, going back to the Deputy's position as Chair of the environment committee, we end up with a situation where people do not need a car; where they can not just leave it at home but maybe get rid of it and enjoy public transport. That is the overriding goal for everybody.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I raised this in February and the response at the time was it was planned that a revised schedule for route 15 would be introduced in September. It is now September. I welcome the clarity on what the NTA is proposing but now it is saying, per the Minister of State's response, it will introduce its changes in December. Everything is being dragged out. We are talking about a fair increase in bus services raising about €70 million of which only a quarter is really targeted at improving services like this.

I am not going to repeat myself but we really need to crack the 15 so it works for the northside. I know the Minister of State will but I implore him to sit on the NTA, to dialogue with it and to get this service working properly so the people I talked about finally get a reliable service as commuters to work or school, or to appointments in the city centre.

Deputy Seán Canney: I thank the Deputy. I will bring his concerns back to the NTA. It is no problem. I will also seek to find out whether it can bring forward that date if it had already given a date in September. The date the authority now says it is going to introduce the service is 6 December. I do not know why it has been delayed. I can imagine why. An additional 12 drivers and additional bus services coming on will make a difference but we need to keep on top of it to ensure the service is fit for purpose and that we provide public transport for those who want to use it. That is the aim of everybody and we will continue to work on that.

Question No. 130 taken with Written Answers.

Bus Services

131. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Transport whether he has conducted any affordability tests on fare increases in Cork. [66855/26]

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

A significant milestone under the national fares strategy was reached in July 2026, when a simplified fare structure already in place in Dublin was extended to Cork. Passengers there can now avail of the TFI 90-minute fare, allowing transfers between multiple bus services within a defined period on a single fare. This is encouraging multimodal travel and reducing the cost of interchange. The NTA recently noted the introduction of the TFI 90 fare and fare capping has delivered a simpler and more affordable fare structure for passengers in that area, with a view to facilitating future expansion of the multimodal network. This represents a shift away from operator-specific pricing towards a customer-centred, integrated transport network. For the first time, passengers using Bus Éireann's Cork TFI city bus services can catch any bus in the city and transfer between buses in Cork city as often as needed within 90 minutes, all for a single fare of €1.70. The new on-board ticket validators complement this by allowing passengers to tap their Leap card. This reduces boarding times and improves overall reliability and punctuality.

The national fare determination announced by the NTA in September builds on this for Cork with city fares being held at those levels from July 2026, rather than adjusted or further increased. Time-based tickets for children, students and young adults such as 1-day, 7-day, monthly and annual tickets will actually see costs fall by about 30%. These offer particularly good value for some frequent users and demonstrate both the NTA and Department are firmly committed to delivering a public transport system that is sustainable, dependable, accessible and affordable.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Just to let the Minister of State know, the fare hike came into Cork in July. What that means for adults going to work, college or hospital appointments is an extra €240 a year. On top of that now we will see the price go up for the train. If you get the train or the bus you are going to see your fares going up. Has the Minister of State conducted any

tests to see if people can afford to absorb these fare hikes? People are telling me they are being priced out. He talks about the 90-minute fare but we have people who could be waiting an hour for the bus. That would not be unusual. Expecting the 90-minute fare to work is not feasible with the bus service we currently have in Cork. Not one extra bus route has been delivered in Cork in 2026 and at the same time the bus fares are being hiked up. How can that be justified? The app is not working. The NTA has admitted that. I have met the authority on a number of occasions. People are standing at bus stops looking at signs and the app is not working. They are looking at their phones to see when the next bus is and the bus disappears. How can that be right? How can the Government be charging people extra for that? The only thing we are getting from BusConnects is announcements. We are not getting buses and we are not getting new bus services.

Deputy Seán Canney: I will repeat what I have said about the changes that happened in July 2026 in Cork. They make the fares cheaper and make it easier for people to use multimodal transport. If there are issues with buses not coming on time we have discussed that earlier and we are working on that. The cost for children, students and young adults in Cork of time-based tickets such as the 1-day, 7-day, monthly and annual tickets is coming down by about 30%. That is a fact. This is as a result of the introduction of the standard discount for young adult and students at 50% and children at 33% of equivalent adult fares. These can offer very good value for some frequent users.

It is important to say this Government has invested €941 million in the PSO levy in 2026. That is a huge increase from 2025 and we will continue to invest in public transport. There are problems with public transport in places and we will continue to work on that to improve its efficiency and reliability.

Deputy Thomas Gould: We were told in Cork the fair increases were to pay for the 90-minute fares that were to come in. This is nonsense. It was done when the schools and the colleges were on holidays. It was snuck in over the summer with the thought that people would not spot it, but I spotted it. People who get the bus contacted me because they spotted it and could feel the difference. We are now being told more hardware will be needed for contactless payments. Will fares go up again when that comes in? People are struggling. There is a cost-of-living crisis. The cost for adults is an extra €240 a year. They cannot afford to drive and now they cannot afford to take the bus. Where was the feasibility audit done to see if people can afford this? The Minister of State talks about the PSO levy, about climate change and about getting people out of cars. How does putting up the price of buses at the same time as trying to get people out of cars work?

I have another point to make. We have one park-and-ride in Cork. There is gridlock in Cork city. Why are park-and-rides not being rolled out north, west and east of the city so we can get people out of cars? We need have buses for them to get into the city.

Deputy Seán Canney: The local authority should be putting in place the park-and-rides. The Department of Transport will support that and we need to see what the proposals are.

Let us just go back to understand what the PSO services support. They support a wide range of Government policy including climate action, sustainable mobility, regional development,

social inclusion, compact growth and economic competitiveness as well as the accommodation of population growth.

There is a significant increase in demand for public transport because we are providing additional public transport at a price that is affordable. It has to be said that 27% of the population can avail of free travel. This is another important fact. It is important that we not lose the run of ourselves. We have to make sure that whatever we do in public transport is sustainable and that we can deliver the service to make sure that everybody has that choice and can enjoy using public transport as well.

Public Transport

132. **Deputy Erin McGreehan** asked the Minister for Transport to provide an update on the actions undertaken to improve transport in rural areas. [67411/26]

Deputy Erin McGreehan: I am asking about the actions undertaken to improve transport in rural areas, in particular in north Louth and mid-Louth.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thank the Deputy for her ongoing support for public transport in Louth and other places in rural Ireland. This question deserves attention in terms of the progress we have made in rural transport. As the Deputy knows, it is one of the key points of our programme for Government. The Minister, the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, and I are very much committed to balanced regional investment being designated as a core principle in the national development plan, NDP, sectoral investment plan for transport. Predicated on that is investment in rural transport, Local Link and that piece to which we will return in a minute.

The Government is firmly committed to rolling out additional improved service levels along with expanded and improved infrastructure at national and regional levels. Probably the most visible of these programmes is the Connecting Ireland rural mobility plan. This is a multiphase programme of investment in a new and improved public transport service for rural areas. Under the programme, upwards of 600,000 people now have access to useful daily public transport services for the first time and 188 new and improved regular public transport services have been provided, resulting in a more than fivefold increase in passenger numbers. Multimodal transport is something that has existed in urban areas for a long time and I am delighted that, under our remit, we are now seeing rural communities connected as well.

It is a key commitment in the programme for Government and also for County Louth, and I thank the Deputy for raising the matter. I met John McGahon, chief executive of Dundalk Chamber of Commerce yesterday and he raised the matter with me. The Deputy has been very strong in her advocacy to me for a long time. The sectoral plan will also see us looking at investment in greenways but also giving an uplift in terms of rail.

In my supplementary answer, I will discuss other matters regarding County Louth.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: As the Minister of State is aware, Louth is the smallest county. Sometimes, one would imagine that it would be easier to get around the county by bus but when one tries to reduce one's reliance on private transport, it feels sometimes like crossing a continent. We all know that rural connectivity is a real programme for Government

commitment. We need to be able to travel between our towns and villages and from our rural communities where people live, work and access all services. The bus service in Louth is not fit for purpose in many ways. There is no direct bus between Ardee and Dunleer, which are neighbouring towns and only a 15-minute drive apart. To make that short journey by public transport, one has to go from Ardee to Dundalk or from Ardee to Drogheda to get to Dunleer. It makes no sense.

The service from Dundalk to Omeath and beyond is very local to me. Buses serve the Cooley Peninsula but the timetable is far too limited. If one wants to rely on transport for education, healthcare or work, one really needs to take the car. The service does not get people to where they need to be in a particular time. We need more frequency.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I hear what the Deputy is saying in the context of County Louth. The key point for us as a Department and for me as the Minister of State with responsibility for rural transport is to look, along with TFI and Local Link, at the enhancement of the No. 161 from Dundalk to Carlingford to Newry. We are also looking at the piece around the No. 162 Dundalk to Monaghan bus service and the review of existing services in County Louth, including the No. 177 between Ardee and Dunleer. I will certainly take the Deputy's views back.

We are looking at the proposed new DN1 route between Áth Leathan, Dundalk Institute of Technology, DkIT, and Haynestown-Marlmount. As part of our negotiations with the Department of public expenditure on the budget, it is important that we see investment in rural transport, but I will work with the Deputy to ensure that we see further investment in County Louth.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: It is positive that the Minister of State is looking at this. We need a robust plan for Louth to allow us to travel across and enjoy our county by bus. It is a fabulous place and the integration of additional routes would be a fantastic investment in the people and roads of County Louth.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I was in Carlingford over the summer, which is a beautiful spot. Regarding the Deputy's point about passenger numbers, the numbers using the regular rural service have increased by 72%.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: That shows the interest.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: If we put in investment aligned with the interest, people will travel. As the Deputy said, it is about tourism and economic opportunity but also about getting people from A to B. It goes back to the discussion that I had with Deputy Gould this morning about getting people out of their cars and onto buses. I will work with Deputy McGreehan on that.

Question No. 133 taken with Written Answers.

Public Transport

134. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Transport the position regarding the new projected costs for MetroLink, if he will commit to delivering MetroLink within this new projected cost, if he will commit to equivalent ambition and resourcing for public transport projects outside of Dublin over the same period, and if he will make a statement on the matter. [67303/26]

Deputy Pa Daly: I also want to ask about whether there is an equivalent ambition to delivering more rural services, as we cannot have a situation where all of the money for the next few years is invested inside the M50 and not beyond.

Deputy Seán Canney: The Estimates are the Estimates. The proof of the pudding will be in the eating when the tender is brought in. I will not give any commitment until we see what the real overall cost is from the tenders. The range that is there at the moment is between €14.4 billion at the lower end to €17.49 billion. The firm proof of the pudding will be when the tenders come in next year. This project is a key component in delivering not just a rail connection within the city of Dublin, but also the opportunity to build houses and open the entire city up for development.

The Deputy asked about rural Ireland and what we were doing around the country. We have put the Galway outer ring road and the Cork commuter rail in as two strategic projects that we need to get done. They are moving ahead fairly fast. Within the all-island rail strategy, which is under my remit, the Deputy can see what has been prioritised in terms of rural rail and what needs to be done there. The Deputy can see what we are already doing in terms of the development at Cork and Limerick stations and what has been completed at Galway station in order to provide for additional rail capacity. That is happening as we speak under the strategy. There is an opportunity for us in the regions to make sure that we continue to develop and provide the infrastructure so that people can live, work and enjoy life in the regions. That is Government policy.

Deputy Pa Daly: I know I am under time constraints, but I note that some people from Garvaghy Road have arrived in the Public Gallery. I welcome them and stand in solidarity with and support them.

There is only one problem, in that the Minister of State has not answered the question I asked him about the budgetary constraints and whether the Government was going to deliver on cost. We have seen what happened over the years with the children's hospital - the cost overruns there - so is the Minister of State going to give us a commitment to deal with any escalating costs? What provisions has the Government put in place to prevent a cost overrun like those we have seen on so many different projects over the years? The Government cannot present the public with another multibillion euro project without keeping costs down because we have seen cuts around the country, particularly in County Kerry, where we are waiting on more buses and larger buses. One cannot even get a cup of tea on the train from Kerry to Dublin. We see that the lack of services there in contrast to all the moneys being committed, so we want to make sure that the money is going to be limited.

Deputy Seán Canney: The Deputy is asking what kinds of constraint or what time or safety factors we will put into the contract. That contract and the conditions of that contract are being prepared at the moment before it goes out to tender.

12 o'clock

I can assure the Deputy that this project will be delivered. It has to be delivered because it is vital for the country. It is the single largest project that we will undertake from a capital expenditure point of view. I look forward to it being delivered.

Many projects in this country are delivered on time, within budget and to the highest standards, and we do not talk about that at all. It is important that I say that and put it on the record.

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Leaders' Questions

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Before I begin, I want to welcome to the Dáil the members of the Garvaghy Road Residents Coalition who are in the Gallery. Fáilte romhaibh go léir inniu. They come here at a deeply concerning moment for their community because a fresh application has been made for an Orange march along the Garvaghy Road in Portadown this Sunday. That is an issue that can reopen issues residents believed were settled for nearly three decades now. It is raising real fears, real concerns and renewed division and tension in that area. It should not be allowed to happen.

Tá teaghlaigh atá ag obair faoi bhrú ollmhór ó gach treo. Tá na billí siopadóireachta ag ardú, tá costas tithíochta ag dul in airde ar ghnáththithe, agus tá costais breosla ag ardú go gasta. Anois díreach, agus muid ag tabhairt aghaidh ar an ngeimhreadh, tá billí leictreachais agus gáis ag ardú arís. Taobh istigh de choicís, tá SSE Airtricity, Bord Gáis agus Energia le gnáthbhillí leictreachais a ardú do níos mó ná milliún teaghlach. Tá géarghá le creidmheas leictreachais. An athróidh an Tánaiste a intinn agus gealltanais a thabhairt inniu go gcuirfidh an Rialtas €400 i gcreidmheasanna leictreachais ar fáil do theaghlaigh fud fad na tíre an gheimhreadh seo le déileáil leis na hardaithe praghais seo atá in ann dóibh?

There is no doubt that people are being ripped off from every direction. The weekly shop, fuel and now electricity and gas prices are all going up and up. More and more of people's hard-earned wages are being swallowed up just to cover the basics. In just 11 days' time, one day before the budget, there is going to be a wave of increases in electricity prices. SSE Airtricity will increase its prices, Bord Gáis will follow and Energia will follow after that. Together, these increases are going to affect 1 million households out there. For families using gas and electricity, the increase will be more than €300 a year.

This is something the Tánaiste could have seen coming. At almost exactly the same time last year, energy suppliers were announcing increases and the Government was withdrawing energy credits from families. It did that despite the energy regulator warning that without those credits, arrears could increase significantly. The Government went against that warning, and

that is exactly what happened. By February of this year, more than 300,000 electricity accounts were in arrears. The numbers were significantly higher than the previous year. By June of this year, more than 500,000 electricity and gas accounts combined were in arrears.

We warned the Government that this was going to happen. We have consistently raised the issue of energy credits and the supports that families need. We have raised it over and over again. The Government simply does not understand the pressure that people are under. Now, we are back here again. Prices are rising and winter is coming. People want solutions. I cannot understand the Government's hands-off approach to big energy companies that is allowing this to happen. It must intervene to help people. It must realise the scale of the problem that is out there. There is a solution. We have put forward the solution to the Government time and again. We have consistently called on it to deliver €400 in electricity credits this winter, and do the heavy lifting in terms of the solutions that Sinn Féin has put forward that would permanently see a reduction in electricity prices across the State. We have repeatedly called for these credits to be restored.

Will the Tánaiste give any certainty to people today? They know that their electricity will increase in just 11 days' time. One million households out there are going to see nearly a double-digit increase. What certainty will the Tánaiste give them? Can he tell them that the Government decision to withdraw the energy credits has resulted in more people falling into arrears, which is a fact? Can he tell them he has learned that lesson and will now commit to them to introduce a €400 energy credit to help them pay these bills? Will he stop taking a hands-off approach while these big companies are ripping off their customers, left, right and centre?

The Tánaiste: First, I join with the Deputy in welcoming residents of the Garvaghy Road to Dáil Éireann today. I am very much aware of the concerns of residents in the area. I am also very much aware of the very painful and traumatic history in relation to that community and what they endured. I want to assure the Deputy that Government officials are monitoring the situation closely. Like him, I am mindful of the role of the Parades Commission. Again I very much welcome the residents to Dáil Éireann today.

I am extremely conscious, as is the Government, of the pressure that people are under when it comes to energy costs and energy prices. I want to say to people in this country that help is on the way through the budget in 12 days' time. There are a number of issues that we are actively endeavouring to advance to provide assistance and certainty to people when it comes to energy, while also being honest with people that there is no government in the world that can absorb all of the impact of a global energy shock. There simply is not, and it would be untrue to suggest that there is, but there are things we can do and things we will do.

The first is providing certainty in relation to excise for the winter period. I heard Deputy Doherty earlier this morning on a radio programme. Beyond weeks, certainty for the winter period on excise is something that we can and will provide.

Second, looking at the issue of carbon taxation in terms of how it applies to certain products, the Deputy will recall that my officials did a piece of work in the summer through the Tax Strategy Group, and they published a paper in July, I think, which looked at the idea of different products and how they could potentially be considered in the context of carbon tax. I am particularly concerned by the home heating situation and the gas situation, which the Deputy

referenced. Similarly, we have to be honest with people on this. There is a limitation to how much you can do on that without bringing yourself into a challenge with the European system, and we do not want to tip that balance wrong, but this is certainly something we are going to actively look at.

Third, there are decisions we can make in terms of parts of our society and sectors within our economy that are most at risk of fuel poverty or most dependent on fuel. I am thinking of lower income households and those who qualify for the fuel allowance. The fuel allowance season will start on Monday, with more than a quarter of households in the country, 500,000 households, benefiting from that. I am also thinking of our farmers and hauliers, who are particularly dependent on fuel, and our supply chains are dependent on them.

Fourth, we need to help households and businesses with the actions that they are already trying to take to reduce their electricity and energy bills. Whether it is through solar panels or retrofitting, we know households and businesses are doing things in the here and now, and we need to make it that bit easier for them to do that. Deputy Doherty will have heard the Minister for energy talk about his plans for a scrappage scheme for boilers, and there has been a significant and widespread welcome for that from experts this morning.

In addition to this, the budget will need to be viewed in the round. There are certain measures we can take on the energy side. There will be a temporary package of measures in relation to energy, and the Deputy made some suggestions on that this morning. The composition of that is for the Government to decide in the days ahead. I would also say to people that they will need to look at the budget in the round. Families and businesses do not view things in the kind of Government Department or agency silos that this place sometimes discusses. They view this in terms of what it means for their families. If we can reduce the income tax burden and look at the challenges and costs that families face around childcare and the like, that too can help.

In 12 days' time, the budget will be delivered. Energy will be a big part of the Government's budgetary package but a cost-of-living theme will be weaving through all of the various levers at the disposal of the Government across a range of areas.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: When I stood here this time last year, raising these questions with the Tánaiste, he was giving the same type of mantra: this would be a cost-of-living budget, and this had to be looked at in the round. People know their real-life experience in the last year. They feel worse off. They feel under more pressure. They have seen their grocery bills increase and their petrol, diesel and home heating oil increase. They have seen their rent increase. They have seen their mortgage increase. They have seen increases that the Government has brought forward in relation to student fees and other things that have put pressure on those families. They know the pressure that they are under. They are also looking at a government that is talking about billions of euro in surplus, and they are asking that some of that is used to support them now.

We have put forward a proposal time and again to the Government. We told the Government that it was absolutely wrong to withdraw those energy credits. There is a direct connection between what happened in households right across the State and the decision the Government took. When it decided to end energy credits, more families fell into arrears - that is just fact.

The Tánaiste can shake his head all he wants. Let me tell him the facts. In February of this year, 316,000 households were in arrears. In the previous year, it was fewer than 60,000.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, the Tánaiste will respond.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: That is a fact. The question I am asking is, will the Tánaiste commit to giving certainty to families and reintroducing energy credits to help people to pay their electricity bills?

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy has been at this for a long time. A very long time, in fact. Let us not rewrite geopolitical history as to why energy prices have risen. It is not due to any decision taken in Dáil Éireann. It is because the Strait of Hormuz is closed. It is because there has been bombing of Iran.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It is not funny.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: It is not funny. The Tánaiste should not laugh about it.

The Tánaiste: Neither the Deputy nor I took a decision. Let us not blow up the egos of people in this House. There is a geopolitical energy shock going on. It is the greatest energy shock in the history of the globe, according to the International Energy Agency. This has nothing to do with energy credits in the last domestic budget.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Of course it has. Does the Tánaiste think that taking away the energy credits did not have an impact?

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: If they made no difference, why did the Government introduce them?

The Taoiseach: Come on, Deputies.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy Doherty. Allow the answer to the question you asked.

The Tánaiste: May I answer the question?

Deputy Pearse Doherty: That is just silly.

The Tánaiste: I know the Deputy likes to blame me for everything but the closure of the Strait of Hormuz is a stretch.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Nobody is blaming the Tánaiste for that.

The Tánaiste: That is what has happened with the global energy market. The Deputy asked whether the Government would use some of the surpluses to assist the people. We have the largest intervention in the European Union. It is eight times larger than the intervention in France.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Tánaiste.

The Tánaiste: That is one of the reasons, when we look at petrol and diesel prices across the European Union, that Ireland is not in the top ten. Help is on the way. There will be more help in 12 days.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Hear, hear.

(Interruptions)

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask that colleagues join me in offering a warm céad míle fáilte to a delegation in Public Gallery, indeed all of those in the Public Gallery today, who are from the working party on general affairs of the Council of European Union, led by Mr. Philip Grant and Mr. Nigel Hutson. They are in Dublin for a meeting of the General Affairs Council and are being hosted in Leinster House by the Minister of State, Deputy Thomas Byrne. They are all very welcome.

On the other side of the Public Gallery, I believe we have fifth and sixth class students from Blessington Educate Together National School. They are all most welcome.

I now call Deputy Whitmore.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I welcome everyone to the Public Gallery, and give a special welcome to the fifth and sixth class students.

There are now more than 500,000 households in arrears on their gas and electricity bills. That number has never been higher and it is continuing to soar. Thousands of people all over the country are facing a cold and bleak winter and feel a rising sense of dread every single time a bill comes through their doors. Many of these people have never had problems paying bills before but now, despite scrimping and saving, they are simply unable to make their budgets go any further.

At the same time as more people go into arrears on their bills, the profits of energy companies are booming. Just last week, the ESB announced its profits for the first half of the year: they were up by €100 million. Its CEO is in line for a pay hike of an eye-watering €161,000. This gives some indication of the bonanza that energy companies are enjoying. This is all happening while their very own customers are going cold. This is not sustainable, it is not fair and it is not right. It is time that the Government stopped hand wringing and actually did something about it.

A windfall tax on the superprofits of energy companies needs to be introduced now to stop this immoral profiteering. This is money that could be used to provide support for those who need it most, a €400 targeted energy credit for low- and middle-income earners to give them

some immediate relief from skyrocketing bills as they face into a very difficult winter. However, the budget needs to go much further than that. We all know that Trump caused the war in Iran and the global energy shocks that arose from it but it is the Government that has left households so exposed to these energy price shocks by failing to invest and to support them to become resilient and move away from fossil fuels. The Government has failed to invest in solar to the extent it should have. We should be front-loading investment in solar panels, which can be installed quickly and easily and bring costs down immediately. That would mean at least a saving of €450 on bills this year, next year and every year after. The Social Democrats have a solar for all plan that we are asking the Government to adopt. It would double the grants for solar panels, introduce a grant for battery storage and make solar panels free for households most at risk of fuel poverty. Finally, please roll out plug-in solar. That is what we need to see, namely, some ambition from this Government instead of the usual tinkering around the edges.

Does the Tánaiste agree that it is immoral for energy companies to make windfall profits during an energy crisis? Will the Government introduce a windfall tax on their superprofits?

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. The Tánaiste to respond.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Will the Government introduce a €400 energy credit for low- and middle-income families and radically ramp up solar?

The Tánaiste: I join Deputy Whitmore in welcoming our constituents from Blessington Educate Together National School. It is good to have them all here.

There are a couple of points I want to respond to. I believe there is significant merit in a windfall energy tax. This is not just me commenting on it, as I chaired a meeting on it in Dublin Castle last week with all of my European counterparts. We have tasked the European Commission with doing a body of work and reporting back to the Economic and Financial Affairs Council, ECOFIN - the meeting of European finance ministers - which will take place, from my memory, on the Thursday and Friday of budget week. It is best to approach these issues at a European level. That is how we approached it in the past when the Deputy will recall that we legislated for a framework and put in place a tax at the start of the Ukraine situation after the brutal, illegal Russian invasion of Ukraine. There are some companies that are benefiting very significantly from profits, not because they are enterprising or innovative, but just because the Strait of Hormuz is shut. Therefore, there is a compelling case. Working at a European level is important, but that is not a long-term comment. The Commission is due to report back to ECOFIN on the Thursday and Friday of budget week.

Deputy Whitmore's party has put forward proposals on how to help people through this winter period and beyond with their energy costs. There will be an energy package in the budget. There will be some temporary measures to help people with the here and now and this winter. However, I agree that there also need to be some measures to help people more permanently. The details of that are for budget day but the Deputy heard the Minister for energy yesterday giving an indication of a number of proposals that he intends to bring forward on battery storage and a scrappage scheme for boilers.

Quite frankly, we are seeing people go gangbusters on solar panels and electric vehicles, EVs. We see it in our own community and in the data that is coming through. However, we

still need to see if there is more we can do to help accelerate that because people are trying to make decisions in the here and now in their own lives to reduce their bills. People are full of common sense. We need to make it as easy as possible for them to make those decisions too. There are things we need to do in the here and now. I know the Social Democrats also voted this way on temporary excise reductions and what we do on home heating. I would make the point that the fuel allowance is already a targeted energy support. It will kick off from next Monday. We accept that, going into this winter period, energy prices will probably be the number one concern on the minds of people in this country and we will come forward with a comprehensive package of measures in the budget in 12 days' time.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I thank the Tánaiste and I welcomed hearing the Minister talking about battery storage. It would have been better if the Government had not removed the battery storage grant in 2022 when Ukraine was invaded. That would have assisted.

A lot of people have put in solar, but there are many hundreds of thousands of people who cannot afford to do it. It is those people who are really struggling. It is the low-to-middle-income earners who are finding it hard to move away from fossil fuels because they are not getting enough support from the Government. Rather than throwing good money hand over fist at these short-term, emergency, temporary measures that are incredibly costly and leave us with nothing to show for them at the end of the day, it would be better if all those billions of euro given in energy credits previously were actually doing their job and we did not have nearly 330,000 people in arrears on their electricity bills or 188,000 people in arrears on their gas bills.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. The Tánaiste to respond.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: They do not work. We need to insulate homes. That entails a long-term strategy and long-term investment.

The Tánaiste: I agree, and then I have a point of difference. I agree that there are lots of people out there who want to make the transition in their own lives and are still finding the gap too large. I was at the ploughing championships and met representatives of the Irish Farmers Association, IFA, in the IFA tent on this. Often, farmers are pitted against climate action but there are many farmers saying they want to put solar on their buildings and they need more support through the targeted agriculture modernisation scheme, TAMS. These are active issues we need to look at.

We need to do both, though. We need to help with the here and now, too. I will say to people right across the country that the measures we help them with, albeit they are classified as temporary in terms of trying to somewhat suppress the growth in energy prices, have a positive inflationary effect on the economy. Officials and economists in my Department estimate that the measures we have put in place to help reduce energy prices somewhat with excise reductions and the like have not been wasted measures and have actually kept down inflation by approximately 0.6%.

Officials and economists in my Department estimate that the measures we have put in place to help reduce energy prices somewhat, with the excise reductions and the likes, certainly have not been wasted measures but, rather, have actually kept down inflation by approximately

0.6%. When someone is shopping in the supermarket tonight with their basket of goods, that food would have cost approximately 0.6% more had we not taken these measures. We need to do both. However, I fully accept that we are facing the second energy shock in the European Union in half a decade and we need to transition much more quickly.

Deputy Ged Nash: Energy costs are the absolute top priority for people across the country. The October budget in a couple of weeks' time will be all about the cost of living. It has been a busy few weeks for the Tánaiste and his Cabinet colleagues. Two weeks to the budget and Simon's sieve gets leakier by the day. There will be indexation of income tax bands and credits for PAYE workers but nothing to address the hit they took last year when working people were made to pay for tax cuts for diners and developers. There will be a fiver in the fuel allowance but no commitment yet to the extra four weeks again next year. There will be an extension of the cuts to excise on motor fuels and, as the Tánaiste has said time and again, something will be done to reduce the price of home heating oil. These measures will barely make a dent in the real costs for families. The Government seems only to be concerned with certain sectors of society - only some energy users and only some road users.

Electricity and gas prices are already going up by at least 10%. Public transport fares are to rise by even more. The price of diesel and kerosene will rise further and it is oil and energy companies that are profiting massively off the crisis caused by Trump. Why is the Government not taking a comprehensive approach to energy affordability? The impact of higher oil prices is already feeding into higher inflation. Input costs for construction, transport, fertiliser and so on will lead to even higher food and housing costs next year. Wages will have to rise but the Government is turning its back, for example, on public sector workers. Families are really struggling with soaring grocery bills and unaffordable rents. They need to know the Government's plan on energy costs. The Tánaiste needs to front up with them now.

Last week, finance ministers from across Europe met with the Tánaiste. They gathered in Dublin. Six of them wrote to the Tánaiste a number of weeks ago in relation to taxing the windfall profits of power companies. A week on, where does the Government actually stand? I know what the Tánaiste said earlier but will this happen? We know that carbon tax will be paused again but consumers are getting the price signal of higher oil prices and that will change behaviour. What we are missing is the ring-fenced funds to help families who were hit the hardest. A windfall tax is needed to support households with targeted energy credits and to fund retrofitting. It could help to plug the carbon tax gap too.

The energy crisis has been rolling on for months - in fact, it has been rolling on for years - and we need a proper plan. In May, the Minister for energy updated the Cabinet on progress from the national energy affordability taskforce. An action plan was supposed to be submitted to Government by the autumn - we have heard little of it since - focused on short, medium and longer-term measures to support households and businesses. That is all this Government seems to be doing. I have three questions. Has the Government received the energy affordability action plan and will it be published before the budget? Will it put an actual windfall tax on power companies and when? On behalf of families throughout the country, I have a very clear question: will the Government finally commit to a €400 targeted energy grant for families across the country?

The Tánaiste: I am slightly confused. On the one hand the Deputy is chastising me for talking about what might be in the budget and on the other he is asking me to give it all out today. Those two things are a little bit contradictory even for me to justify in my own mind. I certainly make no apology nor do I need any permission from the Opposition to talk directly to the people of Ireland about the Government's intentions and not allow those intentions to be misrepresented by the Opposition. I want the people of Ireland to know and will continue to communicate directly with the people of Ireland in relation to our budgetary plans, in relation to our plans to deliver on our programme for Government commitments about making sure work pays and that people who work hard in this country can get ahead and not just get by. We are going to make progress in areas like childcare and there will be a significant package of supports for energy in the budget in 12 days' time.

I know we have this debate regularly and the Deputy will not be surprised to hear me say this but I want to say it again: when he says our packages to date have just supported parts of society or some sectors of the economy, I have to push back on that. The economic advice available to the Oireachtas through the chief economist to my Department is very clear that the package of measures we have put in place has suppressed inflation in the overall economy by 0.6%. A PAYE worker, even one who does not drive a car, is actually benefiting from a lower rate of inflation than we would have otherwise seen. There is a direct correlation between the commodity price and general inflation in the economy. I want to make that point.

I also want to push back on the idea that we do not want to do a deal with public sector workers. We want to sit down with them and for work to pay in this country for everybody in the public and private sectors. We value the role and contribution of our public sector workers. We have constructive trade unions in this country. I said that to them directly this week. They played a big role in this country in the darkest economic days. We want to get around a table and have a conversation about a new public sector pay deal.

On the Deputy's three specific questions, I have received, I believe, or certainly I am aware of the content in relation to the national energy affordability taskforce report. There are a number of proposals there that Government will be able to advance and bring forward. I need to seek clarity from the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, as to his intention in relation to publication and the likes, and I do not wish to speak for him other than to say there is good work being done there. I am taking the constructive, genuine way in which the Deputy wants to see it and consider what might be there, so I will speak to Government colleagues in relation to that.

On the issue of energy in general, the Deputy is asking me to clarify what will be in the package and whether there will be certain proposals. I accept and acknowledge that the Deputy has made constructive proposals too. The final composition of the energy tax package has not yet been decided by Government. It will be decided in advance of budget day. There will be some temporary measures to help in the here and now. The fuel allowance scheme, which is permanent, opens on Monday. I reiterate that for people watching. There also need to be more permanent measures in terms of how we can help people transition. We will consider all of the constructive ideas we have heard in this House in the composition of that.

On the windfall energy tax, given that we hold the Presidency of the Council of the European Union, Ireland has to play an honest broker role in trying to get people around the table to see if there is a consensus or majority view. That is what we kicked off in Dublin Castle the last

week. We asked the European Commission to do a body of work and report back to ECOFIN on Thursday week.

Deputy Ged Nash: We know the decisions taken in last year's budget, where PAYE workers were simply ignored by this Government, have made things much more difficult for ordinary working families throughout the country to absorb even small increases in food and energy prices. The Government needs to make up for that in this budget. The Tánaiste knows that himself. In my view, that is a decision that will haunt this Government and its relationship with PAYE workers for the duration of its term. We know that energy costs will absolutely dominate the political discourse. It is what everybody is talking about on the streets, at football matches and in our offices and clinics. It is of huge concern. We cannot keep making up energy policy and interventions on the hoof. I ask again: why is the energy affordability plan we were told to expect by the autumn to enable us all to plan for the budget in a comprehensive way being hidden? Why is it being concealed? What is the Tánaiste's position on energy credits? He is prepared to tell the media what his view is on excise cuts, carbon tax, kerosene and VAT and so on, but not on energy credits. We need to know.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: If you had come into Government when you had the chance, we would be able to tell you now.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Minister. That is unnecessary.

The Tánaiste: I have direct responsibility in government for taxation policy, excise tax, and the application of tax on carbon. Therefore, when I am asked a direct question, I answer it. The issue in relation to energy credits and energy supports in general is a matter for the broader Government to consider in the round. I genuinely believe, and I think the Deputy does deep down too, that people are less concerned about the modality by which we help people and more concerned about help. What I am saying very clearly to people is there will be a number of ways we will endeavour to help people with the cost of living. They do not quite think in the way we think in this structured bureaucracy we work in, sometimes. They want to know if they are going to be helped to get through the winter, if they will have more of their take-home pay, if their childcare bill is going to come down and if somebody is going to do something in this global chaos of energy to try to suppress Ireland's exposure to it to some degree. The answer to all of those questions is "Yes". The Government will come forward with a range of measures. I acknowledge the constructive suggestions from some Opposition parties. We will take them on board. We will consider all of these in the round and we will bring forward an energy package on budget day, which is just 12 days away.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: The Tánaiste has said budget 2027 will prioritise workers who get up early every morning, yet the hundreds of thousands of workers who get up early every morning to catch a bus, train or Luas find they are being targeted by the Government to pay more. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have made a choice. In the middle of a cost-of-living crisis, they have chosen now as a good time to hike up public transport fares - not by the rate of inflation, which is 3% or 4%, but by an average of 15%, and far more for some journeys. For example, standard fares in Limerick, Galway and Waterford are going up by 26% under the guise of simplification. Child rail commuter fares in Cork are actually increasing by 130%

because of new rules around standardisation. For a short hop journey on Dublin Bus, the fare is rising by 33%.

So what does that actually mean? It means that if you take the bus to and from work in Dublin city, you are paying an extra euro a day, an extra fiver a week, an extra 250 quid a year. That is a real impact on people's incomes at the best of times but to put that on people in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis is cruel. The Tánaiste has made a huge political play about the income tax changes that are due in the budget, which will deliver hundreds of euro to workers. Yet if those workers take public transport, he is going to reach into their pocket and take hundreds of euro back. Budget 2027 will punish people who take the bus to work. The only promise that commuters have to look forward to is that he is going to do it the same time again next year with another fare increase. All we are talking about is €70 million. If €70 million is provided to the NTA in this year's budget, it would remove the need for these public transport fare hikes. It would protect low-income workers from this hit. Why do the financial struggles of workers who take the bus and train not matter to the Government? It found the money to support motorists and hauliers when they needed it. In fact, it found 20 times the amount of money that would be needed to stop these fare hikes. Why is the same concern not being shown to people who take public transport? They are struggling too. They are struggling with the cost of energy. They are struggling with the cost of heating their homes and now, from January, they are going to be struggling with the cost of public transport as well.

This is the Tánaiste's first budget as Minister for Finance. He should not use it to punish people who take the bus and train. He should provide €70 million extra to the NTA to stop these fare hikes. He should treat public transport users with the same concern as everybody else who gets up early.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy O'Gorman very much. I understand that nobody welcomes a fare increase but we are making a choice here to continue the progress that we have made in public transport because a low fare is no good if there is not a bus. There are a hell of a lot of parts of this country where people are still waiting for bus routes, Local Link services, and where people want to see the roll-out of a better public transport network. I can understand why Deputy O'Gorman says it that it would only cost this to do that - what he says is factually correct - but of course this to do that has to be seen in the context of the other things we need to do as well, which is to provide more bus routes and better public transport. We need to invest in more frequent and more reliable services, and in enough buses so that there is a bus when somebody goes to get the bus. The only factor is not the fare but sometimes whether a person will get a seat or if there is a route. There are parts of this country where public transport is still very much in its infancy and we need to invest significantly in that as well.

There is a context to this. Fares will still be approximately 8% lower than they were eight years ago. That is at a time when the cost of running the services has increased significantly too - that needs to be factored in - and when the network is expanding. The State is increasing its contribution to public transport substantially. It will continue to do so. That should not be dismissed. We are also maintaining a number of other things, some of which the Deputy and I worked on in the previous Government. Free travel for kids aged under nine will remain in place. Children do not pay for public transport in Ireland under the age of nine, which is something we introduced in the previous Government. There are 50% young adult and student fares as well. The companion pass has been expanded to everyone over the age of 70 who can

now bring someone with them on public transport for free as well. Crucially, we are going to roll out 140 new and improved services. The fare money is going directly back in to more routes and enhanced routes too, so people using public transport will see the benefits of that too.

Deputy O'Gorman did the thing that lots of people in this House do. Deputy Nash did it a moment ago. "Why do you like the motorists?" We have got to stop doing this. This is deliberately ignoring the economic facts available to this House, as is the House's right, but it is not a very honest thing to do. The advice available to the Government, economically, is that the measures we have taken to reduce fuel prices have helped suppress inflation in the Irish economy by an average 0.6%. Therefore, the person getting the bus, train or Luas has benefited in terms of the inflation in our country being around 0.6% lower. They have benefited from that decision when they have gone into the shop. We should not try to ask: "What about the motorist versus the person getting the bus? What about the person in rural Ireland versus urban Ireland?" The decisions that we have taken have had a positive impact on suppressing inflation growth in this country.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: When the NTA came before us in the transport committee last Wednesday, it was very clear that this fare increase is not about delivering extra services next year; this is about providing the exact same level of service this year as last year. Public transport users are getting nothing extra.

The Tánaiste: They are wrong.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: That is what they told us. That is what they said. The Tánaiste says they are wrong. None of the 145 extra routes he is talking about are funded. Again, that is all conditional on decisions coming up before the budget. The NTA did tell us the consequence of this decision. It is 4.5% fewer passengers using public transport next year. That is going to be the consequence and the legacy. The Tánaiste is right: this is about choices and priorities. In the previous Government, the Green Party chose to reduce fares and deliver more services. The Government is choosing to hammer public transport users.

The Tánaiste: Deputy O'Gorman is continuing his dogma of trying to pit one part of society against the other. The Government has to do more than one thing at a time. We have to continue to improve public transport and we make absolutely no apology for trying to help people in terms of excise cuts. If it was up to Deputy O'Gorman, he would not reduce the cost of petrol or diesel. In fairness, unlike some, he is very honest in relation to that. We believe people, including in his constituency, need assistance in the here and now as well.

The reason the NTA is wrong is that it is not the sovereign Government of this country. We are. What the sovereign Government of this country will do in 12 days' time is provide clarity in relation to public transport funding for 2027. What I am telling the Deputy is we have made a decision that the fare changes that are being brought about by the NTA, which are effective from next year, will result in a sustainable level of funding that will enable us to significantly expand public transport routes in this country. The people have not chosen the Deputy to be in government. He is not going to misrepresent the record of this Government.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Joe Neville: Today, I want to discuss capital infrastructure projects and the legacy this Government can and should leave in the State in relation to important project delivery. We must ensure, while doing this, that we give value for money and that our spending is cost effective. I know that as a country we can do it all.

All around us, the largest companies in the world are at a cutting edge. A ten-minute walk from my house, we have one of the most sophisticated semiconductor foundries in Europe. Intel, even with Covid in the background for a period, was able to deliver a multibillion euro plant on time and on budget. Pfizer, with sites in Kildare and Cork, has spent billions, with companies like Amazon and Microsoft building too. This is done with Irish people at the helm - designing, building and overseeing these successful key projects. We need to ensure that the same rigorous application of high standards is shown to State investments. Through good strategic planning, we have seen our economy prosper, wealth being created and our population grow. With that, our infrastructure has become strained and that is why the Government, wisely, has put €275 billion aside for capital investment in infrastructure over the next ten years.

As a Government, we have also taken positive steps by passing the Critical Infrastructure Act. We have delivered the Accelerating Infrastructure Action Plan, set up the Housing Activation Office and published the detailed national development plan review. We know that we can do things right. The national broadband plan, despite much negativity from the other side of this House, has been a great success. The Luas cross-city extension, which improved public transport in the capital, along with the motorway extensions and bypasses, such as in Tuam and Macroom, have changed people's lives.

We can build and we can deliver but we also need to ensure that the €275 billion put aside for infrastructural spending is spent well. There must be accountability, oversight and consequences where the relevant State bodies fail to deliver. Be it failures from the initial scoping of the projects, lack of functionality or management overrides, it is not good enough for heads of State projects and CEOs to come before Oireachtas committees such as mine and the Committee of Public Accounts and talk retrospectively about cost overruns and delays in capital infrastructure. Many of them then shrug their shoulders when they come before us in the PAC, blaming those who came before them, which leads ultimately to no accountability. This is why I am highlighting this today. The people of Ireland need to be assured that the highest standards are being followed, that value for money is being sought and that infrastructure is being delivered economically and efficiently.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Neville for raising this issue. I also thank him for his ongoing work on infrastructure and for being my party's spokesperson on infrastructure. I was pleased that we visited Intel recently in his county. Intel has shown a real vote of confidence in Kildare but also in the Irish economy.

Deputy Neville is right that we are investing an extraordinary amount in capital. More than a quarter of a trillion euro will be spent on infrastructure in this country in the timeline the Deputy outlined.

With that opportunity comes great responsibility to make sure projects are delivered, with value for money to the fore but also with speed and efficiency. There is obviously a cost to the projects not being in place in the here and now. We still live in a country where public infrastructure can be somewhere between 25% and 30% below the EU average. We all know there are real infrastructural choke points in our constituencies and communities, whether it is water, energy, wastewater, transport or social infrastructure such as schools and hospitals and, of course, housing as well.

The Deputy is right to point to the fact that there are a lot of things this country does well. The national broadband plan was pretty much universally opposed by most political parties in this House but people now herald it in their own constituency, are delighted with the connections and are happy to turn up to the events. We backed the national broadband plan. It has come in on budget and it has come in ahead. It has made this country the most connected country in the European Union. It has made rural Ireland, including farmyards, extraordinarily connected as well. It was something nobody else in this place wanted but we backed it and it was the right decision to make.

There have also been times when things have not gone right in relation to infrastructure. The work the Minister, Deputy Jack Chambers, has done deserves great credit in terms of looking at how we can accelerate infrastructure and what we have done as a Government in bringing the private sector in with the public sector. I never buy this idea put forward by some people that the private sector can just run everything. No, the public sector has an important role to play too, but collaboration between the private and public sector can be really good. Bringing in private sector expertise - I think of the likes of Sean O'Driscoll - along with public sector people to sit around a table and ask what we need to accelerate infrastructure delivery has now given us our action plan. We have seen 95% of the commitments already delivered. All 30 actions in the plan actually remain on track.

We have already seen the benefits in speeding it up. There have been 26 weeks saved on the Waterford wastewater treatment plant, which the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, will be pleased to hear. There have been 26 weeks saved on the Ballymore Eustace to Saggart main water project, Deputy Neville will be pleased to hear. That is due to the removal of external reviews and changes in thresholds within the infrastructure guidelines. We have seen 12 months taken off the greater Dublin drainage project. We have seen timelines for maritime area consents now reduced by 30% for fit bodies. This is already having a really positive effect. The ESB is receiving quicker decisions from An Coimisiún Pleanála and well below the statutory timeline of 48 weeks. With MetroLink, we saw the withdraw of the judicial review speeding up the project. We have passed the Critical Infrastructure Act as well. We have a lot of work to do but the reforms in the action plan are beginning to take hold and we have to drive them on every day.

Deputy Joe Neville: I thank the Tánaiste for the response. I highlighted this because it is so important. Yesterday, I saw glimpses of it at the infrastructure committee. We had Garret Doocey of the housing activation office talking about the projects it did. I asked for specific timelines and transparency to be put in place so the office can come before us biannually at our committee. It is really important we see it in the Chambers and the committees so we know what is being done. Ultimately, then, we can reassure the public that we are on time and the money is being spent.

At the same time, we had Uisce Éireann with us and I was able to highlight the issues we have with the water infrastructure in Leixlip. Local businesses put up a post on social media about water infrastructure. The water was out on Sunday and again yesterday. How do you try to run a business in that situation? There is the yin and yang of longer-term projects being run well but we also have to ensure the infrastructure for the current housing and businesses runs properly and well for them. Whether that be cars stuck in traffic or water not working, those issues have to be resolved in our areas too.

The Tánaiste: I fully agree. The housing activation office and Garret Doocey are doing a very good job, along with the team and the seconding in of people from other State agencies. The Deputy is right that we have allocated a lot of money and communities now want to see those projects delivered quickly. Each of those projects are enablers for housing right across the country as well.

I personally believe there are two ways the Government should operate: the Government should help when it can and get the hell out of the way when it cannot. Infrastructure requires both. We are helping by providing a quarter of a trillion euro in investments but, also, sometimes we need to get out of the way in terms of bureaucracy and red tape - is there anything to be said for another permit, review or body? That is really what the accelerating infrastructure taskforce action plan is about. We help by providing the funding and get out of the way when it comes to far too much bureaucracy and red tape. I have given tangible examples to the House today, on foot of Deputy Neville's question, of where we are already seeing the benefit of speeding up those timelines. We have to keep at that.

An Ceann Comhairle: Before I move to Questions on Policy or Legislation, we are having some technical difficulties with our clock but a minute is a minute. I am still watching.

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

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Earlier, we welcomed some of the residents from the Garvaghy Road. It is a very difficult time for them. People are shocked at the prospect of an Orange Order march being forced down the Garvaghy Road this Sunday. I was a teenager when the Orange Order attempted to force marches down the Garvaghy Road many years ago. I remember the images of the fear that was created in that community - the stand-off, the riots and the violence that happened afterwards. Things have moved on so much and thank God they have but it is utter madness that anyone would try to drag us back there.

For 28 years, this community has lived in peace, free from unwanted Orange Order marches being forced through their community. That progress must be protected. Can the Tánaiste tell the Dáil today what engagement the Government will have with the British Government? Will he join with me in expressing support for the Garvaghy Road community and the right to live free from fear and intimidation?

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. I spoke with his party leader on this issue yesterday. I am very much aware of the concerns of residents in the area. I too remember the scenes on our television screens and the likes of the real, painful, traumatic and extraordinarily upsetting and divisive scenes that community lived through and experienced. I am also conscious that we are all working for a better future for this island and a shared island and shared future and, I hope, ultimately, a unified island as well. I need to be mindful in the position I occupy of the independence of the work and role of the Parades Commission and the need for it to be allowed to do its work. I assure the Deputy and the residents that Government officials here are monitoring the situation closely. We have asked our joint secretariat in Belfast to keep us informed of developments. I am pleased the residents of the Garvaghy Road are here with us today.

Deputy Jen Cummins: On Monday, Virgin Media will show a documentary about special education in this country. The sneak previews I have seen show there are still children without an appropriate school place. However, equally shocking is that those who do get a place in school are being educated in cleaners' rooms with no windows or natural light, or they are being educated under staircases in classrooms. On top of that, a regulation room in one of the schools shown has been put in a disabled bathroom. Thankfully, the caretaker blocked off the toilet, but this is the state of our education system.

The school I saw is Stapolin Educate Together National School, which is trying its best. When the Minister of State visited it before the end of the previous academic year, he told the school to use all available space, and it is. The school is oversubscribed and could fill two classes. What will this Government do to make sure this is not happening in 2026?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue and acknowledge her ongoing work on this. I obviously have not seen the programme but I have seen the promotional clips for the programme and I will of course watch the programme and also discuss the matter with the Minister for education and Minister of State with responsibility for special education.

Objectively, we have seen a very significant increase in special classes, with 587 new classes sanctioned for the year. We have seen new classes established in every county. We have seen an increase in the number of special classes by 130% since 2020 and the special education budget is now over €3 billion. That does not take away from the point the Deputy makes, and I am not endeavouring for it to do that either, in terms of the need for capital to catch up, and the spaces, supports and facilities that our schools need as well. We will have an opportunity to reflect on this further in the budget in 12 days' time but I will watch the programme closely and engage with the Minister on the issues.

Deputy Mark Wall: I raise with the Tánaiste today the urgent need for additional carriages and hourly train services on the Waterford to Dublin line, which runs through my hometown of Athy. I have been raising this issue for the last number of years and I just want to read to the Tánaiste today from an email I got this morning from Eimear, who at the time was on the 7.15 a.m. Waterford to Heuston service. She said there were 18 people standing in the gap by the doors on the second-last carriage this morning. Two of them were retired people, very unsteady on their feet, who kept stumbling and were struggling to hold onto the train as it moved up and down. They had free travel passes, while Eimear had a tax saver ticket through

work. After the train stopped in Newbridge, a further 12 people were standing in the same spaces.

This is happening too often. It is happening too often because there is only one early morning service from my hometown of Athy. So many people have come to live there and that is what is happening regularly. I ask the Tánaiste to request of the Minister for Transport that we get more carriages on that particular line before we have a very serious accident.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue of the need for additional train carriage capacity serving his hometown of Athy on that Waterford to Dublin line. I thank Eimear for contacting Deputy Wall and providing that live lived experience from a train service this morning.

I will certainly speak with the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and ask that he engage with Irish Rail on the matter and come back to the Deputy directly.

Deputy Seamus Healy: The Israeli genocide in Gaza involves scholasticide, that is, the intentional destruction of the Palestinian education system. Israel University, the last remaining university in Gaza was demolished by the Israeli military. Some 80% of schools have either been damaged or destroyed. Tens of thousands of students, teachers, lecturers and university academics have been murdered. The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has raised what it says is very serious alarm over the systemic destruction of the Palestinian education system. Against that background, is it not shocking that the Government is refusing visas to Palestinian students to study at Irish universities? Surely, on the basis of the Israeli genocide in Gaza and the destruction of the Palestinian education system, visas should be granted to these students, who, against all the odds, have qualified for and have been offered places in Irish Universities.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Tánaiste to respond. Please, Deputy. Time is up.

Deputy Seamus Healy: I hope he will reverse that decision.

The Tánaiste: I deplore the ongoing genocidal activities that we are seeing in Palestine. I am conscious, in making these comments, that it is the UN General Assembly's high-level week and that the Taoiseach, the Minister for foreign affairs, the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, and a number of other representatives of the Government are present at the United Nations. The Taoiseach, the Minister for foreign affairs and others are prioritising engagements on issues relating to Palestine.

On the specific issue regarding visas for Palestinian students, the Department of Justice is working with the Department of foreign affairs to assist Irish citizens and their families who are affected from an immigration perspective. The Department is also continuing to work with the Department of Health on the Gaza medevac programme. We have responded to humanitarian crises before by establishing programmes to allow people in the State to bring relatives here if they can prove that they can independently support them. The Afghan admissions programme was the most recent of these. There is no special arrangement in place

for Palestinian students. No one is proposing the establishment of such a scheme, but we continue to support the Palestinian people in many ways.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: The Tánaiste has said that people want certainty around the new investment accounts and that he wants more young people to get into saving. That includes the tens of thousands of ordinary people who get up early in the morning to go to work. Some of them, luckily enough, have been able to put savings into vehicles like exchange-traded funds. At present, those people are taxed on eight years of those savings, even if they have not sold a thing. They are taxed on something they have not sold as a capital gain. The Department of Finance refers to this as a deemed disposal. The people to whom I refer want two straight answers. First, will they be able to move their savings into these new accounts without paying exit tax? Second, will the Tánaiste and the Department finally scrap the concept of deemed disposals or are they going to continue to kick the can down the road? Deemed disposal is an unfair and uncertain tax. It should not be there at all.

The Tánaiste: I will make two points. First, in the context of the final detail of the scheme, we will have an opportunity to thrash all of that out in the debate on the Finance Bill post the budget, including how the new accounts will interact with other investment opportunities. I will be happy to consider all of the issues the Deputy raises then.

On deemed disposal, I am on record in this House - I am certainly on the record in lots of places - as stating we need to move beyond deemed disposal. It was of a different time. It was an anti-avoidance measure, so it would be important to replace it. Obviously, we need to still have anti-avoidance measures. How much we can do in this budget will depend on the overall tax package and competing priorities, but I do expect to make some progress on it. The retail investment roadmap I published this summer shows the clear direction of travel in terms of moving beyond deemed disposal.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: Farmers and fishers in County Louth and across the country are being squeezed by rising fuel, fertiliser and fodder costs. These are essential costs, as the Tánaiste knows. A fishing boat cannot go to sea without fuel. A farmer cannot simply skip the buying of winter feed. Rural families depend on their cars, so they feel pressure at work and at home. How is the Government going to continue to support rural communities, farmers and fishers?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy McGreehan for raising this really important and timely issue. The Government is very conscious, as the Deputy is, of the pressure on farmers and fishers and is determined to provide supports. Today, the Ministers, Deputies Heydon and Chambers, will meet. The Taoiseach, the Deputy and I were all at the ploughing last week. We heard very clearly three issues, namely fuel, fodder and fertiliser. I call them the three Fs. There will be support for farmers with fodder and fertiliser. I am pleased to inform the House that we are working to extend the fuel supports scheme for farmers. I expect the details of that to be finalised in a couple of days.

Deputy Barry Ward: If the Tánaiste or I want to get a Bus Éireann bus or an Iarnród Éireann train, including a DART, we just turn up at the station, buy a ticket and get on. Wheelchair

users cannot do that. There is an expectation that they should give up to 24 hours notice to use an ordinary transport system that is provided and subsidised by the taxpayers of this country. Surely it is not beyond us to provide a better facility for wheelchair users. I acknowledge that there are new DART carriages coming, but they are up to two years away. They will facilitate ease of access, but wheelchair users who are using Bus Éireann or Iarnród Éireann will still have difficulty getting on and off transport and will still have to give notice in the meantime. They should not have to give notice in this day and age and we should be making sure it is easier for them to use public transport.

The Taoiseach: I fully agree with Deputy Ward. I thank him for raising what is an incredibly important issue. I see it in my community and, of course, he also sees it in his, probably most particularly on the DART line. Not to justify it, but this has certainly arisen as a result of a huge disparity in facilities at stations and access points across the country, particularly in the context of the many stations that were designed and built in the Victorian era.

We are absolutely committed to improving accessibility. There has been some clear and tangible progress. Last year, Irish Rail reduced the advanced notice requirement to just one hour at 15 of the busiest stations across the network, covering almost all terminus stations and the majority of assistance requests. There is a specific action in the National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030. Irish Rail is set to introduce a new passenger assistance management system across the rail network for customers requiring assistance, including those with disabilities, by the end of this year. Briefly, another good example is the new infrastructure, as the Deputy rightly referenced, namely the DART+ fleet, which will arrive next year. Each carriage will have an automatic sliding doorstep that will deploy every time the doors open. This will reduce the platform gap. The Deputy is so right to highlight this, and we should pursue it until it is fully resolved.

Deputy Mark Ward: I welcome that Government MEPs and Senators are finally starting to speak out about the dangers and harms of nitrous oxide. I hope Government will start supporting my legislation. My Bill is due to undergo pre-legislative scrutiny in November, following a nine-month delay imposed by the Government. In those nine months, we have had 14 cases of spinal cord damage in Beaumont Hospital and €3 million spent on storage of nitrous oxide canisters seized by customs, a matter which I raised with the Tánaiste at the finance committee. Dublin City Council reports a 490% increase in the number of canisters collected. Some 160,000 canisters end up in waste facilities. Veolia recycled 120,000 canisters last year. There has been 130% increase in the number of people accessing addiction treatment for nitrous oxide and a 900% increase in the number of people discharged from acute hospital services because of nitrous oxide. These figures are stark. They are not mine; they are contained in independent reports. In the absence of any solutions from Government, I ask that it work with me in a tangible way to progress my Bill through the Houses.

The Tánaiste: We will work with the Deputy on this. I acknowledge his sincerity and his work on this, as I have said before. This is a serious issue. I would characterise the Government's position slightly differently in the sense that there was some work that was ongoing in relevant Departments. However, the Deputy's legislation will now obviously go to pre-legislative scrutiny. That is an opportunity to put all of this information and evidence

together to look at the Bill in the round. Certainly, we have very much an open mind in working with the Deputy constructively on what is a very important issue.

Deputy Micheál Carrigy: Longford has untapped potential in terms of tourism. A number of projects have been developed to address this. I have been a director of Longford Tourism for the past 14 years. We have established our tourism network and a new strategy website aimed at increasing the awareness of what our county has to offer. Its rich and often untold story forms a backbone of this vision. I thank the Minister of State, Deputy 'Boxer' Moran, who was here earlier, for his support over the years with the formation of the Hidden Heartlands brand name and the work he is doing in the OPW. The Corlea Trackway Visitor Centre and the Corlea Bog Amenity Walk constitute a unique and untapped tourism and heritage site in Longford. We are working hard to promote the world of our heritage and the activities we have to offer, but we need further investment in order to bring to fruition the various projects that have been identified around the country, particularly for this, as I said, unique historical site and amenity that has so much potential in what is already a fantastic place to visit and enjoy. I attended a directors' meeting 10.30 a.m. for Longford Tourism, and we will be holding our annual general meeting at 3 p.m.

I o'clock

When will we see further investment in this sector and particularly for Corlea bog and trackway as there is a timeline for this to be delivered.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Carrigy for raising this issue. I must say that Longford is really making big progress in the tourism sector. So many people are now heading to Longford and there are a number of tourism facilities there as well. I thank the Deputy for his work and passion around Corlea and the bog and trackway centre. It is a remarkable piece of our heritage. I share the view that there is real potential to make it a visitor attraction for Longford but also for the wider midlands.

I know the Deputy knows through his work that Fáilte Ireland has invested €262,000 into a study on the centre's future development through the just transition fund. I am informed that the work is now nearly complete on that, and this will give the OPW a clear basis for considering the next steps while protecting the Iron Age trackway that makes it such a special area. I am glad the Deputy is keeping a focus on it. I will be very interested to see the options the study comes up with, and the Government will work with the Deputy to advance them.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I was contacted by a woman whose husband has multiple myeloma. It is a type of blood cancer, and it develops in the plasma cells. She stated that her husband is cold throughout the whole winter. He needs help with the either fuel allowance, which he does not get, or lower fuel prices. Another man contacted me and said that they need two cars to get to work. They have to commute huge distances in extreme traffic every day. His wife is considering staying at home to save the costs on the cars and childcare. They have had no holidays in the past two years. They have good salaries but they are paying everything out. Hardworking people in this country are saying that it is no longer worth it.

I want to invite the Tánaiste to the fuel protest meeting in Moate on Sunday at 5.30 p.m. That meeting is being organised by ordinary hardworking people whose backs are against the

wall. In April, this Government made the catastrophic mistake of refusing to talk to these people. Will the Tánaiste learn from that mistake and join us on Sunday?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy very much for the invitation but I will be working here on the budget in relation to fuel and energy, so I do not need to attend a protest meeting. What I need to do is make sure that people in this country do not feel the need the protest because they feel that we are making policy decisions that will help them.

By the way, I have also spoken to a number of the people who were involved in the fuel protests. I met many of them at the ploughing. I met many people at the ploughing and at the Longford show with Deputy Carrigy as well, including people who were involved in those protests. I met all the farmer representative organisations, the hauliers as recently as yesterday and the trade unions. Fuel and energy is a real issue but what I am saying to people, and I hope they are hearing it, is that we are going to provide clarity in relation to excise. We are looking at carbon tax on both home heating oil and gas. I have just given Deputy McGreehan a view in relation to the extension of the farm support scheme as well. The Government will bring forward a package in the round in relation to the energy situation in the budget in just 12 days' time.

Deputy Rory Hearne: The Tánaiste is probably well aware that there are thousands of council tenants across this country living in absolutely scandalous conditions with mould and damp. In my constituency, I have been working with a number of harrowing cases. I visited homes and have seen mould and damp on windows and in bedrooms, and the impact on children and babies. How is it right and fair that council tenants living in mouldy and damp conditions in houses that the State is responsible for are now being charged higher rents in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis because the Government has failed to fund councils sufficiently?

Some 40% of council tenants are in poverty after they pay their rent. That is five times the rate of homeowners. How can they afford more? Is it fair that children are left living in mouldy and damp conditions with devastating impacts on their health? Will the Tánaiste make a real move on the cost-of-living crisis for these people, and will he give councils the funding required for maintenance so they do not have to increase rents on these people?

The Tánaiste: I see the Deputy linked two issues. I see them as somewhat separate. The idea that anyone is living in a home owned by the State that has mould and damp and that children and the likes are there is not an acceptable situation. I fully agree with that. If the Deputy wants to provide me with the information, which I know he will, I am happy to pursue that with the Minister for housing and with the local authority too. Local authorities have a duty of care to their tenants too and just like governments at a national level have to manage their budgets, so too do local governments as well.

In relation to the budget in general, there will be a focus on child poverty. I acknowledge the Deputy was at the child poverty and well-being summit in his constituency in recent weeks. There are a number of targeted measures that we need to take to help families and children most at risk of poverty. The fuel allowance, which opens on Monday, is one such payment but there will be a number of other measures in the budget in 12 days' time.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: Bradley is a 15-year-old boy from my constituency of Meath who is waiting for an urgent orthodontist appointment in Navan, and he is not the only one. Bradley suffers from a severe jawbone condition that requires urgent uninterrupted orthodontic care. For over two years he has endured immense pain, endless procedural cycles and days where he could not even eat solid food. Last October was a milestone when his top brace went on but then the HSE system failed him. His orthodontist went out on unexpected leave and no replacement was provided. When a critical appliance broke in his mouth in July, it took two weeks just to get a cursory glance, only to be told no one else would touch his case. Bradley has now gone seven months without treatment. He is sitting right now with loose braces and useless blocks in his mouth. If his treatment backtracks, he faces a traumatic, preventable operation to break both of his jawbones. Can the Tánaiste give me a cast-iron guarantee that Bradley and other children in Meath will urgently be provided with the orthodontist services they badly need? Both the Tánaiste and I know this is not right.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Guirke for raising this issue. I am sorry to hear what Bradley and his family are enduring. I am not going to comment into the record of the Dáil on an individual case on which I do not have all of the information but the Deputy is entirely right to highlight the issue in relation to the orthodontic system and care in his constituency. On foot of him raising it, I will send a transcript of what he said, plus a broader query, to the Minister for Health and to the HSE and ask that they come back to the Deputy directly.

Deputy Albert Dolan: There are families in east Galway right now who are really worried because they cannot afford the cost of putting a fill of oil in the tank this winter. The reality is that the Government reduced the price on diesel and petrol but it is fair to say that it has not done anything yet to help families with the cost of home heating oil.

In this budget there needs to be a serious measure put in place to support the families that I represent in Galway to get through this winter because the price has completely ballooned. I ask that serious consideration be given to that and that supports be put in place. Also, there are families who have paid huge sums of money in the past month or so to fill a tank. Consideration needs to be given to backdating any payment or any support that goes in place for home heating oil because families cannot decide when the tank becomes empty and they have to fill it.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Dolan for raising the issue. He is right on the broader issue. When you look at the cost of energy, it has risen across the board, of that there is no doubt. However, when you look at the cost to fill a home heating oil tank, it has risen in quite an alarming manner. Roughly speaking, it was €950 to fill the tank last winter. It is anywhere between €1,500, €1,600, €1,700 and rising to fill the tank this winter. This is an extraordinary rise for families.

We are working through this as a Government together. The details will be published on budget day but the Tax Strategy Group paper does identify that we can treat carbon differently on different products. Regarding kerosene, there may be something we can do in that space. What we cannot do is do anything that risks our derogation in relation to the emissions trading system, ETS, because we do not want to end up paying billions more to Europe as a consequence of this too. There obviously will be some people who will be disproportionately

more at risk of fuel poverty, and the fuel allowance system is part of that. We need to look at all of this in the round but we will endeavour to respond.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I have attended meetings with local residents, councillors and TDs from every party about the world famous Dunsink Observatory. The Dunsink urban plan will see a new town built that will have a bigger population than Longford and there are serious concerns. Even though every person we met wants to see housing on the site, there are serious concerns. Promises of new bus and Luas services are met with deep scepticism and concern, even from the National Transport Authority, NTA. Irish Water stated that there is no chance of phase 1 or 2 being completed without the Shannon pipeline at a cost of over €7.5 billion.

Dunsink Observatory is currently working towards UNESCO world heritage status. This will have serious implications for the density and heights adjacent to the observatory. We cannot have a massive development like this being developer-led. It must be State led. Would the Government support a local authority, cross-departmental and inter-agency team to oversee this development to ensure we do not make the mistakes of the past and that we see the environment and biodiversity protected, as well as public transport, water, schools, etc., put in place as the homes are being developed?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Donnelly for highlighting this issue in relation to the Dunsink Observatory and the views of the community there as well.

My understanding is that the public consultation process has concluded. The local authority is duty bound to consider all of that feedback. From what the Deputy says, it sounds like it has received quite a lot. It will then be for the local authority to come forward with the next steps. The Government stands ready to assist in any kind of modality or with suggestions the local authority might make as to how best to consider these matters. We await the next decision from the local authority.

Deputy Martin Kenny: We have a serious issue in the north west in regard to transport infrastructure. The issue of infrastructure has been raised by many Members and the Tánaiste has given commitments in regard to critical infrastructure. The western rail corridor is a particularly critical piece of infrastructure for the centres of population from Sligo right down along the western seaboard. It is welcome that the part from Athenry to Claremorris is now going to be developed. Work is progressing on that. However, in the context of the next leg, which goes right the way up to Sligo and past the international airport at Knock, it is being proposed at the moment that a cycleway be put in place. Transport infrastructure is vital. A cycleway is nice to have and nobody has a problem with it if it is adjacent to the rail line, but it certainly should not block progress in regard to building a rail corridor which will provide essential transport for people from Sligo all the way down to Galway and further afield. People have to go for cancer treatment to Galway because the cancer services in Sligo were closed down. In fairness, people are saying that they cannot go for treatment on bicycles. They need proper transport, and we need to have a commitment from Government that what I am referring to will be done.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Kenny for raising this issue. I am familiar with the greenway issue from my engagement with the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, and various TDs,

including the Deputy, in relation to Sligo. This should not be an either-or situation. Any decision in relation to the greenway needs to preserve the railway. My understanding, from local discussions, is that the greenway will be done in such a way as to preserve the railway line. We have, as the Deputy said, already started on the western rail corridor with the decision on the Athenry to Claremorris leg. We are still committed to the further expansion but in the interim - in the here and now - the greenway can be delivered in a way that preserves the railway line. I am also conscious of the point the Deputy makes more generally about transport in the north west. I welcome the progress that we intend to make on the N17, which will be very much welcomed by the Deputy's constituents too.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Why is the Government using its Presidency of the European Council to propose a massive undermining of the right of privacy of European citizens? The Irish Presidency has a proposal for the digital omnibus, which is a deregulation agenda in the interests of big tech. What it proposes is that, effectively, GDPR be disapplied when it comes to AI. As a result, the use of personal data will be presumed to be lawful as long as it is being used in terms of AI. This means that what currently would be illegal, which is collecting personal data for advertising, would become legal as long as it is being done under the guise of AI. Why is the Government pushing this deregulation agenda? Why is it pushing a massive giveaway of European citizens' personal data to big-tech corporations? Will the Government stop this and will it defend the right of privacy?

The Tánaiste: I happened to see some of the news coverage of the committee discussion in relation to this yesterday. I say this very respectfully, but sometimes there is a misrepresentation of the role of the Presidency of the Council of the European Union. It is not an executive function; it is a role to act as an honest broker in terms of bringing forward the various views raised by the 27 member states at meetings, often of officials through Coreper structures and the likes, as well. It is not a position of the Irish Presidency; it is a bringing forward of the feedback from the member states, fulfilling the honest broker role. From an Irish perspective, we take very seriously the need to live in an innovative European Union and an innovative Irish economy in the context of the benefits of AI that are there. We certainly are not in favour of a free-for-all. Far from it. Our view is quite the opposite when it comes to making sure that there are guardrails in place and that there is respect for citizens' rights. Some of the strengths of the European Union have been around having robust structures in place versus what happens in other parts of the world.

Deputy Daniel Ennis: The ESRI recently published a report which highlighted the number of children living in households below the poverty line rose to 200,000 in 2024. All the while, this Government boasts about tax surpluses. We are told that the money is being kept aside for a rainy day. For those families and children, it is raining and it is pouring. In my constituency, we see billions running through the IFSC while right next door on Sheriff Street, where my family still lives, there are people who cannot even afford to put food on the table. These levels of widening inequality are not inevitable. They are a choice, and they are a choice being made by the Government. The Government reported a budget surplus of €23.2 billion in 2024. When we have 200,000 children living below the poverty line, we do not have a budget surplus; we have a bad accountant. What real, targeted and meaningful measures will the Government take in budget 2027 to reduce the scandalous rate of child poverty in this country?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Ennis for raising the issue of child poverty and for raising it in a very real way in relation to his community and his constituency, including Sheriff Street and the area he represents in Dáil Éireann. What I am not going to do is get into a back-and-forth on statistics and reports, etc. The point is that child poverty is still too high. I agree with that. It is true that the ESRI data probably has not yet seen the benefit of some Government measures that we took, most particularly in the previous budget, but that is not the point. No matter what figure one wants to land on, it is too high. I accept that. What measures are we going to take? We will have to take quite a number of them, but the working family payment and child support payments have been a useful way of targeting resources at those most in need. Continued investment in youth services, education and early years education is also really important. There is a child poverty unit in the Department of An Taoiseach. I must say, in a completely non-political way, that officials and experts now working on child poverty are providing advice to Government which is useful and informed. The child poverty and well-being summit, which will also produce a report, will hopefully give good guidance to this House.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I am sure the Tánaiste is aware that a recent poll in *The Irish Times* is showing that nearly 90% of people are finding it hard to manage financially. I am hearing directly from families and parents across my constituency that go leor daoine are struggling with bills at home. Many of them are also being asked for voluntary contributions or to hold fundraisers just to keep the local school that their kids are attending afloat in the context of paying for heating, electricity and cleaning. I have introduced legislation on private wires that could help to unlock community energy sharing, as is done in Denmark and Germany. I am also pushing plug-in solar, but that is all I can do. Will the Tánaiste, as the Minister for Finance, ahead of the budget, increase the school capitation grant in order that parents who are already struggling are not forced to go into their own pockets so that their schools can stay afloat?

The Tánaiste: First, I will not jump over the constructive contributions the Deputy has been making on private wires legislation and the likes. I thank him for that and for his expertise and interest in that, which is valuable to Government. We look forward to working with him on that.

The Deputy will understand that frustrating thing I am going to say about not being able to get into every specific of the budget, other than to say that we did increase capitation last year. That was important and was welcomed. We are listening and engaging with the school communities in relation to their funding base. The Minister for education is in talks with the Minister for public expenditure. We will finalise the package which will be revealed here as part of the national budget on 6 October.

Non-Binary and Intersex Recognition Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to provide for the recognition of a non-binary gender and for those born intersex; to amend the Gender Recognition Act 2015

to recognise a non-binary gender; to amend the Interpretation Act 2005 to include a non-binary gender; to amend the Civil Registration Act 2004 to allow qualified informants to record an X on Registers for Births, Stillbirths, Adoptions, and Death; to amend the Equal Status Act 2000 and Employment Equality Act 1998 to outlaw discrimination based on sexual characteristics.

This Bill will give legal rights and recognition to non-binary and intersex people in Ireland. This is obviously a small minority of people but they face extreme invisibility, marginalisation, violence and discrimination. The Bill would essentially do three things. First, it would introduce the option of an X marker on the gender recognition certificate, in addition to M and F for male and female. Without legal recognition, a non-binary person is systematically discriminated against in accessing healthcare, legal documents, passports with their own identity, and more. Second, for a person born with intersex characteristics, it would allow a parent or a qualified informant to put an X on a birth certificate, meaning parents would no longer be forced to immediately choose between male and female, with the very serious consequences that brings. Third, it would give equality before the law and prevent discrimination.

What do we mean by non-binary in the context of this Bill? It refers to any person who identifies outside the binary of male and female. This includes non-binary people but also genderqueer people and anyone who sees themselves as not fitting into a male-female binary. Again, there are not exact figures for the number of non-binary people in Ireland. A serious opportunity was missed by the census, for example. It which could have posed a question around that, which was raised at the time. State Departments in Ireland are not categorising. However, up to 10% and possibly more, of people are LGBTQI in surveys and at least one third would identify as non-binary from that category.

Globally, it is estimated that 2% of people identify their gender in a way that is outside the binary.

What is intersex? People who are intersex are born with innate variations of sex characteristics, including chromosomal, anatomical or hormonal, that vary from the societal or medical understanding of the typically male or female. Approximately one in every 500 babies is born with either ambiguous genitalia or other variations of sex development. It is not an insignificant number. Intersex variations may not be noticeable until puberty, with some variations not noticeable without testing. There are more than 40 different types, which I do not have time to detail. The UN recognises that at least 1.7% of the world population is born with an intersex trait. For comparison, 2% of people globally have green eyes. There may be as many as 90,000 intersex people in Ireland alone.

Intersex identities have been portrayed as a newfangled development. In fact, in all ancient civilisations, there was a recognition of many genders, including two-spirit people in native American culture, Hijra people in India, and the third genders and more depicted in art and literature in Mesopotamia and Asia.

This Bill is important for people's personal lives. I do not have time to read out all the testimonials we received when we announced we would be bringing forward this Bill. It is important as well because medically unnecessary and irreversible surgery is being done on children who are born intersex in this country. The Government should bring in a Bill to ban

that practice, which has been banned in many countries, including Malta. It leads to very damaging consequences such as infertility, pain and urinary problems. Ireland has been called out over this on the world stage.

The key reason for bringing forward this Bill is the hostility that LGBTQI people are facing in the world right now. Again, I do not have time to go into all the statistics but we have seen Trump in the US take the X marker off passports and announce there are only two genders. Many people are living in hiding in the US. There are people living in hiding in Ireland as well because they are not able to be comfortable going to their doctor, going to a hospital, getting a passport and doing all the many other things many of us take for granted. Belong To has done some very important research in this regard.

In the time I have left, I want to mention promises that were made by the State. In 2018, after a review of the Gender Recognition Act was undertaken, it was promised that non-binary recognition would be introduced. This Bill would fulfil that promise and answer people's hopes that it will actually be implemented. I have noticed the Taoiseach going on Pride marches and announcing how great it was to do so. Many people who engage with Pride are non-binary or intersex. The Taoiseach must not bow down to any right-wing pressure. The changes we are proposing are very important to people in this country in their daily lives.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Frankie Feighan): No.

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.24 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.05 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.24 p.m. and resumed at 2.05 p.m.

2 o'clock

World Pharmacists Week: Statements

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): Tomorrow, we celebrate World Pharmacists Day 2026. Of course, it is World Pharmacists Week. This year's theme, chosen by the International Pharmaceutical Federation, is empowering pharmacists for healthier futures. It is an appropriate theme for Ireland. Over the past year, we have taken significant steps to empower pharmacists to play a broader and more clinical role within our health service.

Through new services, new responsibilities and new investment, pharmacy is becoming an even more important part of delivering accessible, patient-centred healthcare.

Pharmacists are a phenomenal asset to, and a fundamental part of, our health infrastructure. Community pharmacies are located right where people live. Some 85% of people live within 5 km of a pharmacy. They are embedded in our communities. They are often the first and easiest place for people to turn for trusted advice and practical support. World Pharmacists Day provides an important opportunity to reflect on the immense value of the pharmacy profession. It is a day to recognise not only the expertise of pharmacists but also their commitment, compassion, professionalism and dedication to patients both within our hospitals and in communities across the country.

In September last year, the landmark community pharmacy agreement was published, following agreement between my Department, the HSE and the Irish Pharmacy Union. The agreement supports commitments to expand pharmacy services, provides new investment in the sector, supports value for money and modernisation, and advances important digital reforms. I welcome to the Public Gallery representatives from the Irish Pharmacy Union. I thank them for their work and collaboration on the agreement.

The progress achieved over the past year demonstrates what can be accomplished when the Government, the HSE and professionals work together with a shared ambition to improve services for patients. These achievements include the common conditions scheme, MediBack for the safe disposal of unused medicines; the medicines optimisation support service; the national condom distribution scheme; health promotion initiatives, including alcohol in pregnancy and men's health; PPV23 pneumococcal vaccination for eligible individuals; and the promotion of the BowelScreen programme at population level.

The most significant pharmacy reform delivered over the past year, and indeed for some years, has been the introduction of the common conditions service. This landmark initiative has expanded the role of pharmacists in patient care and has made access to treatment faster and more convenient for thousands of people. For the first time, appropriately trained pharmacists can assess and prescribe treatment for a range of common health conditions. The service currently covers eight common conditions, namely, allergic rhinitis, cold sores, conjunctivitis, impetigo, oral thrush, shingles, cystitis and vaginal thrush. This represents a significant advancement in how care is delivered in Ireland by allowing patients to access care quickly and conveniently without the need to secure a GP appointment for every minor illness.

The service was developed in response to recommendations of the expert task force on pharmacy and was formally launched in January. This service brings healthcare closer to people, reduces inconvenience for patients and families and helps to ensure that people receive timely treatment for common conditions. Importantly, it also contributes to the wider objective of improving capacity across the health service. By enabling pharmacists to manage appropriate conditions safely within their scope of practice, the service helps to reduce pressure on other parts of the system while ensuring that patients receive prompt and high-quality care.

The response from the pharmacy profession has been extraordinarily positive. More than 95% of eligible pharmacies are participating in the service, demonstrating a strong commitment across the profession to supporting this important reform. It demonstrates a strong commitment across the profession to supporting the people in their areas, their customers and patients, who

will be able to get better access and much more quick access to expert care for common conditions. We now have the opportunity to see how we can drive further with the next set of conditions.

Pharmacists are highly trained professionals with an extensive knowledge of medicines, therapeutics and patient care. The common conditions service allows patients to benefit more fully from the expertise of the person at the centre of their community. For parents caring for a sick child, for workers balancing employment and family responsibilities and for people who may find it difficult to get appointments elsewhere, the service offers a practical and patient-centred alternative.

However, it is not just about convenience. It is about a relationship with trust, it is about accessing expertise and it is about building how we are bringing patient care into every part of every community. Nowhere can that be done better than through the community pharmacy network. The community pharmacy expansion implementation oversight group, which comprises representatives from pharmacy practise, the HSE and pharmacy and medicines regulators, supports the safe implementation of this service. There has been extensive training to deliver the service. I really want to thank pharmacists and their teams, who have leaned into this enormous opportunity to change how healthcare is delivered. With the success of the initial number of conditions, the challenge now is to see how much further we can go. The Department is currently evaluating this formally to see how effectively it has been implemented, where challenges have been encountered by patients, healthcare professionals and, of course, where we might go with the future. I have spoken to a number of people around the country who have availed of this of this service. However, I believe that we are nowhere near the point where people really fully know and are aware that it is available and as more people avail of the service, it will build through word of mouth. Even 12 months from now, we will see this as a much more regular part of the vernacular about how people are accessing care. It is a fantastic place to start. Sometimes we have to start somewhere. I am excited to see how this builds and how we can develop it. It is also part of a broader journey.

I want to highlight is MediBack. A few weeks ago, I was very pleased to announce the rollout of MediBack, a new nationwide unused medicines disposal service. Basically, this service provides patients with a safe, convenient way to return unused or expired medicines to pharmacies for proper disposal. It is so very important. The service helps reduce the risk of accidental harm, supports the responsible management of medicines and contributes to environmental protection. It is hugely significant. It helps to prevent antimicrobial resistance, as I said, safeguard the environment, reduce the risk of falsified medicines entering the black market, lowers the risk of accidental poisoning and supports suicide prevention and self-harm reduction by limiting access to unused medicines. If I look in the back of my cupboard, as I did when this service was introduced, there are out-of-date medicines and things that are no longer necessary. I have a little pile to bring back to my pharmacist. I encourage everybody to look in the back of their medicine cupboards to see what they can bring back to their pharmacist, if only for environmental protection apart from protection of their families and households from accidental poisoning or taking expired medicines that are not safe. People should look at the back of their cupboards to see what they can bring back to their pharmacist who is there to support them. The service also supports Ireland's One Health objectives by trying to protect people, animals and the environment from the risks associated with inappropriate storage or disposal of medicines. We know this is a massive environmental issue.

Both the National Hazardous Waste Management Plan 2021-2027 issued by the Environmental Protection Agency and the Community Pharmacy Agreement 2025 identified the establishment of such a nationwide disposal service as a priority. Every pharmacy that signs up to the community pharmacy agreement is required to provide MediBack free to the public. MediBack also aligns with the objectives of Sláintecare by promoting patient safety, improving environmental sustainability and generating evidence to inform future service improvement. The Department, the Irish Pharmacy Union, IPU, and the HSE are currently developing the evaluation arrangement for the service. That evaluation will provide a valuable opportunity to build a clear evidence base on the scale of used and expired medicines in Ireland and over time, the service will give us important information on both the types and volumes of medicines being returned. That information can then help inform future policy on prescribing, including overprescribing and deprescribing, and dispensing practices, including pharmacy and medicines optimisation, antimicrobial resistance and public awareness. It will support a more targeted approach to reducing medicines waste while improving value for money, patient safety and environmental protection. Programmes such as MediBack can operate quietly in the background but they are a really powerful reminder of the broader contribution pharmacists make to society. Pharmacists are not just simply involved in the supply of medicine. They are stewards of medicine throughout their lifecycle, supporting their safe and effective use as well as their responsible disposal. As healthcare systems increasingly focus on sustainability, environmental responsibility and prudent resource management, initiatives such as MediBack become ever more important.

I want to highlight the Health (Provision of Contraception Prescribing Service in Retail Pharmacy Businesses) Act 2026 enabling pharmacists to issue additional prescriptions for some forms of contraception. Patients will be able to seek new prescriptions for short-acting forms of contraception - the progesterone-only and combined hormonal pill patch and ring - throughout the services. Pharmacists, of course, are already able to provide emergency contraception. Needless to say, that will continue. Pharmacists will be enabled to issue repeat prescriptions once a GP prescription has been in place for at least six months, the patient is happy with the form of contraception provided and no additional risk factors concerning side-effects have been identified. That service will be open to women, girls, transgender, non-binary and gender-fluid individuals for whom a suitable form of prescription contraception as prescribed by their doctor for a duration of at least six months. That is going to make a huge difference to the need to attend a GP for renewals. This is possible now through a pharmacy and it is a very important. The service is free of charge for those eligible for the free contraception scheme and it will also be open to private patients who are not eligible for that, subject to a locally determined fee. It really is a fantastic initiative that enables better access for people to conveniently do more with the pharmacy. Now that President Connolly has signed the Bill and it has been accordingly enacted, the next steps are to prepare secondary legislation to enable the training and clinical aspects of the scheme. The drafting of those statutory instruments is ongoing.

I want to thank all the pharmacists right around the country for the way in which they support the patients in their community. I thank them for the trust that they have developed with their community. I thank them for their expertise and professionalism and the way in which they use their expertise in a gentle, careful way to support the people who need them, often at very difficult moments, and support them in an ongoing way help to help manage their

conditions over time. I wish every pharmacist in the country a happy World Pharmacists Day and a productive week next week.

Deputy David Cullinane: I welcome the opportunity to speak today. I thank the Minister for her contribution. Pharmacists are medicines experts and are among the most accessible health professionals in the State. There are approximately 1,900 community pharmacies providing around 2 million visits every week. Their role has evolved well beyond dispensing and medicines management. Community pharmacies are now involved in prescribing for common conditions, vaccination and wider public health work. Hospital pharmacies are also central to safe and effective medicines use and patient-centred clinical pharmacies where patients have more complex needs. The key point is that we need to use pharmacists to their full potential and integrate pharmacies further into community care. That can improve access, strengthen prevention and medicine safety and reduce avoidable pressure on GPs and acute hospitals.

The community pharmacy agreement and the common condition service have been important steps. The common condition service is an important development in pharmacy care and one for which Sinn Féin has advocated. It allows pharmacists to prescribe, on a protocol basis, for eight common conditions, but the work of pharmacy reform is far from complete. The common conditions service still falls far short of universal healthcare because consultation fees are not covered for patients, including medical card holders. Prescribed medicines may be covered in the normal way but the consultation fee itself still has to be paid. If we want to direct more care into appropriate alternatives to GP visits and hospitals, the cost of doing that should not simply be transferred to patients. Government should publish the cost of making essential pharmacy care freely available on the same basis as GP care. More broadly, reducing pharmacy costs for patients should form part of the Sláintecare roadmap. This should include reducing the drugs payment scheme threshold, adding more medicines to the reimbursement list and reforming the GP visit card so that it takes into account other elements of primary care, including pharmacy and dental services. The next step is to make greater use of community pharmacies in chronic disease management and proactive health checks. Pharmacists are still not formally integrated into existing chronic disease management teams. There is scope for a greater role in targeted cardiovascular screening, blood pressure checks, diabetes and cholesterol checks and wider screening and prevention.

We in Sinn Féin have proposed a role for community pharmacy in integrated and targeted cardiovascular health screening and management for people at highest risk of cardiovascular disease.

Vaccination through pharmacies can also be expanded, including targeted free access to vaccines such as the shingles vaccine. I have read recently that there might be some movement on that issue. It might be something that will be included in the budget, if the media reports are right. I am supportive of a shingles vaccine. I know we have to start somewhere, and a start would be welcome. If it is the case that it is in the budget, that would be welcome. Shingles and respiratory syncytial virus, RSV, vaccines targeting those most vulnerable would be really helpful and pharmacists have a role to play there as well.

We also need to move towards a full pharmacy prescribing model, within each pharmacist's accredited scope of confidence. The expert task force recommended independent, autonomous,

prescriptive authority. At present, pharmacists are limited to protocol-based prescribing for eight conditions. The legislation is in place to support the wider prescribing role but it has not been implemented in full. Expanding the role of pharmacy also requires proper workforce planning. Pharmacists have identified increased workloads, administrative burdens and workforce shortages such as barriers to delivering better care. The wider health service continues to suffer from a lack of strategic workforce planning and underinvestment in training places. Students are also facing exceptionally high points requirements because of the limited number of higher education places, despite the need to train more pharmacists domestically. We need to rejig workforce planning for both community and hospital pharmacy.

The South East Technological University, SETU, and University Hospital Waterford partnership is, I think, a good example of the value of regional training hubs. It brings together hospital practice, education and placement, postgraduate training, research and workforce development. Pharmacy already plays a much wider role in healthcare than simply dispensing medicines. The next phase is to build on the community pharmacy agreement and the common conditions service, and moving to universal healthcare must include pharmacy care. That means integrating pharmacy further into primary care, reducing financial barriers for patients, expanding its role in chronic disease management, screening and vaccination, implementing wider prescribing within pharmacists' accredited competence and ensuring the workforce and training capacities are there to support those reforms.

I also want to welcome the visitors in the Public Gallery from the Irish Pharmacy Union, IPU. I commend all of those community pharmacists and those who work for them for the role they play in primary and community care more generally. We obviously look forward to continuing to support the evolution of the role that pharmacists play in healthcare, including in primary and community care more generally.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: I wish to thank the pharmacists for everything they do. Pharmacists play a crucial role within our health services and our primary care system. Within communities, they provide a vital service, often as part of a first call if a person is feeling unwell. They often help in a failing health system where patients are subjected to huge waiting lists for primary and clinical care. The role pharmacists play and the services they offer have developed over the years, especially in more recent years as we have sought to address shortcomings within our primary care system.

Universal healthcare, in my opinion, necessitates pharmacy care. Going by my own engagement with pharmacists, whether as a patient or as a public representative, there seems to be consistent willingness to provide enhanced services and assist in any regard in which they are fully capable and qualified. They just need sufficient engagement, appropriate supports and fair compensation in terms of logistics of delivery. Of course, pharmacists are always invaluable in our hospitals, helping to ensure that medicines are used safely and effectively as outlined by my colleague, Deputy Cullinane, through the example of the 2026 SETU and University Hospital Waterford partnership. They are, however, underutilised and, regrettably, sometimes underengaged and not sufficiently consulted by the Government on matters that significantly impact their ability to best serve their communities.

In terms of underutilisation, I am not sure I ever encountered an issue where pharmacists or their representatives were unwilling to engage and discuss how they could provide additional

and enhanced services. However, there seems to be an emerging trend, particularly in recent years, where what I would view as positive announcements were made but someone forgot to work out the detail of how that service would be delivered and sometimes forgot to talk to the pharmacists. Who was that person who forgot to talk to the pharmacists? If they did talk, they did not listen. A perfect example was the free hormone replacement therapy, HRT, system. I welcomed the scheme and I commend the Minister for her part in developing it in principle and shepherding it through her Department, the Cabinet and so on, but there seemed to be a major disconnect somewhere along the line with regard to realising that, perhaps, the pharmacists who would actually administer the scheme might have some thoughts or needs with respect to its operation. The Minister may laugh but did she consult the pharmacists?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I do not think the Deputy has-----

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Later on, we saw a similar situation in regard to the blister packs. Did the Minister consult the pharmacists? The free contraception scheme is another very positive scheme that our pharmacists are crucial in the delivery of. I have raised with the Minister on a number of occasions the need to significantly increase the upper age threshold for eligibility. Has the Minister increased that age? The scheme was first introduced in 2022 and limited to those aged 17 to 32. The increase to 35 in 2024 was woefully inadequate. Now, in 2026, we are still in the same place. Is the Minister going to tell me today that she is going to increase the age from 32? It still has not happened. At this pace of roll-out, it will take far too long before it is open to all who should be able to avail of it. I am certain that our pharmacists can and would willingly support this delivery but has it happened? I am not aware of any concerns in regard to the logistics of the appropriately expanded service but if there are, I am confident that the Minister could talk to the pharmacists about this and work it out with them. Has the Minister worked it out with them? If the Minister is really eager, she would be willing to work with the pharmacists and ensure that everybody over 32 years of age is able to get free contraception. Otherwise, the only explanation is a lack of political will on the part of Government.

As we mark World Pharmacists Week and recognise the significant value that our own pharmacists provide for all our communities, we have a few good points that the Government should take away from today. Yes, it should continue to deliver worthwhile initiatives and I am certain that it will find a very willing partnership in our pharmacists. Let our starting point be viewing them always as crucial and primary partners in primary care. Seek their opinion and expertise at as early a stage as practicable and hear out their concerns in their own capacity to deliver these initiatives. Crucially, hear out what supports might be needed. With that, we can best ensure that policies can succeed in moving from the theory of policy papers to the practical reality that pharmacies delivering primary care services can do better within their communities.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I apologise to the Minister. I missed her opening statement. I was down at the Traveller committee, where we are looking at the health report produced by the committee, which shows damning findings and extreme levels of health inequalities faced by our Travellers as a result of racism, discrimination and neglect. It was welcome that the two

junior Ministers engaged on that issue but I think it would be good, at some point, for the Minister to engage with that report as well.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I met Pavee Point recently. I will.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: Yes. We might engage as a committee on that because a substantial amount of work and hearings went into that report.

That brings me to the point I made previously. We get a lot of statements on the Dáil floor in relation to many issues. We had statements on pharmacy-related issues not too long ago but there are lots of other health issues.

I see this in my work as Chair of the health committee. We get such a number of requests on different issues from Government and Opposition members to discuss particular topics. We probably have about ten requests for every single session of the health committee. One of the challenges I have is trying to get as many of those in as I can. As such, there is a long list of issues that warrant teasing out on the Dáil floor and enough time at the committee and I would welcome some kind of engagement on the topics we could discuss here. Our group and other groups put forward issues at Whips' and Dáil business meetings but they do not often make it onto the agenda. It would be good to engage on some of those and also some of the legislative priorities. We engaged over a year ago on the assisted human reproduction Bill. We were told at the time it was urgent, it was coming and was pressing and the committee rushed our consideration over the summer. We worked over August to do that report and a year on we still do not have legislation. My point is just that this Dáil time is really precious and valuable and there are pressing legislative priorities the Minister and I share but I would like to see some of that time dedicated to those, including the right to healthcare accountability and many other issues that could be addressed, like staffing issues in the health service, funding, CHI - the list goes on. Traveller health is one that, based on that report, needs to make it onto the agenda.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mark Wall): Deputy, we have been talking about pharmacists.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: It is a related point about how we decide on statements, what kind of statements we have and the discussions we have. It is an important point because I feel strongly, as a citizen and an elected representative, about this Parliament, how we run the Parliament, how we make it more productive and how we serve the citizens of the State best. It is a great honour to be here to represent people and the time we have here is vitally important. Engagement with a senior Minister on these issues is really important and a Minister's time is very precious as well. It is just a point that maybe we could have dialogue on this at some stage.

On the pharmacists, I acknowledge there has been a real expansion of the services on offer from community pharmacists. The focus is no longer just on a dispensing-based service, which is rightly the core of the clinical model and the very foundation of our pharmacies. We are seeing a move towards a more expansive and integrated model where pharmacists' expertise is recognised and utilised. The Minister and her predecessor should be acknowledged for their work to expand services in community pharmacies. It is really important we are seeing the

expansion of the work that happens in pharmacies. Too often task forces are set up but do not lead to tangible change. This has not been the case with the expert task force to support the expansion of the role of pharmacy. The task force was established in 2023 and published its findings the following year. Since then we have seen pharmacists enabled to extend certain prescriptions for up to 12 months, the introduction of the common conditions service and the passage of a Bill to allow for pharmacists to represcribe certain contraceptives and I understand that the Department is finally on course to appoint its first Chief Pharmaceutical Officer.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: It has done so.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: It has; that is great. There has been some real progress and that should be acknowledged and welcomed by both the Minister and her predecessor. It is important that work is happening and it is good to mark it on World Pharmacists Day.

As we know, Sláintecare has a strong emphasis on enhancing public health and prevention and the delivery of an integrated healthcare system. Pharmacists have an important role to play in the delivery of these aims. When it comes to public health and prevention, they are already engaged in health promotion, screening and vaccinations but they are capable of more, particularly in the area of prevention. Take, for example, HIV prevention. There is an urgent need to expand access to PrEP into other clinical and community-based settings. The State's current PrEP programme is too restrictive. We only have 13 public PrEP services. Of the 26 counties served by the PrEP programme, 16 have no public location to access PrEP, while of the 38 private providers of PrEP 33 are based in Dublin. Community pharmacists are part of the solution to these regional inequalities and we need to expand the breadth of healthcare staff eligible to provide PrEP services, and that includes pharmacists. The Sexual Health Strategy commits to:

Explore and where possible, implement the best ways to enable wider, timely access to PrEP, out-of-hours and for people living at a distance from public STI clinics, e.g, through online solutions, availability through pharmacists and primary care services, following necessary legislative change.

Thus it is in the strategy that pharmacists could engage in this work and it would be great to hear from the Minister about where this commitment stands and if any progress has been made since the strategy was published last year. In my capacity as Chair of the health committee I received quite a concerning letter from the Gay Health Network, which represents many of the organisations advocating on sexual health. It said "...despite repeated engagement over almost two years, the South East remains without a publicly accessible PrEP service". That is an entire region without access to a public PrEP service in the south east. The Gay Health Network and others have tried to engage with the HSE on this. They have written and I understand they have not received responses. The network said in its letter that "People living in the South East continue to be denied equitable access to a nationally funded HIV prevention programme that has been available elsewhere in Ireland for several years". There are therefore real concerns about health inequalities and access to prevention. Pharmacists are part of the solution and that issue in the south east needs to be urgently addressed. There should be engagement with the organisations that have been advocating because to date that has not been adequate. Looking at these issues again is on the draft agenda of the health committee.

The other area we have seen progress is the introduction of the common conditions service, which has certainly been a positive development. This service allows for pharmacists to assess symptoms and prescribe treatment for eight common conditions, including thrush, shingles and cold sores. However, my problem with this service is every patient must pay for it. The consultation fee is not reimbursed by the State, even if you have a medical card. Earlier this year the *Irish Independent* reported pharmacists are charging between €30 and €35 for this service and any medicines prescribed comes with an additional cost. I accept the medicine cost can be reimbursable if a patient avails of a HSE community drug scheme and that this new common conditions service is still cheaper than visiting a GP if you do not have a medical card or GP visit card. However, why would anyone with a medical card or GP visit card pay for the common conditions service when they could see their GP for free? This undercuts the main reason for the common conditions service, which is to divert people away from overstretched GP services. There is an access issue there that needs to be addressed. When the Irish Pharmacy Union first proposed this scheme it estimated nearly 1 million GP consultations for medical card patients could be dealt with more appropriately by a pharmacist. We all know there is a problem with how overstretched GP services are and there is a solution here to free up GPs and provide better access to the common conditions service for people with medical cards. At a minimum medical card patients should be able to avail of the common conditions service free of charge. That is something the Minister might take away and have a think about.

Last time we were here we talked about contraception and I will take this opportunity to again raise the matter of prescription-free oral contraceptives. As I have said previously, the World Health Organization recommends prescription-free access to oral contraceptives. This includes both combined oral contraceptives and progestogen-only pills. This would still be treated as behind-the-counter pharmacy access requiring eligibility screening by trained pharmacists before being dispensed. We must remember pharmacists are highly trained healthcare professionals and they should be allowed to operate at the top of their licence. Community pharmacists have been providing emergency contraception prescription-free since 2011 and real consideration should be given to extending this to oral contraception. This would make the process faster and easier for women and further alleviate pressure on GPs. It would be particularly beneficial for those who are not eligible for the free contraception scheme as it would reduce the cost. It has been three years since the Irish Pharmacy Union told the Oireachtas health committee: "There is no clinical reason for oral contraceptives to be supplied only on foot of a prescription; with proper protocols this is a very safe and effective healthcare intervention." The previous health committee endorsed that call from the IPU and wrote to the then Minister for Health on it, urging him to allow direct access to oral contraceptives through community pharmacies. I ask the Minister to look at that one as well.

Also on the topic of contraceptives, there is a need to expand the free contraception scheme in the upcoming budget. The scheme is currently available to women aged 17 to 35 but we know from the National Women's Council and others that age is a barrier to accessing that.

In the area of vaccinations, community pharmacists now administer one in every three vaccines under the flu and Covid vaccination programmes but there is scope there for further expansion to utilise those services to the maximum.

I thank all the pharmacists around the country for their work, dedication and for the services they provide. They are a vital part of communities and provide accessible and trusted services

to people. They are central to the delivery of an integrated care healthcare system as envisioned under Sláintecare.

Deputy Keira Keogh: I thank the Minister for being here. I welcome the opportunity to speak during World Pharmacists Day and to recognise the invaluable contribution made by pharmacists across the country, including in my constituency of Mayo. Mayo people will use any excuse to say "Up Mayo" these days.

This year's theme is "Empowering pharmacists for healthier futures" and it is a fitting reminder of the central role pharmacists play in our healthcare system. They are often the most accessible healthcare professionals in our communities and provide advice, support patients, administer vaccines and ensure the safe use of medicines.

In many rural towns and villages across Mayo, the local pharmacy is a vital front-line health service and a really trusted point of contact for communities.

I recognise the progress that has been made in expanding the role of pharmacists in recent years. Through the Government's common condition service, community pharmacists can assess patients and, where appropriate, prescribe certain prescription-only medicines for a range of common conditions like shingles, impetigo, conjunctivitis, cold sores, allergic rhinitis and uncomplicated urinary tract infections. This means that patients can access treatment more quickly and, in turn, it reduces pressures on our already overburdened GP services and it prevents presentations at accident and emergency departments. Pharmacists also play an important role in supporting women accessing hormone replacement therapy, HRT, with the State now covering the cost of HRT medicines under the national HRT scheme where these treatments have been prescribed by a healthcare professional.

I welcome the upcoming secondary legislation, which I know is being worked on at the moment, to provide regulatory guidance and pharmacist training for the contraceptive prescribing service, which will allow repeat prescriptions for some forms of contraception. This is a really important and welcome move. I think especially of those women who are suffering domestic violence or under coercive control where trying to get a GP appointment might be very difficult or where they might be seen going into the doctor. To be able to go into a local pharmacist and get this is key. These reforms recognise the expertise of pharmacists and demonstrate how empowering them to work at the top of their licence can improve access to care, particularly in rural communities such as those throughout Mayo.

I also really welcome the newly launched MediBack service, which has been online since 26 August. It is another really good and practical example of the important role our community pharmacists are playing. It is providing a safe and convenient way to return unused or expired medicines correctly, which is protecting our environment but also protecting public health and safety. We lost my nana in 2024. One slowly goes through the process of cleaning out the house but we are finding so many unused medications and to be able to pop into the local pharmacy is helpful. It is similar to what we have with batteries where we have the WEEE collection. Now we have somewhere to go with our medicines because it is too easy to throw them in the bin and we do not know the consequences so I remind everybody to check their cabinets this week. I thank the Minister and her Department for their work on that really practical scheme.

I also acknowledge that the demands placed on our pharmacists have increased significantly in recent years because our population is ageing and our healthcare needs are becoming more complex. Pharmacists are taking on an even greater role in preventative care, medicines management and supporting patients to live healthier, longer lives. They consistently demonstrate professionalism and dedication in serving their communities. However, while we are celebrating their contribution, we must also acknowledge the challenges facing them and their struggles. There are a few facing the sector.

The most pressing concern expressed to me by pharmacists in Westport and Newport is the ongoing issue of medicine shortages and stock availability. Despite the calm our pharmacists often offer at the counter, they have told me the true nature of their role, which often involves a lot of stress. To add to that, they are dealing with these significant supply issues where they are sometimes spending valuable time late in the evening trying to source alternative supplies of essential medicines, sometimes contacting prescribers to prescribe something alternative and then trying to reassure concerned patients who cannot access the medications they normally rely upon. This often places additional pressure on already busy pharmacies and can create anxiety, particularly in older people and those managing long-term conditions. I think of one story where a lady was coming in for her regular HRT medication and the pharmacist could not provide it for her, which was stressful for him and for her. This pharmacist told me that at one point, up to 300 basic medicines were not available on his shelves at a particular time and reported that at one stage, he even tried to quarter tablets. That is very stressful. In rural counties such as Mayo, these supply disruptions can have an even greater impact because patients often have to travel significant distances to get to their pharmacist and if we are waiting for the medicine to reach Mayo, that can also add to the delay. Community pharmacists are doing everything possible to manage these shortages but they cannot solve systemic supply chain issues on their own. I was told about that lady with the HRT but also about another mother whose child was diagnosed with ADHD after a long waiting process. She went in to collect the medication but could not get it. I know that these issues are also global in nature, with supply channels being driven by a range of factors and the global demand for medicine does continue to rise with the ageing population and chronic conditions.

I welcome the work that the Minister has done on this. I know there was a new agreement this year. The Irish Pharmacy Union survey for this year is ongoing and we will not see the effects of that just yet but if we look at the Irish Pharmacy Union's 2025 medicine shortages survey, we can see that 57% of pharmacists reported that medicine shortages had significantly increased over the previous 12 months compared with 82% in 2024. However, the overall scale of the problem remains significant, with that 57% of pharmacists still encountering shortages. The survey suggests that shortages might be beginning to level off rather than worsen but it is not lost on me that pharmacists are continuing to spend significant time sourcing alternatives. As such, I really welcome the new framework agreement that was announced earlier this year between the State, the Irish Pharmaceutical Healthcare Association and Medicines for Ireland to govern the pricing and supply of medicines until 2029. I know that this agreement aims to improve patient access to medicine, strengthen medicine supply chains and reduce shortages, encourage the early introduction of generic and bio-similar medicines, and maintain the financial stability of the service. It is in this vein that I welcome the programme for Government commitment to support pharmacists to adopt a proactive approach to managing medicine shortages but the Government must continue working with pharmacists, wholesalers,

manufacturers and healthcare providers to strengthen medicine supply chains, improve communication around shortages and ensure that patients can access the medicines that they need when they need them.

We must also continue to support investment in our pharmacy workforce, particularly in rural areas, so that community pharmacists can remain sustainable and continue delivering essential services close to where people live. Today, in advance of World Pharmacists Day, I thank all pharmacists and pharmacy staff across Ireland but especially across Mayo for their dedication to patient care. I do not want to name all the pharmacists in Mayo but there is one very famous tonic. If anybody is starting to have a bit of a sniffle or to come down with something, he or she is not sent in to see the doctor but, rather, down to Tom Treacy's to get his famous tonic. Nobody knows what is in it but apparently it is a cure for everything. I must also mention my own pharmacist Ronan Lally, who has kept me alive in this new crazy political life. I think we can all agree that we Deputies do not have the healthiest of lifestyles and maybe not that much time to go to the GP, so our pharmacists so often keep us alive. With that, I thank pharmacists for their expertise. Their commitment and service have a real impact on the health and well-being of our communities every day. Happy World Pharmacists Day.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mark Wall): Too true is right.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak during statements in advance of World Pharmacists Day. It has been said many times in the Chamber that pharmacists play an extraordinary front-line role in terms of that preventative and community care piece. We know there are over 1,900 community pharmacies across this country. In some ways, they are the unsung heroes of our health system. While there is a lot of focus on our doctors and nurses and other parts of the health service, it is the pharmacists, many of whom run seven-day operations or extended hours, who are at the front line or coalface within our health system. This is particularly true at a time when access to GPs is an issue. The Minister will be fed up listening to me talking about access to GPs and that very real issue that is particularly concentrated in certain parts of this country. In addition, when our hospitals are under enormous strain, it is really critical that we support our pharmacies and our pharmacists to be able to provide as much of that care in the community as possible.

About 2.1 million adults visit a pharmacy every single week in this country, which is a phenomenal figure. An extraordinary proportion of our population is accessing healthcare through something that is on our main streets not hidden away. In that regard, I welcome the progress in the past year with regards to the vaccination service, and BowelScreen in particular. It is great that 1,600 pharmacies have now signed up to the BowelScreen programme. The MediBack issue has been a bugbear for a long time.

People come to me, particularly when a loved one dies, and there is a lot of medication in the house. It is one of those awful parts of having to deal with the situation when somebody passes away - getting rid of the stuff from the house but with nowhere to go. There is the environmental issue but also the awful waste when it is going nowhere. Therefore, it is fantastic that the MediBack system is now there.

I want to raise the need to look at where pharmacies are located across our communities, particularly those communities that do not have as much access to GP care as is possible. The

Minister will have heard me talk of this before. In the north inner city, the Dublin 1 area has just over 3,500 people to one GP, whereas the national average is 1,700 to one GP. The reality is that people are much more reliant on their pharmacists for care. In the case of my constituency, there is a population with very complex medical needs. In that regard, we need to look very closely at how we support our pharmacies.

The other key point concerns who turns up at our emergency departments. In particular, I think of the Mater hospital being the local GP for many people in my community. When we look at the national figures, people did not have a GP referral for 72% of emergency department presentations last year. That is a wake-up call in terms of how people are accessing health services. To a much greater extent, they should be relying on GPs but because GPs are not accessible and because people cannot get a timely appointment, they end up going to the emergency department.

I say that in the context that we need to better resource and support our pharmacies, particularly in disadvantaged communities. The deprivation grant was rolled out to GPs a number of years ago, which is certainly very welcome, but it is not going to change anybody's world. It is a small amount of money but it is an important reflection and indication to those GP services in disadvantaged areas of the work they are doing. It was changed last year, and some GPs in the most deprived areas are no longer getting it, which is an issue I need to take up with the Minister. I have been putting forward parliamentary questions but I am making very little progress with the HSE on finding out who is now getting it. The key point is that there is a deprivation grant. It should be going to the GPs who have the most disadvantaged set of patients. Similarly, we need to see the deprivation grant going to pharmacies as well. Effectively, they are providing a front-line health service in areas where people cannot easily get a GP. The IPU has put a cost on this of somewhere in the region of €2 million, which is a very small amount, but it would go far in supporting pharmacies in disadvantaged areas.

The other key issue I want to raise concerns prevention and the rollout of vaccinations. We know that community pharmacists play a big role in administering the flu vaccine every year. A source of frustration is the lack of co-ordination with regard to vaccine supplies. Every year, pharmacists contact me to say they have run out of stock, while other pharmacists contact me to ask if I know anyone or any local school that might need the flu vaccine. There is a lack of co-ordination when I talk to the HSE locally about where supplies and stocks are. At a time when we need to be mindful of how money is spent in our health service, it is ridiculous to think that this co-ordination is not there.

Women's health is obviously a very important issue for the Minister, as it is for me. The contraception prescribing service that will operate from early next year will be wonderful. However, to repeat myself, why is the cut-off at the age of 35? I appreciate that it is about money but the key issue is that this is a really important service for women. We need the Minister, as a woman, to champion this within the health budget. We look forward hopefully to some progress on that.

There are two final issues I want to raise. The first concerns the reports this week on the changes to the drugs payment scheme. A number of people have contacted me who are particularly concerned because the drugs payment scheme has been a lifesaver for them. In a cost-of-living crisis, the prospect that the drugs payment scheme threshold may change is very frightening for people, particularly given what was reported with regard to long-term illnesses,

which was some sort of co-payment. As the Minister knows, the list of illnesses on the long-term illness scheme has not changed in donkey's years and, of course, there is a huge demand to add new illnesses to the scheme. The critical issue for those with long-term illnesses who are not on the long-term illness scheme is that there might be changes to how they pay for their drugs. It is a great concern. I ask the Minister to clarify whether there are changes afoot, given the reports we saw.

We have talked today about community pharmacists. Obviously, there are a lot of pharmacists within hospitals but there are also pharmacists within addiction services. They play an enormous and profoundly important role in the lives of those on a recovery path, particularly with regard to the opiates stabilisation programme. It is important to highlight that a number of sessional pharmacists were taken on in the 1990s and 2000s as a fix. They were taken on on a contract basis, and that has been rolled over every year because there was effectively no space for them to be taken on on a permanent, full-time basis. They have been with the service for many years but they accrue no pension rights. The reality is that they have fought and fought the HSE on this issue but they have made no progress. I will take it up with the Minister on an individual basis but it is important for me to raise their situation on the floor of the Dáil. They have provided a vital service but they feel that lies have been told to them by the HSE. The reality is that people have died without any pension entitlement, particularly death benefits for their families. They have provided a service that is hidden from the rest of society but certainly in the communities I represent, it is a vital service. They feel very much abused and disrespected in the roles they have played. I will take it up with the Minister outside the House. It is important to recognise that the pharmacists we are talking about here today are not just on our main streets, although they are wonderful, but also the ones in silent but really important roles in our health service, keeping people alive.

Deputy Albert Dolan: As we work to mark World Pharmacy Week with World Pharmacists Day tomorrow, I want to thank pharmacists and their teams across Galway East and throughout the country for the work they do every day. In towns and villages across my constituency, the pharmacy is somewhere people know they can turn to. They can walk through the door, speak to someone they trust and get professional advice about something that is worrying them. That might be a parent concerned about a child. It could be somebody adjusting to a new prescription or an older person who needs a little extra time to understand their medication. Those conversations are crucial. The reassurance, patience and personal attention that pharmacists provide make a real difference to people's lives. I do not think we can ever underestimate that. In rural communities in particular, the value of having that expertise close to home cannot be overstated. Accessing healthcare can mean arranging a lift, taking time off work or travelling a considerable distance. The local pharmacy provides an accessible connection to care. I also acknowledge all of the pharmacy technicians and support staff. Their contribution is essential to the service that patients receive.

There has been meaningful progress in support of this sector, which I welcome. The community pharmacy agreement provides over €75 million in additional investment across 2025 and 2026, and the common conditions service launched in January is an important expansion of the pharmacists' clinician role. However, if we want pharmacies to take on greater responsibilities, we must address the pressures they face. I would highlight four of them today. The first is financial sustainability. Pharmacies face rising operating costs, just like other

businesses, while carrying significant healthcare responsibilities. Funding must reflect the professional time, staffing and facilities needed to deliver services safely. The second is workforce capacity. New services require trained people and time with patients.

3 o'clock

We have to support recruitment, retention and continuing professional development, including for pharmacies that serve rural communities like those I represent in east Galway.

The third is that medical shortages can cause understandable anxiety for patients and create considerable additional work for pharmacists in the context of trying to secure supplies or arrange appropriate alternatives. We need to strengthen co-ordination and ensure that pharmacy teams have timely information and practical support.

The fourth is administration support. I welcome the legislation that will enable greater electronic record-keeping. We need to ensure that it translates into less duplication and more time for patient care. These issues deserve attention because there is considerable potential for pharmacies to do more. I strongly support making the pharmacy the first port of call for a wider range of appropriate healthcare needs. The common conditions service already enables pharmacists to assess and treat eight specified conditions under approved clinical protocols. This highlights that more than 90% of pharmacies are delivering it. That gives us a strong foundation. The planned evaluation should examine patients' experiences, access and outcomes and help identify where these services can safely expand. We need to be ambitious about the next stage. That will be absolutely crucial for patients because being able to receive appropriate care locally can mean getting a problem assessed sooner. It can also help free up GP capacity for people who need the services of a doctor. Knowing when to refer somebody on is central to the pharmacist's role. Expansion should strengthen co-operation between pharmacists, GPs and healthcare professionals, with clear referral pathways and better communication for everyone.

I also welcome the legislation that enables pharmacists to prescribe contraception. Its implementation offers an opportunity to make care more accessible and convenient for women. We should ensure that participating pharmacies are supported and that women understand how to access this service and receive all the support they require.

The new medicines optimisation service is another important development. People managing several medicines, particularly vulnerable patients, can benefit from support to understand their treatment and take medicines correctly. We should build on that work, including through better co-ordination when someone leaves hospital with changes to their medication. That is really important.

There is also significant scope for pharmacies to play a greater role in education and prevention. Vaccination, smoking cessation, blood pressure checks and support to participate in screening programmes are all areas in respect of which accessible community care can make a difference. I have just come from a meeting of the Committee of Public Accounts at which representatives from the HSE discussed with us the money that is being spent. The one thing everyone continues to agree on is the need to move care out to the community in order to free up space, capacity and theatres within our hospitals such that people will get preventative care as close to home as possible and do not end up in emergency departments.

I would like to see a clear plan for the next phase of expansion that sets out: the services to be developed; the training and funding that will be required; and how rural communities like those in east Galway will benefit. Public awareness has to be part of such a plan. People need to know what their pharmacy can offer, when to use it and what changes may apply. Affordability for patients has to be considered at every step. Pharmacists should be closely involved in shaping this work. It goes without saying that whatever the next phase of expanding the pharmacist's role in our communities is, they must be consulted and engaged.

I again thank our pharmacists and pharmacy teams right across east Galway and the remainder of the country. They have earned the trust of their communities through years of personal service. We should recognise that contribution by supporting them to use their skills more fully and deliver more care close to home.

Deputy Gillian Toole: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit, an Teachta Murnane O'Connor agus an tAire, an Teachta, Carroll MacNeill atá imithe anois.

This is indeed a wonderful day. We are empowering pharmacists for healthier futures. There is a massive opportunity, as others have said, to capitalise on that. I thank the Minister of State and the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, their teams in the Department, the task force, the Health Service Executive, the Irish Pharmacy Union - present in the Gallery are President Ms Caoimhe McAuley and her team - and all of the people who work in hospitals, community pharmacies and the industry in general throughout the country for the massive contribution that has been made over the years.

The Minister of State and the Minister recognise the valuable contribution pharmacists make to people's health, consistently delivering new initiatives and being able, professional, proficient, efficient and willing to rise to any challenges or opportunities that arise. Probably the most salient development that will be of benefit in the context of the safety of patients, but also from the perspective of the Exchequer, is that relating to the medicines optimisation scheme. We have the common conditions service, MediBack and the very worthwhile, softer and more social service available that is the safe pharmacy programme, a facility for anyone experiencing domestic violence to present at a community pharmacy and receive the support of a properly and appropriately trained team. Pharmacists also have a health promotion role, involvement in bowel screening and will soon be able to prescribe contraceptives.

I will pick up on a point made by Deputy Cullinane about the potential for chronic disease projects going forward. That is something the Irish Pharmacy Union and Healthy Meath rolled out about three or four years ago. IT went down exceptionally well and the pilot has been carried out. With both the Minister of State's support and funding, that is something which would be almost ready to be rolled out nationally.

Pharmacists are also especially important in areas of social deprivation and disadvantage. Deputy Rice mentioned the Travelling community, In Navan, County Meath, pharmacists play a supportive role across the areas of addiction, compliance in respect of medicines and general family support. That should be recognised.

There is also a soft and social role for pharmacists in the support of older people in terms of health literacy and - a simple point - loneliness. We know from a 2023 report that 20% of Ireland's population reported that they experience loneliness. That compares with an EU

average of 13%. Again, that feeds into the customer satisfaction rating of approximately 98% for community pharmacies.

Everything else has already been said, so I will not duplicate anything. My recommendation to the Minister of State is to maintain the momentum and to continue to invest and provide appropriate resources. Pharmacists will provide more services to communities. That will increase healthcare capacity and play an even greater role in meeting people's healthcare needs.

I draw the Minister of State's attention to the IPU's submission for budget 2027. Every proposal it contains would deliver a significant return on investment, not solely in a monetary sense but also in the context of the safety of the healthcare that is provided to members of the public. It would also have a benefit for the Exchequer, but the key aspect is safety. It would present an opportunity, in exchange for a very small investment, to gain a massive amount for healthcare. That has already been demonstrated by the Minister of State's willingness to negotiate a very robust community pharmacy agreement. The potential to expand on that is effectively limitless.

We are dealing with a community of people. I call it a community because the people involved in pharmacy across the three different disciplines are committed, efficient, professional and trained to the highest standards. This goes back to the retail experience in particular. If the door is open, you take whatever challenge comes at you. You try to meet the needs of people where they are at. That is even done in the context of medicine shortages, and often the customer never knows that there is a crisis happening in the background.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

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

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

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

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

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.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne - To discuss the need for improvements to the Dublin to Rosslare rail line.

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

Deputy Pádraig Rice - To discuss the repression of the LGBTQ+ community in Turkey.

Deputies Denise Mitchell, Tom Brabazon, Naoise Ó Muirí, Cian O'Callaghan and Barry Heneghan - To discuss support for the Moatview Early Education Centre.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore - To discuss the provision of permanent SEN classrooms for Kilcoole Primary School.

Deputy Mark Wall - To discuss the provision of additional special school places in County Kildare.

The matters raised by Deputies Emer Currie, Jennifer Whitmore, Shane Moynihan, Mark Wall and Malcolm Byrne have been selected for discussion.

World Pharmacists Week: Statements (Resumed)

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): I thank Deputy Toole for her very informative contribution. I know she has expertise in this area. I thank her for her commitment and the work she does. I thank the Members of the House for their contributions. I also thank our hospital and community pharmacists for their work in delivering the significant reforms we have seen across Irish pharmacy over recent months and years.

Every day, pharmacists provide safe and effective medicines, care and support for patients managing their health. They deliver trusted healthcare advice and services in communities and hospitals throughout the country. Today's discussion has highlighted how significantly the profession has evolved in recent years. When we speak about pharmacy today, we are speaking about much more than the supply of medicines; we are speaking about highly-skilled healthcare professionals who are providing clinical care, supporting disease prevention, promoting public health, improving access to services and helping people to manage their health closer to home. Across the community and hospital settings pharmacists are making an increasingly important contribution to patient care. They are among the most trusted and accessible healthcare professionals in Ireland. Every day, they support patients, families and communities through their expertise, professionalism and commitment to high-quality care.

We are seeing important development throughout hospital pharmacies. The advanced specialty pharmacist role introduced in September 2024, recognised the expertise and increasingly specialised contribution of senior hospital pharmacists. The first appointment was made in 2025, with a ward specialist pharmacist providing expert clinical pharmacy and medicine optimisation advice in areas such as oncology, intensive care and paediatrics. The expert taskforce has recommended that we build on these expertise through the development over the coming years of models of pharmacists prescribing in hospital settings, supported by the necessary clinical and regulated enablers. This represents another important opportunity to make better use of pharmacists' expertise to support patients and the wider health service.

We have also seen substantial progress in community pharmacies. Over the past year, community pharmacists have successfully delivered a range of new services in addition to their core role in dispensing medicines, counselling patients, and supporting the safe and appropriate use of medicines.

Pharmacy continues to evolve, with pharmacists playing an increasingly important role in medicine optimisation, disease prevention, vaccination programmes and the delivery of new patient services. Almost exactly a year on from the community pharmacy agreement 2025, several new pharmacy services have been reformed and introduced over the past year, demonstrating what can be achieved when Government, the health service and professionals work together with a shared ambition to improve services for patients. Most importantly, these reforms are delivering real benefit for patients such as faster access to care, more services closer to home and better use of the skills and expertise of the pharmacists. I acknowledge the commitment and collaboration of pharmacists, the HSE, our regulator, the Pharmaceutical Society of Ireland, the Irish Pharmacy Union and our wider healthcare partners in making progress possible. These developments reflect the expanding role of pharmacy within the health service and demonstrates the Government's commitment to delivering faster care closer to home, improving access for patients, and reducing pressures across the wider health service.

Ireland faces significant healthcare challenges in the year ahead. An ageing population, increasing levels of chronic disease, and growing demand for services will require all healthcare professionals to contribute to the fullest extent of their knowledge, skills and expertise. Pharmacists will be central to meeting those challenges. Our work does not stop with what has already been delivered. The recent appointment of the chief pharmaceutical officer in the Department of Health demonstrates the Government's commitment to strengthening the role of pharmacy in healthcare delivery. As healthcare needs continue to evolve, pharmacists will remain central to improving access to care, supporting public health and helping people to achieve better health outcomes throughout Ireland.

The chief pharmaceutical officer will provide strategic leadership and evidence-based advice to support the continued evaluation of pharmacy and pharmaceutical care in Ireland. In the near future, another important pharmacy service, the contraception prescribing service, will be introduced. This service will enable pharmacists to provide prescriptions for specific forms of contraception to women aged 17 years and over, following an initial prescription. The primary legislation to enable this service, the Health (Provision of Contraceptive Prescribing Service in Retail Pharmacy Business) Act 2026, has been signed into law. Work is ongoing on the necessary secondary legislation. Patients aged 17 to 35, who qualify for free contraceptive schemes, will also be able to avail of free pharmacist consultations, prescription extensions through the contraception prescribing services. I want us to continue creating conditions in which pharmacists can practice at the top of their profession, supported by appropriate governance, education, digital integration and multidisciplinary working. I want to see pharmacists continue to play an expanding role in prevention, chronic disease management, and the delivery of care closer to home.

Pharmacists make an important contribution to pharmaceutical care, better patient outcomes, and the strength and resilience of our health service. The Government is committed to ensuring that contribution continues to grow. That ambition is consistent with the vision of Sláintecare, a health service that is more accessible, integrated and centred on the needs of patients. We have listened carefully to the issues raised in the House today and I thank Members for their thoughtful contributions.

To every pharmacist, pharmacy technician, pharmacy team member, educator, researcher and leader working across our health services, I express my sincere thanks for your dedication

and commitment. The future of healthcare in Ireland will depend on making the best possible use of the talents of all of our healthcare professionals. Pharmacists have demonstrated time and again that they are ready to meet that challenge. There is so much that has already been achieved but there is also much more we can do. By continuing to work together, we can support pharmacists to make the fullest possible contribution to patient care and build a more accessible, responsive and sustainable health service. Every patient benefits from this change. I look forward to continuing that work with the pharmacy professions, healthcare partners and the Members of this House for the benefit of patients and communities across Ireland.

An Ceann Comhairle: That concludes statements on World Pharmacists Day.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Financial Services

Deputy Emer Currie: I welcome the Tánaiste's initiative to introduce personal investment accounts. I am on the record of the House saying that quite a bit. It is great. This can play an important role in encouraging more people to move from traditional savings into long-term investment and to build wealth over time. Irish households are strong savers and giving people greater choice and a straightforward framework for investing is welcome. As we create a new framework for future investors, however, we also need to address the problems faced by people who have already invested. That brings me to deemed disposal.

I have consistently called for the abolition of the deemed disposal rule on exchange-traded funds, ETFs, and other investment products, subject to investment undertaking tax. The issue here is not simply the rate of tax, the investment undertaking, IUT, rate is an issue and there is a case for looking at it. However, even if it were reduced, deemed disposal would remain a fundamental problem because it interrupts the benefits of compounding. Long-term investment works because returns can be invested and generate further returns over time.

Under deemed disposal, an investor can be required to pay tax on a gain that has never been realised. They may have to sell part of their investment or find cash from elsewhere simply to meet a tax liability. That means money which could otherwise remain invested and compound over decades is taken out of the investment. This matters in particular for ordinary retail investors. I have had so many people approach me and talk to me about this since I started to raise it. I have been surprised at the response I have got since first bringing it up. People in their 20s and upwards -people of all ages - from all areas of my constituency at different points in their lives and careers all see the opportunity in ETFs as a way to get ahead in life but they also see the unfairness of a tax that penalises potential and unrealised gains. Many are young people building savings towards a first home or people that are building up for retirement. Others have invested an inheritance, redundancy payment or a lump sum. They are investing for the long term, not necessarily looking to realise gains every few years.

Budget 2027 could be a landmark moment when the Government abolishes deemed disposal on ETFs and other investment products subject to investment undertaking tax, IUT. I understand what is happening at the moment and that there are budgetary demands, especially within a planned tax package of €1.5 billion. The Department of Finance has advised in replies

to parliamentary questions I have tabled that IUT receipts account for less than 30% of the combined receipts from taxes subject to deemed disposal, and that makes IUT a practical place to begin, at a potential cost of less than €40 million. Those are my figures based on replies to parliamentary questions. For reference, that is double the cost of reducing the exit tax by 3%, as it was in the last budget.

The abolition of deemed disposal could then be extended to life assurance products in subsequent budgets. The introduction of personal investment accounts gives us an opportunity to create a better framework for long-term retail investment but that framework must work for those who have already invested as well as those who will invest in the future. This would ensure existing investors would not be left behind.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Colm Brophy): I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. I am replying to her today on behalf of the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance.

The deemed disposal rule was introduced in 2006 as an anti-avoidance measure. It applies to investment undertaking tax, life assurance exit tax and equivalent taxes in the self-assessed space applying to investment through certain kinds of funds and life assurance policies. Exchange-traded funds or ETFs are among a range of investments to which the rule applies. It was introduced because a pattern was observed at that time of products being structured so that tax could potentially be indefinitely deferred, which was contrary to the spirit of the gross roll-up tax regime introduced in 2000.

Under the deemed disposal rule, tax is levied eight years after the original investment is made, and every subsequent eight years thereafter. It is charged at the general tax rate for such investments, on any gain in the value of the investment from the date of acquisition or the last deemed disposal. The tax paid under the deemed disposal rule is effectively a prepayment of tax rather than an additional charge to tax, and is allowed as a credit against the tax due on a subsequent chargeable event, with any excess paid being refundable. Like any other aspect of the tax system, the deemed disposal rule is kept under review and may be subject to policy change. Just because a measure was introduced in response to relevant concerns at the time does not mean it should not be reconsidered in the current context.

The Tánaiste has been very clear that more should be done to encourage and support people in Ireland to put their money to work through investing in capital markets. That is why, at the first annual savings and investment forum in March, he announced his intention to introduce a new investment account, similar to the savings and investment account models operating in other jurisdictions but designed to meet Ireland's specific needs in terms of encouraging retail investment. It aims to reduce the complexities related to retail investment taxation and allow retail investors to grow their savings more efficiently.

Importantly, one of the key guiding principles underlying the design of the account is a focus on encouraging new retail investors, rather than directing investment into any particular sector or product. The new account aims to reduce the complexities related to retail investment taxation and allow retail investors to grow their savings more efficiently. A lifetime tax-free threshold will apply to the account. Where the value is above the threshold, a low rate of tax will apply to the excess value of the account. An annual limit will apply to the maximum amount that can be contributed to the account.

Existing regimes in place for taxation of retail investment, including the deemed disposal rule, will not apply to the new account. All tax reporting, tax administration and payment of any tax due to Revenue will be managed by the provider, thereby removing the requirement for the individual investor to calculate or return any tax due.

The Tánaiste believes that the introduction of this account will be a key step in supporting Irish people to put their money to work. However, as stated, that does not mean that the broader tax regime for retail investment is not subject to review and potential change over the coming years.

Deputy Emer Currie: I thank the Minister of State for the reply. I very much welcome the statements by the Tánaiste and the work that has taken place on personal investment accounts. It is a world of opportunity for us. It is a very positive move in terms of maximising the savings that are being put away and could be working harder for everyone.

I also welcome the work that is being done around financial literacy and making investments more accessible for people. Like I said, this was an eye-opener for me. Since I spoke about ETFs and the deemed disposal rule I have met many people on their doorsteps who are concerned about this issue. It has certainly opened up my eyes to how much focus there can be on this area.

When I see issues, I come up with solutions and I try to be practical. I suggest the figures today as a stepping stone towards the abolition of the deemed disposal rule. It might be something that the Department of Finance could look at. I look forward to the budget.

Deputy Colm Brophy: I know from everything she has done in political life that Deputy Currie is definitely a person who looks for solutions. She looks at issues and asks how we can find a solution. The focus of the Tánaiste on the new investment account is very clear and has been outlined. However, he and the Government are well aware of the frustration many investors feel with the deemed disposal rule, as Deputy Currie has highlighted. The introduction of the account does not mean that the broader tax regime for retail investment I mentioned earlier is not subject to review. In that regard, I highlight the recommendation of the funds review published by the Department of Finance in 2024, which, while recommending the removal of the deemed disposal rule also states that the addition of guardrails to protect the Exchequer would be required.

In tandem with this, officials in the Department of Finance continue to analyse how the tax regime for retail investment can be reformed in ways that support investment while balancing this objective with the need to protect public finances. Any future decisions will need to take into account the cost to the Exchequer of changes in a particular year.

Special Educational Needs

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I want to raise with the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan, Kilcoole Primary School in County Wicklow. Kilcoole Primary School covers two schools that have amalgamated, St. Anthony's and St. Brigid's. It was a really good news story. It got approval for a new build and an extension for the new school. The entire community was very excited about it. It is a really positive story. I was there on the day the then Taoiseach

turned the sod. He spoke about how important this new facility would be for the children of Kilcoole. He also said at that stage that it would include special educational needs classrooms. It has since transpired that, despite a new building being built on one site and an extension being built on the other site, there is no permanent SEN classes being provided as no classrooms were included in the design, which is an incredible oversight, seeing as SEN classes have been requested by the Department over many years. There is an obvious need in the area.

Building is happening at the moment with no SEN classes included. The Department has told the school that there will be four prefabs put on the grounds for children with special education needs. That is hugely disappointing. The Minister of State has done a lot of work in this area but children with special education needs should never feel like an afterthought. They should never feel second to everybody else in the school. There will be this fantastic new building that all of the primary school children will be able to enjoy, but then there will be a number of classrooms out the back for children with special education needs. I do not know if this was an oversight - I hope it was - but there is still an opportunity to get this right and include those children in this fantastic new build. The design team could incorporate permanent classrooms into the new build that is happening at the moment rather than sticking children out the back in prefabs or modular units. That is just not fair and it does not spell inclusion. I am really hoping that the Minister of State has some positive news for me on this because anyone looking at this objectively would think it is wrong.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth (Deputy Michael Moynihan): I thank the Deputy for the Topical Issue. The Government is committed to the provision of specialised education for children with special educational needs. In the early part of budget 2026, we have already provided funding for over 400 new special classes and at least 400 new special school places for the 2026-27 school year. It was intended that this would create almost 3,000 new special education placements for September 2026. This would be in addition to placements created due to the natural movement of students, such as those transitioning from primary to post-primary or completing school. In April 2026, the Government agreed to additional funding for the provision of specialised education services for children across the country. This money is funding special education teachers, additional special needs assistants, SNAs, increased capitation, access to specialised school transport and start-up grants for schools opening new special classes and inclusive special classes.

The year 2026 represents the largest ever expansion of specialised education provision in the history of the State. Through the combined efforts of the Department and the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, 587 new special classes have been sanctioned for the 2026-27 school year, including 70 inclusive special classes. This represents an increase of over 40% in the number of special classes being provided in 2026 compared to 2025. In total, there will be over 4,300 special classes operating in mainstream schools next year.

In County Wicklow, 148 special classes are now in operation, providing capacity for 888 students. This includes 16 new special classes for the 2026-27 school year. In April, the Minister, Deputy Naughton, and I announced the establishment of four new special schools for the 2026-27 school year, including in Bray. Dedicated working groups including the Department, the NCSE and the relevant patron body continue to meet to support the establishment of these new special schools. Offers of placements have been made, new principals, teachers and SNAs are being recruited and it is intended that these new schools will

open later in term 1 of this school year. The NCSE continues to advise parents at local level on developments. My Department is currently funding a large scale major project for Kilcoole Primary School. The Department has requested the current design team to master plan for future provision of specialised classes. Modular accommodation is one of the Department's delivery streams for provision of permanent accommodation at schools. Having assessed the position regarding additional capacity for special classes, the Department has determined that modular accommodation represents the most cost-effective method for provision of additional permanent accommodation at Kilcoole Primary School.

Modular expenditure is an investment in permanent accommodation in the same way as any other traditional form of construction. In the majority of cases, it is providing a permanent solution to accommodation requirements; it is not temporary accommodation. Modular accommodation is well suited to the school context. Off-site construction minimises disruption in the live school environment while factory precision and strict quality control deliver robust, low-maintenance buildings. Today's modular buildings represent a major advancement from earlier prefabricated forms and since December 2018, all new builds, including modular, must meet the near-zero energy building standard, ensuring high energy efficiency and sustainability.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I thank the Minister of State. I have seen some fantastic modular buildings but what they are not is the same as the permanent traditional building. The children who will be in those classrooms will know that they are in a different type of build. Those modular buildings will not look like the traditional build and the existing school and they will not feel like it. Those children will feel different. That should not be acceptable to the Minister of State with responsibility for special education. When the Tánaiste, Simon Harris, was Taoiseach and announced this school, he said there would be special education classes in the school. Why were they not included in the design? They should have been. The Government did not do it then but it now has an opportunity to ensure the design includes additional classrooms for those children.

It is not acceptable to make them feel separate to the main class and the main school building. It just is not okay. It may be more cost effective and I have asked the Minister of State's Department for the information as to how much it would cost to modify the current build versus how much these modular buildings will cost. These modular buildings are expensive as well, so I would appreciate if the Minister of State could send me those figures. If the Department is saying it is more cost effective, it would be interesting to know by how much. It is not just about cost, though. It is about including these children so they feel the exact same as their classmates who are in the brand new building.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I take the Deputy's point and I can get the figures for her. In the provision of specialised education, we want to ensure that in special classes that are associated with mainstream schools, inclusivity is one of the major key pieces in it. In the ramping up of the provision and the capacity across the country, I have been at many schools and seen the work that has happened over the past while. We have made a very serious commitment and in terms of any new build that is going on, both at primary and post-primary levels, the first criteria that we reach out for is what is the provision for specialised education in all of that programme. Capital investment has to have provision at mainstream level, both for primary and post-primary schools.

The school leadership brought the school through the amalgamation process and has an exceptional team working there. I take the Deputy's point about buildings but it is also about ensuring every child feels welcome. I know that is the case in this school. In all schools across the country, it is important that it is not just about buildings, be they brick and mortar or modular, and that inclusivity means every child with special education needs feels and is included in the school, insofar as possible. I have no doubt that that will be the case.

On the question the Deputy asked about the financing, because we have provided so much funding this year, last year and again next year, we have to make sure we have provision for specialised education right across the country. I will get the figures the Deputy asked for.

Special Educational Needs

Deputy Shane Moynihan: Today, I speak to the Minister of State about the need for expansion and reform of our approach to dyslexia, dyspraxia, apraxia of speech and the other associated difficulties around literacy for children in our schools in particular. As the Minister of State knows and as I have discussed with him on many occasions, this is something that is very important to me but also something that affects 10% of our population, which is the percentage perceived to have dyslexia, notwithstanding the other difficulties with dyspraxia and apraxia of speech as well.

Ultimately, access to the curriculum, participation in school and participation in the school community that the Minister of State referred to in the previous answer is all predicated on being able to read, write and use the tools that are provided in our schools.

The Minister of State and I have met many groups from up and down my constituency and further afield where they point to the how the purpose of this area of policy and our approach to policy not only need review, but reform. The international evidence shows that there is no substitute for a systematic, highly focused, outcome-focused intervention over a number of years in a separate setting to assist those with dyslexia and ensure they are not locked out of the curriculum. We have made huge strides in this country and the Minister of State has been the reason for a large part of that in rolling out the number of special classes we have available for students with autism. What I am proposing today is that we now look at that same model for how we approach allowing people to participate fully in the curriculum and take account of their speech and language difficulties. I appreciate the investment there has been in special education teaching over the last number of years and also the efforts that individual schools have made to assist those with dyslexia in their school populations, but there is massive variation across schools. There is massive variability in how this is interpreted and we need a cohesive and standardised approach, similar to what we have done for children with autism.

The fact that brings this into focus for me is that if we look at the populations in our prisons and at our populations who are at risk and are marginal, the prevalence of dyslexia, dyspraxia and apraxia of speech among is particularly high. That in and of itself tells me a story. The people who feel they have been locked out of the curriculum feel like they have been locked out of society as well. The evidence points to a very effective solution here, which is that systematic, outcome-focused approach through a reading class or a reading school, which have been shown to be extremely successful in this country.

All I am asking today is that we consider reform of this entire area, that we would look at the experience of groups like Finding Charlie's Voice, and Crack the Code, which have taken a very proactive and evidence-based approach to identifying what we need to do in this area to avoid the variation across schools. I am not casting aspersions on the work that teachers do because there are very committed teachers in this space. It is about making sure we have a time-limited outcome and that, after this intervention to assist those with dyslexia takes place, they are able to go on, participate in the mainstream curriculum and achieve their potential. That is the ask I am putting to the Minister of State today.

Reading classes are not the only part of that toolbox. There is also the question of ensuring that initial teacher training at our teacher training colleges provides teachers with the tools to quickly screen and identify dyslexia, dyspraxia and apraxia of speech so that they know how to signpost to the particular services that are needed, and to make it easy for principals and special education teachers to refer those children who need help to reading classes. The first step here is for us to think about how we approach dyslexia in our schools and how we learn from what we have done successfully in the field of autism and apply that same model to the field of dyslexia.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I thank the Deputy for the question. We have discussed this issue and he has raised it a number of times with me. I have met a number of stakeholders to discuss how our schools support children with dyslexia, including experts in the field, teachers, parents and advocacy groups, such as the likes of Dyslexia Ireland and the Crack the Code group, which I met with Deputy Moynihan before the summer. As he knows, the majority of students with literacy difficulties currently receive additional teaching supports from a specialised education teacher in mainstream classrooms. The Department of Education and Youth has invested considerably in this space, with 15,200 special education teachers allocated to primary and post-primary schools to enable them to support children with additional needs, including students with literacy difficulties. Funding is also made available to schools for the purchase of specialised equipment such as computers or software to assist children where relevant professionals recommend the equipment as being essential for the provision of education. In addition, there are four schools dedicated to supporting students with specific learning disabilities, SLDs. There are also 14 SLD classes in 11 mainstream primary schools located across the country, in counties Dublin, Clare, Louth, Galway, Kerry and Wexford. As the Deputy knows, these settings have a student-teacher ratio of 1:9 and are attended by students normally aged between the ages of eight and 12 years for a maximum of two years. Students will also have a diagnosis of dyslexia and a score at the 2% percentile, or lower, on literacy standardised tests. They will also have an average or above average level of intelligence. In addition, the National Educational Psychological Service, NEPS, offers a national programme of support, which includes national webinars that have been consistently highly attended. All of these supports are important and do support children with dyslexia.

From what I am told by front-line staff, however, is that in some instances further supports are required. Specialised education teachers are an important part of the network of supports but, equally, will not be the solution in all cases. This is something of which I am very much aware and needs to be carefully considered by me as Minister of State with responsibility for special education. What I am clear on at this stage is how we support children with dyslexia and additional literacy needs is an area in which we need to see reform. We cannot continue

with the *status quo* and there needs to be a change. I have discussed this issue with the inspectorate and will be engaging with it further, as well as with officials in my Department and, indeed, with several organisations and advocacy groups. We must all work collectively to ensure we have the best policy in place so that the outcomes for children are the best they can be.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: I particularly thank the Minister for State for his acknowledgement of the need for reform in this area. That is a very welcome statement by him because I know of his personal interest in this matter and his personal commitment to the whole area of special education. I emphasise again that I am not doing down the amazing work that is done by front-line staff in our area but it is about making sure that the full gamut of tools is available to all those who are in area of dyslexia and assisting those with dyslexia. When I think of children who have severe dyslexia and the effective models the Minister of State has outlined in his reply around the reading schools and reading classes we have in place, we have a model in a box that we could roll out to other schools around the country. I know from having spoken to principals and teachers in my constituency that there is a willingness and an appetite to see these in place. They are little different from autism spectrum disorder, ASD, classes, in that it is a two-year programme of support that unlocks so much for the children who require this care. There is a willingness to learn about the approaches that are taken by groups like Crack the Code to the use of structural literacy to ensure our teacher training programmes reflect the need to make sure teachers feel equipped to identify dyslexia very early on, as well as by groups like Finding Charlie's Voice, which speaks about the co-occurrence of conditions such as autism, dyspraxia and dyslexia, to make sure our reading classes and the approach we take ensure that those with speech, communication and language difficulties are able to fully participate in the curriculum. The Minister of State quite rightly stated that inclusivity needed to be at the heart of our education system. Reading classes are a key way to enable that inclusivity because they provide tailored and strong support and allow those children to participate in mainstream education.

I look forward to working with the Minister of State on this. I thank him for his support on it, for meeting the various groups, and for his willingness to look at the reform that is needed to move forward.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I thank the Deputy for giving me the opportunity to reassure the House that the Department of Education and Youth and the NCSE are committed to ensuring that all children can access an education suitable to their needs. The Department continues to engage intensely with the NCSE in relation to forward planning for new special provision to ensure every child has a place in an educational setting best fitted to their educational need.

No policy position can be static and needs to evolve alongside the student population and the needs presenting. If we look back since the foundation of the State, education has constantly been evolving. There have been major movements along the way but it has constantly been evolving, as it has the world over as well. As mentioned, how we support children with dyslexia and additional literacy needs is an area that needs reform and I am engaging with officials on what this reform looks like. I will be advancing this as quickly as possible. I am also working on a new measure that will see the provision of enhanced supports

in mainstream schools for students experiencing literacy difficulties. I hope over the next while that we will be able to update the House accordingly.

I thank the Deputy for his commitment to this matter and for the meetings he has had with the various advocacy groups. I take very seriously the concerns they have - not just his groups', but also the concerns of others we have met across the country, along with other parents and school authorities - in relation to dyslexia and how we need to look at it into the future.

We are looking at reform and how best we can meet the needs because every cent that is spent on special education will have enormous benefit for the child, their families and the State.

Special Educational Needs

Deputy Mark Wall: I welcome the Minister of State to the House today and for giving me an opportunity to discuss with him the urgent need for additional special school places in my area of Kildare South.

Over the past number of years, particularly since I have been in both Houses, I have been raising the urgent issue of special school places in Kildare South. We were previously given a commitment that we would have a special school in Kildare South. Unfortunately, as I have said many times in this House and the Upper House, that school turned out to be located in Craddockstown in Naas, which is in north Kildare. However, it is a very good school. It is operating well but it is completely full, and it causes problems for all of those people who are seeking a special school place for their child.

Another school that we have in our area, and I am looking forward to the Minister of State providing an update on it, is St. Anne's Special School in the Curragh, which is waiting ten years for a new school build. I raised this with the Taoiseach a number of months ago and we are waiting for word on when that great school on the Curragh will see the new build that has been promised for so long and is so needed with so many children now working from prefabs and not getting to use the playgrounds, etc., the school could offer.

However, I want to concentrate today on the new school located in Monasterevin in County Kildare. I want to again put on the record my thanks to the Government and everybody who was involved in getting this school in Ros Glas in Monasterevin because it was badly needed. As I said, I have been saying this for such a long time in this House but, unfortunately, the 18 places available in Ros Glas school have now been totally oversubscribed. We have three different classes there: ages four to eight, nine to 13 and 14 to 18.

In particular, it seems from talking to the Kildare Wicklow Education Training Board, KWETB, it is the nine to 13 class that is oversubscribed the most. It is because pupils are coming from primary school settings into a secondary school setting. There was so much hope that the particular new school in Ros Glas was going to be location for their children but over the past four to five days parents have been receiving letters informing them that their child did not get a place.

I want to read the Minister of State one of those letters. I know that I have been in contact with him in relation to a number of children but this is from a parent, Edel Murray, who is

fighting for a place for her son, Jack. Edel recently shared an open letter to the Minister of State, the Government and to all the public representatives in Kildare South.

Jack is an incredible boy with autism and a moderate intellectual disability. He is so much more than a diagnosis. He is our son, and he deserves the opportunity to learn, grow, build friendships, develop independence, and reach his full potential. But right now, Jack is at home, not because he does not need or deserve school, but because we have been unable to secure him a suitable special school placement.

[...]

Despite our efforts, Jack has been refused a place at every school. We live just 1.3 km from St. Anne's, [the school that I mentioned to the Minister of State before] yet there are no spaces available. This morning, we received a refusal from Ros Glas, our last remaining hope.

We cannot put into words the heartbreak and helplessness we feel. How do you explain to your child that there is no school place for him when all he needs is the opportunity to learn and grow?

As the Minister of State is probably aware, I have spoken to a number of parents, including the parents of Caden and Rhys. I could name so many more. The hope that was there that Ros Glas was going to give them that school place how gone. They will of course appeal to that school for a place but speaking to the KWETB, the hope is very much limited because the places are not there. I ask the Minister of State to maybe give some good news to those parents who have multiple needs and unfortunately do not have a school place for their loved one.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I thank Deputy Wall for the question. The Government is very committed to the provision of specialised education. In the budget of 2026, this time last year, we committed to over 400 new special classes and over 400 new special school places. In April, we agreed additional funding to have more funding in place for more special classes and special school places as well.

The year 2026 represents the largest ever expansion of specialist educational provision in the history of the State. Through the combined efforts of the Department and the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, 587 new special classes have been sanctioned for the 2026-2027 school year, including 70 inclusive special classes. This represents an increase of over 40% in the number of special classes being provided in 2026 compared to 2025. Between 1 September 2025 and 1 September 2026, nine new special schools opened and there are almost 1,000 extra special classes. In total, there will be over 4,300 special classes operating in mainstream schools next year, an increase of 130% since 2020.

In Kildare, 180 special classes are now in operation providing capacity for 1,080 students. This includes 33 new special classes for the 2026-2027 school year. In April of this year, the Minister, Deputy Naughton, and I announced the establishment of four new special schools for this year, including Monasterevin, to which the Deputy alluded. This brings to 20 the number of new special schools established in recent years.

Dedicated working groups in the Department, the NCSE and the relevant patron bodies continue to meet and to support the establishment of the new special schools. On that point, I

thank the ETBs and the patron bodies that have opened those special schools and continue to work very closely with us on the new special schools. We are desperately committed. When a new special school opens, there is a huge new skillset needed and we are desperately committed to ensuring that back-up service is there through the ETBs, our Department and the patron bodies.

Offers of places have been recently made while new principals, teachers and SNAs have been recruited. It is intended that these new schools will open in term 1 of this school year. The NCSE continues to advise parents at a local level on developments, and to support children with contingency arrangements.

The Deputy raised the issue in terms of a specific child and, while I am reluctant to speak about a specific child on the floor of the Dáil, I do take it very seriously. I know that offers were in place and that the Department and the NCSE are working very closely with a small number of children. I have reached out to some of those parents over the past day or two to get a sense of where they are at and to understand their need.

On the 18 places in the three classes in Monasterevin, we are building up the skillset for special school places to open and to build up over the next number of years. That is very much in-built in our policy. It offers us the opportunity to get the skillset but I take the point the Deputy raised in relation to one or more of his constituents and their children. I understand the challenges there and the very serious stress it is causing them. We are working day in, day out to make sure we are meeting that need. The Department and the NCSE will continue to do that in the time ahead.

Deputy Mark Wall: I thank the Minister of State. I have no doubt of his commitment to helping the families because when I contact him, he always comes back to me. That is a sign of his commitment to the families that I and everybody in this House represent. The problem I have is that I have been told by the KWETB that, particularly in the 12 to 13 age bracket, these families could be waiting a very long time to get a special school place because the demand is so high. As I have said, this is a demand that I have highlighted in the Upper House and in this House for the past six years. That is why we were so enraged when the first school was put in Craddockstown. It is a wonderful school but now that we have a school in south Kildare, I ask the Minister of State to look at particular age bracket because that seems to be the biggest issue in relation to the school. I do not know how to advise the parents who have come to me, and I could name an awful lot more.

When the Minister of State talks about the contingency arrangements the NCSE is talking about, it is home schooling, and he knows that. That is what it has said to the parents when they contacted it. It has said it will provide home schooling for them. That means the children who have come so far over the past number of years in some primary settings have no hope because they are going back into a home school setting and those friendships and relationships they have developed, that social inclusion, is gone.

4 o'clock

That is hugely distressing for their families. Maybe we could look at the contingency arrangements again. Maybe we could go back to parents and say that we are going to do more. Again, I do not doubt the Minister of State's bona fides on this because he has been very helpful

to me with every case I have raised. However, I cannot go back to the parents of those pupils in south Kildare and tell them there is no hope, that there are no classrooms coming up for a number of years. That particular age bracket is full and there is no hope of anything coming but I ask again, can we just look at that age bracket, while we are looking in general?

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I thank the Deputy for his kind comments. We do not turn water into wine every time but we do certainly try to help and assist in any way we can. I accept the Deputy's comments on this. We started out this time last year, just after 1 October, with a huge number of students, at primary and post-primary and in special schools, looking for places. We have, through the massive work that continued throughout the year in the Department of education and the NCSE, brought that down to a very small cohort of children, although any one person is one too many. We are working on this. We have sight of it. We meet weekly. We chair a meeting in the Department with the NCSE on a weekly basis to make sure that we have sight of what is happening and the movement over the last number of weeks has been quite considerable.

I take the point that the Deputy makes in terms of the middle group. If one looks at the provision of specialised education, at primary school we have advanced and invested a huge amount into special classes. I would like to thank all of the school communities, patron bodies and everybody involved in that but we have a lot of work to do to make sure we have corresponding provision at post-primary. Going back 20 or 25 years ago, international policy was not about building special schools. It was seen as negative and the commentary was that it should not been done but we have really ramped up the provision of specialised school places and will continue to do so, year in and year out, over the next number of years because we want to ensure that children who have complex needs and educational requirements that are best suited to special schools have places.

I do not want to go into the specifics that the Deputy has raised but I am certainly aware of them. I will be working to try to find solutions for every family over the next number of weeks.

Rail Network

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: Once again I am raising the question of the continually poor service on the Dublin to Rosslare rail line. In terms of Topical Issues, Commencement Matters and parliamentary questions over the last six or seven years, I do not know how many times I have raised this issue. I appreciate that the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, is taking this on behalf of the Department of Transport.

The rail line between Westland Row, which is now Pearse Street, and Dún Laoghaire is the oldest railway line in Ireland. In fact, it was the first commuter rail line in the world, built in 1834. I would argue, if we could transport ourselves back there, that there was a greater commitment to commuters using the line at that time. After its construction in 1834, over the next three decades it expanded all the way down along the coast to Rosslare. We are in a situation now where, in my constituency, if one gets on a train in Rathdrum, Arklow or Gorey, there are only six trains per day on weekdays between those stations and Dublin. Equidistant, if we look at somewhere like Carlow, there are 11 trains a day. If one is coming from Drogheda or Dundalk, there are 16 trains per day, with plans to expand that, and if one is coming from

Portlaoise, which is also equidistant, there are 32 trains every day. However, the issue is not just the number of services. From my home town of Gorey to Connolly Station in Dublin city centre is about 90 km. It takes two hours by train to travel those 90 km. To travel the 182 km from Dublin to Belfast takes roughly the same length of time. If one wants to travel from Dublin to Cork, it is approximately 266 km which takes between two and a half and two and three quarter hours.

This summer the situation got worse. The trains were breaking down. The air conditioning failed on the train on a number of occasions and Iarnród Éireann had to distribute bottles of water to consumers. If there was an alternative, in terms of the N11, that would be fine but the N11 is frequently blocked, with major tailbacks. I cannot see any commitment on the part of Iarnród Éireann to the services in my constituency and right down along the Rosslare rail line. There is talk about battery-powered trains and running more regular trains, while forcing people, potentially, to have to change trains in Wicklow, but there is no guarantee of extra services. In response to all of the questions I have asked, there is no guarantee of improvement of the quality of the trains. New trains were put on the track a number of years ago but were subsequently withdrawn. Essentially, the worst trains in Iarnród Éireann's stock continue to be offered on the Rosslare rail line. I am not satisfied that every time I submit a parliamentary question, the Minister will refer it on and say the operational details are a matter for Iarnród Éireann. It is simply not good enough for the commuting population down along the east coast.

There is a number of potential solutions, including the introduction of overtaking loops on what is a single track and closing a number of the level crossings, of which there are six on the way into Dublin. This would allow the trains to move more quickly or to overtake the DARTs. We are spending €3 million per year on protecting the railway line from coastal erosion. Would it not make more sense to look at moving the track further inland to protect it into the long term? What really annoys commuters is that we are talking about a doubling of the railway track from Dublin to Belfast, from two to four tracks. I totally support that but why can we not, at the very least, see a doubling of the number of tracks on the Dublin to Rosslare line from one to two?

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Colm Brophy): I thank Deputy Byrne, on behalf of the Minister for Transport, for the opportunity to address this issue in the House today. Improving public transport services and infrastructure is central to improving citizens' quality of life and addressing our climate action challenge, and this Government is committed to a fundamental change in the nature of transport in Ireland. In relation to the Deputy's query on enhancing capacity on the network, in particularly in relation to improvements to capacity to the south of Wicklow town, I note that Iarnród Eireann's rolling stock is currently fully deployed in service across the network. Notwithstanding this, I am pleased to note that as part of the DART+ programme, three orders delivering a total of 285 new carriages have been placed so far. When the first and second orders start entering service in 2027 and 2028, respectively, this will allow the redeployment of existing Intercity and commuter trains to other parts of the rail network experiencing capacity issues, including potentially on the Rosslare line. As this fleet enters operation, DART services will also be extended south of Wicklow town, a development which is targeted for 2029. The redeployment of rolling stock is an operational matter for Iarnród Eireann and the

National Transport Authority, NTA, which will be decided on following the entry into service of the new DART fleet.

The all-island strategic rail review, which was published in July 2024, also considered the issue of enhancing services on the Rosslare line. The review considered options to enable faster and more frequent journeys between Rosslare Europort and Dublin, including adding passing loops, tunnelling through Bray Head, developing a new railway along the M11 corridor, and developing a new line for DART services along the N11 corridor. Many of these solutions would be very costly and the review concluded that they would not be justifiable on socioeconomic or cost-benefit grounds, as the east coast rail line would not be expected to support more than one or two trains per hour in each direction. The review proposes that the best way forward for boosting connectivity in the south east in the shorter term is to introduce an hourly shuttle service between Wexford and Greystones, meeting seamlessly with DART services, bringing passengers into and out of the centre of Dublin city. This would be an operational decision and would need to be put in place following infrastructure upgrades planned under the DART+ programme.

On behalf of the Minister for Transport, I again thank the Deputy for raising this important matter.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I thank the Minister of State for the reply. I appreciate that he is taking the matter on behalf of the Minister but there is not an awful lot that is new in what he said. Essentially, the response with regard to new carriages is that when we put new carriages on some of the other lines, the hand-me-downs may be passed on to the Rosslare rail line. In the response, there are no plans for improvement with regard to the N11. There are already serious difficulties with traffic jams on the N11. In fact, people will recall that during Storm Chandra at the start of this year when the N11 had to close at Kilmacanogue, it caused chaos.

I am not seeing any real commitment in the Minister of State's response to the travelling public from counties Wicklow and Wexford. CSO statistics show that approximately 6,500 people travel from the Wicklow-Wexford area, primarily to the southside of Dublin and mostly for the purposes of work, but also to go to college, attend hospital appointments and so on. Unfortunately, the message I am reading in the reply is that the Government does not intend to do anything for those people in the next few years. There has been talk for a long time of extending the DART line to Wicklow. However, that will not be much comfort to my constituents who will have to change trains at Wicklow station on a cold, wet morning to get to the city. In particular, due consideration has not been given to those with mobility difficulties.

I would be grateful if the Minister of State would convey my concerns to the Minister.

Deputy Colm Brophy: I will, of course, relate the Deputy's concerns to the Minister. I take on board what he is saying. Investment in transport is key to what the Government is doing. We want to realise our commitment in that regard. The Deputy is primarily talking about the service south of Wicklow town but, as he knows, there is a very substantial commitment to investment in terms of DART+, including delivery of new battery and electric units and new rolling stock.

For many reasons, people want to move out of their cars and onto trains and buses. That is something the Government will continue to support. I will convey the Deputy's concerns about this line directly to the Minister.

An Ceann Comhairle: Before we move on to our next business, I am sure Deputies will join me in welcoming to the Gallery members of the Meath Cancer Support Group, led today by Ms Rachel Mullen. Their visit is at the behest of Senator McCarthy. They are most welcome.

Electricity Regulation (Climate Action and Connection to Distribution and Transmission Systems) Bill 2025: Second Stage [Private Members]

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

Is lá mór bróid dom é an lá seo mar tá mo chéad phíosa reachtaíochta tar éis an Dara Céim a bhaint amach. Táim ag tnúth leis an díospóireacht. Tá súil agam go mbeidh sé go maith agus fiúntach, agus go dtabharfaidh an tAire Stáit a thacaíocht don Bhille.

This is the first Bill I have introduced. Its Title continues the long Labour Party tradition of snappy marketing. The Title may be technical but the Bill itself is neat. It is designed to fix a gap in our law and do some good.

The Minister of State is aware of my position on data centres. My Labour Party colleagues have repeatedly made clear our view that there should be a moratorium on new data centre construction until we can be sure they will not impact on our ability to meet our climate targets and will no longer push up household energy bills. However, that is not the Government's position. The Bill is very much an attempt to work constructively with the Government on data centre policy. It presents a pretty straightforward proposition that if the Government insists on continuing to connect new very large users of electricity to the national grid, we must ensure those connections are consistent with Ireland's climate objectives and do not place an unfair burden on ordinary households and our electricity system as a whole.

My Bill would amend the Electricity Regulation Act 1999 to give the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, the power to make climate-related requirements a condition of connection to, or use of, our transmission and distribution systems. In particular, the CRU would be able to require applicants to take specified measures to avoid, prevent, reduce, offset or abate greenhouse gas emissions or otherwise advance the national climate objective. The idea for the Bill came about when the CRU published its draft large energy users connection policy last year.

There were some positive proposals, particularly the requirement that data centres would have to generate electricity equal to their own maximum import capacity. If they take a megawatt, they must be able to produce a megawatt to return to the grid. That proposal has subsequently been included in the final decision, which is very much a welcome development. However, at the time the CRU published its draft decision, there was nothing said about how the electricity should be generated. No guardrails were proposed against the use of fossil fuels. My concern was that we would simply see data centres building new gas plants on site and locking in more carbon emissions at the very moment we need to be phasing out gas. Obviously, that is less than ideal from a climate perspective and also from an energy

affordability perspective in terms of the price effect that our existing reliance on gas is already having.

The CRU was asked at the time why it was not considering a renewable requirement. Its response, in essence, was that it did not have the power to do that. Under the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015, public bodies must, insofar as practicable, act in line with the national climate objective. However, the Act frames that objective fairly broadly. The CRU's view was that the Act did not give it the explicit authority to mandate specific emission reductions or abatement measures, such as requiring data centres to use renewable generation. I saw that as a fairly serious legislative gap that could undermine our whole climate strategy.

My Bill, in short, seeks to address that gap. The power to mandate the types of measures I have outlined is necessary for the CRU to have. For new data centres in particular, the logical application of that principle is that their electricity demand should ultimately be matched entirely by additional renewable electricity. In its final decision on new connections, the CRU instituted a requirement that data centres would have to source 80% of their maximum import capacity from renewables within six years of connecting to the grid. I do not believe that is sufficient. One fifth of the massive amount of energy that data centres consume is a huge amount of new fossil fuel demand. Professor Hannah Daly of UCC has done some great work on explaining the issues with the CRU rules. When energy demand is rising so rapidly in Ireland, largely due to the enormous growth in the data centre sector, we could see a situation where we deploy more and more renewables but, at the same time, our emissions continue to rise. Big gas generators can be seen when driving past any of the data centres on the M50. Fossil fuels will continue to provide power to data centres when renewable generation is unavailable.

The CRU's six-year glide path or period of doing absolutely nothing also presents a problem. First, there are no clearly defined interim milestones required from data centres over that time, such as a requirement, for example, to reach 50% renewables within three years. There is not even any need for them to count their emissions over the six-year period. Even more important is that the emissions that build up over those six years are not just cancelled out by data centres providing or procuring renewable energy in later years. Those emissions are cumulative and irreversible. This policy basically means that data centres currently being developed could potentially rely substantially on fossil fuel generation well into the 2030s.

It is also worth noting that the 80% renewables requirement is measured on an annual basis rather than requiring renewable generation to match demand at the time it occurs. This is important because wind and solar generation levels vary depending on the time of day and the weather. By contrast, data centre energy demand is hugely inflexible and requires a highly reliable electricity supply around the clock. A company could satisfy an annual renewable energy requirement while still relying on fossil fuel generation for significant periods when wind and solar output is low.

That distinction matters. Ireland's electricity system already faces constraints in integrating increasing amounts of renewable generation. Network limitations, limited storage and interconnection constraints can prevent renewable electricity from being available exactly where and when demand occurs. Fossil fuels fill that gap. Without additional investment in the infrastructure needed to balance supply and demand, an annual renewable target does not necessarily translate into equivalent reductions in fossil fuel generation. By allowing that 20%

fossil fuel generation, we risk creating a situation where the policy designed to manage the electricity system impacts of data centres will simultaneously encourage investment in new fossil fuel infrastructure.

Such infrastructure could operate for decades, potentially creating precisely the kind of fossil fuel lock-in that climate policy should seek to avoid. We are seeing that already with this Government's proposal to build a floating LNG reserve on the Shannon. This is designed to serve the needs of large energy users.

Last year, data centres accounted for 23% - almost one quarter - of our energy consumption. Over the next few years, that figure will hit 30%. They will soon be using more energy than every household in the country combined. Remarkably, data centres accounted for 88.2% of the increase in Ireland's electricity demand since 2015. Energy demand from data centres has grown an average of 22.6% per year versus 0.4% for all other sectors of our economy. That seems crazy. Data centres are the defining force shaping Ireland's electricity system, an entire system increasingly organised around the demands of a small number of large corporate users and their interests. Even if we forget about the climate impact, the unfettered growth in data centre energy demand is hitting ordinary households in the pocket.

The issues here are twofold. First, there is the enormous stress that the level of energy demand coming from data centres is having on our grid, which is struggling to keep up. For that reason, the Government is now investing billions of euro in upgrading the grid, as well as in new sustainable power generation and additional gas-fired capacity. A confidential memo from the Secretary General of the Department of public expenditure put it plainly: soaring demand, overwhelmingly attributable to data centres, is driving the need for new generation and grid reinforcement. It is not as if data centres will be paying for these upgrades. It will be households who are already put to the pin of their collars who will be footing the bill through higher network tariffs.

I point the Minister of State in the direction of a report released this week and commissioned by Lynn Boylan MEP. It looks at the ways in which the cost of the grid investment required to facilitate the ever-growing demands of data centres and other large energy users are socialised across the public. The fact that this is by design is reflected in the title of the report. I quoted a figure of 88.2%. Data centres are responsible for 88.2% of the growth in our energy demand over the past decade. They almost certainly have not paid for the equivalent share in grid investment. They absolutely have not. There is a line in the report that I think perfectly encapsulates the situation. It states that the grid becomes a publicly funded platform for private growth. Households are paying for the infrastructure that keeps data centres running and allows for the continued rapid growth in their energy consumption, in effect subsidising the demands of multinational tech giants

The second aspect is the actual price effect that data centre energy demands are having. Trying to concisely explain how energy markets work is a fool's errand, but for the benefit of the record I will give it a shot. Electricity prices function on a system of marginal pricing. The cheapest available electricity source is chosen first by operators to meet demand. Typically, the cheapest energy is renewable. When that is insufficient to meet demand, the next-cheapest source is chosen, and this continues until there is sufficient electricity to meet demand. Crucially, the last source to enter the market, which is the most expensive and is typically gas, sets the wholesale price for all other energy sources in the mix. In effect, when electricity

demand is low, renewables can set the wholesale price and energy is cheap. However, when demand is high, gas sets the price and energy becomes more expensive. The thing to consider is that data centre energy demand is remarkably inflexible. It is there all the time. Unlike households or small businesses, data centre power consumption does not fluctuate throughout the day. Where households consume power together during peak periods of the day, such as when making dinner or doing the washing in the evening, data centres' demand profile acts as a rising floor, raising the level of peak demand higher than it would otherwise be and making gas the price-setter more often. Likewise, even during periods of low energy demand from households or other industries, data centres' constant need for energy creates a floor. The inflexibly high level of data centre energy consumption pushes demand above the level of cheap renewable energy more often and, therefore, gas sets the price more often.

The impact this has had on household bills was laid out in a report by Friends of the Earth earlier this year. The price is €715 million. That is the price that data centres put on Irish households between 2015 and 2023. It amounts to approximately €360 per household, or in other words, a week's wages for low-income earners. It is anticipated that under a high-demand growth scenario, which on the current trajectory is the likely scenario, data centres could add a further €1.5 billion to household bills over the next decade. This is at a time when more than 500,000 energy accounts are in arrears. To add insult to injury, data centres are paying less for their electricity than ordinary household users. That is why we in the Labour Party and others have said that we need a levy on data centres' energy use. It is deeply unfair that while data centre operators are getting cut-price deals, hard-working families and households are paying through their noses.

I know that the Government's point is that data centres are an integral part of our industrial strategy and we cannot do anything to upset the tech companies lest they take their business elsewhere. I do not dispute that data centres and the tech sector more broadly are a vital part of our economy. Data centres are a fact of modern life and enable the digital infrastructure that is more or less indispensable to properly participate in society these days. No one is arguing that. Our issue is with the scale of the growth we are seeing now, particularly with these new proposed hyper-scale data centres used for AI. Not only does the Government appear to have no appreciation of the costs associated with this growth, whether those are costs to our environment or people, it has actively been trying to hide those costs. The report on data centres that was commissioned by the Department of enterprise was, frankly, an embarrassment. Not alone did the Government attempt to grossly exaggerate the number of jobs that data centres provide for Ireland, we know from freedom of information requests that the Government explicitly instructed KPMG to remove sections of the report that highlighted the costs associated with the massive concentration of data centres here. Why is the Government so afraid of having this conversation and doing a genuine cost-benefit analysis of the expansion of data centres in Ireland? Is it because those elements of the report which were excluded from the final copy, on the explicit instruction of the Department of enterprise, drew into question the continued green-lighting of more and more data centres and whether the resources required would be better directed in addressing public services such as housing and transport? All mention of housing was cut from the final report and, particularly relevant for this debate, so too was any question raised around sustainability and energy considerations. Clearly, it was not a genuine attempt by the Government to examine the evidence and formulate policy on that

evidence. It was the opposite. The Government had its policy and was looking for ways to justify it, ignoring any potential drawbacks in the process.

I will go back again to my Bill and my motivation for bringing it forward. I have fundamental issues with the Government's approach but acknowledge the role that data centres play in modern life. I acknowledge our over-reliance on ICT as a tax base. This is an attempt to work with the Government. If we continue to allow data centres to develop at the current rate, even accounting for the new connection policy, we will see fossil fuel demand continue and emissions from the sector rise and rise.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Colm Brophy): I welcome the opportunity to discuss the Labour Party's Private Members' Bill on electricity regulation. The Deputy mentioned it in his remarks, but I congratulate him on his first Bill in the House. Unfortunately, having given those congratulations, the Government proposes, as has been indicated, to reject the motion as we are satisfied that the CRU does not require additional powers conveyed upon it to support the furtherance of national climate objectives and that the existing statutory framework is sufficient.

The CRU's core statutory functions include, among others, regulating electricity markets, protecting energy consumers and enforcing critical energy safety frameworks. The explanatory memorandum of this Bill notes the CRU's statement in its 2025 proposed decision paper on large energy user connection policy and that the provisions of the climate action Act do not provide a sufficient legal basis to allow the CRU to explicitly mandate specific emissions reductions and offsetting measures for connection applicants. However, in this same document, the CRU states that section 9 of the Electricity Regulation Act 1999 provides the CRU with a basis to take account of renewable energy policy in the development of electricity connection policy. The subsequent publication of the CRU's large energy user connection policy is a clear example of the CRU using the sufficient statutory powers available to it to support Ireland's climate objectives.

Under this connection policy, new data centres are required to meet at least 80% of their annual demand with additional renewable electricity generated in the Republic of Ireland. This pioneering approach by CRU that new data centre demand must be accompanied by substantial additional renewable electricity generation in Ireland is intended to ensure that rising data centre demand provides significant positive support to the achievement of Ireland's wider decarbonisation objectives.

To address this point in detail, section 15 of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015, as amended, provides that every public body must, so far as practicable, perform its functions in a manner consistent with: the climate action plan; national long-term climate action strategy; national adaptation framework; and approved sectoral adaptation plans; the furtherance of the national climate objective; and the objective of mitigating greenhouse gas emissions and adapting to the effects of climate change in the State. The Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, is a public body to which these requirements apply and with which they actively comply.

Section 9 of the Electricity Regulation Act 1999 further provides for the CRU, in the carrying out of its duties, to have regard to a range of matters including: to promote the continuity, security and quality of supplies of electricity and promote the use of renewable,

sustainable or alternative forms of energy. These legal powers, as employed in the CRU's large energy user policy document, demonstrate that the CRU has sufficient legal competence to impose requirements on large energy users to employ emissions reduction and offsetting measures. The Bill, as proposed, therefore aims to address a perceived gap in legislation which does not, in the view of Government, exist. On this basis, the Government proposes to reject this motion.

Data centres are central to Ireland's modern economy and play a critical enabling role across a wide range of digitally intensive sectors, enhancing the competitiveness of the Irish economy. They strengthen Ireland's position as a strategic knowledge intensive regional hub for the ICT sector and also support broader retention and expansion of existing investment that support billions of euro in annual economic value for Ireland via high-wage employment, tax receipts and supplier ecosystems. According to independent analysis, the industry employs 19,500 people directly. Our technology sector, underpinned by data centre infrastructure, accounts for approximately 7% of our total workforce and over half of total services exports. Their value is evident and the Government remains committed to supporting sustainable data centre development as a result. It is important to note that unlike countries like the Netherlands, Germany and the UK, Ireland does not host large, energy-intensive industrial sectors. Ireland's industrial electricity demand is primarily concentrated in our digital economy. This is our core energy intensive industry. Germany and other countries consume more electricity to support their heavy industry sites like car manufacturing, steel, and chemicals.

Connecting such large energy loads is a challenge that many energy systems across the world are grappling with. In response, the Government's Large Energy-User Action Plan, LEAP, published in 2026, sets out a plan-led approach for very large and energy intensive investments, including data centres, which, due to scale and energy consumption, will benefit from co-ordinated national infrastructure planning. The LEAP will enable Ireland to capture next generation investment in a planned and managed way and unlock significant associated economic, employment and renewable energy opportunities. Our approach will ensure that sustainability, affordability, competitiveness and energy security remain central to policy.

Through effective and focused policies and measures, we are making tangible progress towards objectives of decarbonisation, while supporting sustained economic growth for wider societal benefits. Ireland now has its lowest level of greenhouse gas emissions in 35 years. We are decoupling population growth and economic success from emissions. The Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, now projects that we are close to meeting our first carbon budget, and a reduction in emissions of between 13% and 25% by 2030. The work remains ongoing right across government to implement climate mitigation measures.

Ireland is at the forefront of transitioning to an electricity system dominated by variable renewable energy sources, such as wind and solar, and we have achieved record-breaking levels of renewable electricity generation, reducing our reliance on imported fossil fuels. Most notably, emissions from electricity generation are estimated to decrease by between 53% and 60% by 2030. Significant investment has taken place in increasing the technical flexibility of Ireland's power system to enhance its renewable integration capabilities. The electricity system in Ireland can operate with up to 75% wind and solar at any given moment. The International Energy Agency, IEA, recognised this achievement as remarkable and a global milestone. Ireland currently has over 8 GW of renewable generation capacity, over 5 GW of onshore wind

and over 3 GW of solar PV installed, with hydro, biomass and other small sources contributing the remainder.

The Government has also prioritised unprecedented investment in our grid of up to €18.9 billion, underpinned by €3.5 billion Government equity investment. This investment will ensure that Ireland's electricity grid continues to provide capacity to support the delivery of Government targets across society and the economy. This investment supports expanding our electricity generation, with a particular priority on renewable energy sources.

In addition to investment, the Government is accelerating the roll-out of renewable energy in Ireland by identifying and addressing barriers to the deployment of renewable energy through dedicated cross-sectoral expert groups. These include the accelerating renewable electricity task force, for onshore generation and the offshore wind delivery task force for offshore. These groups bring together senior officials from Departments and State agencies to identify, co-ordinate and prioritise the policies required to support the rapid development of renewable electricity generation. These investments, policies and measures demonstrate that the Government is fully committed to delivering on Ireland's climate ambition across all sectors and to progressing climate action in a planned and coherent way.

Deputy Réada Cronin: Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an Teachta Ahern as ucht an Bhille seo a thabhairt os comhair na Dála. I congratulate him on bring forward his first Bill. I am sorry that the Government is not supporting it, but Sinn Féin certainly will be doing so.

The issue of the explosion in the number of these monstrous data centres for AI is once again before the House. Last week, I and na Teachtaí Pa Daly and Deputy Conway-Walsh tabled a Bill which would ensure that any new connections to the grid would be for public benefit as opposed to solely for private profit. We have repeatedly seen cases of data centres being given priority access to the grid ahead of much-needed housing developments. They are hoovering up energy while simultaneously driving up the price of household energy bills. Ireland is a complete outlier in the context of the number of data centres operating and the amount of energy they consume. The UN has cited Ireland as a cautionary tale because of the amount of our energy we are giving to data centres. On average, these data centres consume about 3% of the energy in the EU whereas in Ireland, they consume almost 24% of our electricity. This is absolutely staggering and completely unsustainable.

Last week, my Sinn Féin colleague Lynn Boylan MEP published a report on how ordinary households are footing the bill for network expansion driven by and for data centres. The CRU, which ultimately decides who pays for the expansion of our grid, instead of charging those who are driving the demands, such as large energy users and data centres, is socialising the cost. It is spreading costs across all energy users, even though its mandate was that it was set up to protect the consumer. It is charging ordinary workers and families for the enormous amounts of energy that data centres consume. Instead of charging the data centres, this Government is rolling out the red carpet for them and making the taxpayer fund their industry before sites are even developed. What is all this for anyway? This question is being asked more and more. Unfortunately, the answer might not necessarily be one we want to hear.

In recent days, the world's leading AI companies warned the UN Security Council of the risks posed by AI to humanity. Anthropic CEO, Dario Amodei, said that if managed poorly, he

believes AI could be a risk to humanity as a whole. We have repeatedly heard these warnings from different individuals who either are or were heavily involved in the AI sector. People will have different opinions about this issue. Some will claim that there is catastrophising and scaremongering taking place, while others may believe that we really are ten years from extinction. The whole thing sounds pretty mad and is very sci-fi. Last week I highlighted the fact that people are saying that this could be corporate or regulatory capture or some kind of stock market scam.

Whatever your opinion is - and more intelligent people than me seem to be worried about it - it is clear that there is a certain unknown with AI and that Ireland, as a country with ten times more data centres than any other *per capita*, is driving its growth. The truth is that we do not know what AI will look like in ten years. Ultimately, we cannot legislate for companies in foreign countries that are in the vanguard when it comes to this technology. However, we can protect people against the negative impacts they are having on people's energy bills and living standards. That is our job as legislators.

In my constituency of Kildare North, there Herbata plans to build a data centre. This project has been much opposed by the residents. They have cited issues such as noise pollution, the water that will be required and the increase in their electricity bills. This data centre, for which planning permission has been obtained, subject to an appeal from An Coimisiún Pleanála, is on 70 acres. In other words, an area of land eight times the size of Croke Park. The residents have mentioned the pressure this will put on the local grid and the fact that Herbata will be given priority access to the grid over new housing developments in the future. We saw how that happened in Lucan recently with the substation that was meant to provide energy to houses but which is being used to power a data centre instead.

The Herbata site is also going to need six gas generators connected to it because, although it is meant to provide its own energy, it is going to have need a back-up. At a recent meeting of climate committee, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions stated that as we are at full employment, we only have so many workers. Construction workers cannot all be building data centres; we need houses. That is what the people in my constituency want. Parents want their kids to be able to afford to live in the places in north Kildare in which they have grown up and not to be obliged to move two or three hours down the road, because that will mean that they will not see them or their grandchildren as often.

According to research published by Maynooth University today, the State could have built 50,000 new homes using the capital invested in data centres from 2019 to 2024. That is crazy. Those in Fianna Fáil had their knickers in a knot last night about sports grants being announced by Fine Gael. It is a pity they do not get upset about the number of people who are homeless or who need homes or the number who are on waiting lists. All they are worried about are sports grants. Anyway, I digress.

An Ceann Comhairle: In the nicest possible way, Deputy.

Deputy Réada Cronin: The Herbata data centre is coupled with another potentially monstrous data centre on the Jigginstown site right next door. My constituents are particularly worried about this and the impact it is going to have. The centre at Jigginstown is going to be twice the size of the Herbata one, which would make it 16 times the size of Croke Park. The

Herbata data centre on is going to use three times the amount of electricity currently used by homes in Kildare. We just cannot keep up. This is unsustainable. People in Naas feel powerless. The Jigginstown centre is going to be a mere 100 m from houses and schools in the area. People are frightened at that prospect and want accountability. They expect it in a democratic society. Public participation in major connection decisions must be provided for by the Government if it is going to continue down the road of building data centres in exchange for a pat on the head from the tech bros.

We have been put in a position whereby we are going to have to hold a protest on the doorstep of Kildare County Council on Monday next, 28 September, at 1.30 p.m., at which we will have councillors across the county to reverse the decision to zone the land at Jigginstown for data centres. A motion in this regard is being brought forward by a Sinn Féin councillor because zoning of land is about the only power councillors have any more. I urge all those in the Kildare area to join us and show their support.

In relation to the Bill before us, Sinn Féin wants to see low emissions from any connection to electricity transmission and distribution systems. We also believe in the social obligations the State has to build houses. This Bill, in its current form - I am sorry for this - could potentially lead to housing developments being rejected on the grounds that the emissions relating to them would be too high during construction. I am sure we could work on that on Committee Stage. We will be supporting the Bill. While we want to see high-quality houses that are affordable and environmentally-friendly being built. I do not think that Deputy Ahern or the Labour Party would want to see homes not built because their emissions do not meet a certain threshold. I am sure that is not the intention behind the Bill.

The Bill tabled by Deputies Pa Daly and Rose-Conway Walsh and I last week would set out a statutory prioritisation for connections that are of public benefit, including housing developments, which is a better way of ensuring public need is put before data centres' greed. We must ensure that we prioritise housing, school and hospital connections to the grid and not facilitate the insatiable quest for more AI that has been so recklessly brought to our shores by this short-sighted Government.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I thank Deputy Ahern and the Labour Party for bringing forward this Bill. I congratulate the Deputy on his first Bill. He will be happy to hear that, unlike the Government, we will be supporting it. We support what is an attempt to place some limits on data centres being automatically allowed to connect to the national electricity grid, regardless of any consideration of environmental and social costs. We think the time for moderate measures has passed. We should not be having any more data centres connecting to the grid. That is the position of Friends of the Earth, which was very well put forward at the AI committee this week. It has long been the position of People Before Profit. In 2021, former Deputy Bríd Smith brought forward our first Bill in respect of this matter. That Bill would have stopped any more data centres being built. At that stage, Ireland was already an absolute outlier in terms of the number of data centres we had and the percentage of our electricity being used. We are even worse now. Whenever the various data centres that are in the process of being built are completed, we will be even worse again.

It cannot be said too many times that data centres are already eating up about a quarter of our electricity supply nationally. People should know that data centres are using 80% of our

electricity in Dublin. The new report by Dr. Seán Fearon, Dr. Patrick Bresnihan and Dr. Patrick Brodie should be read by everyone. Its title is very important. It is: How We All Pay for Big Tech: the Social, Economic and Environmental Costs of Data Centres in Ireland. Up until recently, this has been a debate where most people would have been critical of data centres. Most people do not agree with the Government's approach of giving big tech everything that it wants. However, we maybe have not been clear enough that there is a price to be paid by people as a consequence of the Government being completely captured by big tech.

Those costs are multiple and environmental. Since 2017, every bit of extra capacity added to the grid from renewable energy has been taken up by data centres. As a result, we are not getting any closer to moving to 100% renewables. I refer to the cost in terms of housing, the opportunity cost of 50,000 homes and the construction jobs that I will get onto maybe later. Instead of building data centres - most of the 19,000 jobs the Minister claimed were directly involved are construction jobs - those people could be involved in building homes. I refer also to: the cost in terms of connecting homes to the grid; the day-to-day financial costs, with hundreds of euro paid by every household in this country as a consequence of the data centres using up so much of our electricity and then pushing us up to the expensive electricity generation and into gas; the extra network charges; and the impact in regard to water. There is excellent stuff in the report to which I refer regarding our water usage. The costs are multiple, and what you see is the Government deciding that, right down the line, big tech will come before people.

What is in the report in respect of water is new. When controversy arose in the context of the hosepipe ban over the summer, the Government pointed to dated and limited Irish Water information to say, "No, this is tiny". However, what the report to which I refer provides in an estimate for the first time of overall water usage by data centres. Previous estimates have been limited to their metered water consumption, mainly for cooling purposes, but a much greater factor is the water used in producing electricity for them. The authors of the report estimate that this is equivalent to the water consumption of 340,600 homes, or 18.5% of Irish households. I have already made the point about the 50,000 homes that could have been built if we had not misallocated capital resources to data centres over the course of five years.

I want to talk a little about the KPMG report.

Over €110,000 was paid by the public to produce a junk science report on the supposed economic benefits of data centres. First drafts were not junk science enough, so the Department had to go back to KPMG and ask it to remove any reference to the extra costs paid for by the public, which was originally in the terms of reference. The Department asked the consultants not to include any reference to opportunity costs in housing or public transport. The email from the Department to KPMG could not have been clearer. It said:

... the exec summary needs to present a strong narrative that considers the full gamut of the economic analysis and provides the evidence base that supports the position that we should continue to further develop our data-centre landscape post-2030 in the context of our climate objectives.

Why are we paying for a report that the Government has already written the conclusions of? Why is the public paying for something like this? We are trying to have a debate in society about whether this is good and whether we should go further, and the Government is using

public money to get a report where the outcome is predetermined not by the people who are paying for it, who are the public, but by the Government that is directing where the usage will be.

There is really useful stuff in the new report that exposes the ridiculous methodology used by the consultants. KPMG went over the top in meeting that request from the Government by producing a report in which it came up with a hyperinflated figure of 876,000 jobs in the country being dependent on data centres. The new report reveals that the methodology used to arrive at the figure was to include, for example, a surgeon working within 50 km of a data centre as one of those 876,000 workers. It did the same for a paediatrician or anyone working in a hospital that is located within 50 km of a data centre. Each of those jobs was counted as being dependent on data centres. Obviously, this is ridiculous. The Minister of State gave a figure of 19,000. When you dig down into the KPMG report, however, the figure for direct jobs is 3,300. That is it. The majority of the rest of the jobs are construction jobs, and those workers could instead be in the building of socially useful things like homes in order to address the housing crisis.

This all illustrates how captured by corporations, and big tech in particular, this Government is. It is willing to do anything big tech wants, and that is the role it is playing within the European Union. What is emerging about the Government's role in trying to strip away the right to privacy of not just Irish but European citizens at the behest of big tech is absolutely shocking. The new digital omnibus compromise proposal from the Irish Presidency proposes to end the right of European citizens to the privacy of their personal data in circumstances where that data is used for AI purposes. That is shocking. The Government does not have the courage to stand over that position, but it is very clear if you read the proposal from the Irish Presidency. It is a giveaway of personal data to big-tech corporations. That is the role the Government is playing within the European Union. It is driving a deregulation agenda with all these different omnibuses, but especially with the digital omnibus in this case in order to facilitate a blanket exemption from GDPR rules on the use of personal data for AI.

Then there is the AI summit happening as part of the European Council. The Government has said how great it is that it is doing this. The Minister of State, Deputy Smyth, told the AI committee yesterday that this "will be a timely opportunity for stakeholders from all walks of society and from across the globe to discuss and shape how we can collectively address these topical matters." People should go to the website of this AI summit. There is a huge list of speakers. There must be 50 of them. There is not a single critical voice. There is not a single trade unionist to represent the views of workers who are affected by AI and who might lose their jobs as a result of it. There is not a single climate scientist to talk about the impact of AI. There is not a single critical academic or independent civil society person. It is just big tech. Think of any big-tech company in the world and it is going to be there. Despite this, the Minister of State tried to claim that the summit is for stakeholders from all walks of society. When challenged, she said that of course it is industry-based. Thus, it is not from all across society, is it? The outcome is predetermined, just like the KPMG report. The AI summit is similarly about promoting AI in the interests of big tech.

This has been a bad week though for the Government on AI and data centres. It comes after the bad week the Government last week. People are waking up to the impact of data centres on electricity prices, energy usage and the degrading of culture, education and so on. That is

happening across the world. In America, there is a powerful movement that is succeeding in stopping data centres being built in various states. Meanwhile, the Irish Government is saying that it will accept what is the toxic waste of the 21st century. However, people in this country are growing in confidence and saying that they will not take it. They will not take it in their communities and they do not agree that we should be using more than a quarter of our electricity for these big-tech data centres.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Gabhaim míle buíochas leis an Teachta Ahern for bringing this Bill forward. I agree with him about the fair question. The LEUs across our grid need to come up with solutions as to how they power themselves, how they are benefiting communities and how they are actually contributing. That is where I agree with him in the context of the Bill I brought forward, but there some parts of this Bill I will not be able to support. It is generally just the threshold and how I think the Bill might, in its current form, not only apply to data centres but also any other small industry, factory or apartment development. If that could be amended, maybe I could support the Bill.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I am open to amendments.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Good. I look forward to working with the Deputy on my Bill.

I like what the Deputy is trying to do with the Bill. What we really agree on and always will is that section 34 needs to be amended. The CRU needs to be at the centre of this. As the Deputy and I know from our work on the climate and energy committee, there is a finger-pointing act going because no one wants to be responsible. Giving more powers to the CRU is something both our Bills are trying to do. I commend the Deputy on the fact that the principle is definitely right. I look forward to working with him in the coming term, including on the committee, to solve this problem. However, the way the Bill is currently formatted adds a hurdle and could add a problem. I understand that the Deputy is trying to make it so that large energy users should not be able to connect to the grid too easily, but it projects the weight onto all. With the new condition he has put in, the measures should and can be phased in after connection. However, the Bill does not say what happens if these are not met.

I agree with the Deputy that all LEUs need to cut their emissions. This is something we have to tackle. The different way I am approaching it is that under section 37, a direct line from a generator to a user is effectively blocked. As a result, my Bill would repeal the section and replace it with a clearer system similar to what an Teachta Ahern is doing here, all run by the CRU. I agree that the CRU must decide on an application quicker. I agree that the criteria for the decisions on connections must be objective and non-discriminatory. There can be no disproportionate costs for procedures. Something I would love to see and which the Deputy's Bill alludes to is that if there is another grid connection for an LEU, which could be a data centre, there should be a community benefit fund directly proportionate to the amount of energy the LEU is taking.

The CRU also has to be able to approve a whole class of direct lines, and that is where the private wires Bill I am trying to progress would come in. Smaller producers like schools, nursing homes and GAA clubs should be able to share energy more quickly when they are not using it. That is something I think the Minister of State would agree with. I ask him to take

the principle of Deputy Ahern's Bill that LEUs should and need to meet their climate responsibilities. The different approach I am taking is one whereby we would give them easier tools to meet those responsibilities. Private wires and direct lines will help this, with clear rules that the CRU will impose and a direct community benefit fund that will be proportionate to the savings of a direct line. Then we will not need to force climate action at the connection point.

5 o'clock

We will have made it the easiest option and the single sheriff in town - CRU - will dictate that, so I commend Deputy Ahern on his work and I look forward to working with him in the future.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Colm Brophy): I thank the Deputies from across the House for their contributions during this debate. The Government remains fully committed to delivering on the twin objectives of decarbonisation and digitalisation in a sustainable and affordable manner. The sufficiency of the powers available to CRU through the electricity regulation Acts to achieve those objectives is demonstrated through the large energy user policy, which imposes a requirement on them of 80% of their annual demand being met by renewables generated within the Republic of Ireland. Consequently, we are satisfied that CRU does not require additional powers to be conveyed upon it to support those objectives.

While there is a lot of negative discourse around data centres, they are a critical part of Ireland's economic and digital present future and a key part of foreign direct investment. I recognise that Deputy Ahern's contribution did acknowledge that because in our own constituency, there are thousands of jobs that are dependent on the tech industry. Other Deputies in their contributions do not seem to get how important tech companies are to the economy of this country. Whether one likes them or not and whether or not one views them as a bogeyman, they are still very important players in the economy of our country and data centres are part of the tech infrastructure.

Data centres have strengthened Ireland's position as a strategic knowledge and intensive regional hub for that sector. They also support a broader retention expansion of the existing investment, which is an investment of billions in annual economic value to Ireland. They also provide high-wage employment; have tax receipts, which certain parties like to spend hand over fist but do not seem to like where they come from; and have their own supplier ecosystems, all of which are important. Data centres are significant investors in Ireland's renewable energy sector primarily through their long-term power purchasing agreement, which supports significant development within it.

The CRU's 80% renewable electricity requirement will ensure future growth in data centres will drive further sustainable investment in additional renewable generation capacity and supports Ireland's wider decarbonisation objectives. I acknowledge that data centres should be planned, built and operated in an energy and resource-efficient manner and that should be done in line with Ireland's decarbonisation and energy security. The Government's large energy user action plan, LEAP, published in 2026 provides for such an approach. It set out a plan-led approach for very large energy-intensive investments that due to scale and energy consumption will benefit from co-ordinated national infrastructure planning. What is important is a medium-term plan that will enable Ireland to capture the next generation of investment but in a planned

and sustainable way. It represents a key strategic industrial policy in support of the Government's objective to accelerate renewable energy development, expedite grid investment and streamline planning for the next wave of industrial development. Alongside LEAP, the CRU large energy user connection policy establishes a pathway for new data centres to seek connection to the electricity system that addresses the security of electricity supplies and risks system constraints and promotes the renewable energy target. To address the climate crisis, work is progressing right across Government to implement climate mitigation measures. We are focusing on actions that will accelerate the delivery of measures resulting in a reduction in emissions across all sectors of the economy. The recent EPA greenhouse gas report reaffirms this providing evidence of our emission reductions this year. Additionally, it confirms we have decoupled emissions and economic growth, which is by the way a very significant milestone. We remain committed to driving forward the climate agenda with unprecedented investment. Ireland remains a leader as we transition to renewable-based electricity systems with almost half of our electricity in February, March and April coming from renewable sources. Ireland consistently has over eight gigawatts of renewable generation capacity with onshore wind the largest contributor to this. To facilitate further renewable connections and overall growth, Government approval was received in July for a €3.5 billion investment in EirGrid and the ESB to facilitate the investment programme of up to €18.9 billion out to 2030. These plans, policies and investments are all part of the Government's work to reconcile Ireland's need for growth and prosperity and provide our citizens with a shared need to achieve our climate goals and live sustainably.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I thank all the Deputies who spoke here this afternoon and I appreciate the support from Deputies Cronin, Paul Murphy and Heneghan. I thank the Minister of State for being here. Obviously, it would have been preferable if the Minister could have been here but I appreciate the Minister of State is the designated survivor today, so I thank him for his time. I am disappointed to hear he will not be supporting my Bill. Part of the Government might but I guess not all of it and that is what is important. To the extent that it is worth pointing out, I would be open to amendments on this. In response to Deputy Heneghan, section 1(c) of my Bill does have a *de minimis* capacity level for this to take effect. Obviously, I would be open to looking at that and refining it to ensure that it would not have any adverse effects like Deputy Cronin mentioned. It could happen to apply to a housing estate. That is obviously not the intention of the Bill and that is something that could quite easily be solved on Committee Stage but that does not appear to be to be on the cards, unfortunately.

Regarding the opportunity costs associated with the continued proliferation of data centres, Deputies Cronin and Paul Murphy mentioned a very interesting and important study released today by researchers from Maynooth University, UCD and the University of Barcelona that looks at the broader economics around data centres. It was said previously that 50,000 houses could have been built with the resources that have been directed towards data centres over the past number of years. I am afraid to say that the report finds the Government's claim about the economic benefits of data centres to be exaggerated. It is an extensive study so I do not have time to touch on all of it. However, the basic point is that Ireland's data centre sector might appear to be enormous when measured through the multinational heavy gross value-added metric as it was in the Department's report or when dependent economic activity is attributed to data centres as was done in that report but the genuine additional domestically retained economic activity in the data centre sector is smaller than the Government will admit.

We know that in the ICT sector, the gross value added to the economy is massively distorted by multinational activity. The KPMG report that the Department commissioned to make the case for data centres uses national accounting data. That can include GDP and other similar measures but the gross value-added in the Irish ICT sector is hugely affected by multinational profit shifting, which means profits accrued due to economic activity elsewhere in the world are simply transferred here or booked here by the Irish arm of these multinational tech firms so the profits can be taxed at our relatively low corporation tax rate. Treating that as evidence of corresponding economic activity inflates the apparent contribution of data centres - at least the ones that are located here. We know that the value in the ICT sector that actually stays in Ireland is relatively small, so much of the activity associated with that industry reflects accounting or tax structures rather than equivalent productivity in Ireland. That is really the point I am trying to make. The study says the data centres are essentially passed through investments or enclave industries and the local economic activity surrounding them is limited relative to the value attributed to the sector in these national accounts.

Then, of course, there is the jobs argument around this. In terms of direct employment on the operational side of things, there are around 3,000 jobs across the entire data centre sector and a further 20,000 jobs or so in direct or indirect construction. These are jobs that are temporary in nature. The point is that Ireland has scarce construction workers and skills.

An open question to the Minister of State and the Government is whether using this resource to construct more and more data centres is really the best use of that resource. If they are building hyperscale data centres, they cannot simultaneously build houses, transport infrastructure or other important projects in the public interest. We have been scouring Europe for the past year, looking for the 8,000 construction workers we need to build MetroLink, workers who we want to stay here so they can continue the line out to our area in Dublin South-West, as the Minister of State well knows - *#metrosouthwest*.

Deputy Colm Brophy: I am going to say *#metrosouthwest* as well. I think we both agree on that, 100%.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: It is a comprehensive report. It is worth the Minister of State's time to read and consider it.

I have a couple more points in response to the Minister of State. He mentioned that Ireland's industrial electricity demand is primarily concentrated in our digital economy and that this is our core energy-intensive industry. That is fine but what is happening at the moment is that multiple Ministers are using this argument to justify continuing the *status quo* in their own Departments - by "*status quo*", I mean continuing high levels of emissions. It is fine to say that a justification for data centres is that we do not have any other heavy industry. However, I heard the Minister for agriculture on the radio the other morning using it as justification for continued high emissions in the agriculture sector. Ministers say that we do not have any heavy industry here, and now, this is our heavy industry. If that is the Government's argument, it can only be used once. The Minister of State can talk to his colleagues about that. The Minister of State also referred to Germany and other countries consuming more electricity to support their heavy industries, which is the case, but in Germany, the level of electricity used for heavy industry is about 25% of its energy. We are rapidly approaching that now with our use of data centres. Again, this is something to watch out for.

The Government's ultimate logic for opposing my Bill is that the CRU already has these powers. That is great - job done. I suppose the logic of everything I have said concerns the impact of the increased reliance on and use of fossil fuels rather than renewables. All of that still stands. If the CRU does have the powers it requires, I would like to see the Government pushing it to go further with its connection policy - further than the six-year, do-nothing glide path for connection to the grid, and further than just 80% renewables. If data centres are said to be so vital to retaining ICT jobs and, crucially, corporation tax in this country, and if it is the Government's position that data centres are the anchor for those jobs, I would query that. We have very low corporation tax compared to international competitors. We have a highly educated, relatively young, English-speaking workforce. There are plenty of reasons tech jobs are here. They were here before the data centres came. I am not sure data centres play such a huge role in anchoring jobs here. However, if that is the Government's argument, and if it is the Government's position that it wants to continue to build data centres, all that is Bill was proposing to do, and all I am asking at this point in time, is to try to do that in as sustainable a way as possible. I understood previously that the CRU's hands were tied by a lack of this power. The Government is telling me today that the CRU's hands are not tied, and that it has the power to do this and potentially to do more. I would love to see that happen.

I thank all the contributors for speaking today. I appreciate it.

Question put.

An Ceann Comhairle: In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is postponed until the next weekly division time.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 5.14 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 29 Meán Fómhair 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 5.14 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 29 September 2026.