



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 29 Meán Fómhair 2026

Tuesday, 29 September 2026

Chuaigh an Leas-Cheann Comhairle i gceannas ar 2 p.m.

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Before we commence, I welcome to the Public Gallery the group Every Child Matters, from Meath and elsewhere around the country. They are guests of Deputy Johnny Guirke.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Cuirim fáilte roimh Every Child Matters. You are very welcome to the House.

Tá pobal Bhóthar Garbhachaidh go hiomlán i gcoinne an mhórshiúil de chuid an Ord Oráistigh atá á bhrú síos a mbóthar. Tá sé de cheart acu maireachtáil faoi shíocháin. Caithfidh Rúnaí Stáit na Breataine, Chris Bryant, gníomhú láithreach chun stop a chur le haon mhórshiúil atá á bhrú ar an bpobal seo.

Dignity, togetherness, resolve and strength: that is what the community of the Garvaghy Road has demonstrated over recent days. Mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers, families, neighbours and friends have stood together day and night to defend the peace their community has enjoyed for 28 years. They stand firm because threat remains.

The fundamental question they ask is "why?" Why, after 28 years of peace, are the Orange Order and the Democratic Unionist Party, DUP, so determined to force this unwanted march down the Garvaghy Road? Why, when a generation has grown up without this intimidation and fear, is there such determination to reopen this dispute and override the clearly expressed wishes of the community? It defies belief that the Parades Commission could conclude that this march should return after 28 years.

The Taoiseach correctly described that decision as "incomprehensible and wrong". I agree, but how was such an incomprehensible and wrong decision arrived at? What changed? Remember what this dispute brought in the past: 21 sectarian murders. Among the dead were three little boys, Richard, Mark and Jason Quinn, murdered when their home was petrol-

bombed by loyalists; Rosemary Nelson, the solicitor for the Garvaghy Road residents, killed by loyalists; and Robert Hamill, kicked to death by loyalists.

Over recent days I have stood with the Garvaghy Road community. I have spoken to those mothers and grandmothers who lived through the dark years, and to parents, children and teenagers who have lived their entire lives free from that intimidation and fear.

That is, in the end, the greatest gift that peace has given to an entire generation. Why, in God's name, would anyone seek to drag this community backwards? Whatever their motivations, they will fail because there is no going back. The days of unionist domination are over. The Irish and British Governments have a responsibility to ensure that this community continues to live in peace, free from sectarian intimidation. They have a responsibility to ensure that there is no Orange Order march down the Garvaghy Road. The British Secretary of State can stop this sectarian march being forced down that road and that is what he must do, because the way to restore peace and calm is this. That is the way to resolve this crisis.

Has the Taoiseach informed the British Prime Minister and the Secretary of State of their responsibility to end this nightmare, stop this march and allow the people of the Garvaghy Road and beyond to return to their peaceful lives?

The Taoiseach: I ask the Leas-Cheann Comhairle and the House to indulge me for a moment as I acknowledge the presence and imminent retirement of our colleague Miriam Lord, who is in the Gallery today. I think we would all agree that Miriam's journalism, and in particular her oversight and accounts of our work in this House, has been a critical part of our national conversation, and indeed our nation's democracy, over quite a number of years. In her unsparing but razor-sharp perception and analysis, I sometimes felt that she was rather unfair about me, but she was always spot on about everyone else. More seriously, Miriam has been an outstanding journalist and never produced anything short of must-read reporting. Her many awards and accolades were all richly deserved, and I feel that her absence from the analysis of and argument about our daily cut and thrust in this Chamber will be sorely missed. I am grateful for the opportunity to pay tribute to Miriam and all that she has done.

I appreciate the Deputy raising the issue of what has transpired over the last number of days in Northern Ireland, particularly Drumcree, and the parade, or the decision by the Parades Commission in respect of a parade down the Garvaghy Road. We in the Government, along with everyone in the House, are deeply concerned with what has transpired. In many ways the events of last weekend were deeply depressing. There is a real risk now that the progress that has been made on community relations in Northern Ireland will be set back.

We continue to monitor the situation very closely. Our officials are on the ground, remaining in contact with all key interlocutors, including the Garvaghy Road residents. I have maintained personal contact with Prime Minister Burnham over the weekend, and I know he shares our commitment to upholding the Good Friday Agreement and the immeasurable gains that have been made over the last 30 years. The Minister, Deputy McEntee, also remains in contact with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, who is meeting with the five main political parties and the representatives of the Garvaghy Road Residents Coalition. The Minister has also been in touch with other political parties and groups.

I am keenly aware of the hurt around Drumcree. I have been through it before. I was in government when we had to deal with the catastrophe that unfolded in the late 1990s, as articulated by the Deputy. I too remember very clearly the fear, chaos, violence and tragedy the dispute generated. Drawing directly on that experience, I would urge extra sensitivity from everyone in positions of political or community leadership. I understand fully that feelings are very high, but this is the time for all of us to be calm and careful in what we say and do. I am relieved that those directly involved are open to mediation. I support and encourage that work.

I also support the idea that we might look at an independent international figure to play a role in supporting and encouraging mediation and negotiation. Overall, we need to acknowledge the bottom line is we have made significant progress over many years in furthering reconciliation under the Good Friday Agreement and that a return to the divisions of the past is simply unthinkable. My views on the original decision are well known. My focus now, working with all involved, is to see how we can create a pathway forward that mediates the community out of the grave risk that overshadows it right now. Beimid sásta gach aon iarracht a dhéanamh agus cabhair agus tacaíocht a thabhairt chun an fhadhb seo a réiteach agus treoir níos fearr a chur san áireamh.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Caithfimid go léir iarracht a dhéanamh chun stop a chur leis an máirseáil seo. Everyone in the Dáil knows that all of this is just wrong. All of us know that the 28 years of peace and progress have to be cherished and protected. All of us know the people of the Garvaghy Road have an absolute right to live free from sectarian intimidation, fear and thuggery and that that right must be defended. All of us know that the days of second-class citizenship are over and that we cannot and will not return to the past. We know also that for mediation to succeed, whatever form that may take, the community needs to have the threat of this sectarian march lifted. That is the reality. We know also the British Government and the British Secretary of State can and must intervene to make that a reality. That must happen urgently; that should happen today. The fact there has been a delay in all of this has meant the trauma and fear for the community have grown and grown. Matters have been very peaceful and very orderly. We need to do everything we can to defend that peace and order and the rights of the community of the Garvaghy Road. I appreciate the Taoiseach's efforts but I again ask him to impress upon the British Government and the Secretary of State that he can no longer sit on his hands. He has to intervene and stop this march.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Taoiseach: I have been in touch with the British Prime Minister. We discussed it over the weekend. The Minister, Deputy McEntee, has been in constant contact with the Secretary of State. If we are honest about this, I do not think it is as simple as that. I think that one intervention is not going to resolve it. People have to stand back and there has to be some collective pathway determined with some degree of mediation.

I was listening to former Taoiseach Bertie Ahern this morning. He made the point that the issue has never been resolved. Although people thought it had been resolved, in many respects this is one that has never been resolved. We all know that for 28 years, there was never a decision to allow a parade down the Garvaghy Road, and that is how many of us find it difficult to comprehend how a decision was taken on this occasion. We will continue to engage with

the British Government and all the parties involved with a view to finding a way through this that takes away the significant pressure that hangs over the residents of Garvaghy Road once and for all, or at least to create a pathway. A number of complications to this transpired over the weekend that really call for creative thinking in terms of how we can create a pathway of reconciliation and trust, building on the platform of work that has been under way in this community for quite some time to create a long-lasting peaceful resolution of this.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I pay tribute to Miriam Lord and acknowledge the huge contribution she has made to Irish journalism. On behalf of the Social Democrats, I wish her all the best for the future.

Tá ceart rochtana ag gach páiste ar an oideachas. Ní féidir leis an Rialtas dearmad a dhéanamh ar an gceart oideachais atá ag páistí le riachtanais bhreise. Last night, Virgin Media broadcast a devastating documentary about special education in this country.

Anyone who watches it will be left asking serious questions. How can the Government stand over children with additional needs being educated in a storage cupboard? How can it stand over children in distress being sent to a converted toilet to regulate? How on earth could this be allowed to happen? The documentary showed how some children with additional needs, their families and schools are being comprehensively failed by this Government. It showed how they must spend their lives in a constant fight for services, equipment, resources and an education. Every waking moment is spent fighting with a State and Government that is supposed to be there to help them. The grim reality is that when they lose that fight, there are no consequences for anyone other than the children and the families themselves. There are no inquiries or investigations, just children and families who are left feeling alone, marginalised and isolated, trying to pick up the pieces.

One of the schools that featured last night was Stapolin Educate Together National School. I welcome its principal, Clodagh, and one of its special needs assistants, SNAs, Samantha, to the Public Gallery. I commend Clodagh, Samantha and everyone who is working in special education on their incredible dedication and commitment. The Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, himself visited Stapolin national school last year. He stood in the very storage cupboard where children with additional needs are being educated, so the remarks of a senior education Minister last night that this situation is not acceptable ring hollow.

Another school that featured in last night's documentary is in Ballintemple, in the Taoiseach's own constituency. The principal of the School of the Divine Child, Fiona Thomas, described how they are being starved of resources, and they are not being listened to by the Government. What we saw last night should shame the Taoiseach and everyone in his Government. That is why families were protesting outside the Dáil today. They are at their wits' end. They are tired of this Government's broken promises. They are tired of watching their children suffer and feeling helpless. They are tired of being ignored. They want the Taoiseach and his Government to take action. What does the Taoiseach have to say to them? Why is this Government continuing to fail children with additional needs and their families?

The Taoiseach: First, I did not see the programme yesterday evening. One has to be objective and there has to be balance in the assessment of any story. The last five years has witnessed extraordinary expansion and investment in special education, which the Deputy has

ignored completely in his comments. There is no excuse for, and I do not accept in any way, any child being in a cupboard, a stairwell or whatever. The fact is there has been an 87% increase in the number of special education places in five years. It is quite extraordinary expansion. In the 2026-27 year, we now have 34,000 students who will be enrolled in special classes and special schools. That is an increase of 86% since 2020. There are about 4,324 additional special classes, up 136% since 2020. Staff numbers are up 43% since then. We now have 26,000 SNAs compared with what we had five years ago - I went through it here before - at nearly half that. We have 22,500 special education teachers. Sixteen new special schools have opened, with four opening in Citywest, Balbriggan, Bray and Monasterevin.

The Deputy mentioned the School of the Divine Child. I pleaded with its previous principal and board to move out to the Enable Ireland site in Wilton. It was a brand-new site adjacent to a wonderfully modern new therapeutic centre. The school refused. It was the obvious move that should have happened. The Department was ready to fully fund it. The existing facilities in the school at Lavanagh are not satisfactory at all. I know it very well. I do not accept the criticism on that front. It was a terrible mistake made in not availing of the opportunity to go to a new site next to therapeutic facilities with the Department fully funding it and so on. That site is still there. In fact, I was trying to get two special schools out there, including St. Gabriel's, and Enable Ireland had agreed. There was a dispute between Enable Ireland and the school board on the question. That was a mistake. I did not see the programme last night, but the outcome of that mistake is the facilities the children now have in the School of the Divine Child. That is my view and I hold to it very strongly. It is easy to pick out individual cases. The fact is there has been a very strong, comprehensive provision.

Regarding the parents notify system, I acknowledge that too many parents have to fight too often to get places.

The onus should be on the system, the NCSE and schools to facilitate parents who apply. The parents notify system has now allowed us to have significantly better planning. Again, there were people against that last summer. People were giving out that we had opened it in July. Close to 7,860 children applied through that process seeking a special education place. That is more than double the number seeking places in 2025. Again, we opened about 587 new special classes at the beginning of this month alone to deal with that. There is significant expansion and investment. There is also increased demand, but we are getting there earlier for parents in terms of them notifying us much earlier on and then us working hard to try to get special classes in place. I will come back to the school in Stapolin later.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: It is welcome that the Taoiseach does not accept children getting taught in a storeroom, but that is happening. The reason it is happening is because his Department has told the schools to use every available space and the Department of education has failed to sanction additional classrooms that the schools are crying out for. This is not just one isolated school; it is happening in other places around the country. It is welcome that as Taoiseach he says it is not acceptable but what is he going to do to make sure it does not continue? When is he going to sanction the additional classrooms that the schools are crying out for? Can he give a commitment to this Dáil, and to the people, the parents and the children? On what date will no child be taught in a storeroom any more? What date can he give for that? When is he going to put a stop to it? When is he going to provide the funding for the additional classrooms so that children can be taught in the proper facilities that they deserve?

The Taoiseach: Already this year we allocated a further €646 million on top of €3 billion to cater for the extra demand in special classes and places for special education. We took that decision earlier this year when the full scale of the demand revealed itself through the parents notify system and we were not found wanting in coming up with close to €700 million to deal with that. We will continue to do that. The Deputy made the point about Stapolin national school. That is a new school. I think it moved into a new school building in 2023. It includes purpose-built special education facilities, two special classes, a central activity room, a sensory room and two quiet rooms. It also benefits from additional accommodation, including special education teaching rooms, a library, a multi-purpose room and so on. The school has applied for two additional classrooms. My understanding is that this is currently being considered by the Department's building unit. The vast majority of children who were originally on the waiting list have since secured placements in special classes within the local area or neighbouring areas in Dublin's northside.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: The Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, and the Minister, Deputy Naughton, are doing everything they possibly can, given the extraordinary expansion in the last two years of numbers. In the last two years alone, the numbers seeking places in special classes or in special schools is quite significant. Yes, as a result of that expansion and the awarding of special schools, there had been issues with creating physical space in a very short space of time to accommodate everyone-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: You should conclude, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: -----but every effort is being made and the funding has been put in place to underpin that effort.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I welcome our visitors in the Gallery who are campaigning for children with additional needs. I want to pay tribute to Miriam Lord in the Press Gallery. She has contributed to the gaiety of the nation significantly and many of us will miss her column on Saturdays, even when we were sometimes the brunt of it. Her witty and sometimes barbed words were always a treat to read. I thank her for all she did.

Last Thursday in Dublin, I met with residents of the Garvaghy Road. From them, I heard directly of their distress at the prospect of the Portadown Orange Order marching down the road they call home. Now, their fears are being realised. The grant of permission last Friday by the Parades Commission has reopened seriously deep wounds. We can all be clear that none of this about infringing on anyone's traditions. More than 90% of marches in the North have proceeded without issue. The reason this march has been, rightly, curtailed for nearly 30 years is the enormous horror it causes for a community that has grappled for decades with a legacy of violence linked to so many killings. We think of Michael McGoldrick, the young Quinn brothers, Rosemary Nelson, Constable Frank O'Reilly and more.

We cannot afford a return to that dark past and those grim days of the 1990s. Granting permission for the parade was reckless, irresponsible and wrong with no material change in the circumstances that had led to the march being refused on previous occasions.

The Taoiseach has said that he wants to see calm restored, and I think we all agree with that. It seems today that an international mediator may be appointed to intervene in the dispute. The Taoiseach said that the Government remains in contact with the Executive, the British Prime Minister and the Secretary of State, Chris Bryant. That is important. Indeed, I appealed to the British Government to remain closely engaged when I spoke at the British Labour Party conference in Liverpool yesterday. However, it is a failure of Northern Ireland's political system that the situation remains so tense and volatile today. Clearly, residents may well feel that the institutions set up to protect peace have abandoned them. We must not abandon them. As co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement, the Government has a role in restoring trust. We know that there are sinister actors who want to see mediation fail, and want to exploit the dysfunction in power-sharing and devolution to bring down the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement. We cannot allow them to win. Proactive steps must be taken to restore trust and calm, as the SDLP has said.

Has the Taoiseach asked the PSNI why it told the Parades Commission that the Drumcree parade could safely take place, as it clearly could not? Will he use all diplomatic channels to ensure that the people of the Garvaghy Road are not subjected to further trauma and to ensure that the march does not take place? If mediation fails, will he call on the Secretary of State to exercise his powers to prohibit a parade under section 11 of the public processions Act 1998?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this. I say to her, again, that I concur that nobody wants to go back to the terror and trauma of what transpired over 28 years ago during that particular period. As I said earlier, I found the events of the past weekend deeply depressing. I think we have to focus on the next steps on how we mediate our way through this.

I have given my views on the decision. I am not going to attempt to take the House through that or indeed through whatever rationale the Parades Commission itself has given. We need to be careful of placing responsibility on the PSNI, in terms of that decision. I think the PSNI will say there were caveats to that, but I want to take the opportunity to pay tribute to the PSNI. Jon Boutcher, the Chief Constable, had one singular clear objective. I think he used the phrase that he did not want one hair on one head hurt or injured. His overarching priority after the court's decision and so on was to try to protect human life and that is important. I think we should be clear about supporting the PSNI on that objective and avoiding any action that would precipitate injury or harm to people. I make that point.

The Parades Commission has made its decision. I am clear that I find it difficult to comprehend. I believe that it was the wrong decision. From our perspective, if you look at the 28 years, it is difficult to understand why this year it was allowed. Even if we go through the very manner in which it was allowed, it seems to suggest to me that there are clear issues, if only 35 are being allowed, etc. However, we need to focus on how we can bring all the different dimensions to this together or how we can have a conversation and develop a conversation between the communities involved to try to resolve this once and for all, or to get a pathway to a resolution of this.

I listened to Chris Nelson, the son of Rosemary Nelson, this morning. He articulated the immense trauma that he endured as a result of the murder of his mother. He also said this morning that we must think of the children of this community above and beyond everything else. We just must do everything collectively that we possibly can to avoid any harm or any enduring trauma for the younger generation of the community in Drumcree and particularly along the Garvaghy Road. That has to be our singular objective. We now need to concentrate on how we get a resolution to this, which will not be easy. We have to move beyond the fact that decisions have been taken.

The courts are independent, by the way. I want to be very clear about that. If we can engage with the parties involved, hopefully, we can find a way forward.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: What was particularly impressive about the calm dignity of the Garvaghy Road residents when we met them last Thursday was their concern for a younger generation and to ensure that the dark days of the past would not be repeated for a generation of people who had happily grown up under peace and the Good Friday Agreement. That is why this is now so grim. I agree with and welcome the Taoiseach's strongly worded views on the decision of the Parades Commission. We all share his view that it was an unacceptable and incomprehensible decision. Of course, the most important thing now is to ensure that nobody is injured, or worse, but the longer uncertainty prevails and the longer the standoff continues, the worse the risk for Garvaghy Road residents, the younger generation and all of those who we had hoped would never experience those horrors again in their lifetime.

What we would like to know, from the Opposition side, both the Labour Party and our sister party, the SDLP, is what that pathway the Taoiseach speaks of is. When will the mediator be appointed? Can we see a way to appoint a mediator as soon as possible? If not, then why are we not talking about section 11, which is part of the architecture of the Good Friday Agreement? The power of the Secretary of State to prohibit a parade without any veto from the PSNI or the commission is there in the 1998 legislation. There can be an enabling consultation but no right of veto. The Secretary of State must be prepared to utilise that power rather than run the risk of violence on the Garvaghy Road.

The Taoiseach: I just want to acknowledge the presence of Every Child Matters and the presence of children with additional needs. They are very welcome to the House. Hopefully, I will get a chance to say hello to them later.

The Minister for foreign affairs, Deputy McEntee, has been in constant contact all weekend with various parties and with the Northern Ireland Secretary of State. I have been in contact with the British Prime Minister. We are well aware of the legislative framework governing actions that the Northern Ireland Secretary of State can or could take but the context has to be one where whatever decisions are taken ensure a pathway towards trust and reconciliation between both communities on the ground. Otherwise, decisions can get subject to subsequent legal actions as well, as we saw. The contact will continue. It is fair to say that a consensus has not emerged, clearly, in terms of a pathway forward. People are mindful of the different perspectives and stances that people have on this current situation. We may regret - I certainly do - that because of the decision, we find ourselves in this position but our collective objective now has to be to find a way out of it that avoids the terrible trauma we witnessed in the past.

It would be a singular failure of progress in Northern Ireland if we were to witness something similar to that now.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I wish Miriam Lord all the best in her retirement. She reaffirms that women are the wittiest and the best satirists. Fair play.

I want to raise with the Taoiseach the role of the Government and the FAI in the debacle that happened in relation to the Ireland *versus* Israel game, which continues on. The players are still not certain but it has been reported that they will play in the second part of that fixture. The players had to hold an emergency team meeting and vote the day before a match that had been discussed here and outside in society for months. Does the Taoiseach agree that the FAI's handling of this was shambolic, arrogant and incompetent and that the CEO and the board should resign for their handling of it? The FAI got State funding of €75 million between 2019 and 2024.

Yesterday, the FAI president was still not able to state what the financial penalties would have been. He said they were still undetermined, so the whole thing was over undetermined financial penalties. The FAI has ignored its own grassroots and doubled down on its bad decision by shifting the game, knowing that the local fans did not want it. It claimed that each player had been consulted but forgot that goalkeepers are also players as well. It all led to an eleventh-hour meeting and the exclusion of one of the players who had stated that he did not want to play. The FAI then deceptively reported the vote as being a "significant majority" when, in fact, it was 14 to nine, if you count the player who did not have a vote, the heroic and courageous Gavin Bazunu.

His welfare was not protected by the FAI either. He travelled home alone and so on. I salute him.

What pressure did agents put on young players? It was reported that the Unique Sports Group told players they would never be signed up by American-owned English clubs if they did not play in these matches. The team was sent into a cauldron of racial abuse, with monkey chants for one of the players, as well as IDF chants. A video was circulated showing Yoseph Haddad, who apparently was brought into Leinster House by the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, saying that Israel may lose the football but the IDF always wins.

My question to the Taoiseach is about the Government's role. He made a speech at the UN in which he said: "the situation in Gaza remains an affront to all that is decent" and "Let it not be said that we did not act." Two days later, he facilitated a sportswash in the game against Israel. All through this, he, the Minister and the Minister of State with responsibility for sport have encouraged this game to go ahead. They could have supported the FAI at all times. As Fintan O'Toole said, the Taoiseach had an open goal but he kicked the ball into row Z by not backing a cancellation of the match. Will he join me in calling on the players not to play the second leg of the fixture?

The Taoiseach: First, the level of suffering inflicted on the civilian population in Gaza and, indeed, in the West Bank is horrific. It is an affront to human decency. In my view, the Government has been particularly strong in comparison with many other governments across the world in terms of the diplomatic, political and humanitarian response to this issue. I have

noticed since the outset of the war that it has moved from one issue to another but the debate in Ireland seems to always focus on the Government not doing enough. We are almost dividing among ourselves on Ireland's stance and how strong it is *vis-à-vis* Palestine.

I was at the United Nations last week. There is no other place in the world, except in here, where people think the Government has not been strong enough.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Out there as well.

The Taoiseach: Sorry, at the United Nations or in any other country-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: What about in Palestine?

The Taoiseach: I did not interrupt.

Deputy Rory Hearne: The Taoiseach should ask the Irish people what they think.

The Taoiseach: In any other country, particularly those from Arab countries and the Palestinian Authority, people form queues after discussions to thank Ireland for its principled stand. That is what other countries say about Ireland. I include Jordan, Egypt - all of them. I am just saying that. It is only in here - maybe it is a good sign that people want us to be strong - we get the other kind of response.

We have been at the forefront of condemning what is going on in Gaza and the West Bank. I am seeking more effective ways than a football match, frankly, to try to change the Israeli direction and strategy. Israel's actions now through settlements in the West Bank threaten the two-state solution in a very serious way. We have availed of every opportunity within the EU and the international community to call for Israel to be held accountable. We have supported the International Criminal Court consistently. We have backed that up with very strong funding. During UN high-level week, I attended quite a number of sessions, including with the Global Alliance for the Implementation of the Two-State Solution and an event hosted by Emmanuel Macron, Mark Carney, Prime Minister Andy Burnham and the Saudi Arabian foreign minister to mark a year since the New York declaration of the comprehensive peace plan. We have repeatedly called for the European Commission to act. Our long-standing position is that the EU-Israel Association Agreement should be suspended or, at a minimum, that the trade elements be suspended. We will continue to work to maintain that particular focus.

We have provided very substantial funding to UNRWA and to Palestine more generally. We intervened, with Spain, in the South African International Court of Justice case against Israel under the Genocide Convention. We have made a submission to the International Court of Justice on the legal consequences of Israel's actions in the occupied Palestinian territories. We have co-sponsored resolutions at the UN General Assembly to implement the court's advisory opinion. We recognised Palestine as a sovereign independent state long before other states did so at the time of the New York declaration.

Sorry, I did not realise my time was up. In terms of football, I genuinely believe it was a decision to be made by the football community. We have supported the FAI to the tune of, I think, about €192 million over many years since the last serious debacle it had in respect of governance and so on. I appeal to people not to focus on the players. Some of the campaigns the players have been subjected to have been appalling and unnecessary.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: That is down to you.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I hope I get a little bit of extra time. We all agree the players should not have been in that position. That is a unanimous view. The Government and the FAI put them in that position. I want to think of another player today, Natalie Abudayyeh, a Palestinian footballer who is in an Israeli jail. She played here in Ireland in 2024. Any Palestinians I have spoken to really would have appreciated Ireland pulling out of the game. One of them spoke about rats eating the bodies of people in Gaza right now. The people in Gaza have lost the will to live. That is the reality of a live genocide. I call on the players to send a message worldwide. It is fair enough to wear black armbands and whatever, but pulling out of that game would prevent sportswashing, and image matters to Israel. Since the Taoiseach goes on about how great everyone internationally thinks he is, why did the Irish delegation sit fixed and not walk out when a wanted war criminal with a warrant out for his arrest stood up and gave a speech courtesy of the UN? Why did the Irish delegation take that decision when the Taoiseach was standing up telling the whole world to act? If Russia were playing, the Taoiseach would disagree. He should disagree with Israel playing, and he should come out and call for them not to play. He should support the FAI and the team if they are willing to pull out on Sunday.

The Taoiseach: There are two things I would say. First, we never abstain at a UN General Assembly high-level week meeting. The whole essence of the United Nations is that every nation is there, irrespective of how badly it is behaving. We could walk out on quite a number of nations contributing at the United Nations, if the truth be told.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Yes.

The Taoiseach: The whole idea is to maintain some channels and dialogue. You listen, but you may not necessarily agree. We do not agree with Iran. I could name 101 countries that I might not agree with. Maybe it is not 100 but I could name quite a number of countries that I do not agree with. If everybody started walking out on everybody else in the UN, we would not have a UN.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: There is a warrant for his arrest.

The Taoiseach: This is the classic, simplistic campaigning mode that some Members are constantly in.

Deputy George Lawlor: He is a war criminal.

The Taoiseach: Once this passes, it will be something else. There is always another agenda and another issue. I understand fully that people are very angry. In Ireland, we are very angry, and I have made the point numerous times. We are angry because we understand. We want fair play, justice and self-determination for Palestinians, and we hate to see children being killed. That is natural and it is deep in the Irish psyche. We hate hunger and famine and we do everything we possibly can to end it. Let us be honest too. Deputy Coppinger said it matters to Israel. It does not matter to Israel. Benjamin Netanyahu could not give a toss whether Ireland plays a soccer match or not, so let us be a bit real.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Why did they send Yoseph Haddad there then?

The Taoiseach: They will listen to the US, though. They will listen if enough of a critical mass of countries can get together. That is the key.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please conclude, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: Too many countries have been too slow in response to this, not at the football level but at the political level, the diplomatic level and the international level, and Europe has been divided. That is the problem.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please conclude, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: We attended a meeting last week with four countries that were a year later than Ireland and Spain in recognising Palestine. The Deputy must admit deep down that that is where it lies, not with the football team.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

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

Deputy Mary Butler: I move:

Tuesday's business shall be:

- Motion re Statement of Estimates for the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission (without debate)
- Motion re Sittings and Business of the Dáil (without debate)
- Strategic Lawsuits against Public Participation Bill 2026 (Second Stage) (to conclude at the end of the first speaking round; not to exceed 3 hours and 34 minutes)

Tuesday's private members' business shall be the Motion re Public Transport and Fare Increases, selected by Sinn Féin.

Wednesday's business shall be:

- Statements on Migration and Citizenship (not to exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes)
- Industrial Development (Amendment) and Miscellaneous Provisions Bill 2026 (Report and Final Stages) (to commence no earlier than 4.37 p.m. and to conclude within 90 minutes)
- Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann on the conclusion of Readmission Agreements between European Union and Nigeria*
- Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann on the signing of Readmission Agreements between European Union and Nigeria*

*Two separate motions to be debated together and brought to a conclusion within 60 minutes, with questions to be put on each motion separately; and any divisions claimed to be taken immediately

Wednesday's private members' business shall be the Motion re Introduce a Windfall Tax on the Excess Profits of Energy Companies, selected by Social Democrats.

Thursday's business shall be:

- Railway Safety Bill 2026 (Second Stage) (to conclude at the end of the first speaking round; not to exceed 3 hours and 34 minutes) (Dept of Transport)

Thursday evening business shall be the Second Stage of the Forty-first Amendment of the Constitution (Right to Housing) Bill 2026, sponsored by Deputy Rory Hearne.

Proposed Arrangements for this week's business:

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

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders:

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

(b) private members' business shall be taken following proceedings on the Second Stage of the Strategic Lawsuits against Public Participation Bill 2026 with consequential effect on the commencement times for the items following in the ordinary routine of business;

2. the proceedings on the Motion re Statement of Estimates for the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission shall be taken without debate;

3. the proceedings on the Motion re Sittings and Business of the Dáil shall be taken without debate; and

4. the proceedings on the Second Stage of the Strategic Lawsuits against Public Participation Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion at the end of the first speaking round and the following arrangements shall apply:

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

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

(c) members may share time.

	Gov	SF	SD	Gov	SF
Mins	20	20	20	12	4
	Lab	Gov	SF	IPTG	Gov
Mins	20	12	4	20	12
	SF	ITG	Gov	SF	OM
Mins	4	20	12	4	20

Total: 3 hours 24 minutes

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

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders:

(a) the weekly division time may be taken earlier than 8.45 p.m. and shall, in any event, be taken on the conclusion of Government Business; and

(b) in the event the Statements on Migration and Citizenship conclude before 4.37 p.m., the sitting shall stand suspended until 4.37 p.m. when the order of business shall resume with the Industrial Development (Amendment) and Miscellaneous Provisions Bill 2026

2. the Statements on Migration and Citizenship shall not exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply:

(a) the statements, not including the Ministerial response, shall be in accordance with the sequence contained in the table immediately below (to be read across);

(b) following the statements, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a statement in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes; and

(c) members may share time;

	Gov	SF	SD	Gov	SF
Mins	25	15	10	10	3
	Lab	Gov	SF	IPTG	Gov
Mins	10	10	3	9	10
	SF	ITG	Gov	SF	OM
Mins	3	9	10	3	5

Total: 2 hours 15 minutes

3. the proceedings on Report and Final Stages of the Industrial Development (Amendment) and Miscellaneous Provisions Bill 2026 shall commence no earlier than 4.37 p.m. and shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 90 minutes by one question, which shall be put from the Chair, and which shall, in relation to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment; and

4. the proceedings on the Motions on Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann on the conclusion of, and the signing of, Readmission Agreements between the European Union and Nigeria

shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 60 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply thereto:

- (a) the two motions shall be debated together, with separate questions put on all proceedings thereon;
- (b) the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be in accordance with the table below;
- (c) members may share time; and
- (d) any divisions claimed thereon shall be taken immediately.

	Gov	SF	SD	Lab	IPTG	ITG	OM	Min Resp.
Mins	10	7.5	7.5	7.5	7.5	7.5	7.5	5

Total: 60 minutes

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

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, topical issues may be taken earlier than 7.24 p.m. with consequential effect on the commencement time for Second Stage of the Forty-first Amendment of the Constitution (Right to Housing) Bill 2026, and on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil; and

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

- (a) the first-round speeches shall be in accordance with the table below (to be read across);
- (b) on conclusion of the first speaking round or where speeches conclude before the 3 hours and 24 minutes have elapsed and no other member is offering, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a speech in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes; and
- (c) members may share time.

	Gov	SF	SD	Gov	SF
Mins	20	20	20	12	4
	Lab	Gov	SF	IPTG	Gov
Mins	20	12	4	20	12
	SF	ITG	Gov	SF	OM
Mins	4	20	12	4	20

Total: 3 hours 24 minutes

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is that agreed?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Not agreed.

Deputy David Cullinane: A report has been published into a coping exercise on an inquiry into failures in Children's Health Ireland. The House knows that in 2017, the then Minister, Deputy Simon Harris, made a promise to children with scoliosis and their parents that no child would wait longer than four months for treatment. Bizarrely, the recommendation in this report is that the look-back would start on 1 January 2019 and all of the failures before then will not be examined. Individual cases will also not be examined. Very real concerns have been identified by parents and advocate groups. I spoke to them over the course of the weekend.

We cannot have an inquiry that does not have the confidence of parents of children and advocacy groups. They have to be front and centre. There can be no hiding place when it comes to failures or accountability. First, I ask the Taoiseach that we have statements this week on that report. It is really important. Second, I ask that the Taoiseach and Tánaiste engage with those groups and families because they are very concerned about what is in this report.

Deputy Duncan Smith: In light of the Virgin Meida investigation last night, there is an urgent need for a debate on special education and additional educational needs. We had this Government announcing places at the start of an academic and school year and weeks into it, those places are not filled by children and families we know personally are not getting those places. That is just the tip of this crisis. We need an urgent debate on it.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: We need to discuss the proposed public inquiry into Children's Health Ireland, CHI. The families of children with scoliosis and spina bifida have expressed real concerns about what is proposed in Remy Farrell report. They will not accept a behind closed doors public inquiry. The Minister must sit down with these families and campaign groups immediately. The Government has one chance to get this right. We need truth, accountability and transparency. We need questions and answers with the Minister this week.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: This day last week I asked for an urgent debate before the situation on the Garvaghy Road escalated on behalf of the residents, who I had met the previous day on the Garvaghy Road about the situation that was looming in Drumcree. That request for an urgent debate was completely ignored. The residents particularly asked me to ask the Government about its responsibility under the Good Friday Agreement, and the British Government's responsibility, to make sure communities are free from sectarian intimidation. That was ignored, and we saw the escalation last week. That is still not resolved. The Irish and British Governments have a responsibility to make sure that community is not traumatised and dragged back to the days of sectarian violence and conflict. Can we have an urgent discussion to make sure this Government and this Oireachtas discharges its responsibility in that regard?

Deputy Michael Collins: I attended a meeting in Moate in County Westmeath last weekend with up to 2,000 people. Hauliers, farmers, families and fishermen told us they are in a crisis situation. We have a week before the budget. We need to firmly debate the issues they put before us and asked us to bring to the Dáil to relay the concerns of the crisis they are in. We need to set aside time this week to debate that to make sure we get the budget right next week and make sure the families can survive and people can pay their electricity bills and mortgages. We urgently need that debate this week.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I ask for time to be put aside to discuss the events of the weekend on the Garvaghy Road and the response of this House to it. The march was banned for 28 years. The only reason it was given the go-ahead and that the Orange Order wanted to go ahead with it was to demonstrate supremacy and dominance over the nationalist community there. The Government is the co-guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy-----

Deputy Brian Stanley: The Parades Commission that shot this through has lost credibility. We need to discuss it here-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Stanley should conclude.

Deputy Brian Stanley: -----and our response to that to make sure this does not happen again.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister of State to respond.

Deputy Mary Butler: I thank the Opposition Members for their requests. In relation to the situation in Drumcree in the North, we all understand how sensitive a time this is. The Taoiseach addressed looking for a pathway forward under Leaders' Questions. It is important that everyone involved from the Minister for foreign affairs to the UK Secretary of State and, importantly, the communities are allowed to continue. Statements in relation to CHI will be scheduled in the next couple of weeks. I heard the other requests but we have significant business to get through this week as the budget is next week, so the Order of Business stands.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: There is loads of time.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Order of Business agreed to?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Not agreed.

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

The Dáil divided: Tá, 78; Níl, 66; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Brennan, Brian.	Brady, John.	
Browne, James.	Buckley, Pat.	
Burke, Colm.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Burke, Peter.	Carthy, Matt.	
Butler, Mary.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Butterly, Paula.	Collins, Michael.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	

Byrne, Thomas.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Cahill, Michael.	Cronin, Réada.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Crowe, Seán.	
Calleary, Dara.	Cullinane, David.	
Canney, Seán.	Cummins, Jen.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Daly, Pa.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Devine, Máire.	
Chambers, Jack.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Clendennen, John.	Ennis, Daniel.	
Connolly, John.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Cooney, Joe.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Gannon, Gary.	
Cummins, John.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Currie, Emer.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Daly, Martin.	Gould, Thomas.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Graves, Ann.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Dillon, Alan.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Dolan, Albert.	Healy, Seamus.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Hearne, Rory.	
Fleming, Sean.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Foley, Norma.	Kenny, Martin.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Geoghegan, James.	Lawless, Paul.	
Grealish, Noel.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Harkin, Marian.	McDonald, Mary Lou.	
Heneghan, Barry.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Higgins, Emer.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Keogh, Keira.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Kyne, Seán.	Murphy, Paul.	
Lahart, John.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Lawless, James.	Nash, Ged.	
Lowry, Michael.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Martin, Micheál.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McEntee, Helen.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Quaide, Liam.	
Murphy, Michael.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Naughton, Hildegard.	Rice, Pádraig.	
Neville, Joe.	Sheehan, Conor.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Sherlock, Marie.	

O'Connell, Maeve.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Connor, James.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
O'Donovan, Patrick.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Meara, Ryan.	Ward, Charles.	
O'Shea, John Paul.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Sullivan, Christopher.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Feargháil, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Richard Boyd Barrett.

Question declared carried.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Every Child Matters campaign, which started in Meath, has now expanded to nearly every county in Ireland. It is calling out Government failure, the constant battle for services and supports, and the long wait for assessments of need, vital therapies, behavioural and psychological supports, mental health services, school places and transport. Last night, the heartbreaking impact of all of this was in full view on Virgin Media, with SNAs working under intolerable pressure and children being taught in the most appalling conditions. Parents are done with their children being left behind, and they are at the Dáil today to protest. Their message is that the Taoiseach and his Government are failing their children.

The Taoiseach: I fully appreciate the work that the Every Child Matters campaign is doing. I support advocacy for children with additional needs. I have made the point that the Government has allocated an additional €646 million on top of the €3 billion already provided for special education. That has resulted in 34,000 students enrolling in special classes and special schools this year, an increase of 86%. Right across education, the increases have been quite staggering in meeting the demands. We then have the new in-school therapy programme that is under way, 16 new special schools and significant capital investment. About 70% of all special schools have either had work carried out, or it is currently being carried out, or it is under way in terms of the planning and design of that. Therefore, I do not think anyone can objectively say that every single effort is not being made. It is being made in respect of special education and other services also.

Deputy Daniel Ennis: The Taoiseach will have seen, in the last 72 hours, how the FAI has handled the Ireland-Israel game, and how shambolic and shameful that was. We have no doubt that it will be a dark stain on Irish football and a dark stain on our country. They have talked about protecting their players, but they have done everything but. I think it is safe to say that we all know it was handled very poorly. We will discuss that tomorrow at the Oireachtas committee directly with the FAI. We saw the Taoiseach's UN General Assembly address. I must credit him there. His words were very strong, but that now has to be matched with action. I am asking the Taoiseach this, plain and simple. We have seen no statement from the Government throughout this shambolic mess the FAI has put us in. The overall responsibility has been on the players. Can the Taoiseach say to us, the FAI and the players that if they decide not to play the next game against Israel, he will support the FAI and the players? To date, there has been no comment from the Government on the shambolic nature of what we have seen.

The Taoiseach: There has been comment from the Government. The Government has been very clear, and the Minister for sport has been very clear from day one, that it was a matter for the footballing community and for the FAI, who had to work within the UEFA rules and frameworks. The Government has always been of the position that the Irish soccer team should not be a casualty of this and should not suffer, rather than Israel. The outcome of Ireland not playing, by the way, was that Israel would gain and Ireland would not in the footballing sense. I made the point earlier that the Irish Government has provided about €192 million in total capital and current funding to the FAI, and we are constantly supporting the FAI, for example, with the new League of Ireland academies. That is no more than in other sports and other disciplines, by the way, and in the case of other countries that people have played against, the Government has taken that position.

The Government's overall view is that politically, diplomatically and humanitarially, it has to take the lead on these issues to try to change Israel's outrageous positions, the assertion of their military supremacy-----

Deputy Daniel Ennis: If they do not play, will the Taoiseach support them?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to conclude.

The Taoiseach: -----the undermining of the West Bank and so on.

Deputy Daniel Ennis: If they do not play, will the Taoiseach support them? It is that simple. Yes or no.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy, order please. Deputy Bacik is next.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I again welcome those from Every Child Matters who are in the Public Gallery. I commend presenter Eric Roberts for bringing the reality of Ireland's special education crisis home to us all with his television programme this week. He has put a human face on what families, teachers and SNAs experience every day in our special education crisis.

I pay tribute to those families and parents who participated in the programme, including Labour Councillor Alison Field, whose experience is featured. Ali has fought for years to secure a school place and appropriate supports for her son James. She had to apply to 19 schools before securing a place. This week is her son James's birthday, so I wish him a happy birthday. Ali and James's family should never have had to fight this battle, and no one else should either. Every child has a right to an education. Yet families like those in the Gallery, those on Eric Roberts's programme and those like Ali's family still face the same agonising uncertainty, despite years of assurances. What we have seen is provision for children with additional needs falling far behind what is needed.

Can we have an urgent debate on this and when will every child in Ireland who needs a special place and special supports get that?

The Taoiseach: I did not see the programme last evening but have made the point that the expansion in the number of teachers, SNAs, special classes and special schools has been exponential in the past five years. I do not know whether the programme acknowledged that or not but those are the realities. There has been a dramatic expansion in the past two years alone as well as in the past five years and that has created problems in terms of the physical capacities of individual schools. I did not know that a particular school was referenced earlier but that school had an opportunity five or six years ago to have a completely new building on a new site next to a therapeutic centre but it refused it. In some cases, there is a background as to why certain facilities are as they are.

Stapolin is a new school. Clearly it is doing great work in terms of accommodating and facilitating children with additional needs who are coming in. Again, significant investment went into that new school only three years ago.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: Students continue to be hugely impacted by the cost-of-living increases and the very specific accommodation crisis that leaves so many of them stuck in their childhood bedrooms. The Green Party believes budget 2027 needs to show this generation of young adults they still have some stake in our State. In our pre-budget submission, drafted by our higher education spokesperson, Councillor Eva Dowling, the Green Party is calling on the Government to raise the household income ceiling for free fees from its current rate of €64,000 to €120,000. This significant rise in the free fee eligibility would mean thousands of students in that squeezed middle would become exempt from the need to pay the €2,500 student contribution charge.

As the Taoiseach makes the final decisions about next week's budget, will he consider this proposal or others that will make a meaningful difference to students in 2027?

The Taoiseach: The Government has made a lot of progress in helping students. Undoubtedly, accommodation is probably the greatest difficulty many students face in terms of attending third level education. We have expanded places. We have created new special places for particular disciplines and so on and expanded them. We have substantially improved and enhanced the student support schemes and reduced the fees to €2,500 permanently. The Minister for higher education is in discussions with the Minister for public expenditure in respect of his Estimates and he is anxious, in particular, to try to help larger families who might

have two or three students in third level education at the same time. He is endeavouring to try to see what he can do with the variety of support schemes that are there to help, particularly young people with disabilities and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The decision to allow the Orange Order to march down Garvaghy Road was the most destabilising decision that has been made in the North of Ireland since the Good Friday Agreement. Twenty eight years of improved community relations are now in jeopardy. The people in the North are in real fear. It is hard maybe for people in the South to understand that and the stress that has been created. There were 21 Catholics murdered in crimes related to the Drumcree stand-off in the nineties. The most horrific of those was the burning to death of three Quinn children in their own home. Orange marches have been the fuse for violence for 300 years. The start of the Troubles can be traced back to Orange marches. The Taoiseach rightly said this decision is wrong and incomprehensible but the logic of that is that it should be reversed. The Government is a co-guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement. What influence is the Taoiseach bringing to bear on the British Prime Minister to reverse this decision?

The Taoiseach: There are two things. As the Deputy knows, the Parades Commission is independent so the Irish Government does not have influence over it in that sense.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The British do.

The Taoiseach: Neither does the British Government because it is meant to be independent of everybody.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Secretary of State can change it.

The Taoiseach: I know but let me answer the question to give context to it. The courts are independent so they have reached various adjudications. I have made my comments on the original decision of the Parades Commission. The Minister for foreign affairs has been in regular contact with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. Not everybody sees it the way we see it. We need to put that on the table as well. Therefore, we have to try to work collectively to build on the platform of good community relations that developed over the years and seek a pathway forward through mediation so that we do not have a return to the trauma of the past and can avoid a situation like this ever unfolding again.

Deputy Aisling Dempsey: As the Taoiseach heard, Every Child Matters is a group formed in Trim, County Meath. They were here with us today. They undertook a protest outside and we had a heartbreaking briefing in the audiovisual room this afternoon. That group quickly spread nationwide and the group represents a lot of parents who are fighting for services for their kids. They spoke to us about understaffed CDNTs, not being able to access therapies, the long waiting lists for the assessments of need and inadequate access to education. I acknowledge there has been a lot of work done here. There has been a lot done in reducing the AON list and increased budgets for special education. One of their questions on education was around the AON and medical report process. It is putting our young children in a box. It is

predetermining the education the child will get, whether it be in a special class or in a special school. We should be taking a more rounded and flexible approach to avoid segregation, keeping them where possible with their peers. What is the Department of education doing?

The Taoiseach: We would agree with that, actually, and that is why we are amending the legislation pertaining to assessments of need and are also making sure an assessment of need is not a prerequisite for a school placement, either in a special class or in a different context in the school. That flexibility should be there. Our aim is to try to get the therapies and the therapists providing the services. At the moment, because of High Court decisions and so on in the past, the pendulum has swung to assessment and not enough to delivering the services for children who require them. Most parents want services as quickly as possible for their child.

There has been progress made on CDNTs but not enough, and that is a structure that was historically challenging. We have an in-school therapy service in place now. If I am correct, 61 schools will see that in-school therapy service initially. Recruitment is under way and that will build up over time, so that every special school will have a therapy service. Then we will expand that service to the mainstream.

Deputy Grace Boland: Ten women have now died violently in Ireland this year. That is ten women whose families, friends and communities have been left devastated. Under the Minister, Deputy McEntee, there was real momentum in tackling the scourge of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence with the zero tolerance strategy and the establishment of Cuan. We cannot allow that urgency to diminish. We need to accelerate delivery with more refuge spaces, stronger supports for victims, investment in prevention and education and a relentless focus across Government on tackling domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. That is why tomorrow I will support the walkout for women led by Monica Murphy.

It is a national call for solidarity. Will the Taoiseach commit to renewed urgency across Government and ensure that every Minister treats this with the urgency it deserves? Will he and his Ministers join us for the walkout tomorrow at 11 a.m?

The Taoiseach: First, one of the biggest issues facing modern Ireland and the island of Ireland is domestic violence and violence against women. The Deputy mentioned ten murders. This is a real stain on our society. There is no loss of momentum. The Government is absolutely committed to this agenda in terms of accelerating refuge places. In addition to the work of the previous Government we have enhanced supports for women fleeing domestic violence, in particular. We will be supporting the walkout tomorrow, organised by Ms Murphy.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: Skylarys was approved for reimbursement on 25 August. It has been a very challenging period for our patients with Friedreich's ataxia, FA, and their families. If services in Tallaght University Hospital remain unchanged, some FA patients could have to wait until June 2028 to get the Skylarys prescribed. This is simply unacceptable. Services have been underfunded for years. Patients should be seen yearly but some are waiting two and a half years. What work has been done since 25 August to ensure there is a timely rollout of the drug, Skylarys? How many patients with FA will have the medication,

Skyclarys, in their hands on Thursday, 1 October? There seems to be a lack of information forthcoming from the HSE and the Department of Health and this is simply a bit of a shitshow.

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): What?

The drug was approved-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That is not appropriate language, by the way.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: I am sorry for that but we are a little bit frustrated.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I was in Tallaght on Friday and the CEO confirmed that services will begin on 2 October now that the drug is physically in the country. We will get more of it as time goes by. Services begin on 2 October, which is the earliest possible time we could do. I spoke with the CEO on Friday and this will impact on and disrupt other neurology services but they are moving heaven and earth to make sure patients can get it as quickly as possible.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: How many patients will have it on 2 October?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Teachers, nurses, council workers, workers who work in this building and public and civil servants have voted overwhelmingly - more than 90% in most cases - for industrial action. Some of the work to rules will begin this week because the Government has not offered them a pay increase that will actually make up for the loss of earnings as a result of the inflation and cost-of-living crisis or been willing to discuss pay upfront in negotiations as their union representatives have asked it to do. Is the Government going to sit down and make a proper, decent offer to the workers, including in this building, who keep our public service and Civil Service going to compensate them for the loss of earnings in real terms because of inflation in recent years and give them a decent pay increase to keep pace with inflation over the coming years? Is the Government going to do that to avoid them having to take this action?

The Taoiseach: The last pay agreement not only kept up with but exceeded inflation, particularly for low-paid workers. Of course the Government is anxious to enter into public service pay negotiations. We have made it very clear we want to engage in public service pay negotiations with the unions. I do not believe there is any need for balloting or work to rule. Negotiations without preconditions should commence with the objective of achieving a public service pay agreement for all public service workers, just like on previous occasions. That is entirely doable and is what should happen.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Government will not talk pay upfront.

The Taoiseach: What does the Deputy mean? The bottom line is we want to enter into a public service pay agreement. We are putting substantial funding aside in the budget towards

a public service pay agreement. The unions know this deep down, or the leadership certainly knows it.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: It is horrible to see people who are sick endure financial hardship. It is right that we have mechanisms such as the medical card, discretionary emergency medical card and GP visitor card. However, a callous oversight by the Government has been a failure to increase related income thresholds for those under the age of 69 for more than two decades. For two decades, almost one in three people was covered. Today, the same number of people have medical cards as did at that stage, despite a population increase of more than 26%. Can the Taoiseach tell me the reason for that? Despite inflation running at 28% since 2006, eligibility limits for medical cards have not increased. I ask that the Taoiseach consider this in next week's budget.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Some 52% of people in Ireland have either a medical or GP access card. An extraordinary number of people have access to those services. Demand on the primary care reimbursement service, PCRS, which includes medical cards in the drugs budget, is increasing every year. Our budget is increasing every year and that is to provide services to the people who need them.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: What about the threshold? That has not increased. People cannot qualify for medical cards.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Some 52% of people qualify.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Look at your stats. Go back and look.

Deputy Paul Lawless: A GP practice in Westport is closing. The landlord is selling the building and the doctor has nowhere to go. The GP is effectively working her notice period for the HSE. The HSE has said there is no room in primary care. However, what the people of Westport need to know is what room will be found? The Government should be taking notice. The reality is that Government parties can find €2 million to furbish a meeting room to give councillors an extravagant chamber in Mayo County Council in which to discuss public services, yet the HSE cannot find a single room for a GP practice in Westport. The chamber in Mayo County Council gets a refurbishment and 600 public patients get a farewell letter in Westport. This is landing at the moment and I am very concerned that many of these patients may end up in the emergency department in Castlebar. What is the Minister going to do?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I take it the Deputy has already spoken to local HSE services and exhausted all of the local integrated healthcare areas, IHA, and regional options before raising this in the Dáil with myself and the Taoiseach, who have no knowledge as to the circumstances of this and cannot possibly respond to him?

Deputy Paul Lawless: I have.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I will follow up with the HSE but I assume he has taken it through those local channels before raising it here. I thank him.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Tommy is an elderly gentleman in my constituency. He is in arrears on his electricity bills like 328,000 other people. He is currently really scared because despite being on the vulnerable customer register, and making lump sum payments to try to pay off the bill and get on top of it, he is still receiving letters from his supplier, Electric Ireland, telling him things like his account is now at a critical stage and it will consider his supply for disconnection. This is just not fair. When I rang Electric Ireland on his behalf, I was told to tell him it was fine and it would not disconnect him. He does not know that. The purpose of the letter is to scare him, and it is working. There is a problem with how these entities are engaging with vulnerable people.

On a broader point, there are so many people like Tommy who are not able to get their heads above water, and there needs to be a targeted energy support. These people will never recover from the bills we have seen over the past couple of years.

The Taoiseach: Is Tommy in receipt of a free fuel allowance?

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Yes.

The Taoiseach: He is. That could be organised. Surely if we take the totality of the fuel allowance and the increases, it is approximately €1,000. I have often thought social protection could connect the fuel allowance to arrears and to the companies to clear arrears, or to go through Money Advice and Budgeting Services, MABS, or some facility to help people like Tommy deal with arrears and get rid of them once and for all. If he is a vulnerable customer, as the Deputy has said, and I have no doubt he is, he will not be cut off. At the same time, we can see where Electric Ireland has to have some balance in terms of how it communicates. I can see what is happening here. At least the Deputy has made the call in relation to Tommy.

There is an issue there too. We are providing additional supports, particularly to lower income groups. Really, it is to deal in a targeted way with arrears and the high cost of fuel and energy for people in that situation.

Deputy Rory Hearne: I want to raise the case of Roman Slater, a six-year-old boy in my constituency who is still at home. He has no school place. I have spoken to his mother regularly over the past few weeks and she is broken. She has applied to numerous schools but he still has no school place. He has autism and a developmental delay. I spoke to her again today and asked if there was any update. She said it is so draining, that she thought she would have a place for Roman by now and that knowing a school is willing to take him but will not be given the resources is very frustrating. I raised it with the Minister last week and I wrote to the Minister three and a half weeks ago in relation to it. There is a local school that says it will take him but it needs to be guaranteed by the NCSE that it will be given the resources to do that. Will the Taoiseach guarantee Roman will not spend a sixth week out of school?

I watched the programme last night and it was shocking. Samantha, the SNA in it, made the point that children with additional needs are being left in situations that children without

additional needs would not be left in. It would not be tolerated that a child would be at home for five weeks without a school place. Children with additional needs should not be left like that.

The Taoiseach: I do not have the background to the case. I presume the NCSE is working with the school on this.

Deputy Rory Hearne: I think they could be working more.

The Taoiseach: But you see you-----

Deputy Rory Hearne: They are clearly not doing it sufficiently if he is still at home.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Could we just have the response, please?

The Taoiseach: I do not have the full background. The Deputy has not said it or not, but it seems to me the NCSE is engaging with the school. Is it about teaching resources? How many times do I have to say it? We have expanded resources. We have put €746 million into this.

Deputy Rory Hearne: They are not willing to commit the resources.

The Taoiseach: We are willing to commit the resources.

Deputy Rory Hearne: No, they are not - the NCSE are not.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Address your remarks through the Chair, Deputy Hearne.

The Taoiseach: I do not think that is a fair assessment of it. I do not know the specifics of it. The NCSE is of course prepared to support the placement of a child in a school with whatever SNA or teaching supports are required, or what the physical capacity of the school needs. It could be the case the school would not get the physical thing straight away in terms of a new class or whatever, but at least if the provision was made in terms of teachers and SNAs-----

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: On 15 July I raised the public sector pay agreement with the Taoiseach in this House. He assured me talks would begin at pace in September. September is ending and there is no agreement. Tomorrow thousands of public servants commence industrial action with co-ordinated strikes planned for 14 and 21 October. Last week the Minister, Deputy Chambers, claimed his Department was ready to negotiate, yet unions say they have repeatedly sought meaningful engagement without success. I anticipate the Taoiseach will tell me negotiations cannot begin with preconditions but nobody is asking him to agree the outcome before negotiations begin; they are asking for a credible framework within which meaningful negotiations can take place. The expiry of the agreement was no surprise to anybody in this House, particularly the Government. Will the Taoiseach personally intervene

today, establish that framework and prevent our schools, hospitals and public services from being brought to a standstill?

The Taoiseach: I regret there is a work-to-rule commencing tomorrow. I do not believe there is a need for a work-to-rule to agree on this. I have serious questions about the entire process in terms of the balloting and so on like that of members, if I am honest. The Government is very clear, as it has been in recent years since I became Taoiseach and before. Public service pay agreements have been agreed by successive governments, negotiations have always ensued and, rearticulating what I said earlier, the Government is open to concluding a public service pay agreement with the public service unions. We will be putting substantial funding aside to provide for that. The last agreement exceeded inflation, particularly for low-paid workers. We want to engage in negotiations. It is regrettable that in advance of the opening of negotiations, ballots are taking place.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: The Taoiseach will well know from his earlier stint that investment in early years education is hugely important and also has a net economic benefit. We have seen recent reports stating reading and mathematical results for Ireland have gone down. Maybe we are still higher than a lot of countries but it is no consolation that if everyone is getting dumber, we are getting less dumb. The reality is there is a whole load of impacts there. In many developing areas, class sizes are still increasing, and some more settled areas that are down one or two pupils suddenly lose a teacher. Have there been serious discussions in the context of the upcoming budget on investment in education and trying to bring class sizes down? It is hugely important, especially with that literacy and numeracy element.

The Taoiseach: We are probably less brilliant than we were, as opposed to dumber and dumber. We are very high-up there. One wonders is that related to the advent of social media in terms of reading, literacy skills and numeracy. It is extremely important that AI and all of that, while very important, does not take away the capacity to reason, be creative and be original in one's thinking and analysing of the world and of issues and so on like that. There will be continued investment in education. The primacy of maths, English and so on is still very important at primary level in the overall curriculum. Class sizes have come way down but are variable, depending on location or on how the school allocates numbers and teachers.

I will not go into the age-old argument of whether the pupil-teacher ratio influences outcomes. A whole lot of other factors influence outcomes as well. The demographics are going down. The big issue we will have in the next decade is redeployment of existing resources to maximise outcomes of the kind the Deputy has identified.

Artificial Intelligence Companion Services (Protection of Children) Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to prohibit the making available of certain artificial intelligence companion services to children, to provide for age-assurance

measures and to confer functions on Coimisiún na Meán; to amend the Online Safety and Media Regulation Act 2022; and to provide for related matters.

This should be the best and safest country in the world in which to grow up. That principle should apply to all we do. Colleagues here will know I am an evangelist for technology and artificial intelligence where it can be used responsibly to solve many of our challenges. We can use technology to help children in the area of education and, with parental safeguards, in the area of children's play. I have my doubts about the efficacy of a social media ban for those under the age of 16.

This legislation seeks to address the challenge of the growth of chatbots targeted at children, especially where there are no safeguards in place. We definitely need to be quite worried, and this relates to the last question raised, about the rise of the anthropomorphic chatbot that has human characteristics where the child will feel that he or she is interacting with a human. There are enormous challenges with chatbots being developed that are targeted at children. Children are being found to have developed attachments and emotional bonds. In many ways, it is found they can engage more readily with chatbots than with their human peers. From that, there is the danger that the skills we all take for granted in terms of empathy and human emotion will be compromised. There is also the danger of inaccurate advice from some chatbots leading children to have destructive thoughts and impacting on their mental health and on loneliness. People think the robots are coming and this is abstract but there are already quite a number of chatbots, particularly anthropomorphic chatbots, aimed at children.

When preparing this Bill, I did not anticipate the proposal at EU level under the EU KIDS Act, which will look to address some of these measures.

It is critical that when some of these products are rolled out the principle of safety by design is embedded within this and we look to a situation whereby we prevent an emotional dependency by children on these AI devices. If the EU KIDS Act does not proceed quickly enough, we should move here in this State to try to address it. I am very conscious that at present the US Federal Trade Commission is already investigating the interaction and monetisation of chatbots that mimic human conversation and emotion.

Regarding the EU KIDS Act and the principles that underpin this, the design of a chatbot cannot be used to simulate a human relationship with a child. We have got to build that into our own legislation. This Bill proposes establishing a prohibition on the making available of specific AI companion services and intimate AI friendship and companion services to children. It will empower Coimisiún na Meán to supervise and enforce compliance and will amend the Online Safety and Media Regulation Act regarding the provision of these services. In particular, the online safety codes will apply to cover any of these chatbots that are aimed at children. I am very conscious about how quickly the technology is changing. It is very difficult for us as legislators to keep up. The Government is moving in a way as quickly as possible but in this specific area around the protection of children it is vital that we now take action.

There is always a challenge for backbenchers introducing Private Members' Bills in progressing them beyond the First Stage of debate. I ask the Chief Whip to consider at the Business Committee a provision that on, for instance, Thursdays a number of Private Members' Bills could be considered. We have statements on all sorts of issues during the week whereas

there is limited enough time to allow for further debate on legislation, which on particularly important issues like this we should have.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Bill being opposed?

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

Question put and agreed to.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Statement of Estimates for the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission: Motion

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I move:

That Dáil Éireann take note of the Statement of Estimates of moneys required in respect of ongoing expenditure for the period beginning on 1st January, 2027 and ending on 31st December, 2027, prepared and published by the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission in accordance with the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission Acts 2003 to 2024, which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 28th September, 2026.

Question put and agreed to.

Sittings and Business of the Dáil: Motion

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

That, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, or in the ordinary routine of business as contained in Schedule 3 to Standing Orders, and unless the Dáil shall otherwise order, the following arrangements shall apply in relation to the sittings of the Dáil on 6th, 7th and 8th October, 2026:

(1) (a) in relation to the times of sittings, the suspension of the sittings and the adjournment of the House—

- (i) the Dáil shall meet at 1 p.m. on Tuesday, and at 10.23 a.m. on Wednesday and Thursday,
- (ii) on Tuesday, on the conclusion of the Budget Statements, the sitting shall be suspended until 8 p.m.,
- (iii) on Wednesday, the sitting shall be suspended for an hour on the conclusion of Leaders' speeches,

(iv) on Thursday, the sitting shall be suspended for 40 minutes on the conclusion of Questions on Policy or Legislation, or immediately following the introduction of any Bill, as appropriate,

(v) on Tuesday, the Dáil may sit later than 10.48 p.m. and shall adjourn on the conclusion of the weekly division time, or, where there are no deferred divisions, on the adjournment of the General Financial Resolution,

(vi) on Wednesday, the Dáil shall adjourn either at 9.17 p.m., or 4 hours and 30 minutes after the conclusion of the SOS, whichever is the later, and

(vii) on Thursday, the Dáil shall adjourn at 9.09 p.m.,

(b) in relation to the ordinary routine of business—

(i) Leaders' Questions shall not be taken on Tuesday, and shall be taken on Wednesday and Thursday after Oral Questions,

(ii) Other Members' Questions shall be taken immediately following Leaders' Questions on Wednesday and Thursday,

(iii) there shall be no Order of Business on Tuesday,

(iv) Questions on Policy or Legislation shall not be taken on Tuesday or Wednesday, and shall be taken on Thursday immediately following Other Members' Questions,

(v) a member may move for leave to introduce a Bill on Thursday only,

(vi) Oral Questions to the Taoiseach shall not be taken, and a single session of Oral Questions to another member of the Government shall be taken on Wednesday and Thursday at 10.23 a.m.,

(vii) private members' business shall not be taken on Tuesday and Wednesday,

(viii) topical issues shall not be taken on Tuesday or Wednesday and shall be taken on Thursday immediately after the SOS,

(ix) the weekly division time shall be taken on Tuesday upon the adjournment of the General Financial Resolution, and

(x) no Thursday evening business pursuant to Standing Order 168(2) shall be taken,

(c) any divisions claimed on Tuesday shall be taken immediately;

(d) Questions for written answer are not affected by these arrangements;

(e) no questions on private notice pursuant to Standing Order 44 may be asked; and

(f) leave may not be sought under Standing Order 42 to adjourn the Dáil on a specific and important matter of public interest;

(2) in relation to the sitting of the Dáil on Tuesday, the following arrangements shall apply:

(a) aside from the weekly division time, the business to be transacted shall be Budget Statements and Financial Motions;

(b) in relation to the Budget statements, the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be as follows:

- Minister for Finance – 45 minutes;
 - Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation – 45 minutes;
 - Sinn Féin – 60 minutes;
 - Social Democrats, the Labour Party, the Independent and Parties Technical Group, and the Independent Technical Group – 45 minutes each; and
 - Other Members – 45 minutes; and
- all members may share their time;

(c) on the resumption of the sitting after the SOS, a Minister or Minister of State shall move an allocation of time motion for the Financial Motions; and

(d) the motion for the General Financial Resolution shall be moved not later than 12 midnight and the debate thereon shall stand adjourned forthwith;

(3) in relation to the sittings of the Dáil on Wednesday and Thursday, the following arrangements shall apply:

(a) on Wednesday, after Other Members' Questions, Leaders' speeches shall be taken, and the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be as follows:

- Taoiseach and Tánaiste – 30 minutes each;
 - Leader of the Independent Ministers – 20 minutes;
 - Sinn Féin – 30 minutes;
 - Social Democrats, the Labour Party, the Independent and Parties Technical Group, and the Independent Technical Group – 15 minutes each; and
 - Other Members – 15 minutes; and
- all members may share time;

(b) on Wednesday and Thursday, in relation to the resumed debate on the General Financial Resolution—

- (i) apart from the Leaders' speeches, the debate shall be conducted in 135-minute speaking rounds, in accordance with table 1 below (to be read across, not down), and
- (ii) when there are no further members offering, the debate shall be adjourned, and in any event

(I) on Wednesday, the debate shall be adjourned either at 9.17 p.m., or four hours and 30 minutes after the conclusion of the SOS, whichever is the later, and

(II) on Thursday, the debate on the General Financial Resolution shall be adjourned either at 9.09 p.m., or two hours and 25 minutes after it commences, whichever is the later,

(c) on Thursday, Statements on World Mental Health Day shall be taken on the conclusion of topical issues and shall not exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes, and the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be as follows:

- (i) the arrangements for the statements, not including the Ministerial response, shall be in accordance with the arrangements contained in table 1 below (to be read across, not down);
- (ii) following the statements, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a statement in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes; and
- (iii) members may share time;

Table 1

-	Gov	SF	SD	Gov	SF
Mins	25	15	10	10	3
	Lab	Gov	SF	IPTG	Gov
Mins	10	10	3	9	10
	SF	ITG	Gov	SF	OM
Mins	3	9	10	3	5

(d) on Thursday, Statements on National Breastfeeding Week shall be taken immediately on the conclusion of Statements on World Mental Health Day and shall not exceed 1 hour and 37 minutes, and the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be as follows:

- (i) the arrangements for the statements, not including the Ministerial response, shall be in accordance with the arrangements contained in table 2 below (to be read across, not down);
- (ii) following the statements, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a statement in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes; and
- (iii) members may share time.

Table 2

	Gov	SF	SD	Gov	SF
Mins	10	10	6	8	3
	Lab	Gov	SF	IPTG	Gov
Mins	6	7	3	6	7
	SF	ITG	Gov	OM	
Mins	3	6	7	5	

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Northern Ireland

1. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on Northern Ireland will meet next. [66940/26]

2. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on Northern Ireland will meet next. [66906/26]

3. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on Northern Ireland will next meet. [64937/26]

4. **Deputy Emer Currie** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on Northern Ireland will meet next. [67523/26]

5. **Deputy Conor D. McGuinness** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on Northern will next meet. [67288/26]

6. **Deputy Roderic O'Gorman** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on Northern Ireland will next meet. [66927/26]

7. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on Northern Ireland will meet next. [66869/26]

8. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on Northern Ireland will next meet. [66854/26]

9. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on Northern Ireland will next meet. [66797/26]

10. **Deputy Erin McGreehan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on Northern Ireland will meet next. [64350/26]

11. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on Northern Ireland will meet next. [64347/26]

12. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on Northern Ireland will meet next. [64301/26]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 12, inclusive, together.

The Cabinet committee on Northern Ireland oversees implementation of programme for Government commitments and ongoing developments in relation to Northern Ireland, Irish-

British relations and the shared island initiative. Areas of discussion also include the annual United Kingdom-Ireland summits and their agreed UK-Ireland 2030 programme of work, and the continued roll-out and development of the investment, research and dialogue strands of the shared island initiative. It considers issues relevant to the Government's position as a co-guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement. Members of this House will have seen the situation that has arisen in Drumcree in recent days following a Parades Commission determination in relation to the routing of an Orange Order parade to include the Garvaghy Road. The Government is very concerned about the situation. Our primary concern remains to avoid a return to the divisions of the past, recalling the significant progress made over many years in furthering reconciliation under the Good Friday Agreement. There is an opportunity and a responsibility on all parties to make every effort to mediate a way through the current situation. The Government will continue to work towards that end.

On Irish-British relations, I met with the United Kingdom's Prime Minister, Andy Burnham, at No. 10 North in Manchester on 18 September. We spoke also more recently over the weekend regarding the challenging and concerning situation at Drumcree. We are of one mind that in all circumstances it is important that we work together to protect the gains of the peace process. When we met in Manchester, Prime Minister Burnham and I had a very positive and productive meeting and discussed a wide range of matters, including the strength of the relations between our two countries and our ongoing work under the UK-Ireland 2030 programme to deliver new benefits and opportunities for people and businesses across these islands. We also discussed Northern Ireland matters, including the importance of the principles, institutions and partnerships at the heart of the Good Friday Agreement. We discussed the role of our two Governments as co-guarantors in shaping how we approach all aspects of the agreement, including further progress on the achievement of peace, prosperity and reconciliation on this island and between both countries. The situation in Drumcree is a reminder of the importance of this work.

Last year's agreement between both Governments on a joint framework on legacy was a momentous step forward. Prime Minister Burnham and I reaffirmed our commitment to implementing the joint framework, and to do so as soon as possible. I welcome the fact that the United Kingdom's Northern Ireland Troubles Bill will be back before Parliament at Westminster next month. The Government here agreed and published the heads of Bill for our implementing legislation last June, and a new dedicated Troubles legacy liaison unit is now operational within An Garda Síochána as the central point of contact and co-ordination for victims and families in relation to Troubles-related investigations in this jurisdiction. We are preparing to ensure that we are in a position to enact our legislation to dovetail with the UK Northern Ireland Troubles Bill when it is enacted. I welcome that the British Government is now of the view that there is a need for some reforms to make the Stormont institutions work better. That has been my view for some time. I welcome that the UK Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Chris Bryant, is engaging with the Northern Ireland parties on this, as well as on the critical issue of the Executive agreeing a budget.

As a co-guarantor of the agreement, the Government has an interest here. The institutions of the Good Friday Agreement are designed to be interlocking. Without a functioning Executive, the North-South Ministerial Council cannot function. Our meeting also addressed a number of important international issues, including the seriously concerning humanitarian situation in Gaza and sharply deteriorating situation in the West Bank, and our joint

commitment to supporting a peaceful resolution to the conflict in Ukraine that respects Ukraine's sovereignty and independence. More broadly, Government engagement in recent months, as co-guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement, has included whole-of-government participation in the North-South Ministerial Council plenary in Armagh in May and my attendance, accompanied by the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy McEntee, at the 45th summit meeting of the British-Irish Council in Guernsey in July, alongside representatives of the governments of all eight member administrations.

On the shared island initiative, our programme for Government sets out an ambitious agenda, backed by our €2 billion commitment to the Shared Island Fund out to 2035. We are forging ahead with this investment and co-operation agenda across all sectors. The Cabinet committee on Northern Ireland meets twice yearly. It last met on 15 June. It is intended that it will meet again before the end of the year.

Deputy Paul Murphy: In recent days, there have been attempts to smear the good people of the Garvaghy Road as a mob. It brings to mind what James Connolly wrote about the concept of the mob, as in ordinary people. He wrote that the period where the mob had no power "was the blackest period in human history". He described the mob as a humanising civilising force and finished with the call of "All hail, then, to the mob, the incarnation of progress!" I had the pleasure of standing with this so-called mob over the weekend. They were the most welcoming, disciplined, steadfast and determined community you can imagine. It was these people - the over 1,000 people - who stood throughout the night while the rain came down who held the line against sectarianism. It was them and not the institutions, not the Parades Commission, which incredibly said that this sectarian, triumphalist march connected with murder should be allowed to proceed, and not the courts that upheld that decision. It was the people who held the line and stopped this opening up of a nightmare scenario, not just for the people in Portadown but for communities right across the North.

Has the Taoiseach communicated clearly to Prime Minister Burnham that this Orange Order march simply cannot proceed? That is the solution. The march needs to be stopped.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I just received a letter from a woman called Síle Carson. She is the sister of Daniel Carson who was killed by loyalist paramilitaries in 1973 in Belfast. He was killed just for being a Catholic. She was writing to thank me and us for standing with the residents of Drumcree against the threat of an Orange sectarian march going through the Garvaghy Road, given the history of loyalist killings and violence that led to the death of 21 people.

She was scathing about the Taoiseach's Government - she said I should say this to him - and Andy Burnham's failure to recognise that what is motivating Orange marchers wanting to go through the Garvaghy Road and that led to the death of her brother is naked sectarianism. It is a belief in being triumphalist and treating Catholics in the North as second-class citizens that led to those deaths - the tragic death of her brother and 21 others and many others - and she wants the Taoiseach and Andy Burnham to stand up for communities who are the subject of that kind of supremacist ideology and sectarian intimidation.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I thank the Taoiseach for that statement. Will he please comment further on his ongoing engagement and that of his Government with all political parties in the North outside of the NSMC structure and, following his meeting with the new Prime Minister Burnham on 18 September, on the joint priorities they have set out, given the fact there was the joint statement in Cork previously with the previous Prime Minister and on his conversations with the new Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Chris Bryant, in light of Drumcree, which the Taoiseach alluded to, the awful scenes we saw and in terms of the much-needed Stormont reforms?

Deputy Emer Currie: There are no winners in what has happened on the Garvaghy Road in recent days. No one ever wins in the North when the politics of fear and division is prioritised. The PSNI had no information suggesting the proposed march would cause public disorder or damage to property and that appears to have been significant in the decision to let it proceed. Is the absence of conflict the measure of a harmonious reconciled society? What weight was given to the fear and hurt felt by people living on the road? What role can the Irish Government play in restoring calm, repairing relations and rebuilding confidence in the institutions intrusted with making decisions like this?

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: The Garvaghy Road residents have endured intimidation, violence and murder. They have shown extraordinary resilience and discipline but they should not be expected to endure that again. I was proud over the weekend to stand with residents of Bóthar Gharbhachaidh. Ní glacfaidh an pobal seo riamh arís le bheith caite mar shaoránaigh den dara grád. The community was resolute and clear that they will never again be treated like second-class citizens. They are first-class citizens in a first-class community. They are Irish citizens and the Taoiseach has an absolute obligation to vindicate their rights to live in their community, to live free from fear of sectarian intimidation and harassment. He must protect this community and protect the peace. The Secretary of State has power to make a determination that this march will not be forced through the community. The Taoiseach is the Head of Government and a co-guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement. Enough of the traditional fence-sitting. Statements are well and good but will he actually press the British Government now to take this march off the table?

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I send solidarity to the residents of the Garvaghy Road. We met a delegation here last week and I salute their organisation and their determination. This is a working-class community standing up against a threat to drag Portadown and the North back to the past. The Orange Order seeking to push this march through is sectarian bullying. The march was always offensive to the community. It is not wanted. It is a catalyst for sectarian division. Children and adults have died in the past over this. Twenty-eight years without these sort of marches have been very helpful for this community. The cynical opening up of these old sectarian divisions is disgraceful. This is being dredged up, it would seem, by politicians to whip up division in an attempt to boost them ahead of elections next year, to divert attention maybe from sexual assault trials and so on. It is very important that working class people, Catholic and Protestant, stand together against this attempt to drag the North back into sectarianism.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I will finish on this. What is the Taoiseach going to do? I do not believe the establishment can sit back and just allow this to happen. The Taoiseach, the British Prime Minister and the Secretary of State can intervene to stop these marches being enforced.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The Taoiseach has described the decision of the Parades Commission to permit an Orange Order parade along the Garvaghy Road as "incomprehensible and wrong", and he is right in that. For 28 years there has been no parade on that route and most right-thinking people anticipated that would remain the case. Peace must be protected. As co-guarantor, will the Taoiseach use the influence of this Government with the British Government to ensure the principles of the Good Friday Agreement, namely, equality, mutual respect and consent, are at the heart of finding a lasting resolution? There can be no unwanted Orange march on the Garvaghy Road. It is as simple as that.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Hear, hear.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: The scenes on the Garvaghy Road last Sunday shocked people right across this island. A parade that had been off the agenda for 28 years was suddenly back, and thousands of people stood on the road to stop it. Thankfully, the day passed without serious violence and I commend all those who worked for calm. However, let us be honest about how we got here. This did not come from nowhere. For nearly three decades, too many of us on all sides mistook the absence of trouble for reconciliation. They are not the same thing. Unionism, nationalism, republicanism and, yes, both Governments let the slow work of building trust, dealing with the past and repairing relationships drift. Now, young people who never lived through the Drumcree incidents are being handed its bitterness. Peace has to be maintained and nurtured by all of us. Will the Taoiseach outline what steps the Government is taking with the British Government and the Northern Ireland Executive to support a structured mediation process on the Drumcree dispute? Will he commit to prioritising a properly resourced community reconciliation programme?

Deputy Brendan Smith: I welcome the fact that last Sunday the Taoiseach described the determination by the Parades Commission as "incomprehensible". I did not genuinely think we would be back watching scenes from Portadown, County Armagh on Sunday morning television which we, unfortunately, witnessed up to 1998. I am very glad the Taoiseach met Prime Minister Burnham and that he visited an Irish centre with him. I do not think we can ever pay enough tribute to the people and those volunteers in Irish centres throughout the world, particularly in Britain, and recognise the work they have done over the decades and that they continue to do today. It was clear from the communiqué after that meeting with the Prime Minister that there was a very thorough and relentless focus on legacy issues. They have to be dealt with because of reconciliation legacy. For far too long there are far too many families throughout this island waiting for the truth. They are waiting for the outcome of proper thorough investigations that have not been undertaken, whether it was on the bombings in Belturbet, other incidents across Cavan and Monaghan and the Dublin and Monaghan bombings of 1974. The legacy Bill, the new framework, has to be put in statute as soon as possible. For too many of the families with whom I have worked over the years say to me - as I have said so often in this House - that they are getting old and will be gone to their graves

before they ever get the outcome in relation to the atrocity that took their loved family member away.

The Taoiseach: I thank all the Deputies who have spoken. Deputy Paul Murphy spoke first. Some people may have used that term "mob" but the vast majority of people have not. The vast majority of people realise the enormous generational trauma that people in Garvaghy and Drumcree have gone through over the past three decades in particular. That is the motivation to prevent us having to go back to that type of trauma ever again.

We have engaged with the British Government. We have let it know our view as to what has happened but also how we can perhaps move forward. If we look back over the past number of decades there has been significant advancements in a lot of community relations. The Department of foreign affairs - I have been there on a number of occasions - over 30 years, and before shared island funding, administered the reconciliation fund, which has been particularly effective at interface areas.

4 o'clock

We have supported a lot of working class, sporting and cultural organisations, with a view to breaking down barriers in various communities that hitherto would have had significant issues and tensions. That work has been ongoing. In many ways, what the last number of days reveal is complacency but also the fragility of that and how things can reverse very quickly.

To everybody, yes, we, in this House, find it incomprehensible how the Parades Commission took the decision it took. I have made that clear. What I am focused on now is how we try to collectively mediate our way through this because ultimately the resolution of this has to involve all sides for it to be sustainable.

Deputy Boyd Barrett spoke about Síle Carson and that she said that we had failed to recognise sectarianism. No, we have not. The Irish Government has never failed to recognise sectarianism. The Irish Government and, in fact, the party I lead and other parties, were central to the Good Friday Agreement, which was to create parity of esteem between all traditions, between British and Irish citizenship within Northern Ireland, as well as the North-South Ministerial Council and so forth. I do not accept that assertion by Deputy Boyd Barrett at all, or by anybody in that respect. I do not believe the phrase the Deputy used. Nationalists are no longer second-class citizens in Northern Ireland.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Orange Order wants to put them back there.

The Taoiseach: They are not, however, and never will be. The Good Friday Agreement was an enormous leap forward in that respect.

Deputy Devlin made a point about engagement. I was at Comhaltas's Fleadh Cheoil in Belfast only in August. It was an extraordinary success. Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann managed it very sensitively and, in fact, embraced all traditions within the celebration of Irish traditional music, including Loyalist bands, the Ulster-Scots dancing tradition and so on. That shows positively what can happen with constant engagement. We need that spirit back to try to deal with this current situation, which is very serious.

Deputy Currie is correct. The absence of conflict does not mean there are no threats. The role the Irish Government can play is clearly laid out. Parades have been a function of the Northern Secretary of State and the legislation is there. As co-guarantors, we are speaking to the British Government, The Minister, Deputy McEntee, is speaking to the Secretary of State and I have been engaging with the Prime Minister in relation to all of this.

Deputy McGuinness should stop using phrases like "traditional fence-sitting". That kind of carry-on is not going to solve anything. Everyone in this House is sincere about wanting to bring this to resolution. Let us not be so judgmental. There is no one sitting on fences here. We have all experienced too much violence on this island. It is easy to use catchphrases and soundbites to demonise people on either side of the House. That is not good enough. We had too much violence in the past. My objective has always been to protect people, including current and younger generations, from ever again having to go back to what generations had to experience in Northern Ireland. That is what we want to do.

There is no need for a parade to go down the Garvaghy Road. That is my view. Others have different views. By the way, parades happen all over Northern Ireland. Every parade is not a demonstration of domination. Where communities have agreed, they have agreed. This one has always been a particular issue. As people have pointed out, the amount of murder, death, destruction and trauma associated with this parade makes it exceptional and, therefore, requiring special treatment as well.

In terms of Deputy O'Sullivan's point, which was in response to Deputy Coppinger, the reconciliation fund in the Department of foreign affairs has done a lot of good work, which has been commented upon, and we will continue with it. Again, we are there to support the Garvaghy Road residents. We are there to support the communities in that area with any particular programme that they bring forward in respect of trying to build up trust and reconciliation. Likewise, through the shared island initiative, we stand ready to be of assistance in that regard.

We agree with Deputy Smith in respect of the decision by the Parades Commission. Yes, the Irish centre in Manchester that the British Prime Minister and I visited was reflective of the historical connections between Ireland and that part of Great Britain. The Irish connections there go back generations, to the 19th century, and there were very proud people there who continue that tradition of providing service to people in the area. When I visited the centre in New York with Mayor Mamdani, again, every person had a life story of connection to Ireland and also of building up the country they now live in.

On the legacy issue, that featured significantly during my meeting with Prime Minister Burnham. Again, I believe that this is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to get an agreement over the line on legacy, which has eluded us for 30 years, so that there is proper mechanism for families to get answers as best they can and to get closure in respect of their loved ones.

Cabinet Committees

13. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on EU and international affairs will next meet. [66942/26]

14. **Deputy Malcolm Byrne** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on EU and international affairs will meet next. [66896/26]

15. **Deputy Shay Brennan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on EU and international affairs will next meet. [64293/26]

16. **Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on EU and international affairs will next meet. [64278/26]

17. **Deputy Conor D. McGuinness** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on EU and international affairs will next meet. [67289/26]

18. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on EU and international affairs will next meet. [66935/26]

19. **Deputy Roderic O'Gorman** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on EU and international affairs will next meet. [66928/26]

20. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on EU and international affairs will next meet. [66920/26]

21. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on EU and international affairs will next meet. [66870/26]

22. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on EU and international affairs will next meet. [66798/26]

23. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on EU and international affairs will next meet. [65515/26]

24. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on EU and international affairs will next meet. [68568/26]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 13 to 24, inclusive, together.

The Cabinet committee on the European Union and international affairs was established by the Government on 18 February 2025. It meets quarterly, in advance of regular European Council meetings, and as required. Its role is to oversee implementation of programme for Government commitments in relation to the European Union, including Ireland's Presidency of the Council of the EU, and international issues. The Cabinet committee on European Union and international affairs last met on 29 June 2026.

As the House will be aware, Ireland's rotating Presidency of the EU Council commenced on 1 July. It is our eighth Presidency, and we are tasked with advancing the common European interest and improving the lives of citizens across the Union. We are prioritising work to enhance the competitiveness of Europe's economy, safeguard the fundamental values of our

Union at home and abroad and provide for the security of our citizens. These three core themes - competitiveness, values and security - are closely interlinked and mutually reinforcing.

One of the most serious and important tasks we face is securing agreement on the Union's next long-term budget, known as the multi-annual financial framework, MFF, as soon as possible. It is clear that the European Union's ambitious agenda for the coming years will also need a budget that is appropriate to this ambition. We will seek to secure a solid basis for the future work of the Union through the negotiation of its next multi-annual financial framework.

Ireland is engaging intensively with each member state to understand its perspectives and priorities. Europe needs a budget that supports traditional and successful policies, such as CAP and cohesion, while also investing in our future competitiveness and economic prosperity. The proposals on the table include a new European competitiveness fund to help support Europe's future economic prosperity. We remain committed to agreeing the overarching MFF package by the end of this year. We know this will not be easy. Difficult choices and compromises will need to be made by all member states. We will work as an honest broker to try to narrow gaps and bring people together.

We are also advancing work on the One Europe, One Market roadmap which was agreed in April. It sets out the key steps that we must take together towards simplifying regulation, deepening the Single Market, widening our trade links, bringing down energy costs and ensuring Europe is positioned to take advantage of the digital and climate transitions.

Ireland is also working to move forward on enlargement of our Union. We want to ensure that those countries looking to join the European Union can move forward as fast and as far as possible, consistent with the efforts they are making to undertake the necessary reforms.

We will continue to offer unwavering support to Ukraine, whose people have shown such courage and determination in defending their country. They deserve a just and lasting peace.

Last week in New York, I undertook a series of engagements for UN high-level week. These included an event to mark one year since the New York declaration, hosted by President Macron, Prime Minister Carney and Prime Minister Burnham, and a high-level dialogue on Palestinian children in Israeli military detention. I also attended a UNICEF event on child nutrition where I was pleased to announce a new four-year programme to combat child malnutrition and hunger across Africa, with funding totalling €96 million.

I also attended the annual US host country reception, hosted by President Trump, and while at the UN, I held meetings with a number of other world leaders, including the Crown Prince of Jordan, the Iraqi Prime Minister, the Crown Prince of Kuwait and the Prime Minister of Moldova. The next meeting is on 1 October.

Deputy Paul Murphy: At the UN General Assembly, the Taoiseach said that "we, the collected international community, have failed Palestine". I could not agree more. The problem is that this applies to his Government as well. I know the Taoiseach finds this incredibly frustrating because he thinks he should just get applause for saying the right things, or some of the right things, about Palestine and should not be criticised for the lack of action. However, it is not unreasonable for us to say that the words have to be backed up by action. Earlier, in response to Deputy Copping, the Taoiseach said that he is focused on more important things than sport. That is fine, but then he is the one who gutted the occupied

territories Bill, who opposes sanctions on Israel and who is part of a Government that is two years looking into the fact that flights illegally containing ammunition and weapons are going to Israel through our airspace. When it comes to the issue of sport and sportswashing, the Taoiseach cowardly hid behind the FAI. Deputy Barry Ward said on radio, when Gavin Bazunu came out clearly and it looked like others would do so too, that if the FAI had made a decision, it would have had the backing of the Government. Will the Taoiseach back the players if they say they are not going to go ahead with this game?

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: Ireland's Presidency gives us a real opportunity to tackle an issue that matters greatly to patients and families across Europe, that is, access to innovative medicines. I recognise that pricing and reimbursement remain national competencies. However, there is clear scope for greater co-operation between member states. Joint clinical assessments are now a reality and earlier this year the first EU assessment of a cancer medicine, tovorafenib, for children with low-grade glioma was published, with Ireland's National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics, NCPE, acting as the assessor. The challenge is that a common assessment does not guarantee common access and patients' chances of receiving a life-changing medicine can still depend on where they live. So, while the aforementioned drug, with the NCPE acting as its assessor, was approved in principle, we still do not have an application here in Ireland. Therefore, patients here with that disease do not have access to the drug. With the new EU pharmaceutical package adopted this week and health Ministers meeting in Dublin to discuss access to medicines, Ireland now has an opportunity to lead on this issue. Given that the presidential programme identifies equitable access to healthcare as a priority, what specific outcomes does the Government intend to achieve during our Presidency to reduce the disparities?

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: The Opposition would lead one to believe that this country has done absolutely nothing when it comes to Palestine. However, this country was one of the first countries in the world to enact an occupied territories Bill and now we have the UK and other countries throughout Europe following suit. There needs to be an acknowledgement of that.

I want to ask the Taoiseach about how we can make fundamental changes and put real pressure on Israel through the suspension of the EU-Israel trade agreement. Will the Cabinet committee be discussing how the Government can pursue a suspension of that agreement, moving forward?

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Will the Taoiseach intervene urgently to secure access to Gaza for a mobile maternity unit funded by the community in west Waterford through a major fundraising campaign led by Gael ar son Gaza? We know the criminal Israeli regime has targeted medical personnel and medical infrastructure and this has led to there being no maternity facilities in the whole of Gaza. Women are giving birth in the most atrocious conditions and the impact on women - expectant and new mothers - and their babies is immense. It is part of Israel's genocidal campaign against the Palestinian people. It is an attack on newborns, pregnant women and maternity services. That is why the community in west Waterford and many other communities have raised money to fund mobile maternity units. However, Israel, in its callousness and inhumanity, is stopping them from entering Gaza so women are still giving birth under canvas and in tents, in the most medieval conditions. This

summer, all but two of Ireland's MEPs co-signed a letter to Kaja Kallas seeking her intervention. I will not name the two MEPs who did not sign it but it is on the public record for those who are interested. Will the Taoiseach, in the context of Ireland's Presidency of the Council of the European Union, intervene and use every lever available to him and the EU to get these mobile maternity units into Gaza?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Taoiseach said today that Benjamin Netanyahu, a wanted war criminal, does not care if Ireland plays a football game against Israel. That is not true. If people support BDS, they are not allowed into Israel. People can be jailed in Israel if they support BDS. Why? It is because Israel is terrified of boycott, divestment and sanctions and is terrified of people who tell the truth, that the Israeli state itself is based on apartheid, ethnic cleansing and genocide against the Palestinian people. That is why Israelis are worried and why Yoseph Haddad, who was in this building previously and who is a mouthpiece for Israel, was leading chants in the stadium, while the game was going on, in favour of the IDF, the force that has carried out the genocide. He was leading the chants. What kind of sick state cheers for armed forces engaged in a genocide? It is a state that is not a normal state, one that needs to be treated like apartheid South Africa was treated and needs to be boycotted, just as we boycotted apartheid South Africa. Why does the Taoiseach not show leadership, in the way Gavin Bazunu did, and give confidence and support to the footballers not to play this rogue regime?

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Will the Cabinet agree to send an observer to the Ulm 5 trial in Germany? That trial is taking place without a transcript and without any observer, despite the Minister standing up over there and telling us that there would be oversight of the trial. How can we have oversight if there is no observer on behalf of the Irish Government? I remind the Taoiseach about his speech at the UN when he spoke about an affront to decency in relation to what is happening in Gaza and said that we must act. These young people did not carry out any violence and they have been remanded for over a year. One of them is Daniel Tatlow-Devally, an Irish citizen. I and other TDs and MEPs attended the trial and we saw for ourselves outrageous treatment of the defendants who were behind glass panels. They were not being listened to and were not able to communicate in an ongoing way with their teams. Their alleged crime was to show opposition to the genocide in Gaza by destroying the arsenal that is being built up there. When is the Taoiseach going to send an observer, as was promised by the Minister and the Government?

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Business as usual with Israel is long beyond tenable. Ireland now holds the EU Presidency at a time when the EU's continued trade relationship with Israel is under intense scrutiny. I ask the Taoiseach to outline to the House the concrete steps he taking, as Taoiseach and holder of the EU Presidency, to build the necessary support among member states to suspend the trade elements of the EU-Israel Association Agreement. Will he commit to making this a priority on the agenda of EU leaders?

Deputy Duncan Smith: At the Cabinet committee, will the Taoiseach back up his words at the UN General Assembly with three separate actions to strengthen support for the Palestinian people? First, in light of the British Government's policy reset and its stronger version of an occupied territories Bill, will the Government revisit its own Attorney General's advice as well

as advice from Departments in relation to financial services and services in general and strengthen our own Bill? Second, will the Government follow the precedent set by Deputy Chambers in 2022 when, as Minister of State with responsibility for sport, he wrote to Irish sport's national governing bodies regarding a joint statement, signed by 37 other sports Ministers, which called for Russia and Belarus to be banned from hosting, bidding for or competing in international sporting events? Will the Government follow that precedent through, apply the same to Israel and stop this second game from happening? Third, following on from what Deputy Coppinger said, will the Government send an observer to the Ulm 5 trial, as promised, straight away?

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I welcome the closer relationship between Ireland and the European Union on one side and Canada on the other side. I ask the Taoiseach to outline to the House how he envisages the proposal of associate membership of the European Union for Canada operating.

Will he outline when he expects full Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement, CETA, ratification to proceed here in Ireland? In practical terms, does he see the possibility, either through Erasmus+ or Horizon Europe, of increased opportunities for educational exchange between higher education students and, as I would like to see, at second level as well? There is a big connection between south-west Wicklow, in my constituency, and Canada. More opportunities for exchange between our two countries would be welcome.

The Taoiseach: To Deputy Paul Murphy I would say that neither I nor the Government wants any applause. We just want balance and an acknowledgement that we have been the leading government in Europe, along with Spain, in supporting a Palestinian right to self-determination and in opposing the Israeli genocide in Gaza and what is amounting to ethnic cleansing in the West Bank.

On the humanitarian side, we have been strongly supportive. We have provided over €134 million in support for the people of Palestine since January 2023. That includes new funding of €42 million for the Palestinian people for 2026, of which more than €31 million has been paid to date. Either Deputy Murphy or Deputy Boyd Barrett said our words have not been backed up by any action. That is just untrue. The Deputies cannot get away with saying stuff like that. We have ensured there is continuing financial support to the Palestinian Authority. We have allocated approximately €78 million to UNRWA since 2023, of which €20 million was provided in 2026.

We intervened in South Africa's International Court of Justice case against Israel under the Genocide Convention. We made a submission to the International Court of Justice on the legal consequences of Israel's actions in the occupied Palestinian territories. We subsequently co-sponsored a resolution adopted by the UN General Assembly on 18 September 2024, which seeks to implement the court's advisory opinion. We have recognised Palestine as a sovereign independent state. Since 2024, there have been medical evacuations from Palestine of sick children, along with their family members, for treatment here, with plans ongoing for further missions. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has supported over 400 people to leave Gaza and travel to Ireland since the crisis began. We have led from the front on this issue. It is just nonsense to say we have only made statements and have taken no action.

We have done more than that. We also signed into law the Israeli Settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (Prohibition of Importation of Goods) Act. We were the first European Union country to announce measures prohibiting trade with Israeli settlements. We led the way on that issue, followed closely by Spain, and now other countries are pursuing it. I welcome the statements that have been made by the UK, France and Canada that they are also acting on the issue of trade with Israeli settlements. There has been a reset in respect of the UK. I welcome that and have spoken to Prime Minister Burnham about it. We continue to push for a ban on trade, including services, at EU level, where it would be far more effective.

The fundamental issue remains how to change the Israeli Government from pursuing the policies and militarisation campaign it is pursuing. That is the fundamental question. Within Europe, there has been division. Many member states, for historical reasons, have been very slow to hold Israel to account and have been very naïve in accepting Israeli guarantees in respect of this all along the way.

Deputy Ó Cearúil asked about the suspension of the EU-Israel trade agreement. We are not yet in a position where we can get agreement on that. The High Representative has been pushing it at the Foreign Affairs Council. I have raised it at the European Council. Some member states are still very much against that.

Deputy McGuinness asked specifically about access for mobile maternity units to Gaza. When I was Minister for Foreign Affairs, I went to Rafah and witnessed at first hand the enormous volume of aid that was on the wrong side of Rafah, that is, it was not allowed in there. I was told last week that pencil kits were allowed in for little children. They were not allowed in before that because they included a tiny scissors, with nonsense spoken about them possibly being used as weapons. There is an incredibly malign and vicious approach from the Israeli authorities in respect of allowing aid into Gaza. I saw a mobile tent with coolers and so on that would have facilitated transport of vaccines and other medicine into Gaza. It was refused. There was so much stuff refused. Countries all over the world had made donations of medical equipment, including scanners and everything else. All of it was refused. It is appalling. That is what I said at the UN and I meant it. It is absolutely beyond human comprehension that any state would behave like this. I have spoken to President Trump about getting that aid into Gaza. I will send a specific message regarding the mobile maternity clinics.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan spoke about innovative medicines and joint clinical assessments across the EU. That is welcome. Common access is still some distance away but it is the best way to go and we will be pursuing it with the Commission. Historically, health systems have been very reluctant to have greater European harmonisation. Public health is probably the one area where we have had some success because of the Covid-19 experience, including the vaccines and all of that. The more we have a common approach in Europe, the better it will be all around for EU citizens. That is what a one-market approach means, by the way, and there should be a one-market approach in health and medicine as well. We now have common approval of medicines but, as the Deputy said, they go into the 27 individual member state approval processes. I will talk to the Minister for Health to work out how best we can pursue that at European Union level.

On Deputy Coppinger's question, my understanding is that our ambassador and officials from the consulate and the embassy have been at the trial to which she referred.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I have just spoken to Daniel's mother about it.

The Taoiseach: My understanding is that officials from the Department of foreign affairs and from the embassy have attended the trial. However, I will check that again with the Minister for foreign affairs. Certainly, there was an offer to visit those who are detained. They offered to visit and so on. I am not sure what was the response to that. I will check with the Minister.

On the football matches against Israel, the FAI has sought, through UEFA and otherwise, to exclude Israel from all competition. That would be the desirable outcome.

The first issue Deputy Smith raised concerned financial services.

Deputy Duncan Smith: Yes, Britain is including services, in accordance with the legal advice it has been given.

The Taoiseach: As I said earlier, we are pursuing that through the European Union. The advice from the Attorney General is very clear that implementation is impossible.

Deputy Duncan Smith: Spain, which is an EU member state, has included services. Now the UK is acting.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Malcolm Byrne asked about co-operation between the EU and Canada. What we are looking at here is a closer relationship between the two, with a significant pivot by Canada to Europe because of its trade issues with the US. It is a good idea to have second level participation in Erasmus+. I met with Prime Minister Carney after the state of the union address by President von der Leyen. He certainly is very keen to strengthen the relationship between Europe and Canada. I hope he will be here in November for the European Political Community meeting, at which we will continue to pursue these issues.

I hope CETA will be ratified by the end of the year. There are legal issues in terms of challenges. It is proving to be extraordinarily beneficial to the Irish economy and Irish SMEs, with a fivefold increase in exports. It baffles me why Opposition Members are consistently against that trade deal. It seems they, and Sinn Féin in particular, have relegated trade to the bottom of the barrel in terms of the issues they feel we should be concerned about. It just baffles me that Sinn Féin is taking legal action against a trade agreement that benefits jobs, workers and many companies in this country.

Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation Bill 2026: Second Stage

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Catherine Ardagh): I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I am pleased to introduce the Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation Bill 2026. The Bill introduces protections for those targeted by strategic lawsuits against public participation, commonly known as SLAPPs.

SLAPPs are abusive court proceedings which are not taken to assert a right or seek genuine redress but to prevent, restrict or penalise public participation by threatening and intimidating people or organisations engaged in public criticism or debate. Common targets of SLAPPs include journalists, media outlets, and human rights defenders. SLAPP proceedings are often characterised by an imbalance of power with one party using the significant resources at their disposal to place financial and psychological pressure on the other. SLAPPs create a chilling effect on public interest reporting and debate and pose a significant danger to press freedom, public access to information and to democracy itself. The consequences of SLAPPs have been recognised at EU level. An anti-SLAPP recommendation was adopted by the European Commission in 2022 followed by the anti-SLAPP directive which came into force in 2024.

The directive requires member states to introduce minimum procedural safeguards to combat abusive proceedings against public participation in civil and commercial cases which have a cross-border dimension. Those protections include the early dismissal of proceedings which are clearly or manifestly unfounded and the ability for targets of SLAPPs to seek more generous costs and damages as well as security for those costs and damages.

The Bill transposes the directive and takes account of provisions contained in the anti-SLAPP recommendation. For example, as I have mentioned, the directive applies only to cross-border proceedings. However, in recognition of the need to also address in a domestic context, this Bill goes beyond the scope of the directive and provides safeguards for all civil and commercial proceedings, both cross-border and domestic, ensuring that the same level of protection exists for targets of SLAPPs across all civil and commercial matters.

Many of the safeguards referred to in the directive were included in Part 7 of the Defamation (Amendment) Act 2026 which was enacted by the Oireachtas in February of this year. Part 7 amended the Defamation Act 2009 to provide for safeguards in respect of defamation proceedings, which are a common vehicle for SLAPPs. This Bill draws heavily on the approach taken in Part 7 of the Defamation (Amendment) Act. It builds on the protections contained in Part 7 and introduces further protections in line with the directive. For example, it provides for interventions by third parties to support targets of SLAPP proceedings. It also makes provision for SLAPP proceedings taken in non-EU countries.

To ensure consistency across all forms of civil and commercial proceedings, the Bill repeals Part 7 of the Defamation (Amendment) Act 2026 and instead directly amends the Defamation Act 2009 to include SLAPP protections. This means that all SLAPP protections are referred to in the same legislation.

I will now address the main provisions of the Bill. Sections 1 to 3, inclusive, provide for the Short Title and commencement of the Bill, definitions and the repeal of Part 7 of the Defamation (Amendment) Act 2026. Section 4 outlines that Part 2 applies to proceedings brought against a person on account of his or her engagement in public participation. Section 5 of the Bill outlines that a defendant who considers proceedings taken against them to be initiated on account of his or her engagement in public participation, must inform the court.

Section 6 enables a court at its discretion to allow a person or body with a legitimate interest in safeguarding or promoting the rights of persons engaged in public participation, to make submissions to the court and to assist the defendant in proceedings which are alleged to be a SLAPP. This seeks to ensure that SLAPP targets, can avail of assistance of persons or

organisations with relevant experience and expertise throughout proceedings which may be lengthy, complex, and overwhelming.

Section 7 provides that a court may, on application by a defendant, require a plaintiff to provide security for the defendant's costs and-or any damages claimed by the defendant if the court is satisfied, first, that there is a *prima facie* case that the proceedings are abusive court proceedings against public participation and, second, that the requirement is in the interests of justice. It will be for the courts to determine what is in the interests of justice based on the circumstances of the case but the Bill provides guiding factors for the court to consider. These include the impact of such an order on both parties, the economic situation of the parties, the conduct of the proceedings and any difficulty likely to be faced by a defendant in enforcing an order for costs or damages.

Section 8 allows a defendant to seek early dismissal of proceedings relating to their engagement in public participation on the basis that those proceedings are manifestly unfounded. Where an application for early dismissal is made, the plaintiff is obliged to substantiate their claim so that the court can determine whether or not it is manifestly unfounded. The term "manifestly unfounded" is not defined prescriptively by the legislation but instead guidance is provided to the courts as to the circumstances in which a claim might be considered manifestly unfounded. This includes claims which have no reasonable chance of succeeding or are an abuse of process or interim or interlocutory proceedings which might unreasonably prejudice or delay the trial of a claim. The court is required to consider applications for early dismissal as expeditiously as possible consistent with the administration of justice. The striking out of SLAPP proceedings at an early stage will ensure that SLAPP targets are not forced to endure the lengthy and costly extent of a full trial. At the same time, the requirement that proceedings be manifestly unfounded mitigates the risk that those with genuine claims will be denied access to the courts.

Sections 9 and 10 of the Bill allow a defendant to apply to the court, at any stage of proceedings, including where early dismissal is sought, for a declaration that proceedings taken against them are SLAPP proceedings. Where a court issues such a declaration the court must take that declaration into consideration when making orders for costs. The Bill requires the court to consider the issue of costs as expeditiously as possible and allows the court to order the plaintiff to pay costs to the defendant on the more generous legal practitioner client or legal practitioner own-client basis if it considers this to be appropriate.

Section 11 enables a target of SLAPP proceedings to seek damages for any injury, loss or harm suffered as a result of those proceedings. Damages may be sought at the time an application for a declaration is made under section 9 or 10 or following the making of a declaration. This is a significant provision which recognises the extraordinary and abusive nature of SLAPP proceedings. Its effect is two-fold. It will allow a defendant to obtain compensation for material and non-material damages resulting from the bringing of the proceedings, undercutting the frequent goal of SLAPP litigants to use financial pressure to silence public debate. SLAPP defendants will, therefore, be able to fully defend against a claim, secure in the knowledge that they will be able to seek compensation for their losses. These remedies will also deter those contemplating or pursuing SLAPP proceedings, by increasing their potential losses where they are unsuccessful.

Section 12 requires a court which has made a finding that proceedings are a SLAPP to direct that its written judgment be published on the Courts Service website or, where there is no written judgment, that its order is published. In addition to having a deterrent effect, this will give greater clarity in relation to the frequency of SLAPPs in Ireland and the types of proceedings used as vehicles for SLAPPs, data on which is currently quite limited.

The Bill also contains provisions to protect public participants domiciled in Ireland from SLAPP proceedings taken against them in non-EU countries. Section 13 prohibits the recognition or enforcement of judgments made in third-country proceedings that would have been considered abusive court proceedings against public participation, or manifestly unfounded if they had been initiated in the State.

Section 14 allows targets of third-country SLAPP proceedings domiciled in Ireland to seek a declaration that those proceedings are abusive proceedings against public participation within the meaning of the legislation. Where such a declaration is made, a defendant may also seek compensation for damages and costs incurred in the third-country proceedings.

Section 15 of the Bill inserts a new Part 4A into the Defamation Act 2009. It replaces section 19 of the Defamation (Amendment) Act 2026 which is repealed by section 3 of the Bill. Part 4A consists of 12 provisions to be inserted in the Defamation Act 2009. Section 34A is an interpretation provision which is similar to that contained in section 2 of the Bill. Section 34B clarifies that Part 4A applies to defamation proceedings. Sections 34C, 34CA, 34D to 34I and 34IA and 34IB mirror the provisions contained in sections 5 to 14, inclusive, of the Bill, which I have outlined. The distinction is that these provisions will apply specifically to defamation proceedings.

The Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation Bill 2026 will provide important and effective protection for those who engage in public participation, while maintaining access to the courts for those who genuinely seek to assert their rights. I am hopeful that with Members co-operation, we can facilitate its swift passage through the House with a view to early enactment and completion of the transposition requirements and I commend the Bill to the House.

Deputy Mark Ward: I thank the Minister of State. Sinn Féin welcomes legislation that will provide greater protections against strategic lawsuits against public participation, SLAPPs. The judicial system is a foundational pillar of the State and society. As with any such pillar, that there is faith and confidence in its fairness as to how it operates, but also that it operates consistently and without favour, is of paramount importance. There is much we can and should do to support such faith.

One such area is access to justice. Sinn Féin has brought forward proposals in this regard in relation to jury service and other areas. We welcome the Ministers' and Government's constructive engagement on this. Of course, another such area is the right to legal counsel and while I will not dwell on it today, I appeal to the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, to engage in mediation in good faith with the Law Society to address that crisis, the outworkings of which I do not believe we have even begun to see.

The other side of access to justice as it relates to fairness and this Bill is that some large entities or even individuals have, in effect, endless resources in comparison with others and for

some time, this has allowed them greater access to the justice system and to abuse the justice system and silence political opponents, environmental or human rights activists and others.

Sinn Féin welcomes this legislation, which will provide new protections against SLAPPs across commercial and civil law while enhancing those recently passed by the Oireachtas. People should be clear as to what a SLAPP is, or rather what it is not. It is not when elected representatives defend their good name from spurious attacks. Everybody should have that right. In particular, we welcome the provisions of this Bill that will facilitate third-party interventions in cases by human rights bodies and others with relevant expertise. However, if we expect organisations to assist in safeguarding rights for targets of SLAPPs, we must recognise that we are asking such organisations to involve themselves in cases in the public interest and at their own expense. The Minister of State might consider such in terms of future funding needs of any such body or maybe she can clarify whether, in such a case, third-party costs would also be covered by the guarantees contained in the Bill.

We also welcome further provisions such as those ensuring that defendants may seek that a plaintiff provide security for their costs or any potential damages if the court is satisfied that they can justifiably argue that SLAPP provisions may apply; allowing for defendants to seek early dismissal should a case be manifestly unfounded; and providing for allowance in relation to damages for abusive proceedings. In particular, we welcome the provision whereby Irish courts will not recognise or enforce judgments that are initiated in a third, or non-EU, country that are considered by courts to be SLAPPs, and whereby Irish residents can apply to Irish courts for a declaration of such a case to be a SLAPP when such a case originates in a third country. However, this does call to mind issues raised during the consideration of the criminal justice Act 2026 in terms of co-operation with the judicial systems of other European Union member states. Where are the protections in cases wherein there are fears as to the independence of the judicial systems of European member states that may be experiencing democratic backsliding and whose governments have attacked the independence of their domestic courts?

The approach of the Bill includes repealing a not-insignificant portion of the defamation Bill 2026, passed by the Oireachtas earlier this year, but then goes on to reintroduce it largely verbatim, albeit with additionality. It would be beneficial if the Minister of State could explain in her closing remarks the reasoning for the approach. Why was this additionality not simply considered as part of the previous Bill? Why take the legislative approach within this Bill of repealing what the Government only a few lines later relegislated for? Therefore, in advance of Committee Stage, for the benefit of members of the Oireachtas justice committee, of whom I am one, I ask that the Minister of State direct officials to provide the committee with a detailed briefing note outlining the changes contained therein.

As we discuss access to justice and its relation to SLAPPs, I ask the Minister of State to reflect on the Government's own approach to litigation. A SLAPP can take the form of a case being taken that an individual or entity plaintiff has little intention of seeing through or winning on the merits of the sole basis that they are confident their financial means greatly exceed those of the campaigner or activist defendant they have taken a case against. In spirit and in principle, what is the difference between a SLAPP and the manner in which the Government defends cases taken by children seeking to vindicate their right to an assessment of need? I raised this with the Minister with responsibility for disability only the other day. A total of €7.2 million

has been spent by the Government over the last four years to defend itself in cases against families who were just trying to access their rights to an assessment of need. These are rights in respect of which, under this Bill, the Government has broken the law. It wears families down and can financially exhaust them. It sends a message to the vast majority of parents that they will never be able to outspend the Irish Government.

It may be worth examining whether this legislation can be amended to ensure that once we have pinned down and insofar as possible eradicated the scourge of SLAPPS, it will not be the case that the only SLAPP left is the slap in the face and wallet Irish families receive when they dare to call out the Irish Government on its failures.

In conclusion, Sinn Féin welcomes this Bill. We will be supporting its passage through Second Stage and look forward to working constructively with the Minister of State as to how it may be improved on even further, providing greater and even more enhanced and widespread protections.

Deputy Gary Gannon: The Social Democrats will be supporting the Bill. Before we get into the detail of it, it is worth reminding ourselves of what we are actually trying to protect here. Strategic lawsuits against public participation make the consequences of speaking out so expensive, stressful and prolonged that eventually people decide that it is simply safer not to speak at all. The people most exposed are often precisely the people who are integral to a functioning democracy, namely, journalists, whistleblowers, activists, NGOs and people attempting to expose wrongdoing.

That is why this legislation matters. We are fortunate in this country to have a robust and independent press. Those of us in politics may not always feel particularly fortunate when we open the newspaper in the morning. We might not like what has been written about us. We might think something is unfair. We might think a journalist has completely misunderstood something we have done. However, that is democracy. The test of whether we believe in a free press is not whether we support journalism that is favourable to us. It is whether we defend the right of journalists to scrutinise us, challenge us, irritate us and occasionally make our lives uncomfortable. Events elsewhere over the last number of weeks should remind us of how precious that is.

Earlier this month, Donald Trump announced that CNN, MS NOW and Politico were to be banned from the White House because of reporting he did not like. That was not just rhetoric. Journalists from those organisations subsequently arrived at the White House and were denied entry. Their press credentials were confiscated. A federal judge has since intervened and temporarily restored their access on finding that the ban was likely to be unconstitutional. Today, those news organisations still have to go before the courts to protect their access while that case continues. It is genuinely extraordinary that we have arrived at a point in 2026 when the President of the US has decided that because he does not approve of the journalism of a particular news organisation, those journalists should no longer have access to the seat of government. It is dystopian. It should concern democrats of every political persuasion because governments do not get to decide who is a legitimate journalist based on whether they like what that journalist writes about them. Governments do not get to determine what constitutes acceptable scrutiny of government. The moment journalists begin wondering whether asking a difficult question will cost them access, whether publishing an investigation will result in

retaliation or whether reporting something uncomfortable will result in financial or legal consequences, democracy has already started to lose.

I criticise the Government regularly. I am going to continue to do so because that is my job. It is also worth acknowledging that, thankfully, there should be nearly cross-party agreement in the House for a law such as this. We have a functioning democracy. Journalists can stand outside this building and criticise the Taoiseach, the Minister, the Opposition or anybody in this House. They can investigate the Government, expose failures of the State and report information those in power would much rather never saw the light of day, and thank God for that. We should treasure that freedom rather than simply assume it is permanent, because those freedoms can be eroded. Intimidation can become normalised, scrutiny can become something to be punished and those who have considerably more power and considerably deeper pockets can make the cost of speaking simply too great.

Coming back to the Bill, I welcome the fact the Government is completing the transposition of the European anti-SLAPP directive and even extending these protections beyond defamation to other civil and commercial proceedings. I particularly welcome the decision to extend the protections to domestic cases rather than restricting them to cases with a cross-border dimension because it would make very little sense to recognise the chilling effect of this type of litigation where there is a cross-border element but not where exactly the same things happen entirely in this State.

There are good protections in here. There is a provision for security for costs and damages. There are provisions for organisations with a legitimate interest in protecting public participation to assist defendants, and there is provision for damages where proceedings are ultimately found to have been abusive. Section 8 also allows somebody to seek the early dismissal of a claim as manifestly unfounded and requires the person bringing the case to substantiate the claim.

These are meaningful protections, but there are areas where we can make this legislation stronger as it progresses. There needs to be a clearly identified focal point for people dealing with SLAPPs and it is my understanding that IHREC is willing to perform that role, but I do not believe it is named in the legislation as the focal point. That matters because if we expect an organisation to take on an additional function, we have to formally recognise that function and resource it accordingly. I ask the Minister of State to look at that as the Bill progresses.

An issue arose when we considered the anti-SLAPP provisions in the defamation legislation last year. The threshold for early dismissal remains that a claim is manifestly unfounded. I am not convinced that fully captures what makes SLAPPs so insidious. The point is not necessarily that every SLAPP is completely without a legal argument. It is that the legal process itself can become the punishment. If somebody has vastly greater resources than the journalist, campaigner or whistleblower they are pursuing, they do not necessarily need to win. They can drag proceedings out, increase the costs, consume everybody's time and resources and make that person's life miserable. Most importantly, they can make that next person think twice before speaking.

The Minister of State could look again at whether the underlying proceedings should be paused while an application for early dismissal is being determined. We raised this issue during the defamation legislation on this floor as well. The logic of it is fairly straightforward. If

somebody comes before a court and says, "This case is being used to exhaust me financially and silence me", it somewhat defeats the purpose if the cost of that case continues to mount while we decide whether they are right. The amendments we previously considered sought precisely that kind of stay in order to prevent legal fees continuing to accrue while a strike-out application was being determined. The protection has to work in reality, not merely on paper.

None of these issues take away from the fact that this is good and necessary legislation, but we should never become complacent about having a free press. Whatever disagreements we have in the House, and they are plenty, I hope that is something we can find unanimity on.

Before I conclude, these will be the last weeks before the courts open fully. Next week, chaos will reign around the courts. Our press, even today, is filled with reports of court cases that have proceeded without legal representation. It is incumbent on the Minister of State's Department and the senior Minister to intervene, negotiate and come to an agreement to avoid the precipice of what is going to be a disaster next week.

When we talk about SLAPP legislation, we should also stop and remember other whistleblowers, such as the ones who have come forward and raised issues in relation to the protected disclosure departments. This legislation in regard to SLAPP is happening at the same time that continued penalisation is happening against Dr. Donal Corcoran and Detective Superintendent Brian O'Reilly. I ask the Minister of State to intervene and cease that because if we believe in protecting whistleblowers, and we talk about it often, that must exist across all the architecture of the State. The architecture for protected disclosures is failing and the continued penalisation of those Garda members, through simply making their pay packet, is not fair or acceptable. The Minister of State has a responsibility to intervene.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on this Bill, which supports a free press. I thank the Minister of State and her officials for their work.

Informed public debate and a free press are fundamental in a modern democratic republic. Our democracy was hard won and it should never be taken for granted. A strategic lawsuit against public participation is not a genuine attempt to vindicate a right; it is an attempt to silence. The person who brings it often does not expect to win. They expect the journalist, the campaigner or the community group on the other side to run out of money, time or nerves long before the case reaches the courtroom.

The process is the punishment and the cost is not only theirs. When a journalist drops a story, a community group withdraws an objection or a citizen deletes a post, the public loses. The problem is growing. The Coalition Against SLAPPs in Europe has now documented 1,303 of these cases across Europe since 2010, with 167 new cases added in 2024 alone. It has recorded 33 cases in Ireland and that figure probably only scratches the surface. The same research tells us that only 8.5% of these cases are cross-border. The vast majority are domestic. That is why I particularly welcome the Minister's decision to apply these protections to domestic proceedings, and not only to the cross-border cases the EU directive requires. Anything less would have left the people most at risk with the least protection.

The Bill gives defendants real tools. Under section 6, for example, the court can allow others to make submissions or to assist a defendant, so no one has to stand alone. Under section 7, the court can require the plaintiff to lodge security for costs and damages. Under

section 8 also, a defendant can seek early dismissal of proceedings that are manifestly unfounded and the plaintiff must then substantiate the claim. Under sections 9 to 11, inclusive, a court can declare proceedings abusive, award more generous costs and order the plaintiff to pay damages. Section 12 means those findings will be published on the Courts Service website, so the practice carries a reputational cost as well as a financial one. Sections 13 and 14 mean Irish courts will not enforce abusive judgments from outside the EU, and people here targeted by such cases can recover their losses.

I welcome Part 3. By repealing Part 7 of the Defamation (Amendment) Act 2026 and inserting a new Part 4A that mirrors the rest of the Bill, we will have one set of safeguards, in one place, whether a case is framed as defamation or anything else. That is simpler for the courts and far clearer for the people this Bill is meant to protect.

In my own constituency of Dún Laoghaire, the people most exposed to this kind of threat are not the major broadcasters with in-house legal teams. They are the local and regional papers, residents' association making a planning submission and the volunteer who runs a community page and asks a hard question. For them, a solicitor's letter can be enough to end that conversation. This Bill gives them somewhere to stand.

The research is also clear about who brings these cases. Across Europe, the most common litigants are those in positions of power, namely businesses and politicians. It is disappointing that even here, some elected representatives have appeared to engage in this practice. Every citizen, including every politician, has a constitutional right to their good name and nothing in this Bill takes from that, but those of us who ask the public for its trust should be the last people to use the courts to silence those who question us. Scrutiny is part of the job. Criticism, even unfair criticism, is also part of the job.

That tells us something about the wider state of our public discourse, and that is what I want to turn to now. The space for political debate in this country and across Europe is shrinking, and it is shrinking in strange ways. Since October of last year, Meta and Google have stopped accepting political adverts everywhere in the EU, blaming the complexity of new EU rules. That includes any advert placed for or by a politician. A TD can no longer pay to tell constituents about a clinic or a public meeting. Meanwhile, scam adverts are everywhere. The Taoiseach and the Minister, Deputy Jack Chambers, have both had their images used in them and almost daily a new public figure has been implicated. Last November, Reuters reported that Meta's own internal documents projected that around 10% of its 2024 revenue, some \$16 billion, would come from adverts for scams and banned goods.

Mark Little, in his new book *The Last Good Day on the Internet*, charts how the relentless pursuit of attention and scale fuelled toxic algorithms, hate, misinformation and division. Platforms profit from reaction, and nothing drives reaction like the most extreme position. The clinic notice is blocked, the scam advert is served and the outrage is amplified. That is not a healthy information space.

It is a similar story with political funding. A party or candidate here can only accept limited donations or support. Foreign donations are banned and the rules have recently been tightened again. Yet, some parties have used the gap between this jurisdiction and others, particularly the UK, to take in donations no party could accept here in the Republic, including a single bequest of more than £2 million. None of us wants a UK-style system where crypto money

buys a platform, but some reform is necessary so that our rules are proportionate and cannot be sidestepped by crossing a border.

5 o'clock

Corporate interests and the NGOs press their agendas in this House and around the country every week. In a liberal democracy that is a good thing. We must hear ideas, including new ones and the ones we disagree with. However, set that against the growing web of declarations, returns and compliance rules elected representatives and parties must follow in the course of their ordinary work. Transparency is correct and right but when the heaviest burden falls on those who must face the electorate, the treatment is inconsistent, and it is having an impact.

Add the toxicity of so much online debate and you can see why people are stepping back from public life. A UCD survey for the Oireachtas task force on safe participation in political life found 94% TDs and Senators who responded had experienced threats, harassment, abuse or violence. Some 45% had avoided a particular policy area as a result and 43% said it made them less likely to run for office again. We saw the consequences at the last general election. Thirty outgoing TDs did not seek re-election, compared with just 19 in 2020. Many of them were good, hardworking representatives. When he announced his decision, Ciarán Cannon said, "There's a coarseness, a toxicity in politics now that was barely palpable twenty years ago". The next local elections are due in 2029 and parties across this House are already looking for candidates. If the young parent, the small business owner or the carer decides public life is not worth the abuse, the ballot paper will not reflect the community those people could serve. Last of all, most TDs from all sides of this House welcome the dedicated channels Departments and agencies have set up for Members' representations but the service is very inconsistent and in some cases it has reduced in recent times. We must be vigilant these channels do not become a bureaucratic box-ticking exercise pushing more work on TDs and our offices. A reference number is not an answer, an acknowledgement is not a resolution of a query and a closed file is not a problem solved.

I raise these issues so Ministers - and I understand the Minister of State is aware of these issues - colleagues and the public might consider how we promote healthy public debate and systems that let elected representatives advocate effectively for their constituents. Politics should always be about ideas and policies that improve the nation for all. I have two specific asks of the Minister of State. The first is that the Courts Service publish annual figures on applications made and granted under this Act so this House can see whether it works or not. The second is that the Minister raise with the Minister for housing and local government the need for a review by An Coimisiún Toghcháin of how the rules on political advertising, funding and compliance work in practice and implement the reforms well in advance of the 2029 local elections and potential general election. Democracy must not just work; it must be seen to work.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this. It is quite an important matter and not the first time we have been addressing this in legislation. It is important we do so to ensure the well-resourced corporations can no longer use the threat of legal cases to prevent the disclosure or exposure of wrongdoing or criminal acts by those corporations or by their agents, and the like, and that there are protections here for other civil and consumer cases. We should be encouraging whistleblowers in particular and giving them

all the protections. By given them protections we are standing with the logic behind this but we need to fully adhere to those protections so there is no undermining of the systems. We have seen some of that only recently with the discussion on the Garda Síochána whistleblower section resigning because they did not have faith in their own whistleblowing and how the disclosures were being treated by that organisation. We cannot just pass the legislation. We have to act accordingly and ensure the protections are there.

The free press and free debate have to be protected, as other Deputies have said, though a free press and free debate are not unfettered. We do and we must defend the free press, especially in the era we are living in and when there are moves to silence the press and to hamper it from publishing the truth. It is important for us in a democracy that we understand what the free press stands for, how it defends us in our democracy and how the truth needs to be what is published. We have seen big organisations using the threat of legal proceedings to threaten those who are intent on taking a court case. People are threatened with bankruptcy, their home being taken or whatever. We all know of people who have backed off and who have sometimes sought help in a different way to try to expose wrongdoing. The threat of bankrupting a person is something we need to stand up against and that is why this legislation is to be welcomed.

We also need to live up to it as a State because the State Claims Agency is one of the organisations that threatens people who are taking cases against the State and it has managed to force people. Even though that agency understands it is in the wrong its instructions are to fight cases that are unjust or where a wrong has been perpetrated against a citizen. The thalidomide survivors are an example. They still have not been granted the recognition and the financial compensation they deserve for the wrong done by the State. There are others. There is the Air Corps chemical poison group in which each individual had to take a case themselves rather than collectively. The threat, therefore, was that they would be bankrupted if they did not win the case. It was a question of being forced into silence or poverty. When we are passing legislation aimed at the private sector the State also has to take note of it.

I welcome the commentary about social media. At least journalists are known and their names are printed. In social media people hide and you cannot take cases against them.

Deputy Alan Kelly: This is the second time in seven months the Oireachtas has been asked to legislate against SLAPPs in defamation cases. The Defamation Act 2026 was signed into law on 19 February. Part 7 of that Act inserted anti-SLAPP provisions for defamation cases. On 25 February the Minister signed an order bringing most of the Act into force from 1 March. He did not bring Part 7 into force. The Department said Part 7 would be commenced to align with a separate SLAPP Bill. The general scheme of that separate Bill was published on 11 February 2026, which was eight days before the defamation Act was signed into law. The Government asked the Oireachtas to pass anti-SLAPP legislation it already knew it was going to replace very soon. There are questions there about timing. Is this a good use of the Department's resources? These provisions have never been enforced and this Bill will repeal them. Section 15 in Part 3 inserts a new and longer version of Part 4A in their place. The Minister of State might explain why the Defamation Bill was not simply amended in its final Stages, rather than asking the Houses to legislate twice on the same subject. She should give the House a clear, ideally published, comparison of what the new Part 4A changes versus the version the Oireachtas passed in February.

The Bill is also late. The deadline for transposing the directive was 7 May 2026. We are not very good at transposing directives on time. In fairness, there are a lot of directives that are justice-orientated but it was not presented until 1 July of this year.

We do not have a good track record and the Minister of State should tell the House when she expects the Act to be brought into force.

The Bill promises a bit more than it delivers. The language in the Bill is very strong to be fair and is practical in its effect in most instances but there are issues regarding early dismissal. How Irish courts can already strike out a claim that discloses no reasonable cause of action is an abuse of the court process or is bound to fail. The Bill's definition of a manifestly unfounded claim largely lists those same existing grounds. The defendant's application must be made in accordance with law, which means under the existing rules of court. There is actually no new procedure in place in this Bill so how is it different? Regarding speed, the Bill directs the courts to act as expeditiously as possible consistent with the administration of justice. The final words of that phrase do all the work. The courts already control their own list. Delay in our court is caused by the number of judges we have and the resources available to the Courts Service and nothing in this Bill will change that.

The burden is on the plaintiff. The Bill says that it shall be for the plaintiff to substantiate his or her claims, which sounds significant, but in any application to strike out the claim, the plaintiff already has to show that there is a real case to answer so the practical change is minute, if at all.

On costs, where a court finds proceedings to be abusive, it may take that finding into account when awarding costs insofar as it considers appropriate and may if it thinks fit award costs on a higher basis. That is a discretion that is qualified twice over. The courts already have a discretion under section 169 of the Legal Services Regulation Act 2015 to reflect the party's misconduct in the costs they award. A SLAPP harms its target through cost and delay not usually by winning at trial and this point is being lost. A Bill that does little about cost and delay actually does little about SLAPPs. That is the key point I want to get across here. Delay and cost are the tactics and if they are not addressed, the fundamentals of the Bill are not at the level we require.

What it could do, but does not, is bring in a way of pausing the main proceedings, so when a defendant applies to have a SLAPP struck out, the rest of the case keeps running and keeps costing money, exchange of pleadings, discovery of documents, other motions, etc. The Bill should pause the main proceedings while the anti-SLAPP application is decided.

Regarding full costs as a starting point, once a court has found the proceedings are abusive, the person targeted should recover his or her full legal costs as the default position unless the court decides otherwise for good reason. As regards paying for defence, while we are not saying that it should be paid for and are not arguing in favour of for-profit funding of litigation, has the Government considered a narrow statutory exception allowing the defence of a SLAPP to be funded in certain circumstances because it may be necessary?

On threatening letters, much of the damage is done before any case is even started by solicitors' letters threatening proceedings that may never be issued and are unlikely to be issued. Every prosecution in this Bill begins only once proceedings are started. The Minister of State should say what the Government proposes for the threat stage - not the initiation stage. For

example, working with the Law Society on standards of professional conduct for such letters would be a good start.

Regarding judgments and publishing findings, judgments finding proceedings to be abusive are to be published on the court's website where practical and as soon as is so practical. It is genuinely hard to see when publishing a finding of abuse would ever be impractical. I cannot see how it could be, so why is the conditionality there? That should be taken out. The Minister of State might look at an amendment with regard to that. I will submit an amendment but it would be good if she could come forward with one as well.

Defamation is the most common vehicle for SLAPPs yet under this Bill people sued for defamation get narrower protection than people sued in any other civil case. Both sets of protections depend on whether the speech concerned a matter of public interest and the Bill gives examples of what that includes. For ordinary civil cases, the examples include activities aimed at protecting the values set out in Article 2 of the Treaty of the European Union, namely, democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights, including protecting democratic processes against disinformation. In the defamation provisions, that example applies only to cases within the scope of EU directives, which, in practice, means cross-border cases.

A journalist sued for defamation in an Irish court over reporting on disinformation seems to get less statutory recognition than a campaigner sued for anything other than defamation under what we are debating today. A similar restriction applies to allegations of administrative offences. The Minister of State should explain the policy reason for giving defamation defendants a narrower definition. If there is no good reason, the two definitions should be the same in our opinion.

What is the situation regarding people who are being sued right now as this legislation is being brought forward? What happens to pending cases? The February Act contained a transitional provision - section 20 - that stated the anti-SLAPP provisions would apply only to proceedings started after those provisions came into force. This Bill repeals that section and puts nothing in its place either for the defamation provisions or for the new general scheme, so the Bill is silent on the question that matters most to anyone being sued today, namely, whether this law will help them. The Minister of State might address that in her reply. Where are we as regards current cases and will the Bill help people who are being sued at the moment? Without an express provision, the courts will have to decide that question themselves applying general law presumptions provision by provision. Procedural protections such as direction to deal with applications quickly would probably apply to cases already under way.

On the new liability to pay damages for bringing abusive proceedings, perhaps it would not if the law presumes that new liabilities are not attached to things done before the law was passed. Security for costs and enhanced costs orders may perhaps fall somewhere in between. The uncertainty will be resolved by litigation at the expense of the people this Bill is meant to protect. We need absolute clarity on this issue and I presume the Minister of State's discussions with her officials there involve trying to get such clarity because certainly as regards the provisions of the Bill as currently constituted, we do not have that clarity.

It is welcome that the Irish courts will refuse to enforce abusive judgments obtained outside the European Union - that is universally welcome - and that people living in Ireland who are sued abusively abroad can seek a declaration and compensation here. However, the Bill does

not say who has to prove the foreign proceedings would have been abusive had they been brought in Ireland or on what evidence. The Minister of State should clarify that. Compensation under these provisions would be ordered against a plaintiff based outside the European Union who will often have no assets here. This is obviously a very important point. The Minister of State should explain how the Government expects such orders to be enforced in practice. If the plaintiff has no assets or ties, how is it going to be enforced?

The Bill preserves agreements between the State and a third country concluded before 6 May 2024. Many agreements on recognising court judgments from non-EU countries are made by the European Union rather than by Ireland. The Minister of State should clarify how these provisions interact with those agreements.

Regarding constitutional balance, strong protections against SLAPPs are needed but the Constitution also protects every citizen's good name and every citizen's right of access to the courts. Anyone who has genuinely been defamed must be able to vindicate his or her reputation. Anti-SLAPP law must never become a shield for falsehood either. The Government may say that this Bill goes as far as the Constitution allows but it does not. This Bill goes as far as existing court powers allow. This is a much lower bar than the Constitution sets. None of the additional measures we are proposing decides any case against any plaintiff. On pausing the main proceedings while an anti-SLAPP application is heard, making full costs the starting point once a court is found abuse, allowing defence of a SLAPP to be funded and addressing threatening letters before proceedings are issued, none of those proposals denies anyone access to the courts or weakens the protection of anyone's good name. All are within the power of the Oireachtas and all of us to regulate court procedure.

There is, however, a genuine constitutional limit. Some other countries allow a court at an early stage to dismiss the claim that has some merit because the public interest in the speech outweighs the harm to the plaintiff. That would sit uneasily with our constitutional protection of a person's good name and the right of access to the courts and is not what is being proposed here but this Bill sits way below that line.

I have some questions for the Minister of State. Why did the Government ask the Oireachtas to pass anti-SLAPP provisions in February that it always intended to replace? What does the new Part 4A of the Defamation Act 2009 change compared with the version passed in February?

Will the Minister publish a comparison for us all to look at? Has the European Commission raised the missed transposition deadline of 7 May this year with the State? What did we say to it? When will the Act be brought into force? Will the defamation provisions and the general provisions come into force on the same day? Was the removal of the transitional provision in section 20 of the February Act deliberate? Will people who are already being sued benefit from this Bill? That is very confusing. Why do people who sue for defamation get a narrower definition of “matter of public interest” than people sued on any other basis? I cannot see why there is a difference. Which set of rules applies where a defamation claim is combined with another kind of claim? That is totally confusing.

Will the Government accept an amendment pausing the main proceedings while an anti-SLAPP application is decided? Will the Government accept an amendment making full costs the starting point once the court has found proceedings to be abusive? That would be a

welcome amendment if the Minister would consider it. Will the Government consider a narrow exception to the rules against third-party funding so the defence of a SLAPP can be funded? What does the Government propose to address threatening solicitors' letters sent before any proceedings are issued? It is an area that is completely left out at the moment and needs to be addressed.

The February Act allows a court to penalise with costs a party who unreasonably refuses to use the Press Council's complaints process or the broadcasting right of reply. Will the Minister of State confirm in reply that a defendant will not be penalised for refusing on the grounds that the claim is a SLAPP where the court later finds that it was? How does the Government expect compensation orders against plaintiffs based outside the European Union to be enforced? It seems to be silent on that.

We will have a lot of amendments on Committee Stage, depending on how the Minister of State responds. I suggest there are a number of areas, which we have put a lot of thought into, that the Minister of State might consider. Certainly, we will be putting forward amendments should she not.

This legislation is critical in the grand scheme of things concerning what we talked about previously in relation to Garda whistleblowers. It is beyond my comprehension how the Government thinks that by putting its head in the sand, this is going to go away. This is not going to go away. Many of those who are brave enough to stick their heads above the parapet are on social welfare. Imagine being put through that after all the years of service they have given. It is ironic and something this House probably needs to look at. If they were charged with serious criminal offences, they would be suspended on full pay. These people have pointed out serious wrongdoing, yet they are on social welfare. It is a genuine comment that we need to look at that. I see the Minister of State nodding. It is a fair point to make.

I know these people. Some of them are in the Houses at the moment. What they are saying needs to be dealt with by the Government. This does not have to be a "gotcha" moment. These are real issues in relation to how whistleblowing was dealt with by An Garda Síochána and how it continues to be dealt with by An Garda Síochána. I do not think it is reasonable for us to accept that the people who point this out are being penalised to the level that they are on social welfare, while other people who may have committed serious offences are on full pay while suspended. It is a reasonable point that the Minister of State should reflect on, outside of the issue we are talking about. I also believe that, separately, all of the ongoing protected disclosures that have been made within An Garda Síochána for the last number of years need to be independently audited. No matter where this issue goes, they need to be independently audited. We also need a check on documentation to make sure it is preserved.

Whatever happens, one thing that is central in relation to how protected disclosures are dealt with in An Garda Síochána needs to be dealt with. There is no possible way that future protected disclosures and the process by which protected disclosures are made in An Garda Síochána can be under a directorate, a Commissioner or a deputy commissioner within that organisation. It has to be independent and separate, not answerable to a Commissioner or deputy commissioner for access, funding, legal advice or anything else. That has never been the case and the changes An Garda Síochána has now made, and the directions it has given out, mean it is still not the case. We will never ever get to a position of confidence in that process until it is independent. As has been said in the media, a Commissioner or deputy commissioner

should not be in a position or have any capacity to know about what is going on in relation to that unit and the work it does. They should have no capacity to decide whether funding is given to that unit or not. They should have no capacity to decide whether legal advice is taken. They should have no capacity to even know what experts are brought in to give advice to that unit. They should have no capacity to decide whether people are allowed into the Phoenix Park or wherever the unit is based. It must be totally independent. It is the only way.

I have made three important points in relation to this separate from what I have said on it previously. First, these people deserve respect. They deserve not to be penalised. I am asking the Government to address that now. As I said, if they committed an offence or were on a serious charge, they would not be on social welfare but on full pay. Second, there is a need to preserve documentation and ensure there is an independent audit. Third, please, once and for all, make sure that this unit is independent from the other roles of An Garda Síochána.

Deputy Paula Butterly: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill as it goes to the very heart of our democracy. It concerns freedom of expression, the right of citizens to speak out on matters of public interest and the ability of journalists, campaigners, whistleblowers and community activists to hold those with deep pockets to account without fear of being dragged into costly and intimidating legal proceedings.

We all recognise that every person has the right to their good name and reputation. Indeed, it is enshrined in our Constitution and must always be protected. However, we must also recognise that legal proceedings can sometimes be weaponised. They can be used not as a genuine means of seeking justice but as a tool to silence criticism, suppress scrutiny and discourage participation in public debate. For example, a journalist investigating corruption, a local resident raising environmental concerns, a survivor speaking out about wrongdoing or a community group challenging a powerful interest may ultimately win their case, but even when they are right, the mere threat of years of litigation, substantial legal costs and overwhelming stress can be enough to silence them.

In a healthy democracy, and thankfully Ireland is still a healthy democracy, the truth should never be drowned out by the deepest pockets. The purpose of this legislation is therefore straightforward. It seeks to identify cases that are abusive in nature and allow courts to deal with them in an efficient manner. This legislation introduces mechanisms for the early dismissal of manifestly unfounded proceedings and provides protections for people engaged in public participation. It also allows courts to make appropriate cost orders and other remedies where proceedings are found to be abusive.

Very importantly, and I welcome the fact, there is recognition that public participation is essential to democratic life. Public participation is not limited to newspapers or broadcasters. It includes community activists campaigning for safer neighbourhoods. It includes parents advocating for better services for their children. It includes environmental groups raising concerns about developments in their community. It includes victims, survivors and whistleblowers who speak out in the public interest. All of these people play an invaluable role in our society and, far from being discouraged, they should be encouraged and protected.

As legislators, we should be especially conscious of the pressures faced by local campaigners and ordinary citizens. Large corporations, wealthy individuals and powerful organisations often have access to significant legal resources. Ordinary citizens generally do

not. This imbalance is obvious. Where one side can absorb years of legal costs, the other cannot. Access to justice therefore becomes unequal. Thankfully, this Bill seeks to restore that balance.

I also welcome the protection it provides for responsible journalism and, as we know, responsible journalism does not necessarily have a voice in some parts of this world. A free and independent press is one of the cornerstones of democratic accountability. Investigative journalism has exposed corruption, uncovered wrongdoing, highlighted failures in public services and given a voice to those who might otherwise have been silent. When journalists are threatened with meritless lawsuits simply because they are doing their jobs, democracy suffers, as do we.

That is why Ireland has been encouraged for a number of years by media organisations, civil society groups and international bodies to strengthen protections against SLAPPs. The Government has acknowledged that SLAPPs pose significant challenges to press freedom and democratic debate and that measures are required to prevent misuse of the legal system. Importantly, this legislation does not remove anyone's legitimate right to take legal action where they have genuinely been defamed or harmed. Genuine claims can and should continue to proceed through the courts.

The objective is not to weaken access to justice and to our courts but to prevent the abuse of the justice system. That distinction is absolutely critical. We must always strike an appropriate balance between protecting reputation and protection freedom of expression. Those rights are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they reinforce one another when supported by a fair legal framework. The challenge for legislators is to ensure the law cannot be manipulated as a means of intimidation. The safeguards provided in this legislation are, therefore, proportionate and necessary. They recognise the threat of litigation can itself become the punishment, even in cases where the underlying claims lack merit. By allowing courts to intervene earlier, the legislation reduces that risk that defendants are forced into lengthy and expensive legal battles simply to vindicate their right to speak on matters of public concern.

This strength of any democracy can be measured by how willing it is to tolerate scrutiny, criticism and debate. Democracies do not fear questions. They do not punish those who seek accountability. Democracies depend upon informed citizens engaging openly, freely and honestly in public life. The people we seek to protect through this legislation are often those who shine a light where others would prefer to stay in the darkness. They ask the difficult questions, challenge the established interests and advocate for transparency and accountability. They are not enemies of democracy. They are, in fact, its strongest defenders. For this reason, I believe the Bill represents an important and necessary reform. I, therefore, welcome this legislation and look forward to its implementation.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation Bill 2026. At first glance, the Title of this Bill probably does not tell most people very much about what it actually does, but the principle behind it is relatively straightforward. People should be able to participate in public debate, report on matters of public interest, raise legitimate concerns and ask difficult questions without the legal system being used as a means of silencing them.

At the same time, people have a right to their good name and reputation and if somebody has genuinely been wronged, they must continue to have access to the courts. That balance is important and it is worth keeping it at the centre of our consideration of this Bill. What we are dealing with here are commonly called SLAPPs, strategic lawsuits against public participation. We are essentially talking about legal proceedings which can be used against somebody because their participation is a matter of public interest. The concern is not simply whether somebody ultimately wins or loses a particular case. The concern is that the legal process itself can become the punishment. A person may face the prospect of significant legal costs, considerable time, uncertainty and the pressure that comes with defending legal proceedings.

There can be a wider effect as well. Other people looking at what has happened may decide that they are better off saying nothing. That is where this becomes an issue not just for the individual involved but for public participation more generally. This issue has been recognised at European level already. In April 2024, the EU adopted its anti-SLAPP directive, which requires member states to provide minimum procedural safeguards for people targeted by manifestly unfounded claims or abusive court proceedings arising from their participation in matters of public interest. This Bill gives further effect to that directive in Irish law. Importantly, Ireland is proposing to go beyond the minimum requirements of the directive in one significant respect. The European requirements relate principally to cases with a cross-border dimension. This Bill proposes that the protections should apply to domestic proceedings in Ireland. This makes sense. If we accept the principle that the legal system should not be abused in order to suppress legitimate public participation, it would be difficult to justify protecting someone where a case has a cross-border element but not providing comparable protection where the entire case arises within Ireland.

We have also done some work in this area through the Defamation (Amendment) Act 2026. That legislation contains protections relating to SLAPPs in defamation proceedings. The Bill essentially completes that work by dealing with other civil and commercial proceedings and completing Ireland's transposition of the EU directive.

What will actually change? There are a number of practical measures in the Bill, which I think are worth explaining. A defendant who believes that a claim brought against them because of their public participation is manifestly unfounded will be able to apply to have that claim struck out. Importantly, the legislation states that a court should deal with such an application as expeditiously as possible, consistent with the proper administration of justice. Once that application has been made it is for the plaintiff to substantiate the claim so that the court can assess whether it is manifestly unfounded. This matters because one of the problems we are trying to address is the burden that lengthy litigation itself can impose. If a case really is manifestly unfounded, then we should have a mechanism through which that can be identified at an early stage, rather than requiring somebody to go through a prolonged legal process before reaching that conclusion.

There are also provisions concerning security for costs and damages. Where a defendant can establish a *prima facie* case that proceedings are abusive, a court can, where it is in the interests of justice, require the plaintiff to provide security. There are safeguards built into that decision. The court has to consider matters, including the financial circumstances of both parties, whether requiring security would unfairly prejudice the plaintiff's ability to pursue a

legitimate claim, and the effect of the defendant's ability to defend the proceedings if security is not provided. Again, this brings us back to balance.

We want to protect people against abusive litigation but we cannot replace one barrier to justice with another. A person who has a genuine legal grievance should not be prevented from pursuing it simply because they do not have substantial financial resources. I will be particularly interested in examining this when we get to Committee Stage.

There is another interesting provision in the Bill which allows a person or organisation with a legitimate interest in safeguarding public participation to make submissions to the court and, with the court's permission, assist the defendant. That does not extend to funding the proceedings but it recognises that some cases have implications which go beyond the two individual parties before the court.

The Bill also provides for the publication, where practicable, of judgments or court orders where a court has found that proceedings were abusive proceedings against public participation. This provides an additional degree of transparency around the operation of this legislation.

There are also provisions dealing with proceedings taken outside of Ireland and with certain judgments from third countries. This is important because public debate today does not stop at national borders. Journalism does not stop at national borders and information certainly does not stop at national borders, so our legislation has to recognise the international environment in which people now communicate and publish.

There is a broader point here too. When we talk about public participation we should not think only about national newspapers or prominent journalists. Of course, investigative journalism is an important part of this debate and journalists must be able to investigate and report responsibly on matters of genuine public interest. However, public participation is wider than journalism. It can be a community organisation raising an issue. It can be an NGO. It can be somebody involved in environmental or human rights work.

It can simply be an individual who has legitimate information or concerns that he or she believes should be put out into the public domain. Our democracy depends upon people being prepared to participate but rights come with responsibilities. Freedom of expression does not mean that somebody can say absolutely anything about another person without consequence. The right to participate in public debate does not remove another person's right to his or her reputation or to seek redress when he or she has genuinely been wronged. We should be careful not to create the impression that every legal action taken against a journalist, campaigner or public participant is automatically a SLAPP. It is not. There will be legitimate cases, disputes, and circumstances where somebody has every right to ask a court to vindicate his or her rights. The role of this legislation is to help the courts distinguish between those genuine cases and proceedings which are manifestly unfounded or abusive. That distinction is fundamental.

We also need to be conscious of access to justice on both sides. We quite rightly talk about the cost of somebody having to defend him or herself against abusive proceedings but access to justice also matters for someone who has suffered a genuine wrong and needs the court to remedy it. As this Bill progresses, I will be interested in whether we have got that balance right in practice. Can a manifestly unfounded case be dealt with early enough to make these protections meaningful? Are the tests clear enough for the courts to apply consistently? Are

we ensuring that legitimate plaintiffs are not discouraged from accessing courts? Are the remedies sufficiently practical to make a real difference to someone who has been subjected to abusive proceedings? Those are exactly the kind of questions that Committee Stage allows us to examine in greater detail.

I also welcome the fact this Bill does not simply focus on one particular profession or category of person: the principle is broader. It is about protecting participation in matters of public interest. That is the correct approach. There is a tendency sometimes when we debate legislation to present competing rights as though one must choose one and disregard the other but I do not think we need to do that here. We can support freedom of expression and public participation while also protecting a person's good name. We can protect journalists and ordinary citizens from abusive litigation while maintaining access to the courts for people with genuine claims. We can give judges stronger and clearer tools to deal with abuse of the legal process while maintaining the independence of the courts to decide individual cases on their merits. That ultimately is the balance this legislation has to achieve.

I support the objective of the Bill on Second Stage. The principle behind it is sound. Nobody should be able to use their financial strength or the prospect of lengthy and expensive litigation simply to prevent another person from participating legitimately in a matter of public interest. Equally, nobody should lose their right to vindicate their reputation or other legal rights simply because the person on the other side of the case describes his or her activity as public participation. The challenge is to protect both.

As a member of the justice committee, I look forward to examining details of the legislation on Committee Stage, particularly how these safeguards will operate in practice and whether we have achieved the right balance between protecting public participation, people's good name, and maintaining proper access to justice. On that basis, I am happy to support the Bill proceeding to the next Stage.

Deputy Michael Collins: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill because for me, this is not just a theoretical issue. I know what it is like as a sitting TD to be pursued with legal correspondence and to be threatened with legal action while simply trying to represent the people who elected me. When a constituent comes to my office with a serious concern, my job is to listen to them, investigate the matter, ask questions and where necessary, raise those questions with the relevant authorities. That is what I was elected to do. However, when solicitors' letters start arriving because you have raised difficult questions, there is a chilling effect. You start to wonder what is the next letter you will see, what defending yourself could cost and how far somebody with deeper pockets might be prepared to take it.

If that pressure can be put on a TD, imagine what it is like for an ordinary citizen, local journalist, farmer, community activist or whistleblower. That is why I understand the principles behind this Bill. Nobody should be able to use their wealth, power, or access to expensive lawyers to frighten another person into silence. People have a right to their good name and to defend themselves where they have been genuinely wronged. This Bill cannot and should not give politicians, journalists or anybody else a licence to say whatever they want without consequences. However, there is a world of difference between going to court to vindicate a legitimate right and using the threat of the expense and stress of litigation as a weapon to silence legitimate public interest questions. Sometimes you do not even have to bring the case to

conclusion; a threatening letter can be enough. The prospect of spending tens of thousands of euro to defend yourself can be enough. The legal process itself can become the punishment. That is where this legislation is important.

I particularly welcome the provisions allowing unfounded claims to be dealt with at an early stage, and allowing the court to take stronger action where proceedings are found to be abusive. However, I have serious concerns. Will an ordinary person actually be able to afford to use these protections? There is no point in passing legislation protecting people against expensive and abusive litigation if they need thousands of euro to get to court and prove the litigation is abusive. A person who receives a solicitor's letter may already be frightened out of his or her wits about what the case could cost. I want to know what practical assistance will be available to that person. How quickly will these applications be heard and will adequate resources be provided? Will legal aid - if the person can get it - or some other form of assistance be considered because these protections have to be quick, affordable and accessible, or they will mean very little to the ordinary person?

I also want the Minister to consider the position of elected representatives. A TD's job does not begin and end in this Chamber. We meet people in our clinics and we write to Departments, councils, State agencies and other organisations. We raise difficult cases because sometimes the people sitting across the desk from us have nowhere else to turn. I have been elected to represent those people and I will not be frightened out of representing them by the threat of a solicitor's letter. However, that does not put me or any TD above the law. In effect, representatives acting honestly and responsibly on a genuine matter of public interest must be able to do their job without wondering whether the price for asking an uncomfortable question will be another legal threat landing on the desk.

Our courts must always remain places where people can go to seek justice. They can never be allowed to become a weapon for those with the deepest pockets to silence those who ask difficult questions. The real test of this legislation will come when an ordinary person gets that solicitor's letter. Will he or she be able to stand his or her ground and challenge abusive proceedings quickly? Most importantly, will he or she be able to afford to do it?

Freedom of expression and public participation cannot become rights that only belong to people wealthy enough to defend them. That is the challenge I put to the Minister and it is the standard by which this Bill should be ultimately judged.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill. To simplify it for people, an investigative journalist should be protected. From an investigative point of view, a person may be in a Department, in government or in Revenue. I have two cases before Revenue. They are not for me but for my constituents. To tell the truth, from the couple of cases I have in different parts of Revenue, things are sitting on desks for 12 months and are not being looked at. The knock-on effect of this is the legal bills involved. If somebody is whistleblowing, they are up against the management in these places. People in that position are afraid to do anything because it might affect their jobs. People are actually shoved out in the cold. We can see what happened with the whistleblowers in An Garda Síochána and the Prison Service. They were cast out. Why were there no protections there?

It is the same thing when we talk about journalism. If a journalist is investigating something that is wrong and pressure comes on him or her from a legal perspective, he or she should 100% be protected.

It is the same thing for a sitting TD, Senator or councillor. If they see something wrong and highlight it, they should be protected.

We have seen how many years it took when we had people under investigation in the Garda. All those gardaí were acquitted of any wrongdoing. What stood in the way of that happening? How many years? How many people did not get to where they needed to get in their careers? It not only affected them but their families and extended families. The gardaí are our protectors. I have the utmost respect for the gardaí and I encourage people to join the Garda service. If you are in the Garda protecting people in your area, there should be the same protections for you if there is an internal matter in the service. In any walk of life, no matter where you work or what you work at, there is always a minority of people that do things for the wrong reasons, but the majority are there for the right reasons. We need to make sure the majority of people, those who are there for the right reasons and who want to make things better, are protected, while the ones there for the wrong reasons, even those in positions of power, are held accountable. That is what we need to do and what I would like to see happening.

Looking at criminals and reoffenders, some people are getting free legal aid who have been 25 or 30 times in front of the courts. It is fine if you have done something once or twice, something goes wrong and you get free legal aid, but when you are doing something 30 times, does it not show we have a problem? We are giving them free legal aid. It was brought up in our local authority in Limerick by Councillor John O'Donoghue that there should be a cap put on somebody who reoffends repeatedly. How are you going to learn from anything if you keep getting free legal aid? That is also an issue that needs to be discussed.

From the Garda Commissioner down, everyone should be treated as an equal, regardless of their position, when it comes to accountability. I hope this Bill, when it goes through, reflects that. The same goes for Departments. If our Departments, or certain parts of them, are not doing right, they should be held accountable. Everyone is entitled to legal aid, but I have an issue with it when people reoffend and need to be accountable.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I welcome this SLAPP Bill. Legislation on this issue is long overdue. I have been in the ear of a number of Ministers for justice for at least five or six years, looking for legislation in relation to this. I am glad the European Commission saw fit to begin infringement proceedings against Ireland last May for its failure to transpose the 2024 anti-SLAPP directive into Irish law.

SLAPP is among the worst forms of abuse anybody can suffer. It is not confined to defamation; it comes in many guises. I have seen trumped-up trespass cases, trumped-up pollution claims and so on. In addition to abusive litigation, I have seen victims subjected to other forms of abuse, such as malicious reports to a myriad of regulatory bodies with the intention of tying that person up in knots. I have seen first hand the distress caused to victims of SLAPP and their families. I have seen people receive nasty seven-day solicitor's letters on Christmas Eve and at other sensitive times of the year, such as Easter and the summer holidays.

What is particularly egregious is misuse of the discovery mechanisms of the State. I have seen solicitors misuse these to terrorise victims and keep dragging them back before the courts by disrupting everything they try to do to comply with discovery orders. A very worrying issue is the way the cost orders are racked up against vulnerable defendants. I have seen solicitors try to have defence of SLAPP struck out on various technicalities. Bad as it is to be subject to vexatious litigation, to seek to strike out defence of such litigations is a shocking form of abuse.

I welcome the section of the Bill that deals with forum shopping. It has been suggested by some that one could just ignore SLAPP. This is not possible as failure to file a defence allows an applicant to take out a judgment in default of defence. SLAPP-type litigation requires the victim to field a team of lawyers. This does not come cheap. Litigation typically gets drawn out with loads of court appearances, all the time clocking up a serious legal bill for the victim. The courts are already struggling to cope with the heavy caseload they deal with; to add vexatious litigation to it is unacceptable.

Having examined the Bill, I wish to raise a couple of concerns, which mean we will table a number of short amendments on the next Stage. The need for defendants to demonstrate a case is "manifestly unfounded" is an unduly high threshold that would preclude many SLAPPs from being subject to an early dismissal mechanism. We recognise the threshold was established by the EU anti-SLAPP directive but as the Bill has already gone beyond the minimum standards set out by the directive with respect to its inclusion of domestic cases, there is no reason this flawed threshold should be enacted. The "manifestly unfounded" test is far too high. The legislation should instead allow for abusive lawsuits to be subject to the dismissal mechanism in order to ensure the right to freedom of expression is duly protected.

A letter was written to the Minister for justice in February 2025 about this flawed text regarding the Defamation Act. Nevertheless, we are still seeing that within the system. This is hugely concerning. A defendant does not have cost protection in such proceedings. As such, a high bar will discourage victims from referring instances of egregious SLAPP-type cases. We will propose to substitute "abusive" for all mentions of "manifestly unfounded".

I am particularly concerned that the Bill is silent on those who enable litigation in certain situations, that is, solicitors and lawyers. The enablement of SLAPP is a major difficulty. There are numerous cases of abusive processes, such as serving seven-day solicitor's letters on Christmas Eve; hamming up vexatious cases; misuse of the discovery mechanism, which has been used as an instrument of persecution by enabling lawyers to harass and intimidate; and making false statements in court and knowingly misleading the court. There are scores of ethical provisions which are ignored by enablers. I have seen one person bring these to the attention of the Legal Services Regulatory Authority, LSRA, and it was completely ignored. Ethical provisions are actually part of the Law Society. A solicitor "Has an overriding duty to the court to ensure, in the public interest, that the proper and efficient administration of justice is achieved, and should assist the court in the administration of justice, and should not deceive, or knowingly or recklessly, mislead the court." That is not always put into place. There are similar provisions for barristers: "A Barrister shall not knowingly make, procure or countenance the making of any false or misleading statement of fact, whether express or implied [or] written... with regard to any matter in which that Barrister is engaged, to any Court, other body or to any other party or any representative thereof." That is not always put into place either.

It is worth noting the comments by Mr. Justice Seamus Noonan in the Court of Appeal judgment in *Keating v. Mulligan*, 2022. He described the litigation misconduct of the defendant, stating that his lawyers engaged in gratuitous and sustained impugning of the integrity of the plaintiff, which had to be deprecated in the strongest terms.

6 o'clock

The High Court had determined that the defendant had improperly accused the plaintiff and her lawyers of fraud and awarded aggravated damages in addition to general damages. The allegations were completely improper and need to be resolved-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy's time is up. I call Deputy Gogarty.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: Cuirim fáilte roimh an mBille seo. Is ceann an-tábhachtach atá ann. I welcome the Bill. It is important legislation that facilitates legitimate criticism of institutions and corporate interests. If it is done right, it balances the fear of legal threats and, on the other side, vexatious or potentially defamatory statements. We have heard that this Bill is a direct and necessary response to EU Directive 2024/1069, the anti-SLAPP directive. To be a little bit facetious, it is taking its time. The EU has had to give Ireland a little slap on the wrist to get the legislation moving. Throughout Europe, including here in Ireland, we have been very slow in implementing legislation to protect people. We have seen a disturbing rise in powerful corporations and wealthy individuals basically weaponising our legal system. They are not doing this for justice. Sometimes they are not even doing it to protect their good name but rather to chill debate and discourse and silence those who are speaking truth to power, especially investigative journalists, environmental activists, community groups and individuals who have legitimate concerns. This Bill, in the rightful way, targets those who threaten public interest advocates with some form of financial ruin. Looking at it from a non-expert point of view, it provides a good level of protection, for example offering early dismissal of groundless claims, moving the burden of proof back onto wealthy plaintiffs and forcing litigants to post security for costs.

However, the small person, such as a local campaigner, blogger or small community group, still has barriers because within the Irish defamation framework, groups such as the Law Society of Ireland say that we still lack a serious harm test. Damage to reputation is legally presumed here from day one. Plaintiffs can launch lawsuits without ever having to prove an actual or tangible financial loss, which means they can still - the Minister of State is going to elucidate on this later - intimidate defendants to some degree. We need more clarity on this. As my colleagues in the House have said, we possibly need related amendments on Committee Stage. Another angle is that if a defendant wants to get a case thrown out early, as Deputy Tóibín mentioned, he or she has to prove that a claim is manifestly unfounded. That is a very high legal hurdle because a well-funded corporate legal team can tie a case up for a long time and draft a claim that looks plausible on paper, but to the ordinary citizen, who has an information deficit in many cases, it basically forces them to face the prospect of a full trial and definitely makes them think it is going in that direction. That in itself has a chilling effect.

Regarding the costs, the very act of hiring a legal team to file the anti-SLAPP application costing thousands of euro is going to be prohibitive for some. Very small NGOs, community groups or individuals might not have these funds. It is still hard to get backing for legal cases

in a proper manner. For small persons, therefore, there is still a risk that their home is going to be taken away from them if they raise this issue. When I was a councillor, for example, a pub wrote to me saying that when I had said that people crossing over a median to go to the pub were taking their lives into their hands, that was defamatory against the pub. I had to rephrase my remarks in a certain way because I did not have any means at the time. If we multiply that for people raising genuine public issues, we see that we have to get the legislation right.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Catherine Ardagh): I thank the 11 Deputies who contributed, namely, Deputies Ward, Gannon, Devlin, Ó Snodaigh, Kelly, Butterly, Callaghan, Collins, O'Donoghue, Tóibín and Gogarty. Many of the questions posed by the Deputies were answered by other Deputies, but I will do my best to go through many of the questions that were posed. Most of the Members raised the importance of the SLAPP legislation. The most recent data from the Coalition Against SLAPPs in Europe suggests that 34 SLAPP cases were filed in Ireland between 2010 and 2025. This is not a huge number, but we are also very conscious that collecting information on SLAPPs can be challenging for a number of reasons. Many Members outlined that some SLAPP-type cases might be started on a pre-litigation basis between the parties and before court proceedings are filed. The phenomenon of SLAPPs has only been defined at EU level since the adoption of the directive in 2024. Many SLAPP cases go unreported because those targeted or intimidated do not have the resources to compile and report information on their cases. We must, therefore, be careful not to confuse the lack of information on the issue with the lack of an issue, because there clearly is very much an issue there. A lot of Members raised the issue of attacks on democracy by litigation. A semi-related issue is the use of deepfakes and social engineering attacks on politicians. However, it is not just on politicians and Members of this House but also on local advocates and residents, where attacks online or by way of litigation have a chilling effect on their public participation.

Deputies Gannon, Kelly, Tóibín and Gogarty raised the issue regarding why a case has to be manifestly unfounded to be dismissed early and questioned whether that threshold is too high. There have been some suggestions that the requirement that the claim be manifestly unfounded to be dismissed at an early stage is too onerous. I understand the desire to provide protection for those targeted by abusive proceedings against public participation. However, the striking-out of proceedings represents a limitation on the right of access to the courts, and a balancing exercise is therefore necessary. The Bill outlines an indicative list of circumstances where proceedings might be considered manifestly unfounded, for example in cases where the endorsement, pleading or claim is an abuse of the court process. The list is expressed to be non-exhaustive and takes account of recommendations made by the justice committee in its pre-legislative scrutiny report on the SLAPP provisions contained in the Defamation (Amendment) Act. The wide definition aims to allow the court enough flexibility to balance those rights as fairly as possible in the circumstances in each case.

Deputy Ward asked why there is specific reference to defamation proceedings but not to other types of proceedings. It was Deputy Callaghan who answered that this legislation is not limited to defamation proceedings. It is the finality of legislation to incorporate all civil and commercial matters. On the issue of costs and why the provision of financial assistance is excluded from the supports that may be provided to a defendant, while this may be discussed on Committee Stage, third-party litigation funding and class actions are not permitted in

Ireland. The Bill provides a number of other important supports to the targets of SLAPP proceedings, including the ability of a relevant person or organisation to make legal submissions to the court or provide it with information relevant to determining whether the proceedings are SLAPP proceedings, as well as other non-financial forms of assistance the court considers appropriate in the circumstances. It will also a person or entity targeted by SLAPP proceedings to recover more generous costs and damages to compensate for any loss, including financial loss, suffered by a defendant as a result of the proceedings.

On the general subject of costs, turning to a point mentioned by Deputies Gogarty and Kelly, the general scheme of the civil reform Bill was published earlier this year. It forms part of an holistic approach to the reform of the civil justice system in Ireland, together with other ongoing access to justice reforms, including the judicial planning working group and the Courts Service modernisation programme. These collective reform measures will deliver significant efficiencies across the court system, and we hope we will see a reduction in legal costs. The Bill is a key implementation measure for the legislative recommendations made by the review of the administration of civil justice, otherwise known as the Kelly report. In 2020, the Kelly report made over 90 recommendations regarding civil procedure in the courts, covering discovery, judicial review litigation, multiparty litigation, facilitative court users and technology and e-litigation. The recommendations are intended to take an holistic approach to reform of the civil justice system and require implementation amendments to legislation and the rules of court as well as operational provisions.

Other Members asked why we were introducing damages for SLAPP cases. That was raised by Deputies Ward and Gannon. Allowing targets of SLAPP cases to seek damages for injury, loss or harm suffered as a result of those proceedings is important. It recognises the extraordinary and abusive nature of SLAPP proceedings, which are brought, not to genuinely assert or exercise a right but rather to prevent, restrict and penalise public participation through pressure and intimidation. It also recognises that these proceeding frequently seek to exploit an imbalance of power between the parties, which often involves one party using its position to place significant financial and psychological pressure on the other. It is important not only that those targeted by SLAPPs are empowered to seek redress and acknowledgement of the harm they have suffered but also that there are significant consequences for those who initiate SLAPPs, which we hope will discourage the taking of these forms of proceedings.

Regarding legal aid, I think Deputy Collins raised the question as to why legal aid was not allowed in cases involving SLAPP. There are no specific legal aid provisions in the Bill as reform of legal aid is being considered more broadly by the Department. The Civil Legal Aid Act 1995 and associated regulations govern the provisions of civil legal aid by the Legal Aid Board. Section 28 (9)(a) of the 1995 Act provides that certain "designated matters" are excluded from the scope of civil legal aid. Defamation is one of those matters. Also, legal assistance is not generally available on foot of the legal aid scheme. There are some very limited exceptions to this. The future of civil legal aid generally is being considered by the Department in the context of the civil legal aid review. In June 2022, a civil legal aid review group chaired by former Chief Justice Mr. Frank Clarke was established to review the current operation of the civil legal aid scheme. The findings of the civil legal aid review group were published in July 2025 and they contain a number of recommendations relating to the scope and eligibility of the civil legal aid scheme.

A number of broader questions were posed by colleagues. One of the issues raised was in relation to the threatening letters to those who are considered public participants. It is hoped this matter can be addressed. I am sure it will be addressed on Committee Stage. There was also a question on whether the Courts Service will publish the figures of SLAPP cases. This is something on which we can engage with the Courts Service, and we will do so. Deputies Kelly and Gannon raised the issue of whether bringing a motion to assess the case as a SLAPP case should pause the proceedings. In some ways this would happen automatically. Like in any type of case, once an interim motion is brought the proceedings would be paused at that stage. Other Deputies mentioned they will put down amendments on Committee Stage. We look forward to seeing those amendments and discussing them with Deputies then.

Question put and agreed to.

Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation Bill 2026: Referral to Select Committee

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Catherine Ardagh): I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Justice, Home Affairs and Migration pursuant to Standing Orders 103(2)(b) and 188(1).

Question put and agreed to.

Public Transport and Fare Increases: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Pa Daly: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

recognises that:

- public transport is an essential public service and should be affordable and accessible to all;
- investment in public transport is critical to fairness, social inclusion, balanced regional development and reducing emissions; and
- the best way to increase public transport use is to make services more affordable, reliable, accessible and more widely available;

notes that:

- households, workers, students, pensioners and families continue to face significant cost of living pressures, with rising costs across housing, energy, childcare and everyday essentials;
- the Government has chosen to increase the cost of public transport for those who rely on it, and at a time when fuel costs are spiralling out of control;

- the National Transport Authority (NTA) has acknowledged that increasing fares will result in fewer people using public transport;
- affordable public transport helps to reduce household costs, tackle transport poverty and help workers and families cope with the rising cost of living; and
- commuters are being asked to pay higher fares while continuing to endure unreliable and overcrowded services, including so-called "ghost buses" that simply fail to turn up, leaving workers, students and families stranded and out of pocket;

further notes that:

- the Government has prioritised pay rises for public transport chief executive officers in conjunction with fare increases for commuters;
- this Government have failed to provide adequate funding to the NTA to both expand services, and maintain affordable fares;
- despite repeated promises, the rollout of improved public transport services has slowed significantly, with concerns raised regarding delays to the Connecting Ireland Rural Mobility Plan and promised rural transport improvements;
- communities across rural Ireland continue to experience poor connectivity, inadequate services and a lack of viable alternatives to private car ownership;
- this failure comes amidst repeated examples of waste, mismanagement and spiralling costs within the transport system, including the write-off of approximately €50 million arising from a failed public transport Information Technology project;
- affordable, reliable and accessible public transport delivers significant social, economic and environmental benefits by reducing congestion, lowering emissions, supporting regional development and connecting people with employment, education, healthcare and social opportunities; and
- free public transport for children and young people would ease financial pressures on families, increase mobility, improve access to opportunities and encourage lifelong use of public transport; and

calls on the Government to:

- immediately cancel all planned public transport fare increases;
- introduce free public transport for all children and young people under 18 years of age;
- provide adequate funding to the NTA to ensure affordable fares and expanded services are delivered together;
- deliver better, more reliable and more frequent bus and rail services;
- accelerate investment in rural public transport and fast-track the expansion of the Connecting Ireland Rural Mobility Plan; and

— improve accessibility across the public transport network so that it works for disabled passengers, older people, families, rural communities and all users.

Families and workers across the State are being hit by surging costs from every side. From the soaring cost of energy to higher grocery bills and childcare, households have no reprieve. They are living from week to week and they need a break. However, instead of making life easier, the Government is piling on yet another cost at a time when household budgets are being stretched to breaking point. This is utterly wrong. The Government must reverse the planned fare hikes. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael must deliver on something that successive governments have been short on for decades, which is the political will and ambition to deliver an affordable, accessible transport system fit for purpose in a 21st century Ireland. Due to a lack of investment, workers, students, pensioners and families are already struggling with the soaring cost of living but the Government has decided the solution is to make public transport even more expensive. People are already paying for overcrowded services, delays, cancellations and routes that were never delivered. It is outrageous that the Government expects ordinary people to pay more while CEOs have their salaries topped up, millions of euro are wasted on failed projects, and costly overruns are tolerated without consequence.

The Minister will say there were no fare hikes since 2016 but there were plenty between 2008 and 2016. Also, unspent money that comes in from the carbon tax could be used to facilitate no fare increases. The Government's priorities are completely wrong. The Taoiseach says he wants a budget for people who get up early but instead of helping those same people the Government is hitting them with higher fares.

Let us be clear: this is not just about reversing these fare hikes. We should be asking a bigger question of what type of public transport we actually want. Sinn Féin believes that public transport should be affordable, reliable and accessible. It should facilitate people accessing work, education, healthcare and social opportunities, and it will reduce emissions, tackle isolation and strengthen communities. That is why we are calling not only for the fare hikes to be scrapped but for free public transport for all under 18s. No child should miss out on education, sport, opportunities or community activities because the family cannot afford their fares. Free travel for children and young people would put money back into families' pockets, tackle child poverty and, crucially, encourage sustainable travel from a young age. We are also demanding more reliable bus and rail services. If people are paying into the system, they want a service on which they can rely.

Finally, disabled passengers should not have to fight barriers every day simply to use a bus or train station. Public transport must work for everyone, regardless of disability, age or where they live. Accessibility is not an optional extra; it is a basic right.

Deputy David Cullinane: Hear, hear.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: The decision to hike the cost of public transport fares is a deeply short-sighted move. Every day, thousands of commuters are forced on to overcrowded and often unreliable services. From January, these people are going to have to pay more to get to work, school, college or to go about their daily lives. Public transport is an essential public service, not a luxury, and in the midst of a cost-of-living crisis the Government is telling people the cost of yet another everyday essential is going to rise. This fare hike decision makes no

sense. It stands in stark contrast to the massive pay rises handed out to the CEOs of transport companies. At a time when the Minister claims to be encouraging more people to use public transport, he has decided to increase the costs of services. Even the NTA has said passenger numbers will fall as a result.

This fare hike is totally within the Minister's control. He could have decided to properly fund our public transport system but instead he has decided to lob yet another price increase on households. This is clearly the wrong move and he knows it. This motion is an opportunity for him to acknowledge that the proposed fare hikes are a mistake and that they will reduce passenger numbers. The Minister must act to stop these fare hikes. He must ensure the State's public transport system is properly funded in order for it to be affordable, reliable and sustainable.

The Government is also failing when it comes to investment in rural transport. I raise with the Minister once again the long-promised Athenry to Galway bus service. When I raised this with the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, last week he spoke of the need of "not just doing things for the sake of doing them." That was an outrageous statement to make when the Minister knows there is clear demand for a bus service in Athenry. I have repeatedly raised the case of commuters in Athenry being squished on to morning train services, with nothing to even hold on to, and passengers fainting because of the cramped conditions. We were promised this service two years ago and all we have got is dismissive comments. The people of Athenry and other rural towns deserve better. They deserve effective public transport links, not an attitude that tells commuters to put up and shut up. Once again, I urge the Minister to provide the necessary funding to get the Athenry bus service up and running. It is badly needed and we have been left waiting for too long.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Of all the short-sighted, tone-deaf announcements that have been made by this Government, and there are many, this one is right up there. I genuinely did a double take when I read it. I thought that in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis, surely not even a government as bad as this one is going to jack up the cost of public transport, yet that is apparently what it is proposing.

The Minister well knows that the people in my constituency who get the train in either Balbriggan or Skerries were left out of the Dublin commuter zone, meaning they have already had a fare increase. I spoke to a woman the other day who told me that the fare increase for her is close to €1,000 every year. That is an awful lot of extra money for one person to have to pay to then be told by the Minister that she has not had a fare increase in eight years. She has, and she really could do without another one. In fact, the Minister should be reversing the decision because we have towns in Meath and Kildare in the Dublin commuter zone, while towns in my constituency, Skerries and Balbriggan, have been taken out of it. Will the Minister make that make sense?

For no additional service, people are going to be asked to pay more money and that is not acceptable. The Minister knows the ongoing issues with the 101 and 103 bus services. Frequently, the bus does not arrive. I have a list of excuses as long as my arm but the Minister has already confirmed, and the NTA has as well, that this increase is not going to result in a better service for those people because it is not going to result in enhanced services. It is on a standstill basis. Equally, the people who get the 33 bus in the mornings are now very familiar

with ghost buses. I spoke to a woman the other day in Lusk, who told me she is on a final written warning for work because she is consistently late. It is not her fault. She wants to use public transport. In fact, the Minister says that he wants people to use public transport but if someone lives in Balrothery, that involves standing on the side of the road while full buses pass them by every morning before they eventually get on a bus. For that service, the Minister is going to charge people 15% extra. It absolutely beggars belief.

The Minister knows, and the NTA has told him just in case he does not, that when fares are increased it decreases the number of people who use public transport. This is going to result in fewer people using public transport. As I said, will the Minister please make it make sense? He knows that the sensible thing to do is to reverse these hikes and put Skerries and Balbriggan into the Dublin commuter zone where they belong.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: At a time when families are struggling with the cost of living and this Government keeps telling us that it is listening, I have to ask, who is it listening to? Is it listening to ordinary households or to the big CEOs? While families are struggling with the cost of living, we have seen huge pay increases for CEOs and now we are seeing transport fare hikes that in some cases will see fares for children increase by over 100%. That is not fairness and is not putting people first.

As someone who uses public transport, I have experienced standing in all sorts of weather for a bus that simply does not show up. In Clare, a largely rural county, people are expected to put up with a lack of bus services, an unreliable service and now they are being told that they need to pay more for it. That is unacceptable.

Students are already struggling. Many who cannot find accommodation because of the Government's failure to provide enough student housing are commuting long distances just to access education and are now being asked to pay even more on top of the enormous costs already associated with their education. What message are we sending to young people?

Families are struggling to put food on the table. Parents are doing everything they can to keep households going and children are watching this and asking if that is what they want for their future. The National Youth Council of Ireland has highlighted that seven in ten young adults believe they would have a better quality of life if they left Ireland. These are not young people simply saying that they want to travel, explore the world and come back. They are telling us that they could have a better life somewhere else and that is shameful.

Public transport is not a luxury; it is a necessity. People should trust that their bus or train will arrive and that they will be able to afford to get on it. It should never be a barrier to education, work, medical appointments or to simply participate in ordinary, everyday living. We have a Government that talks about expanding public transport while failing to put in the resources to put it in place. The Ennis town bus route was meant to be up and running in early 2025 but will not be in place until, hopefully, mid-October of this year.

I am calling on the Government to cancel these planned hikes and to be more ambitious by giving free public transport for every child and young adult under 18.

Deputy Martin Kenny: We are here this evening to try to appeal to the Minister to ensure that these transport hikes do not go ahead in circumstances where across the country we have

so many people who simply cannot get public transport in the first place. For example, I was with Irish Rail earlier, and we talked about the commuter service into Sligo town where the earliest train in the morning gets in there at ten o'clock. There is no train for people going to appointments, work or college. Irish Rail says that it has put in place the plan for it but the NTA has no money to provide for it this year.

We have a similar situation here. It is 6.20 p.m. but the next train leaving Dublin to go to Sligo is at seven o'clock. Most people who work in this place cannot get away until long after that and have not got an option. Similarly, the trains are at five o'clock and seven o'clock. There is none in the middle at six o'clock, so people are waiting for hours for it. It is no wonder that people continue to use the only transport they have which is the car. That is what we have to do here and so many people around the length and breadth of the country are in the very same situation.

To be putting hikes on the cost of providing transport when in many cases it is not there is simply untenable. In a situation where we are trying to get people out of the car and are appealing to them to use public transport because we have the carbon crisis we talk about, we cannot have a situation where the Government continues to raise the cost of it.

Deputy David Cullinane: It makes no sense whatsoever in the midst of a cost-of-living squeeze and crisis that the Government would add to people's woes and increase transport costs. There is no justification for it. A 10% increase is a significant additional burden for people who are already finding it very difficult to deal with other rising costs, as the Minister well knows. A government should not be adding to people's stress and problems. The point has been made that we all want to make sure that people have alternatives to the car, for example. We know from all of these proposals in relation to climate action that more investment in public transport is necessary to ensure that the Government and this State meet their climate action targets, which I am afraid we will not because it is always the same. We set these high-level targets and then we do not put the investments in and do not provide people with alternatives, particularly in rural Ireland.

I want to raise two issues in relation to capacity in Waterford city and county. I raised the BusConnects service with him earlier. It just beggars belief that there is so much confusion around that. We are being told that this project could be delayed for up to a year and nobody knows exactly what is happening. I have put in parliamentary questions and still have not had a response. I would appreciate if the Minister could get the Department to come back to me in relation to exactly what is happening because this will mean more bus routes, more connectivity and more options. I was dealing with a parish priest in Waterford city last week who held a public meeting on an issue relating to parents who find it difficult to drop their children off to school because there are no drop-off points. They were using a church car park that can no longer be used. It makes no sense. The priest says that BusConnects is part of the solution.

I have one final point. Waterford City and County Council are waiting for 11 bus shelters for a year and half. What the hell is going on?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: They have not.

Deputy David Cullinane: They are saying that they cost €30,000 each and are coming from Sweden. I have been asking questions and raising this with some of my council colleagues, Councillor Joanne Bailey being one who has raised this at a council level. We cannot even get bus shelters that are on order. It just makes no sense. The Department needs to get its act in order and deal with these issues rather than hiking up charges.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: When it comes to transport this Government and the Minister seem to be entirely without any direction at all. The carbon tax, which is supposedly a behavioural tax, is intended to change people's behaviour. The Government's carbon tax is supposed to encourage people to switch to electric cars and public transport, never mind that some people cannot afford electric cars. It is not a viable option.

In communities like mine in Cavan and Monaghan, public transport is not a viable option either. It is very sparse. Buses frequently run late and students cannot access school transport. What we do have, however, are viable commercial operators we are very fortunate to have in Monaghan. They have been excluded from schemes that deliver reduced fares, such as those for young adults and children. Sometimes a solution for rural Ireland might be found later, and much later at that, with rural people being the afterthought they are to this Government. With regard to rail, for all the talk of an all-island strategic rail review, perhaps my grandchildren might actually see a railroad in Monaghan some day because the Government has put that on the long finger too.

Plenty of money can be found to support transport CEOs, and the Government can find €500 million yearly for school transport for Bus Éireann, yet this Government thinks that we should pay more to access what little unreliable public transport it has to offer us.

I have very little confidence in this Government to deliver public transport for rural people but for the love of God, could the Minister please not make it worse? Scrap the hike now.

Deputy Seán Crowe: Public transport is essential public infrastructure. It connects people to work, education, healthcare, family and community. This debate is not simply about what a bus or train ticket costs but what kind of transport system we want to build for the decades ahead. The Government should reject further increases in public transport fares and instead begin a serious transition towards a universal, free public transport system as a public good. That would require investment and sustainable public funding. We should also recognise the wider costs of our current transport system which include congestion, pollution, high household transport costs, social exclusion and the enormous amount of time that people lose sitting in traffic.

Making public transport affordable is only one part of the challenge. We also need a massive expansion of capacity. The State must accelerate investment in rail and public transport infrastructure right across Dublin. MetroLink is an important part of that investment but ambition cannot stop there. Communities across the south and south west of the city and county have waited long enough for high-capacity public transport. We need a clear plan for MetroLink south west, with the route, funding, planning and delivery programmes established without further delay. We cannot be serious about climate action without reducing congestion or giving people a genuine alternative to the car. Equally, we cannot be talking about delivery some time in the future. We should set ourselves a clear objective to make MetroLink south

west a reality this side of 2040. A public transport system should allow people to get to work, schools, hospitals and communities without having to choose between making that journey and paying another bill.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: The recent decision to hike fares by 15% is baffling. For some of my constituents in Kildare those increases will be closer to 20%. This will mean a €290 annual increase for Newbridge commuters and a €545 annual increase for Athy commuters. These are huge increases at a time when families are already struggling with rising energy, grocery, education and insurance costs. This decision is completely out of touch with reality. Access to public transport is essential for workers, students, older people and those attending hospital appointments or social events. Travelling by bus or train should not be a luxury but these fare increases are pricing people out of public transport.

Customers of Irish Rail and Bus Éireann certainly do not feel like they are experiencing luxury when travelling aboard these services. Day in and day out I hear from commuters in Newbridge, Kildare town, Athy and Monasterevin about overcrowded trains, with dozens of passengers regularly forced to stand in carriages. We need more capacity in Cill Dara. We need earlier morning services and later evening services for those returning from work, events and concerts. I know students in Carlow College who regularly have to leave their classes early in order to catch the train back to Kildare. We need accessible and reliable services and a booking system that works. We need Kildare to be fully recognised as a commuter zone. We need better connectivity for our rural areas in both north and south Kildare. Kildare is one of the fastest growing counties in the State but there are no significant service improvements planned. Kildare passengers will see no tangible benefit from these fare hikes. They are simply being asked to pay more for the same unsatisfactory service. It is maddening.

South Kildare campaigners and the fair fares campaign fought so hard to have our towns included in the short-hop zone and this decision essentially undoes all of that progress. The decision will force more people onto the already congested N7, increasing traffic, commuting times and emissions. The irony is that these developments came during mobility week. The Government speaks about the importance of sustainable transport and reducing car dependency but in reality, this Government and our transport providers are actively discouraging public transport use in the middle of a climate emergency. The Minister needs to wake up and get serious about delivering affordable, reliable and sustainable public transport for all. This retrograde decision must be reversed.

Minister for Transport (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I move amendment No. 2:

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

"affirms Government's efforts to:

- deliver a more frequent, reliable, accessible and sustainable public transport network;
- rollout contactless fare payments on all public transport, and keep fares low and affordable;

- place the Public Service Obligation (PSO) programme on a more sustainable footing;
- support households and businesses through addressing congestion; and
- work to address Ireland's climate targets;

notes that:

- the Government is committed to the delivery of major public transport projects, as evidenced by last year's review of the National Development Plan (NDP) allocation of €24.3 billion to transport projects from 2026 to 2030;
- while the Government has allocated an unprecedented level of investment in transport, representing an almost 87 per cent increase as compared to the previous five-year period, investment decisions will always require a degree of sequencing and prioritisation of individual projects;
- for public transport infrastructure, there is over €12 billion in funding in the NDP from 2026 to 2030, this represents more than double the amount provided in the previous five years;
 - the funding in the NDP will provide for the progression of a number of major public transport projects over this period, including the commencement of construction of MetroLink, Luas Finglas, the Dublin Area Rapid Transit (DART)+ Programme and the Western Rail Corridor from Athenry to Claremorris, as well as the continued implementation of the Cork Area Commuter Rail Programme and the BusConnects programmes across Dublin, Cork, Galway, Limerick and Waterford cities;
- this funding will see the new DART+ Fleet rollout next year, as well as enabling early construction work to commence on DART+ West next year;
- on public transport services, PSO journeys have continued to grow steadily, reaching a record 363.5 million passenger journeys by the end of 2025, this represents an increase of 6 per cent or almost 20 million journeys over the 2024 total of 343.6 million, this sustained and significant growth in passenger numbers underlines the extent to which people are increasingly relying on public transport and demonstrates the critical importance of maintaining and investing in the network to meet this demand;
- Connecting Ireland Rural Mobility Plan is another strong example of progress, delivering exponential growth in rural transport since its launch in 2022, 185 new and enhanced services have been introduced, resulting in almost 8 million passenger journeys in 2024, where Connecting Ireland Rural Mobility Plan services have been implemented, patronage rose by 38 per cent from 2023 to 2024, and is up by 165 per cent compared to early 2019;
- passenger fare revenue is a critical component of the funding base, and is essential to maintaining the financial sustainability of the network into the future;

— since 2022, passengers have benefited from a 20 per cent cost of living fare reduction, extension of the 90-minute fare, a 50 per cent discount for Young Adults and Students, free travel for children under nine years of age, and extensions to the eligibility of the Free Travel Scheme, which is run separately by the Department for Social Protection;

— even following the 2026 adjustment, fares remain approximately 8 per cent lower in real terms than they were eight years ago, and the additional revenue generated through this determination together with continued Exchequer investment, will help the National Transport Authority (NTA) manage rising operating costs, improve capacity and reliability on existing services, and continue the rollout of new services;

— in 2025 alone, 363.5 million passenger journeys were made on the Transport For Ireland network – this level of demand places significant pressure on the funding required to sustain and expand services, and underlines why fare revenue is an essential component of the overall funding model;

— public transport remains highly competitive and affordable, the fare changes support continued network expansion and climate objectives by funding future improvements;

— the Government recognises that an equitable and reliable public transport network plays a vital role in encouraging a shift away from private car use, it is essential that the public transport system remains well funded and responsive to passenger needs and adequate fare revenue is essential to support this; and

— the NTA continually works with operators to improve efficiency and maximise value for money from both fare revenue and public investment, however, public transport services have expanded significantly in recent years, and operating costs have increased substantially, a sustainable public transport network requires an appropriate balance between fare revenue and Government funding to support continued growth and investment."

We can all agree on the importance of stabilising the PSO funding model, investing in the public transport network and the crucial role that fare revenue plays in addressing this. I welcome the chance this evening to discuss the measures already being progressed and those that are captured as part of wider policy initiatives across Government.

In accordance with its responsibilities under the Dublin Transport Authority Act 2008, the NTA announced an adjustment to national fares as per its new fares determination on 3 September 2026, with the revised fares taking effect from January 2027. This is a critical step in the standardisation of the national fares structure and in line with the national fares strategy published in 2023. The key objective of that strategy is providing a more equitable and consistent structure for all PSO services, to which I will return later.

Fare revenue covers approximately 38% of the cost of operating PSO services nationally compared to the European average of 44%. The direct State subvention is much higher in Ireland than the European average. In 2025, about €850 million was spent on the PSO programme, which included a €192 million supplementary requirement to support our public transport network. In 2026, we raised the base for PSO funding with a substantial increase but

inflationary pressures have increased the cost of operating public transport services. This has limited the NTA's ability to introduce improvements to existing or new services, which many of the Deputies opposite are calling for. The adjustments to fares are required to help offset the cost increases in recent years, improve fare revenue recovery and ensure the sustainability of the PSO model. That model underpins our transport system and, importantly, allows for the continued roll-out of BusConnects, Connecting Ireland and DART+.

Since 2022, we have seen inflation of almost 21% which has driven up the cost of operating subsidised public transport services, including fuel, vehicle maintenance and staff costs. In the same period, public transport fares have decreased through various measures, such as the 20% cost-of-living discount, the young adult card discount of 50% and the extension of free travel to all children under nine, which no one opposite has mentioned. This has meant that approximately 1.5 million, or 27% of people in the Republic, are eligible for free or reduced-fare travel. While this is positive from a social inclusion perspective, it has widened the gap between what it costs to run services and the revenue fares bring in. There is a requirement to strike the right balance in public transport fares to enable further enhancements, which both Government and Opposition Members are calling for, to the public transport network in the coming years, offer the most competitive fares to younger and student passengers and to ensure value for money of the PSO subsidy to society.

While adult fares will increase by an average of 15%, child fares are being reduced in several areas nationally. 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. Again, no one opposite mentioned that. 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 aged over 70. A lot of people - approximately 1.5 million - are supported under the free travel schemes and rightly so. 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.

Despite any demand elasticity effects arising from the fare increase, steady passenger growth is expected to continue throughout 2027, reflecting the continued strength of underlying demand for public transport services. Ongoing expansion and enhancement of services are anticipated to attract additional users and further strengthen public transport demand, outweighing any moderate reduction in demand associated with higher fares. The NTA will continue to monitor patronage trends across the network. I want to be really clear that any overall increase in revenue generated will go straight back into investment in public transport services, delivering better connectivity, increased capacity and greater reliability for passengers and commuters. I represent a commuter constituency as well and I speak to commuters from across the country. I know that what they are looking for are reliable services and more services. This investment also forms a key part of the Department's engagement. In the budget process, I will be seeking additional funding to further expand public transport services.

The NTA continuously monitors punctuality, reliability and demand. The Deputies opposite are right to raise specific issues on certain routes and I raise them directly with the NTA myself.

We needed many of those routes to improve reliability and provide additional services. The additional funding that will be provided in 2027 will be directed exactly to that end. We are

working closely with the NTA to address the service issues. I am working with it directly on that. We must ensure reliability is improved for passengers.

The NTA has identified approximately 140 new and enhanced service initiatives nationally as part of the additional funding that will be available under the 2027 budgetary Estimate. Many Members have spoken about certain services they want to see. I, too, want to see them. We must ensure the funding is there to enable that to happen. That will be done through fare income, which is an important part of it, and through public service obligations. When I became Minister for Transport, I said I wanted to put the PSO process on a sustainable footing such that we do not have to go back every single year looking for Supplementary Estimates. A bus or rail network cannot be planned into the future in that way.

The additional revenue will be focused on providing a lot of the new services people are looking for, while also protecting the most vulnerable. There are three aspects to improving public transport accessibility, particularly for people with disabilities. The first is ensuring there is a universal design approach for all new infrastructure, to which our ambitious investment programme will adhere. The second is addressing legacy infrastructure deficits. We have greatly increased the funding to retrofit legacy inaccessible parts of our infrastructure. We will maintain that increased level of funding to ensure disabled people will be able to turn up and go, just as they should be able to do. Third is providing supports for independent travel. The NTA has expanded the independent travel support scheme to Dundalk, Drogheda, towns in Donegal, Sligo and Leitrim, and to the Louth Meath Fingal Local Link area.

Under the national development plan, as Deputies know, there is significant increased investment in the public transport network. In the Fingal area, work is commencing on MetroLink, which will carry 20,000 passengers per hour to and from the city. Planning has been approved for the Luas extension to Finglas. Phase 1 of the Cork commuter rail project is done and we are moving on to phase 2. Work is under way on the Liffey Valley BusConnects, with a second corridor contracted. All of these services are critically important for a growing population.

We are seeing people respond to those developments. In the past full year, there were approximately 363.5 million public transport journeys. I want to see more of that. We want to see improvements across our rail system. Deputy Martin Kenny mentioned issues in Sligo, of which I am aware. Issues in different areas are raised with me regularly at Question Time. I want to see improvements because I want to see more people using public transport services. We have had a significant increase over the past number of years, including last year. This year, we are projecting a 6% increase.

Commuters want affordable services but they also want reliability and to see an expansion of the services that are already there. I assure Deputies that the additional income arising from the NTA determination on fares is not to secure a stand-still position. In fact, it is to provide additional services. As part of the budgetary discussions I am engaged in, I am seeking additional funding to enable us to do even more. Fortunately, we are now in a position in which we are able to build significant public transport infrastructure across commuter rail, Luas and DART services. The roll-out of DART+ will take the service into Deputy O'Reilly's constituency as well as my own. That has been long called for and it is starting this year through shared island funding and additional funding from my Department.

This year was a stabilisation year across services. There still are issues regarding reliability and punctuality on certain services in particular. I raised those issues directly with the operators and the NTA and I am meeting the latter again tomorrow to discuss them. I assure Deputies that the additional revenue from the fare determination brought forward by the NTA will go into new and expanded services. Many of the Deputies' constituents and commuters generally are looking for that, and I intend to deliver it. As part of our budget negotiations, we intend to secure additional funding to do more in that regard.

I thank Deputies for their comments and feedback. It is important to get feedback. We all want to see improved services and an increase in the use of public transport. What we are doing will help to ensure that happens.

Deputy Ann Graves: Demanding that people pay more for public transport in a cost-of-living crisis is wrong on every level. It just cannot go ahead. The Government is clearly removed from the day-to-day struggles of ordinary families as they try to make ends meet. If there was any commitment to reducing emissions, the Minister would be making public transport more affordable, reliable and accessible for even more people.

In Dublin Fingal East, the transport system is a joke. I listened to people speak at the Swords Senior Citizens Club AGM last night. It was notable that no Government parties were represented. The Minister was not there.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The EU energy ministers were over here. I had to attend that meeting.

Deputy Ann Graves: A major issue for those senior citizens is the lack of the regular bus service that was promised between Swords and Beaumont Hospital. I received confirmation from the HSE last week that the service would be running by the last quarter of 2026. Two days later, I got a contradictory letter from the NTA saying the service would not be in place until 2028. Pensioners cannot fork out €60 for a round trip to hospital appointments.

The Minister is a local TD and is responsible for transport. He is failing communities across Dublin Fingal East. He said he has spoken to commuters but, clearly, he is not listening to them. Swords and Donabate are two of the fastest-growing areas in Fingal but a decent, reliable public transport service is not being provided. Yesterday, people spent more than an hour sitting in their cars in a traffic jam from Swords to Donabate because there is no alternative reliable service in place for them.

I genuinely look forward to the delivery of the metro. We have been waiting 35 years for it and it is still a few years away. In the meantime, I call on the Minister to ensure residents in Swords get a regular bus service to Beaumont Hospital as a matter of urgency and that a linked-up, reliable and sustainable public transport service is put in place to serve the people of Dublin Fingal East.

Deputy Pat Buckley: We have been told time and again that we should all be using public transport. Yet, there are communities across east Cork that have no adequate public transport whatsoever. The Government, with a straight face, is telling those communities that public transport will now be more expensive, notwithstanding that there is no public transport there

at all. It is farcical. For people in Knockadoon and Ballymacoda, which are on the coast beyond Ballycotton, it is not a question of increasing fares. There is absolutely no service there at all. A lot of those residents have contacted me in the past few weeks. Many of them are elderly and are reaching the stage where they can no longer drive. They need a good, reliable public transport link to Midleton, where they can avail of GP services, shopping, banking and other essential services.

There are approximately 4,000 people living on that eastern Cork coast. I have written to the NTA on a couple of occasions to ask about Knockadoon and Ballymacoda. The response I received stated: "The NTA does not have sufficient funding to introduce new or enhanced bus services in '26. In advance of budget '27 and a greater certainty of funding availability for enhanced or new services, we are unfortunately not able to provide a date for implementing any of the bus service enhancements." There is a difference between east Cork and Dublin. A couple of years ago, I saw a fellow out by LH 2000 at 7.30 a.m. tutting because he had missed his bus and had to wait six minutes for the next one. I said to him that if he was in my part of Cork and missed the bus on a Tuesday, it could be the next Tuesday before he got another. That is the reality of the difference between the two places.

I am very disappointed by the Minister's amendment to our motion. However, nothing surprises me.

Deputy Máire Devine: Many people might say that people in my constituency of Dublin South-Central are really lucky when it comes to public transport. We live in the inner-city areas between the canals and so we must have perfect transport services. In fact, that is not true. I have been bombarded with emails from constituents who are livid over the fare increases, and rightly so. As well as the hundreds of emails from angry and upset residents, I have been approached by people on the Luas, at the bus stop and on the street to demand that the Government not proceed with these price hikes. They cite the dire cost-of-living crisis.

They rightly point out that transport services are not delivering for them and the fare increases will likely reduce their use of services. Let us take the Dublin Bus route 73 as an example. A constituent from Crumlin says, "As a daily commuter, I cannot rely on this service any more, its terrible reliability, ghost buses, and completely inaccurate real-time information." The new 80 route serving Chapelizod, was implemented a year ago, but the residents had to block the main road in the village to get attention for their concerns. Multiple bus stops have been removed from service without consultation with residents. We need solutions. Residents of Inchicore and the Liberties remain troubled by the persistent reports they will lose all routes down Thomas Street, where they shop weekly. Last week in Inchicore, a family of tourists was in disbelief at my staff pointing out to them that they had to go to the shop because they needed coins to pay for the bus. Dublin Bus does not accept anything else. Notes and debit cards are still not supported. Why should people pay more for a service that does not deliver or serve them? It is just not good enough.

Deputy Mark Ward: The Government wants people out of cars and on to public transport, and I agree with that. I have no issue with it whatsoever. In theory, it is good, but in practice, it is simply not working. To encourage people out of cars, the first thing that needs to be done is to make public transport more accessible. The last thing that needs to be done is increase the cost of public transport in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis. It is also bad for the environment

and the ever-increasing traffic congestion around Dublin, as we see ourselves as we move around.

The Government has also failed to deliver and provide for adequate public transport in my own area. The DART+ South West, which would bring a DART service to Clondalkin, Lucan and Adamstown, was granted planning permission in November 2024. Despite the Minister's arguments, the funding has not yet been released. I am very disappointed that in his ten-minute speech, I did not hear DART+ South West mentioned once. That is concerning to me. DART+ South West is a game-changer in my area. It would bring 20,000 passengers in each direction per hour. The reality is that because of the lack of train capacity, passengers in my area are fainting on trains because of overcrowding as they try to go to work. Now, the Minister wants them to pay more for the privilege of fainting.

The Minister mentioned BusConnects. There are 12 schemes, all of which have secured planning permission. How many have been delivered fully? Not one. I have seen the work on the Liffey Valley route starting, but that was meant to start years ago.

I will raise one last issue. The lack of public transport is forcing people to drive. I ask the Minister to look at parking provision in new estates in new areas. This is causing a lot of concern for residents.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: Increasing public transport fares during a cost-of-living crisis is wrong. It is short-sighted, unfair and hits those least able to afford it hardest, namely, young people, students, pensioners, workers and families already struggling to make ends meet. People are being asked to pay more for a service that is already falling short. Simply put, it is higher fares for an incomplete service. The National Transport Authority, NTA, has noted that a 10% fare increase results in a 3% decline in passenger numbers. Why are we making public transport more expensive when we should be encouraging more people to use it? It shows once again how out of touch this Government is.

In Limerick, the problems are clear. Take the Condell Road, for example. This is a populated area with infrastructure where people would use a bus service if they had one, but there is no service there. I have raised this in the Dáil on a number of occasions. I again call on the Minister to personally intervene to ensure a bus service is provided on the Condell Road. We have bus lanes and bus stops but we have no buses. BusConnects has been delayed until 2028 at the earliest. We are being told we will not get a bus service until 2028 at the earliest. That is not acceptable. It is not fair on the residents and the Minister needs to intervene. Deputy Sheehan has raised the issue of a bus service for the Condell Road a number of times as well.

Almost a decade after BusConnects was announced, the plan remains incomplete and timelines continue to slip. As I said, Limerick BusConnects is delayed until at least 2028, yet fares are going up. We are giving the Government an opportunity to change course, reverse these fare increases, invest in a transport system that works, deliver the routes and services communities have been waiting for and put workers, students, pensioners and families first. Do not ask people to pay more for less. Cancel these plans and start delivering the affordable, reliable public transport that Limerick and the rest of the country deserve.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I thank my colleagues in Sinn Féin for putting forward this motion. I listened with attention to the Minister's opening remarks on the motion. If he can deliver what he just put forward, I will be the first to stand here in a couple of years and say he has done a really good job. There is an awful lot of good in this. The potential and the demand for public transport in this State are very clear. While we struggle to build significant capital projects, what the Minister has before him is a portfolio that offers real potential.

I also noted from the Minister's opening remarks the idea of stabilising the PSO with Supplementary Estimates. We know that a Supplementary Estimate was required only because it was not budgeted for properly in the first instance. Is that not a fair assessment? That is what the PSO costs year on year. In recent weeks, I have heard the Minister and many others emphasise that we are still below par when it comes public transport fees in the EU. We are either aspirational about public transport or we are regressive. If we compare ourselves to some EU states, they are moving in the other direction, towards free public transport, or certainly free for certain demographics in society. They are certainly not making tone-deaf decisions, such as increasing fares. There is no justification for doing that, even if, as the Minister says, fares have not increased in eight years. That rhetoric is simply not an acceptable reason for this decision.

Successive Governments' transport policy has focused on the movement of cars, not people. What the Government has done in its most recent budgets is treat roads funding and public transport funding as if they are a gift to the backbenchers, who are hungry to rush out to their constituencies to stand beside a new bus stop or new bus and say what they have delivered for their communities. It is unacceptable when we know that the truth is that the NTA is not receiving an adequate level of funding.

Demand for public transport services is at an historical high. We are also living in the midst of a climate crisis. What message do the fare increases send to commuters and public transport users? If we, collectively in this House, want to move as many people as possible away from cars towards public transport and secure that modal shift, as is surely our ambition, increasing the cost of public transport when demand is so high is a poor step.

We have heard time and again a figure of 140 new services. I have not seen the detail of that yet and I do not know if the Minister has either. However, he is asking people to pay now and see the detail of the plan later. This did not have to happen now. The NTA, the Minister and the Department could have been forthcoming, by at least providing a detailed breakdown of what those 140 new services will look like, when people are being asked to pay more. If that is available, I would love to see it, and I certainly would look forward to seeing it. In many ways, it would help people to digest what is a real tangible cut. We know this is the first in a series of cuts. "We cannot fund anything forever" is what Taoiseach said in response to these cuts. That concerns me, because if Donogh O'Malley had taken the same type of approach back in the 1960s when it came to free post-primary education, that sector would look very different now. We need ambition, and I am worried that this does not track with where we are going with this Government.

BusConnects has failed many. It has disconnected communities in Leixlip and Celbridge, to call it as it is. Many small communities have been left isolated when they had a more than adequate service to begin with. That desktop study has failed. To be honest, I am not a perfect mathematician. I struggled in the leaving certificate when it came to maths. I believe these

fare increases will garner €70 million in additional revenue. This year, Irish Rail had to write off €50 million for a botched IT project. The Department of education, because it overspent, has imposed a levy of €18 million on the Department of Transport. Due to poor expenditure in Irish Rail and a levy imposed by the Department, there has been a write-off of €68 million. When I asked about this last week during oral questions, the Minister was not here and other Ministers said it was a budgetary decision.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I was at the UN.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I am not criticising the Minister. I am just letting him know that when the question was asked last week, no answer was forthcoming because, it was said, this was a budgetary decision. We have, however, an overspend of €68 million.

7 o'clock

What are we doing? We are putting €70 million worth of additional fares on the taxpayer. It is simply not good enough. As it stands, while the Minister's opening remarks are very aspirational, and I reiterate that if he delivers on those, I promise him I will be the first to stand here and say very well done, I do not believe we can get there. I will tell the Minister why. We are doing the wrong things when it comes to climate. We are doing the wrong things when it comes to the affordability crisis. When we have such momentum behind the move - the modal shift from cars to multi-occupancy vehicles - we are struggling. We are failing and the optics of this will be a really regressive step. The Minister could do away with these hikes. I think he knows in his heart of hearts that he could. There are certainly ways around that €70 million within his budget. What he is justifying is inexcusable. I really ask him to reconsider that, certainly for the core demographics of people who are using public transport. He should work that into the budget. This does not have to happen in January. I ask him in that time to reconsider.

Deputy Daniel Ennis: In a cost-of-living crisis and a climate crisis, one of the things that makes least sense is increasing the cost of public transport. However, that is a decision this Government has made. The Government could have chosen to invest further in public transport and encourage more people to use public transport networks it has already invested in, but it has not. Public transport is a public good that needs investment. This Government should be building on those investments, not undermining them by pushing people away from public transport.

For every 10% increase in public transport fares, ridership is estimated to fall by 3%. Instead, the Government has decided to place another financial burden on individuals and families who are already struggling through a cost-of-living crisis, with public transport fares set to increase by an average of 15%. This will have a significant impact on those individuals and families who rely on public transport. For many people living in my constituency of Dublin Central, the impact will be particularly acute, with short fares increasing by approximately 33%. This increase will disproportionately affect those on lower incomes and at a time when people are already struggling, a lot of people simply will not be able to afford this. At a time when the Government is already making abysmal progress towards meeting its climate targets, the last thing it should be doing is pushing people off public transport and back into cars.

As the Minister well knows, Dublin is already one of the most congested cities in the world. With a predicted decrease in public transport ridership, congestion will only get worse. Dublin drivers already lose 158 hours per year in rush hour traffic and that figure will only increase if people move back to cars because of the higher fares. On top of that, increased congestion makes our bus and Luas services slower and less efficient, further undermining our public transport network. Increasing fares also runs directly against the Government's own climate policy. We are supposed to be shifting journeys away from private cars and towards public transport if we are to meet our own emission targets, yet at this very moment, when we need to accelerate that shift, the Government is allowing public transport to become more expensive.

The contradiction is even clearer when we look at the Government's own record. When fares were cut in 2022, Ministers explicitly argued that cheaper fares would encourage people onto public transport and reduce our reliance on private cars. If reducing fares supported a modal shift then, the Minister needs to explain how increasing them is supposed to support that very same climate objective. All the facts, evidence and research point towards keeping public transport affordable, but the Minister is not following the advice here. Instead, he appears to be betting that public transport users do not have the same ability to bring the country to a standstill as other sectors.

Ultimately, fare increases are a political choice, and a very poor one. If the Government is serious about getting people out of their cars, reducing emissions and making public transport a viable alternative, it should be making public transport more affordable, accessible and not putting up the price of using it.

Deputy Rory Hearne: The Minister and everyone here knows these fares are illogical. We have a cost-of-living crisis. Again, the Minister knows and everyone knows that people are really struggling. We want to get people out of cars and into public transport, and the Government doing this by increasing fares. It is completely counterproductive. People are talking about average increases of 15%. In Dublin, the short Leap fare is going to increase by 33%. I have been speaking to people in my constituency. They are very frustrated and angry. They are really going to be hit by this. The Dublin short cash fare is going to increase by 35% from €2 to €2.70. The Government talks about services and the need to balance the public service obligation, PSO, and what is given but it has a massive budget surplus. Surely the logical thing to do was give the NTA sufficient funding so that it did not have to increase fares. People are really frustrated by this. They see that it is a bad decision and it is bad policy. I would really call on the Minister to reverse this decision because we need to move away from cars. We need our cities to actually have decent public transport.

My concern is that what is behind this is a drive to the privatisation of public services and public transport. We have an increase in the likes of Go-Ahead Ireland and private operators being given public routes. Are these fares about incentivising more private involvement in our public services? Is it about making them commercially attractive for private operators? Go-Ahead, for example, which runs 30 routes, is an international company. It is owned in Australia and somewhere else. Why do we have private international companies running our public transport system? The Minister is shaking his head again and saying this is not true, but I would question whether it is.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I did not, actually. As it happens, I did not, but go on.

Deputy Rory Hearne: Is it? Why not have a completely public transport system then? Why get private operators? Surely we understand the failure that has happened in the UK with the privatisation of public services. We should have fares as low as possible. People have spoken about places like Luxembourg where free public transport has worked. We need to be reducing fares rather than increasing them and ensure that we have a proper public service.

Talking of my constituency, something I have raised with the Minister before is how BusConnects has made it very difficult for people. On three of the new routes, 24, 23 and F1, Dublin Bus's own assessment of its performance shows that they have not met their punctuality targets. None of the three new routes that were brought in are reaching their punctuality targets. As my colleague mentioned, in one of the most congested cities in the world, this is illogical.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this motion today. It is a great motion. I think we in the Opposition are all of one mind on this. There is absolutely no way we would be proceeding with an increase in public transport fares at this time. I have read the Government's counter-motion and I read the Minister's comments earlier. By reading them, you might think we were living somewhere in continental Europe such is the level of propaganda about how great our public transport system is. This week marks German Unity Day. We barely have a unified Luas system here.

I am genuinely baffled by this decision. Keeping public transport fares low is good policy. That has been borne out by the fact that we have seen huge increases in the numbers on public transport over the last number of years, far outstripping population increases or anything like that. The NTA has told us that for every 10% increase in fares, there is going to be a 3% decrease in the number of people using public transport. At a time of a cost-of-living crisis and when, as the Minister knows, we are in the middle of a climate crisis as well and we are trying to get people to use more sustainable modes of transport, a move like this that really punishes people who are less well off, who cannot afford to buy cars, or disabled people, students and other cohorts who are already up against it, is a really baffling move. It is not like the Minister is up against it from the Opposition. We all think this is a great policy. As I said, we are unified. It is a very popular policy with the public. It is a popular policy when it comes to politics as well. It is just sad that this Government is kind of pitching one section of society against another, or certainly looking out for the interests of certain sections of society and not all of them.

How is it that the Government can find €1.2 billion to subsidise people who are able to afford cars to drive to work, while the less well-off people who are stuck on public transport or cannot afford to buy cars are not getting the benefit of the largesse of this Government? I just do not think it is fair. The amount the NTA requires not to go through with this is €70 million. That is 6% of the €1.2 billion the Government has been able to find down the back of the couch to subsidise the cost of petrol and diesel, and we know there is going to be more. Of course people who are driving their cars are suffering as well, but I do not think it is right for this Government to look after one section of society and forget about others with this public transport fare hike.

In the Labour Party, we are dead set against it and very proud to support the Sinn Féin motion tonight.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: To be honest, this makes absolutely no sense. It is a political choice and a very bad one. It is a bad choice also from a climate change point of view. I was listening to the former Minister for Transport, Eamon Ryan, on "Drive Time" the other day and I have to say, I could not have agreed more with him. It is a real pity that somebody like him is not in government at the moment. We spent €1 billion effectively chasing the price of a barrel of Brent crude oil in terms of fuel subsidies, something that is not even really working and that we are not going to be able to sustain indefinitely. We have climate, cost-of-living and energy crises, yet the Government is slapping 15% onto public transport fares because the capital plan for transport is not worth the paper it is written on. That is a fact. It is a complete fiction and the Government needs to plug the gap somewhere.

We know we are far too car dependent. We know that given the climate crisis we are all living through, even if some of us might be in denial about it, we need to get more people onto public transport. Through this decision, people who get the bus, the Luas and the train are the ones who are going to suffer. I wonder sometimes whether they should come out and grind the country to a halt to get the Government to listen to them. They are on packed trains and they have ghost buses. In some cases in Limerick, when you look at BusConnects, which was promised and then delayed three times, they do not have any bus at all. If the Government were serious about public transport, then it would fund it properly. We are spending €100 million per month at the moment and cutting public transport fares, or at the very least sustaining the reduction, is a cost-of-living support that puts money back in the pockets of ordinary workers, students and young people.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I find the decision to increase the price of public transport absolutely mind-boggling when all of the available evidence proves that the use of public transport is dictated by the price of it. Every day, every Member of this House hears stories about mothers with prams and elderly commuters left standing between carriages. In my own county of Cork, I receive a significant number of emails from commuters on the Midleton and Cobh lines who are dealing with two-carriage trains that are packed to the rafters. This is far from encouraging people on board. State services are driving them away.

I want to speak specifically about school transport. School transport, which of course is related to this issue, has increased its fees on parents who are battling with the fairy tale that is free education. There is an issue here I want to flag. The school bus is, for many young people, their first ever experience of public transport, and it is the beginning of kids seeing the benefit of it. We should make it free, increase the capacity, get parents out of the school run chaos and get kids using public transport early.

Commuters are getting nothing extra for these increased fees. The National Transport Authority, NTA, has said that 4.5% fewer passengers will use public transport next year because of these increases. The Government is rowing back on the relative progress made by the previous Government in lowering public transport fees. At a time when we should be making climate decisions that can be made in the here and now, the Government is encouraging people back into their cars, into traffic and the long and stressful commutes. If the Government provides a service for rural communities, they will use it. The Local Link in places like north Cork is usually full and so many people rely heavily on it. Let us have more of that and more service times that give rural people access to the local night-time economy through the Connecting Ireland rural mobility plan. This is mind-boggling and I am shocked by it.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: These fare hikes are outrageous. At a time when people are facing a severe cost-of-living crisis, what is the Government doing? It is making it more expensive for people to get to and from work. I received a message from a constituent last week saying that she had to borrow €3 from her boss to get home because she was not paid until the next day. That is the reality workers are facing in this country. How does the Government respond? It makes the daily commute even more expensive.

I get the train every day. We pack on. It is overcrowded and unsafe every day. My constituents are on about the 33A, the 33X, the 101 and the 101X, which are also overcrowded. Despite the pressure they are already under, they are being asked to pay more. What message are we sending to workers? Instead of making public transport more affordable and reliable, the Government is making it harder for people to use it.

Workers should not be punished for going to work. They should not have to borrow €3 to get home. This is another hit to working people who are already desperate and struggling to make a pay check last until the end of the month.

Deputy Mark Wall: First, I wish to thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this very important motion. I am not sure who the Government is listening to but the proposed public transport increases are being met by simple disbelief by people in Kildare South. Time and again in this House and the Upper House, which I am a former Member of, I have raised the need to improve reliability and availability and address the overcrowding on our public transport services. We are now met with, "Hold all that; we're going to increase the fares."

I will make this plea. Has anyone from the opposite side of this House sat on the M7 in the morning for hours on end trying to get into the capital for work, knowing the stress it is putting them through and knowing that they are going to be late for work? Has anybody sat on the M7 waiting to go to a hospital appointment? I have mentioned cancer patients here before who have been late for appointments because of this stress. God forbid if anyone needed to get to the airport. It would seem the opposite side of the House is not listening to those commuters. Despite the motions that we in the Labour Party have brought forward to assist with this traffic congestion and get commuters out of their cars and onto public transport, the Government has simply rejected these. The Government's big idea, its answer, was to propose, as we know, an average increase of 15% in public transport fares.

For those who may say we only give out here on the Opposition benches, let me be clear. My colleagues have been clear. Time and again, I have welcomed the new rural links in my area, the new priority bus lanes on the M4 and the one under construction on the M7. I have welcomed them and will continue to welcome them. I have welcomed the investment in our train stations, such as Athy, but I cannot for the life of me welcome a fare increase for the commuters of Kildare South.

What we need to do is encourage commuters off our roads and onto public transport. That needs to be a priority for this Government. Increasing fares by 15% will, as has been pointed out, including by the NTA itself, reduce the number of those using public transport by more than 4.5%. It is time to cut fares on public transport. It is time to deliver a reliable, available and comfortable service, which everybody in this State deserves.

Deputy Charles Ward: I thank Deputy Daly from Sinn Féin for bringing forward this motion on public transport and fare increases. Instead of working towards a goal and trying to increase bus services in rural areas, this Government is taking a step backwards. The decision to increase public transport fares by an average of 15% to 30% next year is a major step backwards. The people of Donegal simply cannot afford this type of daily increase for a service that is often very poor and is extremely unreliable, yet we are being expected to pay an even higher fare for an already poor service, with no intention of any upgrades to justify the extra expenditure.

Donegal is not served by any rail connections, yet the bus service, particularly the main ones - routes 30, 32 and 64 - are so poorly connected that they are completely inadequate for the communities they are meant to serve. Instead of investing further in these services, the Government continues to strip them away. The recent decision to take away the 30 Expressway is further proof of this downgrading of services. I have been contacted by many constituents regarding an extremely poor 64 service.

Here are three examples. The first one says:

I am personally fed up missing connections because the Express bus cannot arrive in time to meet the Local Link so I can get into college. Trying to get the Expressway 64 to keep a decent timeable in order to connect to the Local Link is impossible.

The next person said they were a wheelchair user in Letterkenny. They said they have been unable to use the 64 service for the past 18 months because wheelchair-accessible booking has not been available.

The third person said the 64 bus service is unreliable when it comes to stopping in Drumkeen and this leaves people stranded and unable to plan with confidence. There is no late evening service after 6.30 p.m. This is 5 miles outside Letterkenny. It effectively cuts people off in the evenings from activities, part-time work and socialising in the town unless they can be picked up by car.

The lack of consistency of frequent buses into and out of Letterkenny is a real problem and with the current situation of traffic chaos in Letterkenny, it is unsustainable for residents, workers, students and businesses alike. Journeys that should take 15 to 20 minutes are now taking an hour to an hour and a half. We need to think outside the box. We need to provide buses and bus services for every child in these areas so we can get cars off the road. We need to aim for what we are meant to be doing instead of causing more chaos with cars having to come and pick people up because the bus services are not there.

I also take this opportunity to urge the Government to introduce a national no-wait card for those who have chronic illness, as well as access to toilets. The issue is especially prevalent in Donegal because we do not have access to trains, which have toilets on them. We need all the help we can get in Donegal.

Deputy Seamus Healy: The Government must reverse the 15% average increase in fares for public transport announced by the National Transport Authority for 1 January. This increase worsens the cost-of-living crisis and undermines climate policy. Switching from private cars to a comprehensive system of public transport, not just in cities but also in rural Ireland, where there is no alternative to private cars, is the most effective action we can take to meet our

climate goals. There are billions available in the Infrastructure, Climate and Nature Fund to reverse these increases and build a nationwide system of free, reliable and accessible public transport. This fare increase is moving in the wrong direction and is out of step with many of our European neighbours, where public transport is very low cost or even free.

Public transport is an essential public service and must be accessible to all, and I mean all. That means not just people in cities but also those in rural areas, like my constituency of Tipperary South. It is an area where there is limited public transport available and no practical alternative to the private car. If you are from south Tipperary and work in Clonmel at Abbott's vascular division, Boston Scientific, Tipperary University Hospital, Tipperary County Council, MSD, Medite or any other business, you must use a car. If you attend third level in Clonmel, you must use a car. If you shop in Clonmel, you must use a car. If you are from south Tipperary and attend third level in Waterford or Limerick, you must use a car. The Government must prioritise public transport in rural areas.

I also wish to highlight the unacceptable situation at Clonmel Railway Station. Clonmel station is a hub for trains and Bus Éireann services. Large numbers wait for connecting trains and buses there. They wait outside in hail, rain and snow while the station building remains closed. There is no access whatsoever to any service like toilets or waiting areas. I raised this issue again recently, only to be told that while internal works including passenger waiting areas, accessible toilets, a changing place toilet and staff facilities will be carried out as part of an accessibility programme funded by the National Transport Authority, the works will not commence for another two years. That will mean another two years of people waiting in all weathers without toilet facilities or waiting areas. This is not good enough by a long shot. I am asking the Minister of State to intervene to ensure these minor works in what is an existing building commence immediately.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The 15% average increase that has been proposed is over the top and defies logic. It is a retrograde step. We are supposed to be getting people onto public transport to reduce our carbon emissions and reduce congestion but this is putting our transport system in reverse. Inflation is only running at a fraction of that. This could not come at a worse time when there is cost-of-living crisis due to the sky-high cost of rents, mortgages, home heating, electricity and groceries. The Government will discourage many people from using buses and trains and push them back into cars, which will have a negative effect. The National Transport Authority has conceded that and I am hearing it from commuters in the Portlaoise and Portarlinton areas. All our efforts should be going towards getting as many people as possible onto public transport and reducing traffic congestion and pollution. It is worth noting that just weeks after the exposure of the €50 million written off by Iarnród Éireann for a failed traffic management system, we now get a proposal to increase charges by 15%. We need a better use of the existing subsidy from the taxpayer and that is an issue. I have no problem with the subvention. We can increase it further. We need to improve capacity on our packed trains, on the Luas trams, where people are like sardines, and on buses.

Facilities at railway stations are very poor. In Portlaoise, for example, there are two tiny shelters and hundreds of people stand out in the rain getting soaked. They could be on their way to college or work in Dublin, Limerick or wherever. The situation is the same in Portarlinton and Ballybrophy. That needs to be addressed. We need basic weather shelters at railway stations and proper toilet facilities.

Packed trains and carriages need to be taken into account and dealt with. We need extra carriages. Iarnród Éireann told me all its rolling stock is in full use and that is good, but new carriages are promised and that needs to happen. I am appealing to the Minister to halt this 15% increase in public transport fees, to put on more services and in the case of Laois to put on an 11 p.m. train from Heuston. The service currently finishes at 10 p.m. It is a good service but there needs to be an 11 p.m. service as well for people attending events in Dublin. We desperately need to improve facilities at railway stations like those at Ballybrophy, Portlaoise and Portarlinton, as I have outlined. We need a survey of carriage, bus and tram capacity and to put on extra capacity where required. All of this is needed along with good use of the subsidy given by the taxpayer. We need to expand the local town and bus service as well. We have a good one in Portlaoise and Carlow but that needs to be extended. I appeal to the Minister of State to see that this happens.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I thank Deputy Daly for bringing forward this motion. This is ultimately a question of political choice. It is possible to enhance public transport services and keep prices affordable. It was done during the last Government. Those four and a half years saw a huge expansion of bus services all over the country and at the same time they saw a 20% cut in everybody's public transport fares, a 50% cut for young adults and the securing of the funding to ensure under-nines could go free. Those were political choices made during the last Government and driven by a Green Party Minister in the Department of Transport.

This Government has made a different political choice. Yes, there may be some service enhancements but people are going to pay more for them. That is the difference at the heart of this. Do we look to keep fares low and continue to enhance services or do we go with the Minister's approach whereby we can have one or the other? My colleagues in the Green Party and I will always argue for keeping the fares low and expanding the services and we will make that argument any time. However, to hike fares by 15% on average in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis defies logic. This is a 15% increase when the rate of inflation is running at 3.4%, and the only promise the Government can make is that it will come back next year and hike fares again.

The Minister had a great line in his speech. He used the phrase "Despite any demand elasticity effects arising from the fare increase". Let us be clear about what that means. It means people who stop taking the bus or train due to unaffordability because of this decision. The NTA tells us to expect a 4.5% decrease in the number of passengers because of this decision. What sum is ultimately at issue here? It is €70 million. That is what the price increase is going to bring in. I am not saying it is a small sum, but when you place it beside the €1.3 billion that has been mobilised very quickly to assist other parts of society with the increases in their costs, and specifically their transport costs, you can understand why bus and train users are so angry. The electricity bills of people who use the bus and train are going up too. Their grocery bills are going up too and now, from 1 January, they are going to see a 15% hike in their transport costs.

This is a political choice. Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil have made the wrong choice here. They should provide the NTA with that €70 million, choose to expand public transport and keep it affordable. It can be done.

Deputy Paul Lawless: This increase in public transport fares is affecting the most vulnerable citizens and many students in third level education. The reality is that because of its failure in terms of housing, this Government has displaced so many young people from university campuses right across this country and, in many cases, these young people are now living at home and commuting into college on a daily basis. They are doing so not because they want to. They have to because of Government policy. The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage outlined recently that he is not even considering the demand element with regard to housing. As a result, many young people across Ireland are commuting to college and the Government is robbing them of that opportunity in terms of college life and that wonderful time of independence in one's life. The Government has put them to the train and the bus, including getting one bus to another. I have had a number of calls about problems with connecting buses for young people going to college. The Government is now increasing the fares for the privilege of having to commute to college on a daily basis. It is wrong. I hope the Minister of State saw the National Youth Council of Ireland survey that showed seven in ten young people are planning on emigrating. The Government cannot offer them a bed for college or a reliable bus route in Mayo and other rural areas but it is now increasing the fares significantly. I ask the Minister of State to reconsider this proposal regarding hiking the cost.

I also want to speak about bus transport in Mayo. I thank Citylink for its work. I worked very closely with Citylink when the Government service from Ballina to Galway pulled out. It was Citylink that actually stood up in terms of offering an additional service. It was interesting and there was an irony because Government TDs and Ministers in Mayo were jumping up and down sending out press releases and timetables with their names on them, when it was the State service that had failed and pulled out and it was the private sector that was standing up. I worked very closely with Citylink on it and, extraordinarily, at the time Citylink was unable to even get the data from the Bus Éireann service to ascertain whether or not it would put on a service. It was extraordinary that there was no communication on that. I ask the Minister of State to reconsider this position.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: It is almost like we are watching an episode of "Austin Powers". He has woken up from the sixties and then he sees the Minister - Dr. Evil - with this cunning plan. The trains are overcrowded and the buses are full when they turn up. It is a case of "Sure lads, how are we going to help with the demand situation here? I know. We're going to raise the price of public transport to discourage people from using the service". That demand reduction is built into the moronic idea of increasing the price of public transport at a time when people are suffering in many other walks of life. There are areas where less demand will lead to an improved service for others but there are people who live in places in my constituency, such as Adamstown, Clonburris and Seven Mills, where the trains are always full but the people in these houses are only given 0.75 parking spaces per housing unit and do not even have the option to drive. They cannot charge an EV to try the greener driving option because they cannot tag on their domestic charging tariff with it. They have no choice but to use public transport but they cannot rely on it because the buses do not turn up and if buses are cancelled, there is no real-time information.

A tourist in Dublin trying to pay with a credit card cannot do so because we still do not have that technology on a bus and the driver is delaying traffic explaining to that person that they need to pay in a different way. The system is not fit for purpose and, as I have said before, the

NTA is not fit for purpose. It is a real kick in the craw to increase prices when people are suffering from increases in the price of food, fuel and electricity. That is what this Government should be getting right now - a full stop for this sort of measure.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: The Government projects a €9.2 billion surplus for this year and today it is looking for a 15% increase in bus and rail fares. I do not know if I heard this right. This Government projects a €9.2 billion surplus for 2026 and it wants to increase bus and rail fares by 15%. My God. I was in Moate the other night at a meeting attended by over 3,500 people from all walks of life - the transport network, the haulage network, carers, nurses and contractors - wondering how their businesses are going to survive and then they see a Government with a €9.2 billion surplus. I heard the crowd across there saying how the Green Party did great things in the last Government. It spent a rake of money on electric buses that are parked and cannot be used, tied us to Europe on an unrealistic plan that we cannot achieve and brought pain to this country, but that was put in there by this Government. It signed up to that too.

It goes to show that if this Government was a business of any type in this country, it would be bust. It makes bad decisions and wastes money and what does it do? It goes back to the Exchequer and looks for more money for its mistakes. There is no accountability and nobody gets fired so it loses money and wastes money every year and comes back the following year. When I told the Minister for public expenditure in the Oireachtas Committee on Budgetary Oversight that there were people who could not get a rebate because they were not compliant because they might have been late with a repayment, he said "Richard, people have to be compliant", but this Government is not compliant. Every year, it goes over budget but the difference between the Government and a business is that the Government inflicts pain on everyone in this country to fix mistakes. It cannot even run a budget.

Now we come to the 15% increase in bus and rail fares. When people are trying to make a difference for the environment, the Government penalises them as well. The day of reckoning is coming and it is coming soon. The people in this country no longer have any faith in the Government. Hopefully, the next time there is an election, they will finally vote with their conscience.

Deputy Michael Collins: At a time when families, workers and pensioners are already under enormous financial pressure, increases of around 15% across many public transport services, including Local Link, rural services, buses and trains will be another blow. The biggest problem we have in this country is accountability regarding transport. I do not think the NTA is accountable. I thank Sinn Féin for this very good motion.

We had the NTA before us at the committee. West Cork Connect has offered to take over the whole running of the Kinsale area, which would save millions of euro for the State. I asked the NTA why it would stop that. Basically, West Cork Connect is a private bus service. Bus Éireann is trotting around after it, just in case it would have any little bit of success. Good God almighty, what is wrong? Millions can be saved, so why is the NTA not considering that instead of using these heavy-handed tactics to make sure that good private operators are out of work, and instead of working with them and pushing that service? Millions could be saved and services put into areas like Caheragh, Drimoleague and Skibbereen. There is no bus service from Bantry or Kealkill to Macroom and Drinagh has no bus service. The NTA had tenders

for Clonakilty and Grange a year or a year and a half ago, but it never delivered the service. It is a farcical situation. The NTA tells us there is no money. They are broke. The whole system is in collapse from start to finish and we are not getting what we could call accountability.

School transport is a shambles. It is an absolute disaster in many areas, regardless of where people are. It is the same complaint. I brought it up in the Dáil last week, but it has been put off as if there is no problem. There is a major crisis. People have spent five years getting a bus ticket and in the sixth year they will not get a bus ticket. It is outrageous. You could not make it up if you tried to make it up because people would not believe it could happen in any other world out there.

Instead of connecting Ireland, we are disconnecting Ireland. We are not using the private operators to run some of the services and Bus Éireann to run services in other areas, which would ensure that everybody gets some good out of the transport service. While I am talking about the transport service, what about people with disabilities? What about Megan O'Sullivan in Allihies, near Castletownbere, who sits at home because she has intellectual disabilities? She will not be picked up. Either her father or her mother will have to give up their job to take her to the services, which she can make such a success of if she gets there. Instead, she is left sitting at home in a chair. That is the kind of Ireland we have.

The Government has forgotten the people of Castletownbere. It has forgotten the people of Caheragh, Kealkill, Grange and Timoleague. It is not good enough. The money is there but it is blown apart. I am part of a rural transport board, or Local Link or whatever they want to call it nowadays. The Government took the buses from us and decided the NTA would run the service. It splashed out millions, not hundreds of thousands but millions of euro extra. While I am on that, I would like to wish David O'Brien, the Local Link manager in west Cork, the very best as he is retiring this weekend. He has been a brilliant servant to the people of west Cork and the whole of County Cork over the last number of years.

Deputy Carol Nolan: The sheer audacity of the Government proposal to increase public transport fares is breathtaking. The Government wants to increase public transport fares while large parts of rural Ireland are still waiting for public transport that actually exists. In Offaly, people are not talking about buses being too cheap. They are talking about the bus that never comes or they are angry about the route that does not exist. Only recently, I received confirmation that the long-promised route 826 connecting Mullingar and Edenderry, a service that would finally provide a direct public transport link across parts of Offaly, Westmeath and Laois, is stalled because there is no funding available. It is not delayed because of planning or staffing but because the Government has simply not provided the money. The Minister says fares have to rise to support the system. People in rural Ireland have every right to ask what system exactly he is talking about. The Government is asking people to pay premium prices for a second-rate service.

Let us look at what is happening to motorists at the same time. Figures released to me show that €23.7 million has been collected from motorists at the Portlaoise toll plaza every single year. That is completely unfair on businesses, haulage businesses in particular, that have to go through that toll frequently. Every day, workers, families, farmers, small business owners and hauliers across Offaly hand over more of their income simply to travel the roads they depend on. The M7 and M8 were built over 15 years ago. The concession runs until 2037.

Now, after collecting tens of millions of euro from motorists, the Government wants public transport users to pay more as well. If you drive, they have their hand in your pocket. If you get the bus, they have their hand in your pocket. If you live in rural Ireland, they expect you to be grateful for the privilege. If you work, you are taxed out of existence. The contradiction at the heart of this policy is impossible to ignore. For years, the Government has told people to leave their cars behind, but every action it takes pushes people back towards their cars. It cannot tell people to get out of their cars while failing to provide reliable alternatives and it certainly cannot justify fare increases when new rural services are being frozen because the money is not there, such as the 826 service that would serve Mullingar to Edenderry.

Deputy Albert Dolan: I want to use this debate to make a very simple point, which is that if the NTA and the Department of Transport are going to ask people to pay more for public transport, then people are entitled to ask what they are getting for it. For the people I represent, that has to mean two things: capacity and connectivity.

There are three practical examples in Galway East where we need to see delivery. The first is on the train from Athenry to Galway city. A parent contacted me just last week. His daughter is a college student in Galway. She fainted on the early train to Galway city from Athenry because it was so crammed. There were only two carriages and it was absolutely wedged. This is a daily occurrence for commuters in Galway. It needs to be tackled. I know there are capacity constraints across the country for rail, but the new carriages cannot come quickly enough for the people who are commuting daily. The trains are only going to get stuffier and hotter over the winter months.

The next practical step that could be taken relates to towns like Athenry, a town with over 5,000 people. For almost two years now, there has been no bus from Athenry to Galway city. We always had a bus in Athenry. Immediately after the private operator pulled the service a PSO was put in place, but we have still not seen a bus put on the route from Athenry to Galway. It is something that I and my constituency colleagues have been calling for. We know that Athenry needs to have a bus going to Galway city, which would take pressure off the train as well.

The last point is that there was a long-mooted Local Link service to be run from Athenry to Tuam. An Athenry to Tuam service serving Monivea and many other villages along the road would be an incredible addition for connectivity between the towns of Athenry and Tuam. These are the priorities that matter to people. That is what matters. It matters that if they need to get somewhere, they have the connectivity and if they choose to use the service, they have the capacity. That is the whole point I wanted to make today.

Deputy Michael Cahill: I want to make a particular point about the impact of the proposed fare increases on people in my county. I recognise the significant investment the Government is making in public transport. In 2026, €940 million is being invested across the public transport network and that investment is badly needed. However, we need more capacity, more services and better connectivity.

As a backbench Government TD, my responsibility is also to bring the concerns of the people of Kerry into this Chamber. The messages I am receiving from people across County Kerry are very clear. They are worried about what these increases will mean for them. We

have a very real cost-of-living crisis. The national average increase is approximately 15%, but people in Kerry are concerned that some fares could increase by significantly more than that, in some cases by over 30%. That matters in a rural county like Kerry.

We are not talking about people who have multiple public transport options outside their front door. We are talking about people travelling from rural communities to places like Dingle, Killorglin, Castleisland, Tralee, Killarney, Kenmare and other towns across the county for work, education, healthcare and essential services. For many people, public transport is not a lifestyle choice. It is how they get to work. It is how a student gets to college. It is how someone who does not drive gets into town. If the cost of that journey rises substantially, we have to ask what the consequences will be. Will people continue to use public transport or will some have no option but to get back into their cars, if they have a car?

That is not just an issue for those passengers. It affects congestion, our roads and our climate objectives as well. I have received correspondence from constituents in Dún Chaoin and elsewhere in Kerry making exactly this point. They are not asking for special treatment. They are asking that affordability is properly considered, particularly for people in rural areas who have fewer alternatives.

I also recognise the Government's response points to the additional services and capacity these fares will help provide. The commitment to 140 new and improved services is very important. The continued 50% discount for young adults and students, reductions in many child fares and the continuation of the free travel scheme are all very important.

My county did not receive any additional funding for additional Local Link services this year. That was very disappointing but I believe there is a very simple principle here. If we are asking people to pay more they need to see and feel the improvement in the services they receive. There are a number of services I would like to mention that are in the pipeline but the funding has not been forthcoming for Local Link in Kerry to provide them. They are: Beaufort to Whitefield and Killorglin; the Gap of Dunloe to Beaufort and Killarney; and my own parish of Glenbeigh to Dooks along to Cromane and on to Killorglin. A route was approved for Killarney to Rathmore and Gneevgullia and on to Mallow. It is already approved but has not been launched. I support the investment in public transport. I support expanding services. I am asking the Minister of State and the NTA to pay particular attention to the impact these increases will have on rural Kerry.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I too am glad to get this opportunity. I thank Sinn Féin for raising this very important issue. Many people are very concerned about raising the cost of travel on public transport. We appreciate the public transport we have in Kerry very much because it is a very rural county and towns are dispersed and far away from each other. The Kenmare to Killarney route provides a great service. My idea is that maybe we do not need the larger buses all of the time. Maybe we could save by having a minibus or a 35-seat bus that could fulfil the needs of the people.

I am very concerned about young people and under-18s going to college, and indeed the over-18s, with the raising of the cost of travelling on buses. Many people - parents and students - are very concerned about this.

I also want to raise the issue of concessionary bus tickets. There is a problem in school transport that is manifesting a lot where people need their children to be taken on the bus, but if they are within the distance and only have a concessionary ticket they are not allowed to travel on the bus. In places like Killarney town itself, we need a lot more buses to bring people in from the outlying parts of the town. This is because the town is very busy, you cannot leave children walking and some parents do not have a second car so it is very hard for them to get their children to school, be it a mile away or whatever it is in the town's suburbs. We need more transport there. Then there is the route from Killarney to Killorglin. We need more space on those buses. Secondary school students travel from Killarney to Killorglin and have done so for years but we do not have enough capacity there at all times.

I am very concerned about the cost when we are trying to entice people onto public transport. Many people have no choice but to travel on public transport. I do not think now is an opportune time to raise the cost for people, with people under so much pressure.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Neale Richmond): I thank all the Deputies for their contributions this evening, for the points they have raised and for bringing these important topics to the House.

As set out in the Minister, Deputy O'Brien's, earlier remarks and the counter-motion, the Government is committed to maintaining a sustainable PSO funding model that supports continued network growth, service improvements on public transport, the delivery of BusConnects and Connecting Ireland, commuter rail expansion and future investment, while ensuring public transport remains reliable, accessible and affordable. The proposed fare adjustments are necessary to underpin these objectives and support the long-term sustainability of the network.

Maintaining affordable fares must be balanced with ensuring a financially sustainable transport system capable of funding service improvements, network expansion and fleet investment. Achieving this requires a careful balance between delivering high-quality, reliable services and ensuring the network is adequately resourced to meet growing demand. As passenger numbers continue to rise in recent years, with a record breaking 363.5 million journeys undertaken just last year, supporting people to make that switch from private car use, it is important to recognise Ireland has maintained an effective eight-year fare freeze alongside targeted affordability measures, including the young adult card, free travel for children up to nine years old and the 90-minute fare.

In line with international best practice and to bolster the State's capacity to invest in service expansion, network improvements and operational resilience, and to encourage continuous passenger growth, it is essential, therefore, that we prioritise the reinvestment of increased fare revenue, ensuring we can maintain a well-funded, reliable system and deliver greater, long-term benefits rather than reducing fares to unsustainable levels. These measures compare favourably when viewed in a European context with those adopted in many other countries. While we acknowledge the objective of improving affordability on a wider scale, making public transport free for all, as suggested by some, would impose a significant fiscal burden on the Exchequer with potentially far-reaching funding implications for the wider transport system and any other budgetary suggestions or requests.

In this regard, providing free travel for all would significantly undermine the financial sustainability of the public transport system and constrain the ability to maintain and enhance service provision. The proposal to make public transport free for all is difficult to determine but would be substantial. The fare revenue loss alone in 2027 is in the range of €538 million to €595 million and does not include the cost of the provision of additional fleet and services to cater for the expected additional passenger demand. We fully recognise that keeping fares affordable is important but so too is ensuring that we can continue to introduce new routes, increase frequencies, improve reliability and connect more communities to public transport.

The Government completely appreciates the pressure rising fuel costs is placing on households, transport operators, the wider community and families across the country. Public transport has a particularly important role to play at times like this by providing a more affordable and sustainable alternative for many people. In that context, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and his Department are keeping under close review how the public transport system is equipped to respond to current pressures. At the same time, it is important the measures are carefully considered and aligned with available resources so they are effective, sustainable and deliver real benefits to passengers. There is a requirement to strike the right balance in public transport fares to enable further enhancements to the public transport network in the coming years, offer the most competitive fares to younger and student passengers and ensure the value for money of the PSO subsidy to society.

As articulated earlier, the recently announced change in fares is aimed at supporting the continued expansion and improvement of public transport while maintaining affordability. Any overall increase in revenue generated here will go straight back into investment in public transport services, delivering better connectivity, capacity and reliability for passengers and commuters. I counted no less than 14 interventions from Deputies who called for that increased level of service and availability in this debate alone. There is a lot of demand. It is understandable and merited but it does have to be paid for somehow.

Regarding funding, an unprecedented funding allocation of €940 million for PSO services was secured in budget 2026, as laid out by Deputy Cahill. This is a significant 43% uplift in the allocation from the previous year's budget. While 2026 saw this substantial increase in Exchequer funding, continued inflationary pressures have increased the cost of operating public transport services which has limited the NTA's ability to introduce improvements to existing services or new services in the TFI network as part of the wider capital investment under the national development plan. Any funding provided to the PSO programme under budget 2027 will still be supporting over 65% of operating costs overall. Fares have to play a role, therefore, in rebalancing that equation. The adjustments to fares are required to help offset the cost increases in recent years, improve fare revenue recovery and ensure the sustainability of the PSO funding.

8 o'clock

We are at a key juncture for public transport in Ireland. Reliable and sustainable services are critical as passenger numbers grow. Congestion worsens in urban areas and a greater proportion of the population depends on public transport for commuting, education and essential travel. The challenge, therefore, is to balance affordability for passengers with the long-term financial sustainability needed to expand and improve public transport services.

The NTA applies detailed statistical analysis of all services, and it shows the passenger growth is expected to continue throughout 2027, supported by the ongoing expansion and enhancement of services which are anticipated to attract additional users and further strengthen public transport demand. To support this increased demand adequate funding, including increased fare revenue, will support the delivery of key transport programmes and commitments in line with operational and resource capacity. For example, the NTA recently identified approximately 140 new service initiatives and capacity enhancements as part of its 2027 budget submission to the Department of Transport, taking account of competing funding demands and wider public transport priorities. They remain subject to the outcome of the annual Estimates process and, if approved, will represent the biggest year-on-year enhancement of services in many measures. As per the intervention of Deputy Dolan, these measures would allow for the continued growth in PSO journeys, which have continued to grow steadily, and demonstrate how the public is making positive steps in making the switch to using public transport.

The adjustment of fares is required to ensure the sustainability of the PSO funding model and support the Government's commitment to continued network growth, service enhancements, investment in BusConnects in Dublin, Cork and other cities, the completion of the Connecting Ireland rural mobility programme, continued development of commuter rail services, and funding future improvements while keeping public transport competitive and affordable. As a Government, we must remain fully committed to building on these positive changes and delivering a public transport system that is responsive to passenger needs. In this regard, as noted in the Minister's earlier remarks, the Government is investing record levels of public funds into public transport infrastructure. Over the lifetime of this Government, we will see shovels in the ground of MetroLink, DART+, Luas Finglas and the reinstatement of the western rail corridor between Claremorris and Athenry. We will also see the continued progression of core bus corridors in Dublin as part of the BusConnects Dublin programme, the completion of phase 1 of the Cork area commuter rail programme and the progression of phase 2. These projects, along with others provided for in the national development plan, will help provide a high-quality, connected public transport system for all passengers and help to alleviate congestion.

I assure the Deputies that the Government recognises that transport connectivity is hugely important for all people, particularly those who live and work in rural Ireland, as evidenced by the launch last year of Ireland's first-ever smart demand responsive transport, DRT, pilots in Achill, Killarney and the north east of Limerick city. Using the TFI Anseo app, passengers are now able to book on-demand rides with ease, bringing the convenience of modern rideshare together with the reliability and affordability of public transport. This pilot is funded under the Government's climate action fund which supports innovative transport solutions which contribute to a greener and more connected Ireland. The roll-out of the current phase of the Towns++ programme began with the launch of the Carlow town bus service in 2023 and, most recently, a Mullingar town service launched earlier this year.

I thank the Deputies for raising these issues and initiating a very important discussion. However, for the reasons the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and I both outlined, the Government is opposing the motion. The Government has high ambitions for our public transport system and has allocated funding to make them a reality. We want people to shift to sustainable modes and believe the new fares remain competitive and continue to represent great value to commuters

and all passengers. We also believe that investment in new services is essential and fare changes will help facilitate this and will mean that public transport will continue to be attractive for more and more people in the years ahead.

The Government and Department of Transport, in partnership with the NTA and operators, remain fully committed to delivering a public transport system that is reliable, accessible, affordable and capable of meeting the growing needs of communities throughout the country. It is, therefore, essential that the public transport system remains well funded and responsive to passenger needs. Adequate fare revenue is critical to supporting this.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit. Fillfimid anois ar Sinn Féin ar feadh deich nóiméad leis an díospóireacht a chríochnú.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: On Friday last, I got an update from Dublin Bus on the performance of three of the main bus routes that serve my constituency. It states that the H1 route has unfortunately not achieved the target of punctuality in recent months. The H2 route has also has not achieved the target of punctuality in recent months, and I received the same answer for the H3 service. The Minister of State is telling commuters who are annoyed at being late to work, college or appointments that they need to pay more for a service that is either constantly delayed or does not show up. Seriously, is he for real?

We are in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis. Everything is more expensive. The last thing we should be doing is hiking public transport fares and putting more costs on the people who get up early in the morning, as the Government likes to say. If we want people out of private cars, we should reduce transport fares and increase the number of people who are entitled to free public transport, particularly those under 18 years of age because what we will then see is those young people developing good habits at an early age. This is a slap in the face for ordinary people. I urge the Government to intervene and stop these fare hikes.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: Increasing rail fares on the antiquated Rosslare, Wexford, Wicklow and Dublin rail line would be an absolute joke. It would be a bad choice and would make no sense. Despite great expansions at Rosslare Europort, the gateway to Europe which connects Rosslare to Dublin, our capital city, it is an absolute farce and has regressed hugely. It takes longer to get to Dublin by train than it took 40 years ago, when I started using the service. There are fewer carriages, carriages are cramped, toilets in stations are often not open, there has been no catering service for years and, as I said, the journey goes at a snail's pace due to the failure of successive Governments to invest in rail infrastructure. Yet, the Minister wants to charge people more for the privilege of using the service.

When Deputy Mythen and I met with the manager of Iarnród Éireann in Buswells Hotel, we pointed out that, unfortunately, many of those who use the Rosslare, Wexford, Wicklow and Dublin rail line are forced to stand the entire journey to Dublin, often in between carriages. This is absolutely shocking in 2026. Why would we ask passengers who board in Gorey, Arklow, Rathdrum and Wicklow and are squashed like sardines before they do a hard day's work in Dublin to pay 15% more for the privilege? That is a bloody joke. There are only two services that are capable of getting commuters from my constituency to Dublin to get to work

before 9 a.m. This is pushing many of them back onto the road as commuters on a gridlocked M11.

Despite all the bluster about reducing carbon footprints and all of that, the Government has refused to prioritise public transport and invest in the rail service. It could make that happen. It could take cars off the road and improve people's quality of life, instead of people being stressed in the morning trying to get to Dublin because they have no alternative but to use public transport. How on earth can the Government expect them to pay 15% more for an antiquated service that runs from Rosslare to Dublin? I call on the Government to rethink and reverse this crazy decision.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: The Government is expecting people to pay more for public transport at a time when those who depend on public transport are already struggling with ever-increasing household costs. The Government has proposed that from January 2027, adult public transport fares are set to increase by an average of 15%. In Dublin, the 90-minute Leap card fare will rise from €2 to €2.30. There are a number of economically vulnerable areas in my constituency of Dublin North-West. These price hikes will have a seriously negative impact on families in this cost-of-living crisis. Particularly now with the high cost of fuel, many of my constituents are becoming more dependent on public transport.

There has been an overhaul of the provision of public transport in my constituency, yet despite promises of better connectivity, there have been numerous complaints about the reliability of the new bus services. For example, in Dublin North-West, with the introduction of phase 7 of BusConnects, routes 23 and 24 have had reliability issues since their introduction. Common among the complaints are long delays in waiting for buses and multiple bus cancellations. A bus service is only useful if the bus arrives on time and with sufficient capacity. Unreliable services force people back into cars and taxis, undermining the Government's own objectives on congestion, emissions and public transport usage.

I, along with the community, have submitted proposals to the NTA to amend certain proposed new routes, particularly in terms of their accessibility. For many people, especially the elderly, public transport is a necessity and not a choice. As such, it should be accessible, dependable and affordable.

Extending the age requirement for free travel to 18 would have a societal benefit, allowing for greater opportunities for young people to attend school, extracurricular activities, jobs and social events regardless of household income. The Government should not allow these price hikes to go ahead. Instead, it should properly fund public transport, as well as address reliability and capacity issues.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: Do any Government Members listen to the radio or watch television? Do they hear workers and families talking about the cost of living every day? What do they do? They make it more expensive to go to work, school or college, or to attend essential services, particularly health services, that some people rely on the public transport system for. The Government claims it wants more people to use public transport, but its actions tell a different story - they tell the truth. Increasing fares while asking people to leave their cars at home makes no sense. Ghost buses that put people's jobs at risk are unacceptable. For how long has the Minister been promising it will be sorted? This morning on RTÉ, it was said to

the Minister that people are standing there, the bus is coming and then, minutes from its supposed arrival, it disappears. That is happening all over Dublin West and all over Dublin city. I heard last night at a meeting from Shannon, a resident of Tyrellstown who started college and is already missing classes because of these ghost buses.

Those on the Government benches love to waffle about the Opposition having no solutions. Well, here they are: stop the fare hikes, introduce free travel for under-18s, improve the failing services, end the scandal of ghost buses and deliver decent services for people. I will provide an example. In Tyrellstown, in the new developments of Kilmartin, Hollystown and Hollywoodrath, there are no rail services and there is a poor bus service that is made worse by ghost buses when people are relying on those buses.

I met representatives of Irish Rail today and they said they are hoping for funding for DART+ to be given this year. Why does the Government not tell them the funding is there and let them get on with the job of delivering a world-class system? This comes down to political choices. Last year, the political choice the Government made was to give €250 million to developers who were already building apartments. Let us help the people - the workers and the families - who are struggling.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: *Haveyouseenthe103.ie* is a community website set up a few weeks ago to track the failings of the 103, 103X and 105X bus services from Ratoath and Ashbourne to Dublin. I have the report from the first few weeks and it paints a damning picture. This is not just about delays; it is about a system failing the people who depend on it. Now the Minister wants to hike up fares for the privilege of this frustration. From 2 to 28 September, there were 275 community reports and 155 officially cancelled trips. A quarter of all notifications of cancellations arrived too late to be useful, very many of them after the bus was due to arrive. Commuters checking the Bus Éireann website would have missed 84 cancellations, while those checking the app would have missed 47. One feed is never enough. This is communications failure on top of service delivery failure. Meanwhile, more than 100 full buses passed stops, leaving passengers behind. This accounted for 28% of community reports, 27 at Ashbourne Community School alone. That school is far from the last pick-up point. Ghost buses that were shown and that then vanished accounted for 92 reports. The chain of accountability from the Minister to the Department to the NTA to Bus Éireann is like the 103 - it is broken. Someone must answer and the Minister is the one charged with responsibility and authority. It is clear from the data that we need extra capacity at the morning peak and we need answers on why the live feed shows buses that never come. More than anything, we need a bus service that is fit for purpose.

Question put.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is deferred until the weekly divisions tomorrow evening.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Energy Prices

115. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance if he will consider applying a 75% windfall tax on the profits of energy companies, including electricity companies. [68614/26]

Deputy Pearse Doherty: From next Monday, over 1 million households will see gas and electricity prices begin to increase. Households lose out but big energy companies will be the big winners. Energy companies will rake in even greater profits while ordinary people are left to carry the burden. Will the Minister bring forward a windfall tax on these excess profits and use the money to help households struggling to keep the lights on and heat their homes this winter?

Tánaiste and Minister for Finance (Deputy Simon Harris): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta. More broadly regarding energy prices and the like, I am conscious of the pressures people are feeling in relation to energy bills. They are real, not just in Ireland but across the European Union and large parts of the world. In an Irish context, we will have our budget next Tuesday, when we will endeavour to assist people with those bills, particularly through the winter period. The Government is conscious of the increased financial pressures on households and businesses in recent months. In response, it has introduced a number of measures to help reduce - or at least suppress the growth of - fuel prices for households and businesses, with additional supports for key sectors of the Irish economy and supports more widely in relation to excise reductions.

The European Commission's AccelerateEU communication addresses the EU's rising energy costs and volatile fossil fuel markets and aims to accelerate the clean energy transition and strengthen EU energy resilience. While the communication notes member states may take domestic measures, no EU-wide approach has yet been agreed. The temporary solidarity contribution, TSC, was introduced in line with the Council regulation of 6 October 2022 to tackle windfall gains being made in the energy sector following the commencement of the war in Ukraine. The TSC formed part of a co-ordinated European response, reflecting the highly interconnected nature of EU energy markets - when we acted, we did so at an EU level - and a view that an emergency intervention to mitigate the effects of high energy prices at the time could not be sufficiently achieved by member states individually. It continues to be our view that tackling the energy crisis in a co-ordinated way between EU member states is preferable, given the interconnectedness of EU energy markets.

Governments across Europe are rightly attentive to developments in energy markets and their impact on households, businesses and the wider economy. As Minister of Finance, and in the context of our Presidency of the Council of the EU, as I think we discussed before, we put the topic of a windfall tax on the agenda of the ECOFIN meeting in Dublin and I have requested the European Commission to reflect on those discussions and report back at a meeting of ECOFIN next Thursday and Friday in Luxembourg. I will update the House after that.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. The Minister knows the European Commissioner has ruled out a Europe-wide energy windfall tax. He said it was better done domestically. There is no point in the Minister for Finance hiding behind the skirts of the European Union. It said, as of Tuesday, that it is not planning to do this and that it is best done

at domestic level. These companies are raking it in. Households will be fleeced by nearly double-digit increases in gas and electricity from Monday, the day before the budget. One million houses will, within a week, see their electricity and gas prices increase and the Minister is hiding behind something the European Commission is telling us, the public, that it is not planning to do and that would be better done domestically. Will the Minister look at introducing a windfall tax on the excess profits these energy companies are making while ordinary people are put to the pin of their collar trying to keep warm and keep the lights on this winter?

Deputy Simon Harris: My position is extraordinarily clear. I heard that individual Commissioner's comments today. I met with Commissioner Hoekstra yesterday, who is the Commissioner with responsibility for taxation. He is due to report and engage with EU finance Ministers in Luxembourg next Friday.

It is not only my view but the view of the German finance Minister, the Italian finance Minister and four other finance Ministers, expressed in a signed letter to me, that the best way to consider acting on this is at an EU level. That is how we acted in this House in the past, as the Deputy will recall, at the start of the war in Ukraine. Due to the interconnectedness of the EU energy market, it makes sense to look at these things as a European Union. Of course, there are things we can and will do domestically and we will outline a number of those in the budget. Regarding the windfall energy tax, I am clear on the Government's position, and I am also clear on the position of many of my EU counterparts, that working together at an EU level is the right way to go. That is why we will formally be discussing this in Luxembourg on Friday week.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It is the energy Commissioner who made the point that there will be no windfall tax at a European level. That is the wrong position - I absolutely agree on that - but in this Parliament, the Minister, as the Minister for Finance, can bring one in if he wants. He can tax the excess profits. We are talking not about the profits but about the supernormal profits that energy companies are making. He should tax them at a rate of 75%. Why? It is because they should not be making these types of profits while people are being pushed to the pin of their collar and we are seeing double-digit increases in gas and electricity prices. It is immoral that energy companies are making these types of profits. As the Minister for Finance, the Tánaiste would have the back of ordinary Irish people if he stood up and said he was going to make sure these excess profits are taxed and that that tax would be redirected back into people's pockets and to households right across the State to help them with their electricity and gas bills. That is a decision that he could make today if he wanted to. Will he consider that?

Deputy Simon Harris: The Deputy keeps asking me the same questions. I have the back of ordinary workers. We tested that electorally in Galway West not that long ago when the Deputy's party put its proposition and I put mine. We won the by-election and his party did not. We have tested these propositions with the people because the people of Ireland know that, of course, it is more nuanced than the Deputy outlined. We are in the European Union. Energy is extraordinarily interconnected across the European Union. That is why it is not just my view, but the view of multiple governments of a whole variety of different political persuasions - some of the right, some of the left and some of the centre - that the best way to

consider these issues is at a European level. That is not a new phenomenon in this House. It is also what we did when we previously introduced measures at the start of Russia's brutal illegal invasion of Ukraine.

We will continue to work on how best to deal with windfall profits. I share the Deputy's analysis of the situation on the windfall profits and how we best deal with that. We will continue to do that at European level. Domestically, we will continue as a Government to have the backs of ordinary workers. That is why we have brought in packages of measures that far exceed what most other European countries have done. We have an ability to do that because of our good management of the economy.

Banking Sector

116. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance the action his Department is taking to address the continued tracker mortgage and consumer protection issues arising from the transfer of mortgages (details supplied). [68857/26]

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: What actions is the Minister's Department taking to address the continued tracker mortgage and consumer protection issues arising from the transfer of mortgages from KBC to the Bank of Ireland? I have spoken recently to a family who have recently lost their home because of overcharging both by KBC and Bank of Ireland. What action is the Department taking to address this?

Deputy Simon Harris: Tracker mortgage failings by lenders have caused significant distress. That phrase probably does not quite capture the level of distress. In some cases, it has had devastating consequences for the affected customers. The Central Bank of Ireland launched the tracker mortgage examination in 2015. This followed engagement and intervention with a number of lenders when it became clear that tracker-related issues could be industry-wide. The tracker mortgage examination was the largest, most complex and most significant consumer protection review ever undertaken by our Central Bank. It involved an initial review of more than 2 million mortgage accounts by lenders. The aim of the tracker mortgage examination was to put in place a framework that ensured lenders identified and put impacted customers back in the position they would have been in if the lenders' failings had not occurred. This required lenders to examine the extent to which they had met their contractual obligations to tracker mortgage customers and to examine the transparency of their communications with customers in relation to tracker-related issues.

The tracker mortgage examination was designed in a way which allowed affected customers, after they had received redress and compensation, to continue to have options to appeal. This could be done to the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman and to the courts. Over the course of its work, the Central Bank produced regular progress updates and published its final supervisory report in 2019, which is available on its website. It also concluded seven enforcement investigations against lenders with tracker mortgage failings. The Central Bank of Ireland advises that, at the end of June 2025, circa 42,000 customer accounts were impacted across 11 lenders in the tracker mortgage examination. Circa €750 million has been paid in redress and compensation to impacted customers. The Central Bank also advises that more than 99% of redress and compensation due to impacted customers

identified in the tracker mortgage examination has concluded and compensation has been paid. Remaining cases are understood to be due in the main to uncontactable customers.

The Central Bank has also indicated that it continues to monitor the outcomes of any complaints, appeals and court cases and has communicated to lenders the expectation that they must fully consider whether any individual customer issues arising could have the potential to impact more widely. The Central Bank's consumer protection code applies in full to all lenders and all mortgages.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: In the case in question, this is not an uncontactable customer. The family took out a tracker mortgage with KBC. For years, the bank charged them the wrong rate, which KBC eventually admitted to. When KBC left the Irish market in 2023, the family's mortgage was transferred to Bank of Ireland. The overcharging did not stop. It carried on under Bank of Ireland. The customer wrote to Bank of Ireland's CEO and asked to meet, but the bank refused. Instead, the arrears letters kept coming, as did the repossession warnings. In the end, the customer was being overcharged to the point where he could afford the mortgage. He was forced to sell his family home. This had a devastating impact. I have written to the CEO of Bank of Ireland raising this case, and I have yet to receive a response. Does the Minister accept that there could be many more people in this loan book affected by overcharging? Will he, as Minister for Finance, ask the Central Bank to examine how incorrect balances from redemption figures persisted after years of tracker remediation and how many other customers are affected?

Deputy Simon Harris: Obviously, I will not comment on an individual mortgage situation, and the Deputy is not asking me to comment on it. I appreciate that is not the point he is raising in the Dáil tonight. "Yes" is the short answer to his question. I will ask the Central Bank of Ireland to specifically look at the issue the Deputy has raised. If he wishes to either copy me on that correspondence or send me other correspondence outlining the situation, I would be very happy to speak to the Governor of the Central Bank and ask the Central Bank to engage with the Deputy directly. The figures that are available to me, which I am sharing with the House and are available to the Deputy, show robust action by the Central Bank across a whole variety of lenders - 11 of them - affecting over 42,000 customers, with over €750 million paid in redress and compensation in what was the biggest examination ever carried out by the Central Bank on this issue. It was the largest, most complex and most significant consumer protection review. If the Deputy has, as he clearly does, some information that he would like the Central Bank to consider beyond that individual case and to provide an assurance, I would be very happy to seek to do that for him.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I welcome the Minister's response that he will contact the Central Bank about this wider issue and ask it to examine it. I am not just raising a specific case. This is an example and if this has affected the family in question, there could well be a very significant number of others in the loan book that was transferred who are similarly affected. That warrants investigation by the Central Bank. I welcome the Minister's commitment that he will contact the Central Bank about that. If he needs more information, I will certainly engage with him and pass it on.

Deputy Simon Harris: I certainly will. For the record of the House, I do not have any information at my disposal in relation to that wider issue or the potential for a wider issue. However, considering that the Deputy has raised the matter on the floor of the Dáil, I will send a transcript of this exchange to the Central Bank. If I or the Central Bank requires any further information, I will ask it to come back to the Deputy. I will report back to the Deputy once I have received an update from the Central Bank.

Tax Collection

117. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance if he will outline the estimated cost to the State of vulture funds using structures like IREFs to avoid paying taxes on rental income. [68615/26]

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Within a stone's throw of this Dáil, there are apartments owned by vulture funds. They charge over €3,000 for a two-bedroom apartment and the Government lets them off without paying a penny in tax on their rental income. Hundreds of thousands of euro are being fleeced from renters right across this city and elsewhere and the Minister of Finance does not ask these funds to pay a penny of corporation tax on their rental income. Is the Minister going to continue to adopt that position, which is against his officials' advice, that there should be a tax applied on these funds?

Deputy Simon Harris: Until December 2016, income and gains arising on Irish real estate and distributed by certain Irish regulated funds to non-resident investors were outside the scope of Irish taxation. The Irish real estate fund, or IREF, regime was introduced in the Finance Act 2016 to address concerns that non-resident investors who were making investments in collective investment funds were not taxed on income and gains from Irish property. That was the starting point in relation to the regime the Deputy referenced.

The regime is predominantly a withholding tax regime that applies to an Irish fund where 25% or more of the value of the assets in a fund is derived from Irish property, such as land and buildings. Where the profits of the IREF are transferred to a non-resident investor, the IREF is generally required to apply IREF withholding tax at a rate of 20%. There are exemptions from IREF withholding tax for certain investors, for example, where an investor is a domestic, EU or EEA equivalent pension scheme, investment fund or life assurance company.

These categories of investors are generally associated with collective, widely held investment. Exemptions are in line with international taxing norms. They are necessary to prevent double taxation in the hands of the ultimate individual investor, and it is a wider policy objective to support financial security through long-term investments such as pensions and life assurance policies.

In order to prevent instances where exemptions from IREF withholding tax intended for collective investment are inappropriately used for personal investment, the IREF legislation contains complex anti-avoidance measures referred to as the personal portfolio IREF rules. The IREF regime also contains a suite of other anti-avoidance measures which protect the Exchequer from abuses. IREFs are not obliged to separately report the source of the profits on the IREF return as the value passing to the investor is the reference point for taxation under the

tax regime. While the financial statements filed by IREFs contain high-level detail of the profits generated by IREFs, the profits of an IREF may arise from various activities including, for example, investment income, property development, property sales and rental income. Some IREFs also engage in non-property related activities. In the absence of a breakdown of the source of the profits, I am advised that Revenue is not in a position to provide an estimated cost for the Deputy. As the Deputy knows, I intend to carry out-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): Go raibh maith agat.

Deputy Simon Harris: I will come back on this.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I am well aware of the IREF regime. The record will show it was me who campaigned to bring it in in 2016, just as it was me who had to force the Government to bring in the renters' tax credit and the mortgage interest relief that it continued to argue against but finally started to see sense on. This is the issue here. I have continued to campaign on this point. Just think about this: there are two-bedroom apartments a stone's throw from this building, from our national Parliament, and their owners are charging €3,000 rent and the Government allows them not to pay a penny in tax on that rental income. If that apartment was owned by the Chairperson or anybody else out there, they would have to pay 25% corporation tax on the rental income. If it was owned by a private company, they would have to pay tax on it. However, because it is vulture fund, an institutional investor, Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and the Independents allow them not to pay a penny in tax on the eye-watering rents they are crippling young people and older people with in this city and beyond. It is scandalous. Worse is-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): Go raibh maith agat, a Theachta.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: -----that the Government's officials have called for a tax to be introduced. It is there in black and white.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): Tá an t-am caite.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: There is no point in the Minister shaking his head. It is there in black and white. The officials have called for a tax to be introduced.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): Go raibh maith agat. Glaoim ar an Tánaiste.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Will the Minister finally do the right thing?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): Go raibh maith agat, a Theachta.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Will he tax the vulture funds on the rent they are collecting?

Deputy Simon Harris: Let the record of the House show that it was a government led by my party in 2016 that introduced the legislation and legislated in relation to these issues. Just to be clear. I know the Deputy does this thing about Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael for the social media clips, but let the record of the House show that it was a Fine Gael Minister for Finance who actually legislated in relation to the IREF legislation. The reason I read out the lengthy answers at the start of this is because the Deputy distorts the situation and frames the debate in a certain way. The IREF was actually introduced, as the Deputy has said, and, in fairness, as he acknowledged and campaigned for, to address concerns that non-resident investors who were making investments and collective investment funds were not taxed on income and gains from Irish property. However, there is an issue - again, I do not think the Deputy should speak for my officials - in relation to double taxation. In the answer I have given this House I have very clearly outlined that. Therefore, we gave a commitment that we were going to carry out a consultation in relation to simplifying the IREF regime, something the Deputy says he looked for to be introduced in 2016. We intend to carry out a consultation to see what improvements and simplifications need to be made and I intend to publish that consultation this year.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): Go raibh maith agat, a Thánaiste.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I have the documentation. The Minister's officials have recommended a tax at the level of the fund. They have recommended a rate of that tax. A tax of that nature could bring in a quarter of a billion euro. Does the Minister know what he could do with a quarter of a billion euro? He could do what Sinn Féin is proposing, that is, to double the renters' tax credit and put €2,000 into every renter's pocket across the State to help them as they are being fleeced by the landlords the Government protected over many years. Does he know what else he should do along with that? He should make sure he bans further rent increases. That is the type of policies we are putting forward. To go back to the core of this, there are people who are ripping their tenants off with these type of eye-watering rents of thousands of euro, and they are not paying a penny tax on that rent. If I am the landlord, I have to pay tax; if it is a company down the road, it has to pay tax; but if it is a vulture fund or institutional investor, they pay no corporation tax on that rental income. It should stop-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): Sin é, a Theachta. Tá an t-am caite.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Department officials have recommended that the Minister bring in a tax.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): An Tánaiste.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Will he actually-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): A Theachta Doherty, tá an t-am caite.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: -----take a side that is not the side of the vulture fund in this case?

Deputy Simon Harris: Again, it was Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil in government that introduced the renters' tax credit. It was Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Oh my God.

Deputy Simon Harris: No, sorry. You get to say your thing and I do not say "Oh my God", so just sit there and allow me answer these-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Who pushed you into it?

Deputy Simon Harris: Just to be very clear-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Who forced you into it?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): There is one speaker.

Deputy Simon Harris: I just do not understand. If the Deputy is so effective at his job-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I am-----

Deputy Simon Harris: -----I do not understand why he is sitting over there as the longest-serving Opposition spokesperson on finance in the history of the European Union. Maybe reflect on that for a moment. We introduced the renters' tax-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Still larger than Fine Gael for the past two elections.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): There is only one speaker and the Tánaiste has the floor.

Deputy Simon Harris: We are here and you are there-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Still. Good luck to you.

Deputy Simon Harris: -----and that is for a reason called democracy.

We introduced the renters' tax credit. We increased the renters' tax credit. The programme for Government commits to further increasing the renters' tax credit. It is now worth more than €300 million to renters in this country. We also introduced rent pressure zones, including providing protections to renters in Donegal, that did not exist until we brought in those rent pressure zones. There are specific issues - and this does not suit the Deputy's quick social media clips - in relation to double taxation. We want investment to come into this country, we want more homes to be built, we want more apartments to be built and we want more rental

properties for people. There are specific issues in relation to double taxation which we need to work our way through.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): Go raibh maith agat.

Deputy Simon Harris: That is why we will publish this year a consultation on a simplified IREF regime.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: More consultation. Why not act?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): Glaoim ar an Teachta Ged Nash-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Why not act? It is because you have are in bed with the vultures. That is the reality.

Deputy Simon Harris: That is a slur.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It is the truth.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): -----without interruption.

Exchequer Returns

118. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance to provide details of the impact assessments undertaken on Exchequer revenues in relation to the proposed savings and investment account. [68940/26]

Deputy Ged Nash: Has the Tánaiste carried out an impact assessment in terms of the Exchequer related to his proposed saving and investment accounts proposition, and where that is at? I expect we will hear more about this and the details around the proposal in next week's budget, but at this point will he confirm that an assessment of the impact on the Exchequer has taken place, and if he is prepared to publish that assessment?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Nash. The introduction of the investment account is a key step in fostering a stronger culture of long-term investment in our country and supporting greater financial resilience over time for individuals and families. We want to provide a simple, accessible and attractive framework for investment. The investment account will help individuals to put their savings to work, strengthen their economic resilience by helping people build assets, prepare for future financial needs, and improve their ability of our citizens to withstand economic shocks. It also contributes to the broader piece of work going on in deepening Europe's and Ireland's capital markets. While many of the parameters of the investment account have been shared and published in the roadmap on the taxation of retail investment this summer, a number of aspects, as the Deputy rightly suggests, will be announced on budget day, including the tax-free threshold, the flat rate of tax that will apply and the

maximum amount you can contribute to an account in one year. In that context, final estimates of initial costs to the Exchequer on the introduction of the investment account will be provided as part of budget 2027. We will also provide, as the Deputy seeks, an economic impact assessment of the proposed investment account. The assessment uses a modified version of the dynamic representative agent model developed by the European Commission. The model has been adjusted to incorporate Irish parameters and data. It examines the potential impact of the proposed account on household investment, wealth accumulation, consumption and Exchequer revenues over a 20-year period. It compares the introduction of the account with a baseline in which there is no policy change. The analysis uses Irish household wealth data from the European Central Bank and income data from the Central Statistics Office. It also takes account of international experiences. In addition, the staff working document published with the European Commission's recommendation on savings and investment accounts in 2025 considered the potential fiscal impact of introducing investment accounts on member states at the EU level and suggests that these changes would have a positive economic impact. To cut a long story short, yes, we will publish it, and it will be published in advance of this House considering legislation and the detail of that legislation, so that we will then have an opportunity to tease through it together.

Deputy Ged Nash: I expect then, from what the Tánaiste is saying, we will see more details next week in the budget but that a lot of the tax-related matters will be addressed in the context of the Finance Bill that we will be dealing with in early November. Figures published by the IBEC group, Financial Services Ireland, would suggest that there will be a conservative 10% adult uptake. It applies a €30,000 tax-free annual allowance so that is probably a threshold that has been inserted into the media and with which we are familiar. It said that its first-year cost estimate would be approximately €54 million in foregone tax receipts. Is that an estimate that is familiar to the Government? Is that the baseline on which it is working? I would find it useful if the Tánaiste could establish, given his clear interest in this issue - he has been interested in this issue for some time now - an assessment in terms of the number of savers who may take up the opportunity to engage in this form of an account in the first year or two.

Deputy Simon Harris: These are very fair questions. I am very happy to engage with them and we should engage with them in detail through the Finance Bill piece.

While we have seen a significant uptake in these accounts in a number of member states that have introduced them, I do not see this as a kind of light bulb or light switch moment. I see this more as a cultural change in terms of finance and investment that we will be on over a number of years and, if and when this works, I see this as being a moment that we will look back on in ten, 15 or 20 years, perhaps a bit like auto-enrolment, and see that it made a real and meaningful difference.

We need to make these decisions as a collective in government, but I expect the Exchequer impact, and I want to thank the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, for his work on this, to be very modest in the first year. I expect the economic assessment that I will publish to show the positive impact that this will have, which would also be in line with what the European Commission has found when it has looked at it on a member state level.

I have tried to put quite a lot on the record of the House in terms of the various information and methodology that we are following in terms of public finances. We want to get this right but the threshold-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): Go raibh maith agat, a Aire.

Deputy Simon Harris: Sorry, my apologies.

Deputy Ged Nash: There is probably never a good time to launch an initiative like this given with what is happening with the US Treasury at the moment. In addition, given the kind of investment that will take place because of the products available such as bonds, exchange-traded funds, ETFs, shares and so on, it may not be the best time ever to do it.

I will be straight with the Minister. I do not see this in the scheme of things as being a priority. It is something that will happen. It has to happen. I understand why people will want the money that they have on deposit in bank accounts that is not earning an awful lot in interest at the moment to work harder for them, but I have said it before and I will say it again, it may very well be a bit of a minority sport. The reality is that people who may be watching in this evening and people who are following Dáil proceedings, this will be the last thing on their mind during a cost-of-living crisis when they are finding it hard to pay the bills.

I have no issue with the principle of it. It very much aligns with the objectives of the European Union in terms of savings and investments, capital markets and so on. I have no issue with that, but there will be tax foregone. It may ultimately prove to be beneficial to our economy and society but time will tell.

Deputy Simon Harris: I very much agree that time will tell is a fair analysis of the situation, and I appreciate that the Deputy does not have an ideological or principled objection to it. I also appreciate that this House will want to get the detail right and will want to tease through that.

I fully accept that we are living through a cost-of-living crisis and I fully accept that that it is real, but alongside that there is data from the CSO published only in the past month that shows that Irish people are continuing to save in many cases. They are small amounts, and this is not the Government or the Oireachtas telling them to open an investment account, but for those people trying to set aside very small amounts and a few bob, we want them to be able have the same opportunities, and quite frankly they do not at the moment because the tax system has been too complex. People have had to be a tax expert or a wealthy person to be able to avail of investments. Over time I might be able to convince the Deputy that this is something that the labour movement and the Government can align on in terms of it actually being something that is fundamentally good for ordinary workers.

However, I fully accept that this is not in any way being put forward by the Government as a response to the cost-of-living crisis but more actually to building up economic resilience over time for households.

Tax Code

119. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance if he will consider further measures on excise duty to reduce the cost of petrol and diesel. [68617/26]

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The price of diesel is well above €2 per litre at the pumps right across this State, and at many of them it as high as €2.20. I am sure that the Tánaiste has noticed that. It is hammering people who have no alternative to driving. For many people in rural areas, their car is their connection and lifeline. They simply cannot do without it, whether it is going to work or dropping the kids to school. Does the Tánaiste accept that the situation has got worse since the Dáil was recalled? Does he accept that there is now a need for further intervention to reduce the cost at the pumps in the scale of further reductions in excise?

Deputy Simon Harris: I fully and factually have to accept that the price of diesel and petrol has risen further since the Dáil was recalled. That is a statement of fact and there is an onus on all of us in this House to work in a constructive fashion in terms of more proposals and ideas that we can consider together.

Faced with the sudden rise in global energy prices, we have taken a number of actions. We have taken actions that did reduce the price as to what it otherwise would have been at the pumps. We have provided targeted assistance for vulnerable households. We have introduced financial support for critical sectors with acute exposure to high fuel prices. We also have to continue, and we saw more measures today from the Minister Climate, Energy and the Environment, Deputy O'Brien, in relation to vital long-term investment to try to help people who are genuinely trying to transition but need support in terms of that, whether it is replacing the boiler or putting solar panels on the house.

We have seen over €1.3 billion in measures targeted at households, farmers, agricultural contractors, hauliers, and businesses. The Government has delivered one of the largest, if not the largest, support packages in the EU *per capita*. As we finalise the budget for next week, we are extremely conscious of the pressure that people are under when it comes to energy costs and energy prices.

We are actively endeavouring to advance a number of issues to provide assistance and certainty to people when it comes to energy, including on excise, and I have already signalled this.

We have got to be honest with people, and I think the Deputy accepts this, that there is no government in the world that can absorb all of the impact of the global energy shock. We have already temporarily reduced the mineral oil tax applying to petrol, auto diesel and marked gas oil, MGO. Inclusive of the reduction in the NORA levy, these changes save consumers and businesses 27 cent per litre of petrol, 32 cent per litre of auto diesel and 7.4 cent per litre of MGO.

It is perhaps because of those reasons that when I attended a meeting of the budgetary oversight committee last week, I was able to print out an article from the Euronews website that showed while diesel and petrol prices are still very high in Ireland, we were not featuring in the top ten in the European Union for petrol or diesel as of last week. I need to check them again this week. I am just making the point that the interventions are making a difference.

I have been very clear. We are not going to be a position to restore those excise measures in November as previously outlined, and we will be bringing forward more proposals to provide certainty for the winter in next month's budget.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I have said it numerous times. We cannot control the international price of a barrel of oil. We cannot control what happens in the Middle East or in the Strait of Hormuz, but what we can control in this House is the amount of tax we apply to petrol and diesel. When people are driving up to their petrol stations and they are being charged €2.20 for a litre of diesel and they need that car and the diesel in their tank to go to work, drop the kids to school, visit their mother or whatever, then that pressure is too much.

The resources are in the State. We can all accept that. The resources are in the State to help people at this time of need. I am putting it to the Tánaiste very clearly. When these prices are this high, the Government needs to go further. It has the ability to reduce excise further on petrol and diesel. It can do that. It can do it on the budget day, if it wants, which is only a couple of days away. It should have done it before this, but I am asking the Minister whether the Government will consider reducing excise further on petrol and diesel. It is a simple question. Is that under consideration?

Deputy Simon Harris: Quite frankly, we are considering the whole issue of energy in the round. We need to be truthful with people. I am not suggesting that the Deputy is not. We need to be truthful with people in relation to things like EU directives and how far we have gone. In fact, we have gone further, as the Deputy knows, than the EU directives and sought derogations in some cases already. We have also got to be honest with people, who rightly want us to be able to do a whole variety of things in the budget next week, that there is a limit to what we can do and what any government can do in relation to energy.

At the moment, as profiled by the financial resolutions passed in this House, the excise cuts are due to be reversed starting in November. That will not happen. As a Government, we have agreed to provide clarity and certainty for people for the winter months. There are also other pressing issues that the Deputy and others have highlighted around home heating oil, gas and perhaps the carbon tax that is applied in relation to that. There are limits in relation to that too under the ETS2 derogation, but there is room to do stuff.

There are lots of ways of helping people with energy and cost of living and some of them are not related to energy, such as things like income tax proposals and childcare costs. People do not look at what they have at the end of the week or month based on which Department did what. They look at the overall package that the Government brings forward and we will bring forward a range of cost-of-living measures next week.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I told the Minister a couple of weeks ago that the Government's plan to reintroduce excise on petrol and diesel was nuts. Putting up carbon tax in two weeks' time in October and then further on 1 November is absolute bonkers. That is why we voted against it. Let us be clear: the Government will get no pats on the back from people for saying "I am not making your lives worse." What people expect from a Government is of course that not to make things harder, but when diesel and petrol prices are high, and the diesel price is €2.20 per litre, they want the Government to use some of the resources that workers collectively

across this State have created. They want the Government to use the additional VAT that was brought into the Government's coffers, including €300 million more than expected at the end of August because prices are so high, to reduce excise further.

The Minister did not answer the question. He said that the Government is looking at everything in the context of energy. My question was not about energy broadly. My question is about petrol and diesel. Workers and families want to know whether the Government understands the pressure they are under. Is the Government considering further excise reductions on petrol and diesel?

Deputy Simon Harris: Where the Deputy and I have disagreed on this, and we have disagreed on a few points, is that the Government has taken the approach, which we actually think is the right approach, to be agile and nimble, locking in decisions for long periods, when, with the greatest of respect, the Deputy or I did not know what was going to happen the Strait of Hormuz and whether it was going to get better or worse. The Deputy and I did not know that. Locking in taxpayers' money actually takes away the ability to be agile or nimble. We have shown every time as a Government that we have responded and respectfully the Deputy has suggested every time that we were going to put it back up but we have not. We are being agile and nimble. We are using taxpayers' money - we have to look at it in the round - to help people in the here and now.

What we have done with petrol and diesel has not just helped at the pumps. It has suppressed inflation in the economy by around 0.6%, so it has had a positive impact on food prices too.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Will the Tánaiste answer the question?

Deputy Simon Harris: The answer to the question is that all of these are matters for budget day next Tuesday. The Government will consider all of them. The Deputy would not expect, because he has been at this a while, any other answer from me-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: If it is to one of the newspapers, the Tánaiste will leak like the *Titanic*.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): Deputy, please.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: He will leak like the *Titanic*.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): Deputy, it is the Tánaiste's opportunity--

Deputy Simon Harris: I look forward to engaging-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: If there is a journalist in the corridor, he will tell him everything, but, by God, will he tell the Dáil-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): Deputies, the time for the question has expired.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: -----or the people of Ireland who are worried about their fuel bills? If there are any journalists here, maybe we will get an answer to the question-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): We are moving on to-----

Deputy Simon Harris: I read Siobhán Fenton's book recently.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): -----an Teachta Tony McCormack.

Deputy Simon Harris: She gave a very good insight into how Deputy Doherty performs in this House. I think it is on page 154.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): An Teachta Tony McCormack, the floor is yours.

Deputy Simon Harris: It is a good description. She says he is a nice man and just acts for the cameras.

Business Supports

120. **Deputy Tony McCormack** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance his plans to implement the recommendations of the cost of business advisory forum report that come under the remit of his Department. [68706/26]

Deputy Tony McCormack: Before I start, I would like to offer my sympathies to the family, friends and work colleagues of Mihai Chinez and Denisa Chinez, who lost their lives so tragically in a workplace accident yesterday at Banagher Precast Concrete.

What are the Minister's plans to implement the recommendations from the cost of business advisory forum report that relate to his Department?

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Robert Troy): I thank the Deputy for his question and echo his words of sympathy to the families who were bereaved yesterday.

The Government is conscious of the challenges facing all businesses in the current economic climate. The programme for Government sets out a range of commitments to support small and medium enterprises, SMEs, and promote innovation, economic growth and entrepreneurship while maintaining competitiveness. This is an ongoing process.

The report of the cost of business advisory forum was published on 28 August. This is an industry-led report. It was facilitated by the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment and established as one of the commitments under the programme for Government to examine the factors contributing to the cost of doing business in Ireland and identify practical measures

to improve competitiveness. The forum brought together business representative bodies from retail and tourism to agriculture and the multinational sector, alongside Departments and State agencies. It was designed to facilitate a solution-focused dialogue between businesses, policymakers, regulators and experts who have insight into the factors driving the rising costs of business in Ireland. A number of meetings of the forum have taken place since its establishment in June 2025. These focused on insurance costs, regulation and planning, water services, legal costs, regulation and compliance and banking, payments and financial services. The report contains 63 recommendations aimed at reducing business costs, strengthening competitiveness and easing regulatory burdens. A number of these come within my Department's remit.

My colleague the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment has contacted the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance, Deputy Harris, as well as other relevant Ministers to assess the feasibility, resource implications and potential impacts of individual recommendations and identify priorities for action. The Government is committed to progressing practical measures that reduce the cost of doing business, enhance competitiveness and support a favourable operating environment for SMEs and enterprise. I am advised that the forum will reconvene in January 2027 to review progress made to date.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I welcome this report and the 63 recommendations it contains. I also welcome the commitments outlined by the Minister of State to identify practical measures that can reduce the cost of doing business. A number of these recommendations fall within the remit of the Department of Finance. They could make a real difference, particularly to small businesses. I ask the Minister of State to give us an indication of the priorities within his Department and what practical progress he would like to see made before the forum meets again in January.

Deputy Robert Troy: I thank the Deputy and acknowledge his interest in and advocacy for SMEs. Indeed, as my party's spokesperson, he has been to the fore in raising the issues facing SMEs, not just in his own constituency but across Ireland. His own experience as an SME operator means that he can speak with real authority in terms of the challenges facing SMEs. It is important that we listen to people like him who are operating businesses and who understand the challenges.

One of the key issues that falls under my area of responsibility is ensuring reduced insurance costs for businesses. We did considerable work in the lifetime of the previous Government in terms of the action plan on insurance costs, publishing the personal injury guidelines, bringing down the cost of claims and enhancing the role of the Injuries Resolution Board and the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission in order to ensure that we create more competition in the insurance industry. Some 57% of SMEs are now paying less than €1,000 in annual insurance premia. A total of 90% of businesses are paying less than €5,000 in annual insurance premia.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I compliment the Minister of State and his Department on the work they have done on insurance. The cost of insurance was one of the main findings of the report. This is something that many businesses are under pressure with. I want to focus on one area that is particularly important for small businesses, which is access to credit. The report

identifies limited competition in business banking and high borrowing costs as problems for small businesses. Access to affordable credit can decide whether businesses can buy equipment, take on another employee, invest in new technology or enter a new market. The forum recommends examining the case for a State SME bank. We already have State-backed structures that support business finance. Will the Minister of State ensure that this recommendation is properly assessed? More broadly, can we examine whether small businesses are actually getting enough affordable credit from the current system? We talk about helping Irish businesses to start, grow and become exporters, but access to finance is essential if we want that to happen.

Deputy Robert Troy: I could not agree more, and that is something I advocated strongly for when I was a Minister of State in the Department of enterprise in the previous Government. Establishing a new State bank will be fully considered by my Department, including in the context of conducting any necessary further stakeholder consultation. I would like to draw the Deputy's attention to a large number of State supports that are currently in place to help SMEs to access credit. These include the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland, SBCI, Ireland's national promotional bank, which was established in 2014 to deliver financial supports that address failures in the Irish credit market while driving competition and innovation and ensuring the efficient use of available EU resources. The SBCI will have provided about €5 billion in lending to more than 66,000 SMEs to the end of 2026.

I would also point to recent changes to the credit union lending regulations by the Central Bank that are enabling credit unions to lend up to 15% of their assets to SMEs. That is an area in which I see real growth opportunities to support SMEs going forward.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Cross-Border Co-operation

121. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance to report on the progress made on a new double taxation convention between the UK and Ireland with the aim of improving cross border labour mobility. [68631/26]

122. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance whether he intends to engage with the British Government on the issue of cross-Border workers, people who live in the North and work in the South, who face numerous tax anomalies. [68200/26]

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Cross-Border working is an increasingly important feature in our all-island economy, with thousands of people crossing the Border every day to work. Brexit and the growth of remote and hybrid working have exposed practical difficulties for workers and employers dealing with two tax systems and different rules. Negotiations on a new double taxation convention between the Irish and British Governments present an important opportunity to simplify these arrangements. What progress has been made in these negotiations and when are they expected to conclude? What practical improvements will they deliver for cross-Border workers and for their employers?

Deputy Simon Harris: I propose to take questions Nos. 121 and 122 together.

I thank Deputy Conway-Walsh for the question and for her ongoing engagement on this issue. This is a matter that I am determined to get done. I had a good discussion with the new Chancellor of the Exchequer in the UK, John Healy, on the matter when he was in Dublin for the informal ECOFIN meeting. The two questions concern cross-Border working on the island of Ireland. I can inform Deputy Conway-Walsh that progressing and enhancing the all-island labour market is a priority for me, my Department and the Government of Ireland.

The tax treatment associated with cross-Border working has been subject to ongoing discussions in recent years, particularly in light of the increase in remote working as a result of the pandemic. However, cross-Border working gives rise to complex issues involving shared taxing rights between different jurisdictions. There are potential issues for employees, employers, and Exchequer revenues, with a wide range of policy issues requiring consideration including around double non-taxation and the likes. There is also the need to respect long-established international tax principles. Nonetheless, it is absolutely necessary from an all-Ireland labour market perspective to find a satisfactory solution to the issue. I am pleased that the Irish and British Governments are committed to finding a solution.

Deputy Conway-Walsh will be aware that the second annual UK-Ireland Summit, which was held in Cork on 12 March, acknowledged and committed to this work being undertaken in order to address the complexities of the cross-Border issue. The joint statement that arose from that summit welcomed agreement to engage on reaching a decision on this issue and the commitment to reviewing a bilateral Ireland-UK approach to address concerns arising from hybrid cross-Border work.

9 o'clock

Engagement on this matter between my departmental officials, Revenue officials and His Majesty's Revenue and Customs, HMRC, commenced in 2025 to facilitate an exchange of views, share experiences and consider recent developments in relation to cross-Border tax issues. Revenue and HMRC officials are currently considering various approaches in the context of a broader renegotiation of the double taxation agreement with the UK, with a view to finding a solution on cross-Border working and also to update and modernise the double taxation agreement, which is now almost 50 years old. The Deputy will be aware that the double taxation agreement is an international treaty. Such agreements are strictly confidential while under negotiation. As this particular agreement is still in the process of renegotiation, I cannot discuss further details of either the process or the substance of the negotiations other than to say that all double taxation agreements must be brought before the Oireachtas prior to ratification.

Revenue is aware of the uncertainty faced by employees and employers regarding the taxation of employment income. Where the employee can avail of a hybrid working engagement, he or she could live in one jurisdiction and work in the other. These are common daily realities for many people. The negotiations are at an advanced stage. I engaged recently in Dublin with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the progress. We are committed to finding a mutually acceptable solution to cross-Border hybrid working. While I cannot give the House a definitive timeline, I can say that the negotiations are going well and I expect we will bring them to a conclusion to everybody's satisfaction. I will keep the Deputy informed.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I appreciate that the Tánaiste cannot give the details here tonight. I am raising this issue because I want it to be an absolute priority. Ten years on from the Brexit referendum, cross-Border workers are still dealing every day with uncertainty and complexity. In excess of 18,000 workers crossed the Border, along with €17 billion in trade, in 2025. We need to make it as seamless as possible for workers and employers.

A few months ago, we spoke in this Chamber about the fiscal implications of a united Ireland. Here we have the fiscal implications of partition on our island. People living on one side of the Border and working on the other can find themselves navigating two tax administrations alongside different rules on social protection, pensions and employment rights. Where somebody works from home for part of the week, questions can arise around tax liabilities and employer obligations. This creates uncertainty, not only for workers, but also for businesses that might otherwise recruit people from across the Border. We should be making it easier to live, work and employ people on an all-island basis, rather than allowing administrative barriers to discourage labour mobility.

Deputy Simon Harris: I agree with that fully. While we are here talking, quite rightly, about an all-island economy and the better shared future we want to build, I am conscious of the very tense situation in the North tonight. With the Taoiseach, I engaged on that today with the Deputy's party leader and with Michelle O'Neill. We are all thinking tonight of a community in which people are feeling a sense of trauma and retraumatisation. Nobody ever wants to see us brought back to the previous time. It would be odd to have the conversation arising out of these questions without acknowledging that context and backdrop.

The Deputy is right that there is too much conversation in the media of what is nearly a gotcha question as to how much a unified island would cost. There would also be huge benefits from an all-island economy. I welcome her constructive engagement on the discussion we had in this House on the dynamic effects. There would be some upfront costs, of course, but there also would be huge benefits. The idea of having to give one figure for the cost is not helpful. I try to put useful data on the record of the House.

In the here and now, as we prepare to build our shared future and, I hope, a unified island into the future, there are practical issues arising for cross-Border workers. There are people who live on one side of the Border and work on the other. There are people working some days on one side of the Border and some days on the other. We need to fix this issue and get it right. It is a personal priority for me and for my Department, and also for Revenue from a practical point of view. In fairness, I think it is also a priority for the UK Treasury. It is an outcome of the UK-Ireland summit in Cork last year. I am committed to getting it done and we want it done as quickly as possible. The fact that we are also doing some broader work is not to delay that. The double taxation agreement review is also a good thing in terms of east-west processes. I will let the Deputy know as soon as we have progress on that. Both the Chancellor of the Exchequer and I have noted the good progress that is being made.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I, too, send solidarity to the residents of the Garvaghy Road. What is happening there is an absolute disgrace. I appeal to the Tánaiste, as a member of the Government and leader of his party, to get the Taoiseach and the Government to act immediately. We cannot let this continue. We know what needs to be done. There will be no march down the Garvaghy Road. People need to understand that. The Secretary of State must

play the role he has to play in this as co-guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement. We met the residents here last week. What they have been put through is not right, and it is not right for it to continue another day. We cannot be spectators in this. The Government has a role to play, as does the British Government. There must be intervention. There is no way that the Parades Commission should ever have made that decision. It was totally wrong, and it was a wrong done to every person on this island.

Deputy Simon Harris: The Parades Commission got this extraordinarily wrong. I am very clear on that. There has been good engagement with the Deputy's party leader and with Michelle O'Neill in her capacity as party vice president. To be fair to everybody, the Taoiseach is extraordinarily engaged on this issue; of that there is absolutely no doubt. My colleague, the Minister for foreign affairs, is in the North this evening. We are engaging closely with the Deputy's party colleagues.

I, too, had the opportunity to meet the Garvaghy Road residents when they were here last week. What really struck me was that they are decent people who all have simply worked far too hard for far too long to ever go back to the situation of the past. The Deputy will know this, because she has been up there with the community, but they told me of the young people who had grown up expecting this conflict to be just a distant memory. We are never going back and we cannot go back.

The most important thing in the here and now is that space be created. I do not want to say anything to cut across that process other than that we are, and will remain, very engaged as a Government and as co-guarantors of a peace agreement that so many people have worked so hard to get to this point. I heard a woman speaking on "Morning Ireland" this morning who is a Garvaghy Road resident. She talked about how her children were growing up playing with children from another community tradition in a way that would not have been imaginable in the past. Even if this issue ended today, and we all hope it does, there is a level of trauma and retraumatisation that is real after the events of the past few days. We will all have to work together on that in the time ahead.

We continue to work together in a sensible, all-island way to resolve the taxation issue for the future. There are very practical implications for people, regardless of their political tradition. We can do much better for cross-Border workers and I am determined to bring the matter to a close.

Tax Yield

123. **Deputy Louis O'Hara** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance to outline the amount of carbon tax collected for the years 2024, 2025 and to date in 2026. [68497/26]

Deputy Louis O'Hara: Will the Tánaiste outline the amount of carbon tax collected in 2024, 2025 and to date in 2026 and how he proposes to support householders who have borne the brunt of continuing increases in that tax in recent years?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy for his question. The carbon tax has been a central pillar of Ireland's climate policy framework. It has provided a clear and credible long-term

signal in terms of our work as a country to transition away from fossil fuels and move towards a low-carbon economy.

Provision was introduced in the Finance Act 2020 to provide for annual increases in carbon tax rates up to May 2030. Carbon tax rates on petrol and auto-diesel are generally legislated to increase at budget time each year up to 2029, with the increase delayed until 1 May for all other fuels up to 2030. In April, the Government deferred the 1 May 2026 carbon tax increase on home heating fuels and marked gas oil, MGO, until October in light of the extraordinary circumstances and increased fuel prices created by the conflict in the Middle East. I am advised by Revenue that the amount of carbon tax collected was €1.067 billion in 2024 and €1.176 billion in 2025. The provisional figure to the end of August this year was €866 million.

Revenues raised from the carbon tax are allocated for expenditure on just transition and climate-positive measures, including funding social welfare measures, agri-environmental schemes and retrofitting programmes. The net impact of the combined measures funded by the carbon tax has consistently been shown to be progressive. As of budget 2026, the Government has allocated over €4.2 billion in carbon tax revenue for those purposes since 2020. Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, analysis consistently shows that the lower income deciles are better off as a result of the social protection measures funded by the increased carbon tax.

The Government remains committed to our climate action policy, which includes the carbon tax. However, we took the decision to pause the 1 May increase to help alleviate fuel price pressures being faced by households and businesses. In budget 2026, €1.114 billion was allocated to climate action measures and to ensure the most vulnerable were protected from the unintended impacts of the increase.

I will make one further point in the interests of fully informing the House.

As the Deputy has heard me say before, we published a tax strategy group paper over the summer. It outlined different ways one could consider the carbon tax reforms that could be made. We are considering that in the round and I have particularly signalled that changes be considered for kerosene and gas.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: Households across the State are under massive pressure at the moment when it comes to the cost of filling their car and heating their homes. In terms of home heating oil, we brought forward proposals on eight different occasions just this year to remove the carbon tax on home heating oil, but the Government has opposed that on every single occasion. There has been no reduction of carbon tax or excise duty on home heating oil this year, while prices have gone through the roof. Over the past number of years, we have seen successive Governments heap more upward pressure on the cost of home heating fuels, petrol and diesel through continued carbon tax increases, and there are further ones planned all the way through to 2030. The carbon tax is a regressive tax which forces the most vulnerable and disadvantaged households in this State to pay a premium. These are households that very often have no other alternatives available to them. The ongoing fuel price crisis shows us that when the cost of fuel and home heating oil increases, it is the most vulnerable and most disadvantaged people who feel the impact the most. The ongoing increases are going to further exacerbate that inequality. When will the Tánaiste finally acknowledge this reality, stop pretending that high carbon tax and tax increases are working, and give households a break?

Deputy Simon Harris: I appreciate that when it comes its application, the carbon tax is not equally felt by all citizens. I take the point that the data shows that those living in rural Ireland are twice as likely to use home heating oil as a fuel source - as an example - as those living in larger towns and cities. According to the latest available CSO figures, around 26% of households in Ireland use it as their main heating fuel, so that is probably around half a million households. The Government understands that these are disproportionately older households, disproportionately rural, and in a lot of cases, lower income households as well. Many households are eligible for the fuel allowance. We extended it by four weeks earlier this year, meaning that close to 470,000 households will have benefited from additional payments, totalling €152 per household. The fuel allowance season has now commenced for this winter period. I am also conscious that there are those who use home heating oil who do not qualify for the payments, so the upcoming budget will consider all of these issues in the round.

We would also have to consider - I think the Deputy is endeavouring to do this too - that we stay on the right side of the ETS2 derogation. We do not want any unintended consequences in relation to any changes that may be brought forward.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: The Tánaiste says that he understands but this year he has not done anything on home heating oil. He has not reduced the excise duty or the carbon tax on that at a time when prices have increased massively. We all understand that prices have increased because of the conflict in the Middle East. The Government still had options available to it to alleviate that pressure for households, but it has simply chosen not to do so. That needs to happen as a matter of urgency. The Government needs to completely remove the carbon tax from home heating oil to give households a break. Carbon tax increases need to be taken off the table. In the context of the prices we have at the moment and people, especially in rural Ireland, not having the alternatives available to them, it is totally unjustifiable for the Government to continue to proceed with these increases. They should be taken off the table. What choice does a person have if they are renting and their landlord does not want to get rid of the oil tank? What choice does a person have in rural Ireland where there is no public transport available to them, where they have to put petrol or diesel in the car? They cannot afford an expensive electric vehicle. These tax increases are anti-rural. They disproportionately impact low-income households and the Government needs to acknowledge that reality. Remove the carbon tax completely from home heating oil. Cut the tax on petrol and diesel as well to continue to give people a break, because households cannot sustain any more increases.

Deputy Simon Harris: We can have a difference of view on this. We have taken a number of measures to try to help people with energy and fuel supports. It is probably the largest in the European Union *per capita*. I agree with the Deputy on the point that not everybody is in a position to change their home heating oil tank. I think particularly of older people as well. It just simply might not work for people. Quite frankly, there is a difference between saying do not increase the taxes versus a complete abolition of the tax. We need to operate in this space while being conscious of the ETS2 derogation. We all take our views and our advices in relation to this. We have a derogation from opting into the ETS. We do not want to have a situation where we transfer revenues being collected by one form of taxation and spent domestically here over to a large payment of billions of euro to the European Union. We have to consider all of those issues. The tax strategy group paper, which no doubt Sinn Féin will be

considering as part of its alternative budget too, talks about trajectories and different products. The Deputy is correct; there are things the Government can choose to do. The Government cannot do everything. The Government can help people with costs in general, including the cost of energy and filling the home heating tank through a variety of means, including the income tax system.

Banking Sector

124. **Deputy Martin Daly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance the steps he is taking to ensure adequate access to cash and in-person banking services in rural communities, particularly towns in counties Roscommon and Galway; the way in which the effectiveness of the access-to-cash framework is being assessed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [68571/26]

Deputy Martin Daly: I ask the Minister the steps being taken to ensure adequate access to cash and in-person banking services in rural communities, particularly in towns in the counties of Roscommon and Galway, and how the effectiveness of the access-to-cash framework is being assessed under the Finance Act (Provision of Access to Cash Infrastructure) 2025.

Deputy Robert Troy: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. The Government is committed to ensuring that cash remains available as a means of payment and last year put legislation in place to achieve the same. The Finance (Provision of Access to Cash Infrastructure Act) 2025, which was commenced on 13 June 2025, implements a recommendation from the 2022 retail banking review as part of the legislative framework. The section 5 order issued under the Act established criteria to ensure that access to cash infrastructure across the State remains sufficient and effective. Designated entities which are credit institutions that hold prescribed percentages of current accounts and household deposits are responsible for ensuring those criteria are met. The Central Bank is responsible for monitoring and enforcing the access-to-cash framework on a quarterly basis. This includes assessing the number of cash service points and the ATMs against the criteria prescribed in the section 5 order.

The initial quarterly reports published by the Central Bank indicate that the levels of cash infrastructure remain broadly in line with those criteria. Where non-compliance is identified, the designated entities are responsible for taking the necessary steps to address it. In addition to the access-to-cash criteria, the Central Bank has implemented a local deficiency framework, effective since 1 July this year. The framework allows members of the public to notify the Central Bank where they believe there is inefficient access to cash services in their locality, even where the access-to-cash criteria for the wider region have been met. Perhaps that is something the Deputy is referring to in his own constituency. The Central Bank has published guidelines detailing how it will assess submissions, make determinations on whether a local deficiency in cash infrastructure exists, and decide if remediation is required. The guidelines are available on the Central Bank's website, along with a cash access map, to help individuals to identify the location of cash services in their area.

Deputy Martin Daly: I thank the Minister of State for his answer and I am reassured by what he tells me. Cash is still a vital component of our economy, especially in rural areas. In my own town of Ballygar, County Galway, we lost the Bank of Ireland in 2021 and access to 24-hour cash. It took a considerable campaign by the Ballygar Regeneration Group to get the Athenry Credit Union to install an ATM in June of this year. Cash still remains a critical safety net for individual groups, especially elderly people, people who are living with disability or people who may have an intellectual disability. It is a tool for social inclusion. It allows for immediate settlement of bills and it is a fundamental safeguard for consumer privacy. It is also a real backup in cases where the digital infrastructure around money transfers may fail or in the case of a natural disaster.

Deputy Robert Troy: I could not agree more with the Deputy. It is critically important that we retain the use of cash and that it is available and acceptable by all businesses. It is a legitimate way of paying for goods and services. I will address what has been done to correct deficiencies in the Deputy's constituency, which he is focusing on this evening. The most recent quarterly access to cash report published by the Central Bank, based on data collected as of 30 June, identified a non-compliance with the criteria in the west region, of which counties Galway and Roscommon are part. Specifically, deficits were identified in the number of ATMs per 100,000 people and the percentage of the population that should be within 10 km of a cash service point.

Detailed information on the number and location of ATM cash service points is available on the Central Bank website. The Central Bank has issued a non-compliance notification to the designated entities and after receipt of the notification, the designated entities have at least one month and up to eight weeks to present proposals to the bank for addressing each instance of non-compliance. Regarding what the Deputy is raising in the Chamber today, the Central Bank is acutely aware of where there are deficiencies and is already acting on that.

Deputy Martin Daly: I thank the Minister of State for his reply. I take the reassurance that there is a constant monitoring of cash access and that the system is responsive to individual communities and groups that have a problem in accessing cash.

I come back to the idea that rural communities depend on cash. Due to the lack of transport links and accessibility to ATMs or other banking services, it helps people who are unbanked and those who rely on settling their day-to-day grocery bills and transactions in cash. It is an accessible, physical means of exchange for vulnerable citizens. It also helps increased budget management for many people because cash is a tangible thing for them. In a world of increasing loss of privacy for individual citizens where major corporations control our identities and data, it is most important that we have the safety net of cash in our society.

Deputy Robert Troy: "Local deficiencies" is the term used in the legislation for where particular difficulties arise in accessing cash in NUTS 3 regions. Even if a region meets the designations but people locally feel that particular pockets within the overall region are adversely affected, there is the mechanism whereby a local person or representative can notify the Central Bank directly. The Central Bank will then assess each submission and determine whether that particular local geographical area warrants a remedy. There is a very clear mechanism whereby local areas can ensure that access to cash is readily available. As a fourth-

generation postmaster in a small village in Westmeath, what I would say is that, if people do not use services such as that, they will lose them. It is critical that people use the services that are there because we only miss the water when the well runs dry. Services such as the post office and credit union, particularly in rural Ireland, are critical for ensuring that people who are not banking literate have the ability to carry on their daily lives, pay their bills, access the cash, etc. I will put the call out there to use the services that are in people's localities because if they do not, they will lose them.

Vacant Properties

125. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance for an update on the collection of the vacant homes tax. [68491/26]

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Deputy Gould ask me to take this in his absence. Obviously, we have been waiting a long time for the vacant homes tax to be introduced. There was a collection of data and so on. It has been introduced now. We understand that the collection rates are very low. I am asking the Minister for an update. We have the 2025 self-assessed data, but what is the most recent data the Minister has? Have we seen a spike in terms of compliance? What options is the Department looking at for this year? I think we can accept that the tax is not working in its current form.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Doherty and Deputy Gould, whom I know has a particular interest in this. The vacant homes tax was introduced in 2022. The tax is currently charged at seven times the base rate of local property tax. Following re-evaluation last year, in which all local property tax charges were increased by a small to moderate amount, vacant homes tax will scale accordingly. The tax operates on a self-assessment basis where the number of properties in scope and the amount of tax payable depends on the self-assessed returns submitted by property owners, the number of properties declared as liable and the number of property owners entitled to claim available exemptions from the tax. There was a decrease in the number of properties liable for the vacant homes tax between the first and second chargeable periods and a further decrease between the second and third chargeable periods. This is not unexpected, given the behavioural nature of the tax, its objective of bringing vacant residential properties into use and the level of demand, which we all know, for housing in the State.

Regarding the collection of vacant homes tax, I am advised by Revenue that, from January to August of this year, approximately €1.34 million was collected in vacant homes tax. As the Deputy is aware, I intend to introduce a new derelict property tax in this year's budget. Further details about the tax will be part of budget 2027, which I hope we can then legislate for in the Finance Bill. Creating and introducing the new tax this year is a key priority for my Department. It is hoped that this tax will paint a clear picture of the level of dereliction across our towns and cities. The data collected will help inform local and national decisions regarding long-term vacant and derelict properties. I will continue to work with colleagues to ensure that any further interventions are appropriately calibrated and represent the best use of resources.

The new measure will try to build on the progress we have made to date in relation to vacancy and dereliction. The derelict properties tax - a robust one using Revenue - is the way

to go. We will be outlining details of that in the budget but looking to legislate across the House on this between now and the end of year.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: My understanding, and the Minister might correct me if I am wrong, is that dereliction and vacancy are two different things.

Deputy Simon Harris: They are, yes.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: We are talking about apples and oranges here. The Minister is talking about a derelict properties tax. That is fine; a property that is derelict is visibly derelict. We are talking about vacant homes. We are talking about how the whole idea of this tax is to get homes into usage and to penalise people for leaving properties vacant and not using them in the middle of a housing crisis. We have argued time and again for many years with the Government to introduce this tax and to make it stronger and its rates higher.

Crucially, we cannot have the situation where the Central Statistics Office, CSO, says there are 70,000 vacant properties. I accept that not all of the 70,000 would fall under the scope of this tax because of some of the caveats and exemptions that are there, but it is not the case that there are only 2,361 vacant properties across the State. It is just not the case. This has been going on, and what I have not heard from the Minister is how he is going to fix it. He is telling me that he is going to introduce a different tax for a different type of property. That is not what I am interested in at the minute. I am interested in the tax that has existed for the last four years. It is simply not working. Has the Minister any proposals to actually fix this? Are we going to see anything in the budget that is going to fix this or is the Minister just going to leave it the way it is?

Deputy Simon Harris: I fully understand and agree that vacancy and dereliction are two different things, but the taxes are all aimed at the same purpose of making sure that we get homes back into use. A tax of vacant residential property is one policy tool to address vacancy but it is also a behavioural change tax. It is about making sure that people do not leave houses in vacancy. We would expect, when we bring in a tax, that behavioural change will start to take effect.

I take the Deputy's point. He referenced the 70,000 figure while also acknowledging that there may be many that do not meet the definition of vacancy. When Revenue looked through all of this, as the Deputy will remember when all of this was introduced, it wrote to around 25,000 property owners who were potentially within the scope of the vacant homes tax. Many of the property owners declared them as being occupied and for the first chargeable period of the tax, there were about 6,800 properties declared as vacant. Some 2,800 of them claimed an exemption from the tax. In the first chargeable period, which went from November 2022 to October 2023, there were 3,910 properties liable for the vacant homes tax. That reduced in the next chargeable period to 2,357. In the third chargeable period, from November 2024 to October 2025, there were 1,655 properties liable. Therefore, we see this as a tax that is actually bringing about behavioural change. The next focus from a Revenue perspective and a Government perspective will be tackling what we believe to be the bigger issue around derelict properties.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister has announced the derelict properties tax numerous times, but derelict properties are derelict properties and are harder to get into use in the system than vacant homes. Of course we need the tax on them - that should absolutely happen - but it is not a case of looking at something else and forgetting about the fact that this tax here, which has been introduced for the last four years, is not working. I still have not heard anything from the Minister that suggests there is going to be any change. He has brought in a tax that allows people to self-declare that a house is not vacant. Is there any follow up in relation to this?

Is there a compliance issue? Has the Tánaiste sat down with Revenue? Is he concerned that fewer than 10% of those who got these letters are paying the tax? Is he concerned that a tiny fraction of the owners of properties that the CSO identifies as vacant are in compliance when it comes to the tax?

We are in the middle of a housing crisis. The accepted view is that a large number of homes are vacant. The idea behind this behavioural tax is that you would tax people in order to get these properties into use. Have 10,000 or 20,000 houses gone into the private rental sector as single tenancies? No, they have not. It has gone in the other direction. All the evidence points towards there not being a massive change in behaviour. On foot of that, one can only be led to believe that this tax is not working and is not being complied with.

Deputy Simon Harris: Revenue does a very good job of collecting taxation in this country. That is why there are often calls in this House for derelict properties to be handed over to Revenue, because Revenue has teeth. As the Deputy knows, Revenue has powers under the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 to address compliance or non-compliance with legislation. It has the power to require a chargeable person to file a vacant homes tax return. It has powers to make inquiries, raise and amend assessments and request a chargeable person to provide certain records. If anyone has evidence of people not complying with taxation law, I am sure Revenue would be very interested in that, particularly as it also has the power to issue a notice to a chargeable person requiring them to provide records to demonstrate that their property was in use as a dwelling for 30 days or more in a chargeable period. Where such records are not provided or where the records provided are insufficient, Revenue may deem the property to be vacant for the purposes of the vacant homes tax.

It is entirely possible that when this House legislates on vacancy and links it with the local property tax structure, behaviour does change and that, therefore, the number of properties that become eligible for tax, when it is a behavioural change tax, actually falls. We keep these issues under review, but Revenue does have significant enforcement powers.

Disability Issues

126. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance whether changes to the tax system are being considered for budget 2027 to better recognise the additional costs faced by persons with disabilities, including the cost of transport, energy and medical and assistive equipment; and whether additional or enhanced tax reliefs in this area are under consideration. [68536/26]

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Are changes to the tax system being considered? I understand that the Tánaiste will not be announcing anything this evening, but I ask that anything relating to people with disabilities, particularly in the context of the cost of transport, energy, medical and assistive equipment, be pushed. Are additional or enhanced tax reliefs in this area under consideration? Is the Department working on anything relating respite or overnight stays for people with disabilities?

Deputy Simon Harris: Across Government - and I know this is an issue the Deputy is passionate about - we recognise the significant financial pressures experienced by households, particularly the financial pressures being experienced by households in which there is a person with a disability, amid the heightened cost-of-living environment that obtains. In response, we have implemented a number of measures to try to help the most vulnerable.

When this Government took office, we committed to a step change in the delivery of supports and services for people with disabilities in line with our programme for Government commitments. The previous budget was the first step in delivering on this. We provided €3.83 billion to specialist disability services this year. That is an increase of almost 20%, or €618 million. It was worth every penny and was vital, but it was a much larger increase than went to pretty much any other Department. It is going to be vital in the context of delivering on the national human rights strategy for disabled persons.

There are already a number of measures within the tax system that support people with disabilities and carers. These include tax relief for health expenses, which provides relief to individuals who have incurred costs in respect of qualifying health expenses, such as, for example, their medical equipment. In addition, substantial measures relating to income tax and the universal social charge have obviously reduced the tax burden for all workers in recent years. Broadly speaking, the income tax measures implemented over the period of the previous Government were in line with wage growth. In order to support people with energy costs, we took a number of measures.

To answer Deputy Heneghan's direct question, the tax system is not the only vehicle in this regard. That is why we are committed to introducing a cost-of-disability payment. Work is being done by the Minister, Deputy Calleary, on that. I met the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, earlier today, and there is good work being done in relation to respite services, which is a key issue. The Government will look at this matter in the round across a range of Departments in the context of what we can do to help people with both service provision and costs. The Government is very committed to introducing a cost-of-disability payment in this year's budget.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I will always push for plug-in solar. The Tánaiste sent a lovely letter to my office regarding finance and directly helping on that. We need to make it easily available for people across Ireland and do a pilot scheme for those with disabilities or those who live in rented accommodation. I appreciate the support I got from the Tánaiste's office in that letter.

I recently attended the Before We Die national assembly at the Helix, which is located in my old university. That campaign asks one fundamental question, namely who will care for adult children - people's sons and daughters - with intellectual disabilities when ageing parents

are no longer able to do so? At the Helix, figures which show that 2,314 adults with intellectual disabilities are living with parents over the age of 70 were presented. More than 500 are living with parents over the age of 80. These families are providing lifelong care. Some of the supports the Tánaiste mentioned are a help to them. In the context of budget 2027, will he examine whether the tax system can give greater recognition to families caring for those with disabilities, particularly older parents who continue to provide full-time care, in circumstances where appropriate supports or residential provision are not available?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy for his ongoing interest in and genuine expertise regarding the issue of renewables and plug-in solar, and for his correspondence. I continue to engage with colleagues across Government on that. We will keep in touch with the Deputy in respect of it.

I also thank the Deputy for raising the Before We Die campaign. This is something we are discussing right across Government. The Taoiseach and I, along with relevant Ministers, intend to meet this group again shortly. The Taoiseach and I have already met its representatives. I would argue that many if not all Ministers have met the group, as have so many other TDs. The group is right. There are real issues here. There are some legislative issues that it has highlighted, but there are also a number of practical issues. If we are building more homes - not enough, but more - in our communities. If we are building more social homes than at any time since the seventies, even a small change in a community in terms of a percentage of those homes being provided for those with disabilities could really move the dial. There is a lot of good work going on with the Ministers for housing and disability on this matter.

On tax and expenditure, we will have to wait until next week's budget. We will engage during the week on specific measures, but people can expect that a cost-of-disability payment to be introduced in the budget.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I appreciate that. I look forward to next week. In respect of the budget, what the Independents and I have been pushing for is relief for those with disabilities. They need to be protected and looked after, particularly in the context of what the Before We Die campaign has highlighted. They also need to be catered for in relation to the greater context of energy and how plug-in solar, battery storage and other smarter uses of electricity can really help them. Last week, we saw people asking for a one-off energy measure of €500. How about one-off, ten-year solar panels that are going to constantly reduce people's bills? That is something I will continue to push for, and I welcome the engagement.

I will send further correspondence to the Department regarding a constituent who has raised the position of people with obstructive sleep apnea who require continuous positive airway pressure therapy. This relates to the question I started with. I understand that it is cheeky to throw it in, but when someone is diagnosed with a chronic condition, they must continually use medical equipment. I would appreciate if tax treatment in this regard could be facilitated in an adequate way as well.

Deputy Simon Harris: I am always in awe of the Deputy's ability to cover a lot in a question, but these are all serious issues. I do not mean to be flippant.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: You have to be.

Deputy Simon Harris: Earlier today, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, brought 11 measures to Cabinet in relation to improving grants around solar, battery storage and the boiler scrappage scheme. The Deputy is right. I understand, as does he, that we have to help people in the here and now. Many people are looking for help in order to allow their families and businesses to make the transition. Sometimes, the gap in that regard can be too big to bridge. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, is coming up with a lot of ideas that I think are going to make a real and meaningful difference to people. I hope the measures brought forward today help. I know the Deputy will keep on the Minister's case and our case in regard to improvements in other areas.

On obstructive sleep apnea, I will consider the Deputy's correspondence with the Minister for Health on that issue and see what may be possible. I am happy to have a further discussion with the Deputy on the matter.

Question No. 127 taken with Written Answers.

Tax Code

128. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance if he will remove excise duty from home heating oil in recognition of the severe pressures faced by families as a result of soaring costs. [68612/26]

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I have been raising the issue of home heating oil with the Tánaiste over a long period. The reality is that people have used home heating oil right throughout the current crisis. They use it to heat their homes. They also use it to heat their water in order to be able to wash the dishes. Home heating oil is what 700,000 households across the State rely on, and the Tánaiste refused to cut any excise at all from it because all of the excise is carbon tax. I put it to the Tánaiste again that he needs to reduce the excise on home heating oil. He needs to take it away completely.

It can be done under the European rules. There is no minimum requirement and therefore the Government made an error by not supporting families in the past when it reduced it on petrol, diesel and green diesel.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan): Thanks, Deputy. You can come back in afterwards.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I am asking the Minister to take all the excise away from home heating oil while these prices remain high.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy very much. The Government is very conscious of the price increases in home heating oil. They are very real and significant. The conflict in the Middle East has severely impacted the cost of kerosene. We have taken some measures that have helped those most at risk of fuel poverty and the Deputy knows that. We extended the fuel allowance by a further four weeks. That resulted in additional payments to about 470,000 fuel allowance recipients, many of whom would use home heating oil. It meant a

typical household receiving the fuel allowance, which is roughly a quarter of all households in the country, received €1,216 over the course of the fuel allowance season. We also deferred the planned increase in carbon tax on home heating fuels which was due to occur last May until after budget day and said we would have an opportunity to review these matters again in the budget. As the Deputy knows, we took a range of other measures as well, including expanding fuel allowance eligibility.

The Deputy is correct - we have debated this for quite some time - that the fuel excise applied to kerosene home heating oil is purely carbon tax. We need to be honest about what is and is not possible to alleviate the burden of higher fuel prices in the short and long term. Changes have to be carefully calibrated. We are working through this as a Government and the details will be published on budget day. However, as the tax strategy group paper identifies, we cannot treat carbon differently on different products. Regarding kerosene, there may well be something we can do in that space. I do not necessarily want to be argumentative about this but there is advice available to me - I am happy to discuss it and no doubt we will during the budget - on not risking our derogation in relation to the ETS. We certainly do not want to end up, and I know the Deputy does not either, paying billions more to Europe as a consequence of doing that, so there is a balance we have got to get right on that. I am happy to share our views on that. There obviously will be some people disproportionately at risk of fuel poverty and we have got to continue to target those measures at them. We need to look at all this in the round and we need to continue, to Deputy Heneghan's point, to look at helping people move from fossil fuel-dependence, though I accept that is not as easy for everybody. This will all be looked at in the round and I have been clear I am minded to do something about the taxation that applies to kerosene.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: We had the discussion earlier on and the Minister will say it was a Fine Gael Government that did this but there is no doubt, if you look back at the record, that the reason the Government did not reduce any excise duty on home heating oil is because it is carbon tax, which is this Holy Grail. I really do not want to go into a discussion on that, but the Government is moving now. For the first time it is going to reduce the carbon tax. That is good. It is good that the Government has got there, or that it is going to get there next Tuesday.

As for what the Minister says about what is and is not possible in Europe, if he is willing to share that he can send it to me. My understanding is that the new rule will not take effect until 2028 and therefore a temporary reduction on kerosene will not have an impact in relation to this. If we do this for a period during 2027 it will not have an impact. Obviously if we were to continue it into 2028 it would but for the immediate future it is a bit of a red herring, unless the Minister knows differently. The issue is that it is within his gift to take all the carbon tax off home heating oil. That is about 16 cent per litre. We charge VAT on top of the carbon tax so it would reduce the cost of a fill by €183. Would that undo the price increases that have happened? Not a chance. Prices have gone through the roof. They have gone up about €700 since the start of the year. However, it would show that the Government is doing the maximum it can on excise duty on this type of fuel, and that is what I am asking the Minister to do.

Deputy Simon Harris: We should have an informed conversation about this. What the Deputy has said is true. There are things the Government can do and this House can do, and there are things we cannot do. I am going to be honest, as the Deputy has been honest, in

saying whatever we do on the taxation side will not be enough - I am talking about the taxation on energy piece - to bring prices back to where they were last year. The Deputy is not seeking that and nor am I. There are things we can do to not make the situation worse and there may be things we can do to make the situation a little better. We need to get that calibration right and that is what we are working to do. There is the question of whether you do something temporary or whether you try to provide clarity for the next number of years. At the moment, as the Deputy knows well, there are two things, namely the trajectory out to 2030 and how the carbon tax is applied to products. Do we try to provide just help in the here and now or do we try to provide a clear view on the trajectory of carbon tax on kerosene out to 2030? If we do, that very much impacts on ETS 2. I accept the Deputy is correct about it not coming in until 2028 and I am happy to very honestly debate this issue but we are looking at all of this in the round. Kerosene and gas are two issues we should seriously look at.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: This again bring us back to the point we are at now, which for a lot of people feels like an emergency. There are things happening in this State that are genuinely concerning from a health and safety point of view. There are mothers and fathers going to the petrol station and filling five-gallon drums with kerosene. I am not sure how good an idea it is to be driving around country roads with five-gallon drums of kerosene in the boot, but people cannot afford anything else. There are plumbers being called out to deal with airlocks over and over again. They are refusing to charge the call-out fee because they know the only reason the system is airlocked is there is no oil in the tank. At a time when there is money in our coffers to support families I am asking the Minister again because this is something he has the ability to change. There is no minimum level of carbon tax on kerosene at this point in time.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan): Thanks, Deputy Doherty.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister can reduce it all. He can take the cost down by €183 a fill. We published the legislation.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan): Deputy, we have one more question.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Government voted against that and the following day it came out and said it might do something on carbon tax. I welcome that. My job is to push the Minister into positions he does not want to be in. That is fine. He will refuse to say he did not want to be there but I can play back the tunes in here.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan): The Tánaiste to respond.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I can show the Minister his predecessor saying the Government was not going to introduce-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan): Thanks, Deputy.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: -----a renter's tax credit, that it was not going to introduce mortgage interest relief-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan): Thanks, Deputy.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: -----and that it was not going to introduce the IREF stuff. I could play all those things back but my job-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan): You are just taking time from the next question, Deputy.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: -----is to keep on pushing and pushing.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan): With respect, will you please sit down?

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The question I am asking is whether the Minister is minded-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan): Can you give the Tánaiste an opportunity to respond, please?

Deputy Pearse Doherty: -----to go the full level in relation to excise duty on kerosene.

Deputy Simon Harris: The Deputy has described his job as he views it. It is of course his job to hold me to account in this House. It is also our job, every now and again, to try to work collaboratively on different issues. We will not agree on all of it and that is fine and healthy but we agree that we are living through a cost-of-living crisis, that the cost of kerosene and energy is very high, that we need to look at measures to try to assist people and that even when we do that there are global factors.

Not everybody is equally affected. We all know that and that is why targeted measures through the fuel allowance are also important to reach those most at risk of fuel poverty. Not everyone is at risk of that. The cost of living is real for lots of people but some people are acutely at risk of fuel poverty. Trying to reach them in the here and now is important too. We showed an ability to do that somewhat last year with the fuel allowance changes. That helped people. Enabling people to get that lump sum option helps to fill the home heating tank as well. There are now about 470,000 households getting the fuel allowance as well, so it is not insignificant. I take the Deputy's point. We published the tax strategy group paper this summer to have an informed discussion on the carbon tax trajectory and how it applies to certain products. We will bring forward our specific proposals next week.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan): Thanks, Tánaiste. The final question tonight is again in the name of Deputy Carthy, to be taken by Deputy Doherty.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: No.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan): I am sorry, it is Deputy Boland.

Budget 2027

130. **Deputy Grace Boland** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance the way in which he intends to balance measures to support working families with the need for continued investment in infrastructure and public services in budget 2027. [68584/26]

Deputy Grace Boland: I did not think I was going to get in there at all with Deputy Doherty overrunning.

Ireland's strong finances are the result of years of careful economic management and responsible decision-making by successive Fine Gael Governments. Due to that stewardship we are in a position to invest in the future while also supporting households with the pressures they face today. However, as the Tánaiste knows, many working families are feeling under pressure due to the rising cost of groceries, childcare and energy. He might give me some comfort that the budget will see measures that will support and help working families to not just get by but to get ahead.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy. I will indeed. The first job of government is to not make anything worse so when there is a global energy crisis and real cost-of-living pressures we need to make sure we try to pull policy levers that are going to help and not chase inflation. The measures we have taken on energy already have had a positive impact on the economy. I am not saying petrol and diesel prices are not extraordinarily high, because they are. They are a lot lower than in other European countries, while still being very high. However, they are having a broader positive effect in somewhat suppressing inflation growth. Sometimes people in this House ask why we did this for the motorists.

We did it for the motorists but it has helped suppress food inflation and economists in my Department reckon it has helped suppress inflation growth by around 0.6%.

There are lots of different ways to help working families. Obviously, the social protection system is one. We have a good social protection system in this country helping those most in need. I am proud of the changes we made around the working family payment. We need to continue to support those most in need but the tax system can help too. It is my view that too many workers are paying the higher rate of tax but it is also an objective fact that people are paying the higher rate of tax at below the average income in Ireland. The programme for Government clearly says that, all other things being equal, we should be looking at bands and credits. We made a lot of progress in government over the previous time and we need to try and build on that so there will be an income tax package that will help people keep more of their own money but will also help make sure people do not pay more tax as their wages grow or careers progress or they get promotions or work overtime.

I know the Deputy feels very passionate about childcare because we have also discussed it. We have to continue to really invest in childcare. I know the Minister for children will bring forward measures there. There is a clear commitment in the programme for Government

around where we want to get to over the lifetime of the Government. We have to look and take a step in that direction in this budget and we will do that as well. The Deputy is also right to say that we have to look at how we continue to invest in infrastructure because in her constituency, which is the youngest and fastest-growing in the country, we need social and economic infrastructure. A significant amount of money has been allocated to capital and we have to make sure that is delivered quickly and cut through bottlenecks and red tape - the work the Minister for public expenditure is leading on in terms of accelerating infrastructure.

Deputy Grace Boland: I very much welcome the income tax package. It is really important that work pays and as the Tánaiste know, our working families are really the backbone of the economy. Childcare is not only essential for equality, it is also essential for our economy. Childcare is actually essential infrastructure and I very much welcome the investment in childcare not only in affordability but also accessibility. Fingal is one of the youngest areas in the country and Balbriggan is the youngest large town. It is essential that we are investing in childcare and investing in community childcare, which is something that my area really lacks. I very much hope that we see support for a huge expansion of community childcare in this budget. Without giving away the budget, the Tánaiste might also briefly indicate some of the measures we might see next week so that I can go back and tell my constituents.

Deputy Simon Harris: What we will see next week in the first instance is an ability to make sure we keep our country safe. When I came into this House, unemployment was around 15% and the IMF was in town and not just as visitors. We have all worked really hard to get our country back to a place of full employment where we are having discussions on how best to reduce tax and to increase public expenditure. We should never take that for granted so keeping the country safe at a time of huge global volatility is our first job as a Government. We will do that. We will continue to run budget surpluses and invest in our funds not for rainy days but for demographic change, infrastructure delivery, climate and adaptation.

We will take measures in the here and now to help people with the energy crisis. We have to make calls around excise and the debate we have been having in terms of home heating oil and gas. There will obviously be a personal income tax package. The Government is clear about that. The Deputy is right. Childcare is a social issue and an equality issue but it is also an economic issue. I am meeting lots of people across the country - disproportionately women - who are making career decisions not on the basis of their choice but on the basis of the lack of affordability or accessibility of a childcare place. Next week in the budget, we are determined as a Government to take a big step in that direction and to build on that for the lifetime of this Government.

Deputy Grace Boland: I very much welcome the Tánaiste's comments about childcare. It is not just affecting parents. We have nearly full employment but instead of being able to participate on a part-time or even full-time basis in our economy, many grandparents are actually providing childcare because there is absolutely no choice in areas like mine in Skerries and Balbriggan, where there really is no accessible childcare. I know that the Tánaiste is working closely with the Minister for children but it is really important that we see the second stage of the action plan launched this year so that we have a road map and know where we are going over the next three years to make sure that we see more accessible and more affordable

childcare. We know that community childcare actually drives affordability and, unfortunately, because of the lack of it in my area, my area has among the highest childcare fees in the country so it is really important that we invest in our economy by investing in our people and supporting parents and grandparents to participate more fully in our economy if they so choose.

Deputy Simon Harris: I fully agree with the Deputy. I know she sees it in Balbriggan and Skerries and across her constituency in Fingal. It is the Minister for children's intention to produce that road map. A lot of work is going into it because as the Deputy rightly says, there are lots of moving parts here. We have to address affordability, accessibility and how we support the workforce. We have made some good progress on that. We have also made decisions over the course of the past year to invest public money for the first time in capital projects in terms of the development of childcare facilities as well. This is a key issue. We also have to recognise that it is up to a parent as well so it is about providing parental choice and recognising that some parents will perhaps want a childminder in their home and the likes. There is stuff we can consider doing on the tax side in relation to supporting childminders too so we are looking at this in the round as a Government. We see it as a key core priority and a key part of Ireland's economic and social infrastructure. We also recognise that for many families, it is a second mortgage. It is a really big bill. We have made good progress on it over a number of years as a Government. I am proud of what we have done with ECCE as well but building on this will be one of the planks of the budget and not just the budget. It will be one of the planks of our work over the next four years.

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Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan): 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 Pádraig Rice - To discuss the repression of the LGBTQ+ community in Türkiye.

Deputy Jen Cummins - To discuss counselling and mental health supports in primary schools.

Deputy John Connolly - To discuss the proposed expansion of the TFI bike rental scheme in Galway city.

Deputy Colm Burke - To discuss making the shingles vaccination free of charge for immunocompromised patients and those over 65.

Deputy Paula Butterly - To discuss a review the withdrawal of funding for the Walk PEER programme.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny - To discuss the delay in responses to parliamentary questions regarding assessment of need waiting lists.

Deputy Donna McGettigan - To discuss the need for a 24/7 sexual assault treatment unit in the HSE midwest region.

Deputy Albert Dolan - To discuss protecting payments for small scale renewable electricity generation.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne - To discuss the digitalisation of Irish health records.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness - To discuss the need for a primary care unit in west Waterford.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell - To discuss the clearfelling of mature Norway spruce in Merlin Woods in Galway city.

The matters raised by Deputies Pádraig Rice, Paula Butterly, Mairéad Farrell, Malcolm Byrne and Albert Dolan have been selected for discussion

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Human Rights Issues

Deputy Pádraig Rice: Since 12 September, LGBTQ people, organisations and activists in Türkiye have faced a co-ordinated wave of detentions, arrests, digital restrictions and public targeting as part of an organised operation by authorities. This crackdown represents the first mass criminalisation of LGBTQI+ people, activists and associations as part of the government's anti-LGBTQI agenda and a new round of operations is expected imminently. At least 117 people have been detained in connection with the operation, of whom 44 are LGBTQI human rights defenders. At least 83 individuals have been arrested pending pretrial detention while 25 LGBTQI people who are closely connected to associations have been arrested, including founders and members of associations whose houses have been raided and digital equipment seized. The targeted associations include seven LGBTQI human rights organisations and organisations working with people with HIV. The fear is that the government is trying to collapse these organisations. Social media accounts of LGBTQ organisations and activists and social media accounts belonging to journalists and human rights organisations expressing solidarity with communities or sharing information about the operation have been restricted, with a total of 419 social media accounts blocked across Türkiye since the operation on 12 September. Meanwhile the right to freedom of assembly of those protesting this harassment has been unjustly restricted, with 125 protesters detained in total across Ankara, Istanbul and Izmir. Lawyers and journalists who were gathering in front of the courthouse in Istanbul to protest this crackdown were detained. Access to medicine, clean clothes, hygiene products and even drinking water has been restricted in some of the prisons. The investigations have also been marked by procedural violations and discrepancies that demonstrate the political motivations underlying this operation. Activists have been repeatedly questioned about the ordinary functioning of their organisations, including their organisations' structure, membership, hiring and funding, in particular international funding.

LGBT activists have called for a global day of action. On Wednesday evening at 6 p.m., over 20 Irish LGBT organisations will gather outside Europe House to call for urgent action in

response to the reported crackdown on LGBTQI civil society in Türkiye. LGBT activists, human rights defenders and civil society organisations are facing detention, prosecution and repression. Nobody should be oppressed or discriminated against because of their sexuality, sexual orientation, gender identity or sex characteristics. Unfortunately, what we are witnessing in Türkiye right now comes at a time of deepening concerning backsliding on LGBTQ rights globally, including in the US under President Trump. When there is an erosion of fundamental rights, it is usually the LGBT community that is targeted first. This cannot be accepted as normal and we must call it out whenever we see it. The asks from the organisations are simple. They are the protection and humane treatment of LGBTQI people and human rights defenders in detention, the release of people detained solely in connection with legitimate human rights activities and the exercise of fundamental freedoms, and an end to the targeting of LGBTQ organisations and independent civil society. They want continued international solidarity, diplomatic pressure and support for LGBT human rights organisations and civic society space in Türkiye. We have a duty to stand up for human rights in every corner of the world.

10 o'clock

The Government must now engage with the Turkish ambassador to Ireland and outline its serious concerns over her country's despicable attacks on LGBTQ activists and journalists. The Government must urgently use all available diplomatic channels, including bilateral and multilateral engagement mechanisms, to raise these concerns directly with the Turkish authorities regarding the ongoing operation, and the detention of and restrictions against these human rights defenders. We must move beyond expressions of general concern and clearly communicate that the detention and prosecution of human rights defenders because of their legitimate activities, as well as the targeting of communities, is a violation, that this discrimination is unacceptable, and that it will be taken into account as part of political, economic and diplomatic relations with Turkey.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Neale Richmond): I thank the Deputy for raising this important matter. Recent actions against LGBTQI+ organisations and persons in Türkiye are deeply concerning. As he outlined, reports indicate that, since 12 September, the Turkish authorities have launched a co-ordinated operation targeting LGBTQI+ organisations, activists and associated businesses. The operation, called “My Family is Safe” by the Turkish Minister for Justice, is reported to have moved from the police operation phase into formal judicial proceedings. While the investigations are officially framed around obscenity, prostitution and public morality offences, concerns have been raised about the possible use of organised crime provisions against legally registered civil society organisations.

Like the Deputy, the Government is particularly concerned by reports of widespread detentions, raids on homes and LGBTQI+ organisations, the blocking of websites and social media accounts and the seizure of digital equipment. We also note the worrying allegations of an apparent media campaign portraying funding of civil society organisations by European and other donors as being linked to alleged illegal activities.

Ireland fully supported the statement of 18 September by the European External Action Service expressing concern about the arrests and legal proceedings in Türkiye. The Minister,

Deputy McEntee, decided last Tuesday that, in our national capacity, Ireland, along with some EU member states and like-minded countries, would deliver a démarche, which is a formal diplomatic proceeding, expressing deep concern to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Türkiye. On 23 September, at the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, Ireland also aligned with a statement of the LGBTI Group of Friends, of which we are a member, regarding these very disturbing developments. Just last week, I addressed championing diversity and support for LGBTQI+ communities at the United Nations General Assembly, where I once again raised the Irish Government's deep concerns and condemnation of activities in Turkey.

As noted in the statement by the LGBTI Group of Friends statement delivered at the Council of Europe:

The 'My Family is Safe' campaign announced by the Minister of Justice in Türkiye is particularly troubling when viewed against the broader deterioration not only for the situation of LGBTQI+ persons, but also more generally concerning the increasing pressure on civil society in Türkiye. The European Convention on Human Rights protects the rights of freedom of expression, freedom of association, and peaceful assembly.

The promotion and protection of the rights of LGBTQI+ persons is a domestic and foreign policy priority for Ireland, and this is reflected in our current campaign for membership of the UN Human Rights Council for the 2027-2029 term, where defending the rights of LGBTQI+ persons is one of our five thematic priorities. As an EU candidate country and member of the Council of Europe, Türkiye is expected to uphold the highest democratic standards and to ensure the respect of fundamental rights for all. The European Commission, supported by Ireland, has underlined on numerous occasions that the protection of fundamental rights of LGBTQI+ people in Türkiye remains a major concern.

The rights of peaceful assembly, freedom of association and freedom of expression, including for LGBTQI+ persons, need to be fully respected. I was unaware of the protest tomorrow evening, but I offer my full and unequivocal support to the Deputy and the 20-plus organisations that will meet tomorrow evening outside Europe House. It is very timely. I note the four general calls that the protesters are making, and I stand in full support of that. We will continue our call on the authorities of Türkiye to ensure that all proceedings against LGBTQI+ organisations, activists and human rights defenders fully respect the rule of law and the rights guaranteed by the European Convention on Human Rights. The Government retains a very active watching brief and will move further should we be required to do so.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I thank the Minister of State for outlining the Government's response, which is comprehensive. I welcome the Government commitment to keep a watching brief on this, because it is an evolving situation. It is a very serious crackdown on human rights organisations, lawyers and journalists in Türkiye. What we are seeing is deeply concerning. As I said, it is part of a rollback on rights that we are seeing right around the world. That is why it is all the more important to continue to advocate and defend LGBTQ human rights here at home, and to see advancements in terms of the national strategies. We need to continue to be a beacon for LGBT rights around the world. I thank the Minister of State for his engagement on this. I ask him to continue to engage with the Turkish ambassador here.

In the time left, I want to put on the record letters from some of the activists who are currently in prison, which have been published by ILGA-Europe. Selin Berghan, who is involved on the board of one of the organisations that was attacked, said:

I am experiencing this process as part of the struggle for sexual freedom. I know that this will be neither the first nor the last price I pay for this struggle. Like the others, I wear this price as a badge of honor. I'm sending my gullüm (queer joy) to all my friends I struggle alongside.

Another trans woman, Janset Kalan, has also been arrested for being a board member of an organisation. She said:

I would like to direct my letter to the trans community around the world. This is not only because I'm firstly a member of such a distinct and marvellous community but also because I hope to bring further attention to the T in the community. Thank you for all your support, solidarity and [for supporting us around the world.]

Nedime Erdoğan is a mother to an LGBT child who has been sentenced to prison. She has fought for years to enhance rights for LGBT people. She said:

For years, while fighting against the bullying and injustices faced by LGBTI+ people across all areas of public life, from education to healthcare, I have also worked to involve families in this struggle. I have tried to explain the importance of families understanding their children, supporting them and standing by their side. No operation can change the meaning of the struggle I have waged as a woman, a citizen and a mother.

These are just some of the people who are currently in prison, whose cases we want to highlight. I thank the Minister of State for maintaining a watching brief on this.

Deputy Neale Richmond: To make it abundantly clear, every person, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or any other characteristic, is entitled to equality, dignity and the full enjoyment of their human rights. Being LGBTQI+, forming an association and defending rights are not crimes and should never be crimes. Ireland remains in full solidarity with LGBTQI+ persons and their allies globally, particularly in Türkiye right now.

Over the past 18 months of my work in this current role, I have had the distinct displeasure of having to directly confront Ministers from countries such as Uganda and Liberia, which have initiated and maintained blatant discriminatory legislation that is absolutely abhorrent. Unfortunately, as the Deputy rightly said at the outset, this is part of a wider trend. We in Ireland have a very dark history in terms of equality, and we have to admit to that. We celebrate ten years of marriage equality this year, which is great, but we also have to recognise that we are less than 30 years on from the decriminalisation of homosexuality. What came before that in a very dark, troubling period for all of us.

That is why Ireland's commitment in this regard is underlined by our co-ordinated alignment last week with actions affirming our concern both in Ankara and at the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. We will continue to monitor developments and raise our concerns with relevant interlocutors from Türkiye and EU member states and at other multilateral fora. As I mentioned, I raised this at the United Nations last week. We are running for a seat on the Human Rights Council. We will be elected to that in January, and we will make sure that two-

year term will be defined by standing up for the rights not just of minorities more generally, but of our brothers, our sisters and our friends in the LGBTQI+ community who are, worryingly, seeing backsliding globally that simply cannot be allowed to happen in Türkiye or anywhere else.

Disability Services

Deputy Paula Butterly: I want to raise concerns regarding the future of the WALK PEER programme and the potential loss of vital transition supports when current funding comes to an end in December 2026. The programme supports young people with intellectual disabilities and autism as they move from school into further education, training and employment, helping them to achieve greater independence and better life opportunities.

The programme operates in ten partner schools across the country, including St. Ita's in Drogheda, St. Brigid's in Dundalk and Ballymakenny College in County Louth. Through one-to-one support, career planning and ongoing guidance, it helps young people and their families navigate what can often be a challenging transition from school into adulthood. The programme has reported positive outcomes. In fact, I would say the programme has had excellent outcomes, and it has been independently evaluated. Importantly, it does not simply support young people while they are at school.

It also provides transitions support for up to three years after school, helping participants to access and sustain places in further education, training and employment.

While I welcome the Government's investment in the rolling out of a national transitions support service through the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, my concerns lie in the fact that there appear to be no real resources. As far as I can understand it, it is giving special schools additional hours to roll out the programme but it will be the existing staff, who are already stretched and stressed - these wonderful teachers and support staff - who are expected to take on this extra load. Also, it is my understanding that these supports will only exist for those young people in special schools. In County Louth, however, we have seen in Ballymakenny College how a successful pilot has been rolled out in a post-primary setting. Under the new proposals, this will disappear.

Further, I am concerned that a gap remains in the post-schools supports currently provided by the WALK PEER programme. As matters stand, funding is due to end in December, leaving 110 young people potentially affected. This includes 50 participants already progressing through further education, training and employment, and a further 60 school leavers due to transition in 2027. These are not simply numbers. Behind every figure is a young person striving for independence and a family hoping that their son or daughter can realise their full potential.

The issue is particularly important in County Louth. Students attending schools in Dundalk and Drogheda have directly benefited from this programme. Families in our county need certainty that these supports will not disappear at a critical stage in their children's lives. I have previously highlighted my concerns regarding the withdrawal of services. Schools, parents and students have consistently reported positive outcomes from the programme. It has promoted inclusion, supported well-being and helped schools to respond to the increasingly diverse needs they face in the classroom and outside.

The evidence also suggests that the programme represents really good value for money. The estimated cost of WALK PEER is approximately €9,500 to €10,000 per participant compared with an estimated HSE daycare service cost of approximately €15,000 per participant.

There is now a real risk that a significant gap will emerge in these transitions supports. We cannot allow the young people in Louth and across the country to lose momentum at such a critical phase in their lives because of the uncertainty around the funding arrangements. Will the Minister of State commit to reviewing this decision and to exploring a mechanism that would allow these supports to continue with the WALK PEER programme as the lead? Will he also engage with the relevant Departments and agencies to identify a sustainable funding solution, preserve the expertise built up within the WALK PEER programme, and ensure that these young people continue to receive the support they need to access further education, training and employment?

Deputy Neale Richmond: I am grateful to Deputy Butterly for raising this very pertinent and personal issue, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan.

As the Deputy is aware, as part of the National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030, the Government has committed to the development of a national policy on transitions, which will map out how we support young people completing school into the various pathways for life after school. This work is ongoing and a report is expected by the end of this year.

Over the past four years, the Department of education, in partnership with the NCSE and Walkinstown Association for People with an Intellectual Disability, WALK, has been testing two different approaches to a transitions support model. A teacher-led programme has been operating in 41 special schools as part of the comprehensive employment strategy for disabled people. The WALK PEER ability transitions programme currently supports seven special schools and three post-primary schools in Dublin, Louth, Cork, Cavan and Westmeath and I greatly appreciate the Deputy naming St. Ita's and others. This programme is delivered by careers and employment facilitators who work directly with students in their final two years of school but also support the students for a further three years post school.

Both programmes finished in June, were externally evaluated and were the subject of very positive feedback from all participant schools and stakeholders more broadly. Both evaluations recommended the expansion of a transitions-type model of support to students.

In relation to the WALK PEER model specifically, funding of €2 million has been provided through the Dormant Accounts Fund, DAF, over the past four years to support the programme in the ten schools. The programme is fully funded until December 2026. To provide a continuum of support until June 2027, the Department of education has submitted an application through the DAF 2027 for additional funding and a decision is expected shortly.

In addition, a number of Departments have received a submission from WALK to expand the programme over the next four years. While the outcomes of the programme are positive, the scalability of the model to all special schools over the next number of years is limited relative the scalability of the teacher-led comprehensive employment strategy, CES, transitions model.

Based on the outcomes of both pilot programmes and subject to the total funding available, the Minister, Deputy Naughton, and the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, announced a new transitions support service for all special schools in June this year. The purpose of the new service is to support young people with disabilities as they prepare to move from school into further education, training, employment and other post-school opportunities and pathways. Additionally, the focus of schools' work can be on supporting transitions into the school. The service is being rolled out to all special schools from this month and will be managed by the NCSE. The service provides each special school with 34 transitions support teaching days per year. This flexible allocation will allow schools to deliver transitions support at the times it is needed most throughout the school year. Prior to the roll-out of this service, there was no guidance allocation to students in special schools. All mainstream post-primary schools already receive an allocation for guidance counselling to provide support to students in line with their needs throughout all stages of the post-primary journey.

That all said, I take very seriously on board the request made by the Deputy on behalf of the school communities and students and will engage directly with the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, and ask him to speak to the Deputy in the forum of a deputation meeting.

Deputy Paula Butterly: I thank the Minister of State. In that reply, there seems to be a bit of light at the end of the tunnel and some hope that funding will be found. We have young people who are halfway through a programme that could suddenly come to an end in December. At the very least, they must be allowed to participate until June in order to finish that course.

The Minister of State mentioned that special schools would come under the wing of the NCSE but what about those post-primary schools that have provided this programme and demonstrated excellent results, like Ballymakenny College in Drogheda? What will happen to them? The Minister of State mentioned that services and resources were provided through counsellors but the key factor of the WALK PEER programme is the expertise. They are there for the last two years that a participant is in school, they are there when school closes and they are there for the young people and their families up to four years after they have left school. That is a vital component and is expertise that we should not lose.

The Minister of State mentioned scalability. The WALK PEER programme acknowledges that there are scalability challenges but it has also suggested a model in which its group can act as a hub where its members' combined expertise, working alongside the school, would allow it to transition successfully over the coming years. Do we honestly believe that teachers and support staff in special schools, whom we know face daily challenges - they are stressed and stretched to the very limit - would, simply by giving them additional hours, be able to roll out the same quality service to these young people? Will they be there when the school closes? Will they be there for the four years after school? I reiterate the calls and thank the Minister of State for taking these questions to the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I am grateful to the Deputy for raising this timely issue. The provision of transitions supports for students in schools is a key priority for the Government, and for the Department more broadly. As outlined, there is a commitment under the National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030 to work within Government and with others to improve retention rates and progression for disabled children and young people as they deal with transitions within education.

Both pilot programmes have identified the need for a transitions support model for students with disabilities and recognised the importance of interagency collaboration. Both programmes have been welcomed by participant schools and widely considered as hugely beneficial to the sector. The provision of time and staffing to schools has afforded them the opportunity to work directly with students in their final years in school to develop individualised transitions plans. Reports from schools suggest that a dedicated transitions planning programme relates directly to better outcomes for students. The new transitions support service will build on the pilots and should be seen as a first step in providing transitions supports to students.

In March, the Minister announced a €48 million investment in the new DEIS strategy and DEIS plus scheme. Schools in the DEIS plus scheme will benefit from enhanced guidance provision at post-primary school level.

As is quite clear, not all the issues the Deputy raised are able to be addressed at this stage, and she can imagine that a lot of big decisions have to be made in the coming days that will have a direct impact on the future of the service.

However, as has been pointed out by the Deputy and indeed is made quite clear by the Department, the pilot schemes have worked. They have been successful and there is an appetite to build upon them. I have to make sure the budgetary requirements are delivered. I very much look forward to working with the Deputy and the relevant Ministers to make sure that happens.

Wildlife Protection

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: It is hard to put into words the importance of Merlin Woods for the community in which I live. It is one of the only green spaces on the east side of Galway city. It is surrounded by Doughiska and Ballybane, and slightly further on are Renmore, Mervue and Roscam, all of which are areas that have benefited from that green space. To be honest, it is actually hard to understand or fathom in any way why these woods - this local amenity - are being destroyed in the way that they are.

Friends of Merlin Woods have campaigned and worked not only to protect the woods over a long number of years, but also to ensure they have become the heart of the community. This has meant that young children and adults have learned about the biodiversity in the area. It has brought people together in the summer but also in the winter through the "hearth of winter" celebrations. Courses happen in Merlin Woods. They are also a place for people to go. So many people have been in contact with me in the past number of weeks to tell me they use it as a place of reflection which has particularly helped them through difficult times in their lives. It is a really crucial piece of the architecture of the community on the east side of Galway city. I say that to give the Minister of State the context for what is happening in Merlin Woods at the moment.

I want to raise some very specific questions with the Minister of State. Merlin Woods is a local biodiversity area under the Galway City Council development plan, and is protected under it. It may also be seen under Article 10 of the European habitats directive as being a stepping stone with its proximity to the SAC areas and creating a connection and widening the genetic links. In this context, I have to ask some questions. In what way does the work in Merlin Woods align with the national biodiversity action plan of no net loss? In some of the areas

where trees have been felled, is there an account of how many dreys were found? Dreys are where squirrels live. How many of these dreys were saved from cutting? Red squirrels are protected under the Wildlife Act. While mitigating measures were put in place to feed squirrels and create corridors after the fact, the destruction of their dreys could be seen as a wildlife crime. How many visits has an ecologist paid to this site? Residents have reported that trees have been felled where they feel they did not have the oversight needed. In the general areas where the squirrel dreys were meant to be, they saw that too. What other mitigating measures were put in place for other wildlife such as insects and invertebrates, marsh fritillary butterflies and the many other species of butterfly?

The Minister of State may not have all the answers to these questions, but I am interested to hear what the Department and the line Minister have provided in the response. That will be very critical for the people who are trying to protect Merlin Woods. It is also critical that all these questions be brought directly to the Minister responsible. An exact response is needed as soon as possible. This is happening right now. We cannot have a situation where I get a response two or three weeks later. We need to ensure this area is protected for wildlife but also for the people of the east side of Galway city.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I thank the Deputy for her Topical Issue. I am here today on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Heydon, and the Minister of State, Deputy Collins, who are in Brussels on EU Presidency business, to address the associated felling licence process. I hope the response will provide an element of clarity. I will, of course, put the questions the Deputy has placed to the Minister and the Minister of State, and ask for an answer to be directed to her as quickly as possible.

Merlin Park in Galway city, as the Deputy has outlined, is one of the largest urban woodlands in Ireland, extending to approximately 80 ha of native and exotic trees, wildflowers, birds and mammals. From recent press announcements, the Government is aware that the owner of the woodlands, Galway City Council, is implementing plans to replant Merlin Woods as a native woodland, following the extensive damage caused by Storm Éowyn in January 2025. I commend Galway City Council on actively developing this woodland. The management of the woodland is a matter for the council, under the oversight of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

I am aware that the council is planning to fell trees in the park. As Deputies might know, the felling of trees normally requires a licence issued by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, in accordance with requirements set out in the Forestry Act 2014. However, on this occasion, the council was not required to obtain a tree-felling licence because the Forestry Act contains an exemption from the requirement to have a tree-felling licence for trees in an "urban area". This means that Galway City Council is entitled to fell trees in the urban areas which are part of its remit without having to notify the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. In fact, I have been informed by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine that the Department has not received or issued any applications for felling licences to Galway City Council in relation to the Merlin Woods park area so far. In addition, the Department has confirmed that the trees in the Merlin Woods park are part of an "urban area" and comply with the exemption from the requirement to have a tree-felling licence, as provided for under section 19 of the Forestry Act 2014. This exemption is important because it allows local authorities to have full control over the urban areas they are responsible for.

It is also important to note that irrespective of any felling licence requirement, the provisions of the Planning and Development Act and regulations do apply. More generally, unless an exemption applies, the purpose for the requirement for obtaining a licence for tree felling is necessary in order to protect forests, and also to ensure forestry operations and activities are carried out in compliance with the principles of sustainable forest management. Tree-felling licences normally carry an obligation to replant the area felled. Reforestation after felling is essential to prevent deforestation, which would otherwise counteract the benefits of Ireland's afforestation programme and associated public expenditure on afforestation, which to date represents a substantial State and European Union investment.

I believe that forestry plays a critical role in meeting climate targets, supporting rural employment and providing a domestic supply of timber products. Well-managed forests contribute to biodiversity, water quality and protection of soil as well as providing a recreational amenity for communities. I do not think the passive educational opportunities provided by these areas, as the Deputy outlined, can be overstated. The same applies to their importance to local communities and the wider population. Therefore, while this appears to be largely a matter for Galway City Council, the questions the Deputy put to the Minister are valid and I will ensure a speedy response to her in due course.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: I appreciate that. I appreciate that the Minister of State is not the line Minister and that it is quite a specific case, but the reason I raise it here is because the people have not been silent in relation to this. The community has not been silent about it. The people who deal with Merlin Woods day in, day out have been saying they feel this is a serious destruction of the habitat, as I have outlined, and of many different species. They have spoken about the serious impact it has on wildlife. The Minister of State mentioned that there was not a requirement for a tree-felling licence but the works at Merlin Woods must follow environmental laws, even if there are exemptions. From my understanding, it seems that there is no funding in place at the moment for the replanting. That is another question that needs to be answered by the Minister.

The question of a clean-up on foot of Storm Éowyn is separate to what I have raised. In this instance, the felling of healthy, standing trees is having a serious impact. It is a serious concern. In addition to the protest outside Galway City Council, we have had protest walks through Merlin Woods because the community has stated very clearly that this is destruction of wildlife. These are people who know what they are talking about. They know this woodland. They have been photographing it for years on end and know exactly what has been there and what is being destroyed. I understand the Minister of State is not the line Minister, but I have raised this as a Topical Issue for the Minister in question to respond. I understand there will be another response from the Minister, but he needs to respond urgently.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I accept the Deputy's requests but I will point out two things that I think are important in order to be helpful. It is important a separate question be put to the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage as the management of woodland is a matter for him. Felling licences come under the Department of agriculture. This is exempt from a felling licence, as I laid out in the previous reply, but the management is perhaps a more pertinent issue, given the concerns raised by the Deputy and the community at large. The Deputy has asked some clear questions that I will pass on to the Minister. I will stress the need

for expediency. One of them would have been here but, unfortunately, both were required to chair meetings in Brussels. We will proceed with that going forward.

Patient Files

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I am grateful to the Minister of State for taking this issue on behalf of the Department of Health. It concerns the digitisation of health records. The current situation, which has existed for quite a long time, is not acceptable. We do not have link-ups between GPs and hospitals in terms of health records; we do not even have links between hospitals. If one health venue or health centre has to get the records for a patient from another, it often requires a clinical practitioner - a doctor or nurse - to physically go off and look for them. I was quite surprised that that even applies to parliamentary questions on general health records, such as on the number of heart surgeries conducted in all hospitals in Ireland last year. That should be pretty simple - someone presses a button and the answer comes up. Yet it still is not all digitalised and there are not links right across the system.

The Government is finally moving toward a single electronic health record system. If it is to be patient-focused, any medical professional should, with the patient's permission, be easily able to draw on patient records once they have the patient's name and date of birth. Whether it is a patient's engagement with a GP or their previous medical experience, all that data should be capable of being brought together. I would go further. The possibility should exist for all the clinical data gathered to be used for clinical research purposes. If we consent, the data could be used in an anonymised way and that could inform clinical research. That will represent an enormous opportunity for the health sector in Ireland whereby we can target our resources if, for example, we know men of a particular age are at particular risk. I know the Minister of State has been a strong advocate in the area of prostate cancer. If we know from the clinical data that comes together who we need to target, that will make much more sense.

My concern and the reason I asked for an update is this. When the State's Chief Information Officer came before the Joint Committee on Artificial Intelligence last year, he anticipated the single electronic health record system could be in place by 2030. The latest I am hearing is it will be 2032. I am aware the Minister for Health announced a shortlisting or procurement process was starting in February 2026. This is potentially the most transformational operation in our healthcare system. It will result in the saving of lives because data will be provided to practitioners much more quickly. It will potentially save significant amounts for our health service. One of our challenges, which is why we definitely need to invest more in clinical research, is we know we have an ageing population. We hope we will all be healthier as we age but there are greater challenges ahead.

I worry, and I say that because of many of the major IT projects managed by the State. While the business case is always well-presented, there are often challenges in how it is operationalised. I find it bizarre that, with all our modern technology, we are talking of further delays before this is in place. A patient-centred approach is vital. I would be grateful if the Minister of State could provide an update on where we are with the process.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I am grateful to the Deputy for the opportunity to update the House on the digitalisation of health records and the progress being made to support patients

and healthcare professionals through safer, more connected care, stronger research and innovation and a more sustainable health service. I am taking this Topical Issue on behalf of the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill.

As Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, I should highlight the success and the efficiencies of the digitisation of our passport service. Perhaps that is the exemplar of what can be achieved. It continues to go from success to success.

The programme for Government commits to the continued digitisation of Irish healthcare records and information systems, and significant progress is being made. For too long, important health information has been held in separate systems and on paper records, making it more difficult for information to move with the patient across care settings. Our objective is straightforward: information should follow the patient, not organisational boundaries. The Government's approach is set out in Digital for Care: A Digital Health Framework for Ireland 2024-2030. Supported by significant investment in digital health, we are moving from strategy to delivery through a phased programme designed to improve access to information, strengthen care delivery and modernise how health information is managed and shared.

Three national programmes are central to this work. First, the HSE health app is the patient-facing element of Ireland's digital health transformation. Since its launch in February 2025, it has attracted more than 250,000 registered users and provides access to a growing range of services and information, including appointments, referrals, waiting list information, vaccination records and digital health cards. I do not think there is a Member of this House or the Seanad who has not been personally pushed by the Minister to make sure they have it downloaded to their phone.

Second, the national shared care record is now a live national service across all six HSE health regions. It enables authorised healthcare professionals to securely access key patient information from multiple systems through a single shared view, supporting safer and more co-ordinated care.

Third, the national electronic health record programme will provide a comprehensive longitudinal digital record across publicly funded hospitals and community services. Government approved the preliminary business case in February 2026 and procurement is progressing. The programme will be managed through a series of regional deployments on a phased basis to mitigate risks and ensure lessons learned are incorporated throughout the programme, with all health regions live by 2032. As with major infrastructure investments, costs will be refined through a series of related procurements, with associated governance arrangements and approval processes in place to ensure value for money and appropriate oversight.

Alongside these programmes, the national electronic prescribing programme is progressing through procurement. The resulting electronic prescribing and dispensing service will result in safer, better care for patients, especially as they transition between healthcare settings.

The Health Information Bill, which passed into law earlier this year, provides the legal basis for the sharing of health information and the establishment of digital health records. Together with Digital for Care and the upcoming European health data space, EHDS, regulation, it establishes the framework needed to support more connected care and the responsible use of health information for both primary and secondary purposes. The EHDS regulation will create

a common framework across Europe to support secure sharing of health information for direct patient-care-specific secondary uses such as research, innovation, public health and policy development and health service management. Importantly, secondary use of health data in this way continues to be protected under GDPR and this is further enhanced by the EHDS regulation.

Ultimately, our ambition is simple: that health information follows the patient wherever they receive care. By connecting people, healthcare professionals and services through trusted digital infrastructure, we can support safer care, better patient experiences, stronger research and a more sustainable health system. Better information supports better decisions, better care and, ultimately, better outcomes for patients. I am genuinely grateful to the Deputy for raising this and for continuing to be a strong advocate on this issue.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I thank the Minister of State. I totally agree with him. The ambition is to follow wherever the patient receives care. We have to ensure that by 2032, whether you are in a GP surgery, a hospital, a community care setting or a nursing home, the medical records are easily accessible. I am concerned that we are talking about six years; it should be done more quickly. The timeframe has continued to be pushed out. In an era of modern technology, we should not be waiting that long, particularly given many countries, including some in the developing world, are far more advanced in the digitisation of records. The process will ultimately pay for itself, both financially and in lives saved. If the Minister of State is giving me the commitment that in 2032, no matter what health setting we are in, that data will be easily accessible, that will be key.

I get that this is very sensitive data. The risk has to be managed. There has to be transparency around the process and it needs to be explained.

I hope the Minister of State will raise this next point further with the Minister. We are talking about what is happening in the European health data space. We know that healthcare costs are continuing to go through the roof, but if we can effectively target resources, it makes much more sense. Let us use that data and marry it with effective clinical research. There is a lot of wonderful clinical research in Ireland. The clinical research centre in UCD, which the Minister of State will be familiar with, has done amazing work. If we can marry all of that data from our healthcare system with clinical research, it will result in huge financial savings, but we can also be world leaders in being able to use that data to tackle disease.

I am broadly happy with the answer, but I will remain concerned if the timelines continue to slip.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I am grateful to the Deputy for his comments, which I will bring directly back to the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill.

As the Deputy is aware, the digitisation of health records is already under way and being delivered in three stages. The HSE health app is designed to provide patients with greater access to their own health information. The national shared care record is connecting data that is already in digital format, albeit stored in separate data silos. It is helping healthcare professionals to see more information about their patients regardless of where they were treated previously. That is happening today. The national electronic health record, EHR, will build on

those foundations to provide a comprehensive longitudinal record across all publicly funded hospital and community services.

The timeline outlined is realistic, but it is also there to make sure it is all encompassing. This will be done on a phased basis to ensure that it is done in the totality by 2030, but many of these advances will be made before that. That is why the EHR programme is ambitious. The health service is complex and successful delivery requires more than technology. It requires clinical and operational leadership. It requires changes in how we operate today to more standardised processes, high-quality data, staff training, and managing robust technology and infrastructure that is cyber resilient. It also requires sustained investment. Reflecting this, the Government has significantly increased funding for digital health and technology in recent years, building strong foundations to support digital transformation. Those same digital foundations can also support the research and innovation that the Deputy has outlined.

Under the European health data space, health data may be reused for approved purposes with a secure and tightly governed framework. Appropriate safeguards will be essential to ensure that we maintain that public trust in all that we do. However, our goal is clear. Information should follow the patient. It should be available to healthcare professionals wherever and whenever it is needed to support the delivery of safe patient care. By driving key digital health initiatives, such as the HSE health app, the shared care record, the national EHR, electronic prescribing and related digital care initiatives, we are building a modern and more integrated health service and creating the conditions for delivering better care, better access, stronger research, responsible innovation and more evidence-based decision-making. The ability of the Deputy to continue to hold this Government to account is vital in achieving those goals.

Renewable Energy Generation

Deputy Albert Dolan: Across east Galway and, indeed, the country, families and farmers are putting their own money into solar panels. They are looking at the electricity bill, they are looking at the roof on the house and the farm shed, and they are making a decision to invest. That investment is something that should help them for years to come. Even with grant support, that is still a substantial commitment. People use savings and some borrow. They work out what they have to and make sure that the payback period makes sense and that they will get their money back. Part of that calculation is what they will receive for the electricity they supply to the grid. My concern is that, over time, suppliers could chip away at those payments, leaving people with a very different return from the one they expected when they installed their panels. I recognise that the clean export guarantee provides for payment, but families need some certainty about what that payment will be worth. If a household is expected to pay a high price for electricity coming into the home, it is reasonable to expect a respectable price for the electricity going out. I accept that there are different costs involved, but the small producer still deserves a fair deal. Will the Government examine a minimum export payment or another enforceable safeguard to protect households and small farmers against the erosion of their payments? Will the Minister of State ask the regulator to examine whether the current arrangements give people enough certainty to invest?

To elaborate on it a bit further, I have a fear that, down the line, the electricity suppliers could cut the payments that people based their original decisions on. There are many people

out there right now who are struggling to meet the high costs of energy and just keeping their lives going. Whether it is the electricity coming into the house or trying to operate a small business or farm, everyone can benefit from being energy independent in their own right. That is what solar panels give people. I understand about if the grid does not have the capacity, whether it is by virtue of not having enough battery storage yet or whatever the case may be, but we cannot allow the energy companies to disregard the initial investment that was made by these people and the deal that they signed up to. For example, if they are getting 19 cent per unit that they export, they should continue to get that because that was the deal that they signed up to when they bought the panels. I understand that things can change, but the Government needs to give people certainty over the amount they are going to be paid for the electricity when they export it because these calculations are done based on the payback period. They buy the panels and put them up and the payback period says, that within four to six years, they will have made their money back. From then on, they will be in a great position because they will have lower energy bills. In the summer, they will go into a credit. In the winter, they will eat into that credit. For families that have done this that I have spoken to across east Galway, they have told me the benefits they have got from solar panels.

I welcome the Minister's announcements today to fund batteries to the tune of €600. That is a fantastic idea because that will give people even more energy independence. I also welcome that the grants are now being extended to homes that were built between 2022 and 2025, which means that those people can access the benefit of panels as well.

I hope I have made my point clear and I look forward to the Minister of State's response.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I am grateful to the Deputy for raising this pertinent and timely issue. For the benefit of the House, if the Deputy does not mind, I might give a bit of context as requested by the Minister, Deputy O'Brien. The microgeneration support scheme, MSS, provides supports to domestic and non-domestic applicants, in the form of grants for solar PV installations, up to a maximum of €1,800 in 2026 for household installations. As announced this morning, the scheme will also provide as of next week a new €9,000 grant for homeowners in receipt of certain Department of Social Protection payments.

The domestic MSS forms part of a wider residential retrofit programme that, in line with eligibility criteria, supports energy efficiency upgrades and the installation of renewable energy technologies in existing housing stock. Since its pilot launch in 2018, the domestic solar PV scheme has gone from strength to strength, with over 123,000 homes being supported. Budget 2026 allocated over €67 million to this year's scheme and so far this year, over 21,000 homes have been supported. Renewable electricity generation has a strong role to play in promoting innovation and enabling diversification by business.

Significant support has been provided to the non-domestic microgen grant, NDMG, operated by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, on behalf of the Government. This provides financial assistance to help businesses and other sectors to install solar PV panels to generate electricity on site. Through this scheme, grants are available for renewables self-consumers above 50 kW and up to 1 MW, up to a maximum of €162,600. From its launch in 2022 to September 2026, this scheme has supported 3,300 installations totalling over €34 million and the Minister is ambitious to grow this scheme.

Associated with these schemes for homes and businesses, the clean export guarantee, CEG, provides an opportunity for micro and small-scale generators to receive payment from their electricity suppliers for excess renewable electricity they export to the grid, as the Deputy has detailed about his constituents in Galway East. The payment from the electricity suppliers is intended to reflect the wholesale market value of the electricity. Applicants can receive both the NDMG and the CEG on an ongoing basis. The flat-rate CEG tariffs on offer from suppliers have generally ranged from circa 16 cent per kilowatt hour to 25 cent per kilowatt hour. Responsibility for the regulation of the electricity and gas markets, including regarding the clean export guarantee, is solely a matter for the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, which was assigned responsibility for the regulation of the Irish electricity and gas markets following the enactment of the Electricity Regulation Act 1999.

In line with long-standing policy on deregulating price setting, the CRU ended its regulation of retail prices in the electricity market in 2011 and in the gas market in 2014.

Price setting by electricity suppliers, including remuneration for microgeneration for householders and businesses, is a commercial and operational matter for the companies concerned. In June 2024, the CRU published its decision paper Clean Export Guarantee: Enduring Arrangements to Remunerate Customers for Microgeneration Exports. It confirmed in that paper that it is of the view that the competitive approach whereby suppliers set their own competitive export tariffs has functioned well and will continue.

I am aware, as is the Minister, that there has been some concern that tariffs may diminish. I stress that the Minister has no information which suggests that this is the case. Notwithstanding that, as part of our energy transformation it is important for businesses and households to have maximum flexibility and control in how they consume electricity. As the Deputy mentioned, for that reason the Minister earlier today announced new grants for the installation of batteries. The Deputy raised some serious concerns and offered a proposal that I am not in a position to provide an affirmation on. I will of course refer that back to the Minister, Deputy O'Brien.

Deputy Albert Dolan: I really appreciate the clarity provided in that detailed response. It definitely raises the question about looking back at what has happened in that time since the CRU stopped regulating energy. There are a lot of energy providers and competition in the market. There is also a lot of renewable generation happening. The most concerning thing in the response was the statement to the effect that "price setting by electricity suppliers, including remuneration for microgeneration for householders and businesses is a commercial and operational matter for the companies concerned." Right now, it makes sense for them to pay for the supply that comes from solar during the summer because it provides power to the grid. It is available and they can buy it relatively cheaply compared with what they would pay on the wholesale market. A problem could arise whereby if a huge number of homes have a large amount of electricity to export, on most peak export days the relevant commercial entities will not want to buy all of that electricity if it cannot be stored. I may be barking up the wrong tree here. We need to have a bigger conversation around storage.

I again welcome the grant announced earlier today. It is going to be absolutely fantastic because it will make it easier for people to decided to also install batteries when they are initially putting in solar panels, because the grant is there for that. I ask the Minister of State

to take the message back to the Minister, Deputy O'Brien - I will relay it to him as well - that we have to protect people who are supplying electricity to the grid. Regardless of whether they are small businesses, farmers or domestic households, they deserve to get a fair price for their electricity.

Deputy Neale Richmond: As I have set out, the electricity and gas retail markets in Ireland operate within a European Union regulatory regime wherein electricity and gas markets are deliberately commercial, liberalised and competitive. Responsibility for that regulation of the electricity and gas markets, including in the context of the CEG, is solely a matter for the CRU.

Regarding the development of tariffs under the CEG arrangements, the CRU is of the view that the competitive approach whereby suppliers set their own competitive export tariffs has functioned well. However, if communities, farmers or others wish to pursue an export-only project, the small-scale renewable electricity support scheme provides a fixed 15-year tariff for the development of smaller scale solar and wind energy projects up to 6 MW. This tariff is set by the Minister. However, such export projects are not eligible for the separate CEG, which is a payment for self-consumers only.

On the matter of the CEG, it is important to stress that I am aware that there has been some concern around remuneration levels diminishing significantly. I emphasise once more, not necessarily for Deputy Dolan but for those outside the House, that the Minister has no information which suggests that this is the case. Separately, however, a battery energy storage system means that businesses and households can maximise the benefit they get from the electricity they generate. When the Deputy talks about the parallel conversation on storage, this is perhaps the moment to move into that in greater detail. That will require very real infrastructural investment, not just by individuals but also by the State on a larger scale. A broader discussion will also be needed. This is partly why the Minister announced the new grants earlier today. Batteries provide greater flexibility in that they allow homes and businesses, if it is more favourable for them to do so, to retain the electricity generated on site for their own use rather than relying on exporting it to the grid. The Deputy raised some very real concerns which I hope I have gone some way to assuage this evening. I will bring the matter directly to the attention of the Minister, Deputy O'Brien.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 10.55 p.m. go dtí 9 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 30 Meán Fómhair 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 10.55 p.m. until 9 a.m. on Wednesday, 30 September 2026.