



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions	157
Protected Disclosures	157
Departmental Contracts	159
Refugee Appeals Tribunal	161
Prison Service.....	163
Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions	166
International Protection	166
An Garda Síochána	168
Sentencing Policy.....	170
Prison Service.....	172
Legal Aid.....	174
Legal Aid.....	177
Citizenship Applications	179
An Garda Síochána	182
Closed-Circuit Television Systems.....	183
Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions.....	186
Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions.....	197
Financial Resolutions 2026.....	199
Financial Resolution No. 8: General (Resumed)	199

DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 7 Deireadh Fómhair 2026

Wednesday, 7 October 2026

Chuaigh an Ceann Comhairle i gceannas ar 10.23 a.m.

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Protected Disclosures

1. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration the number of protected disclosures made by members and staff of An Garda Síochána, either directly to his Department or through internal Garda channels, and to Fiosrú, in each of the past five years; and the number upheld, dismissed or under examination. [70836/26]

Deputy Matt Carthy: My first question relates to the protected disclosures regime within An Garda Síochána and what have been fairly serious and damaging allegations made publicly, including in an "RTÉ Investigates" programme. Has the Minister carried out any assessment of whether the protected disclosures system is functioning? Could he outline how many such disclosures have been made by Garda members and staff over the past five years and how many of those have been upheld, dismissed or remain under consideration?

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I thank the Deputy for his question. I, as Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, take extremely seriously any protected disclosures that are made to the justice sector. The Deputy's question concerns members of An Garda Síochána and Garda staff. It is important to point out that a member of An Garda Síochána or a member of Garda staff has a number of options if he or she wants to make a protected disclosure. In the first instance, he or she can go to the internal protected disclosure unit within An Garda Síochána, which was enhanced in January 2025. If he or she does not want to do that, he or she can go to Fiosrú, the independent entity to which members of An Garda Síochána can also make protected disclosures. Third, he or she can go to the Office of the Protected Disclosures Commissioner, OPDC. Finally, he or she can make a protected disclosure to a Minister. Obviously, as Deputy Carthy will be aware, it is not the function of Ministers or Members of the Oireachtas to investigate protected disclosures, but what we do want to ensure happens is that there is a sorting process whereby the protected

disclosure is put into an area where it will be identified, reported on and concluded. As Deputy Carthy has indicated, the legislation places reporting obligations on all public bodies.

My Department received 34 protected disclosures from members and staff of An Garda Síochána from 2022 to 2026. In 2022, my Department received three protected disclosures. Following an amendment of the Protected Disclosures Act in 2022, the process changed slightly, which I will address in a moment. From 2023, 31 disclosures were received, four of which were returned by the Office of the Protected Disclosures Commissioner for examination. The four disclosures returned by the OPDC have been referred to the appropriate statutory body under protected disclosures legislation. An Garda Síochána has received 46 protected disclosures in the period from 2022 to date in 2026. Fiosrú has received a total of 161 protected disclosures from 2022 to 2026. I have received a breakdown of these numbers, giving information about activity in each of the years.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The protected disclosures regime was put in place to ensure we would not have a recurrence of previous scandals within An Garda Síochána. We are aware that protected disclosures have been made regarding the mishandling of weapons, the misuse of State funds and defective Garda holsters. These are very serious issues, but almost as serious is the allegation that those who made disclosures are actually sidelined, obstructed and sometimes penalised for doing so. Questions arise in respect of how the Minister's Department and, in particular, a predecessor of his handled a protected disclosure that came before her in one instance. My supplementary question is very simple: would that happen again? Is that the route that the current Minister would follow in respect of a protected disclosure of that nature? Would it be referred back to An Garda Síochána, or would he instead seek an independent examination? It is important to clarify what the situation would be today if such a protected disclosure were made.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: The Deputy is going from the general to the specific. I am cautious about speaking specifically about individual protected disclosures but, obviously, I have examined the files on what happened prior to my arrival in the Department. My view is that my predecessor, Deputy McEntee, behaved in an entirely appropriate manner and followed departmental advice in respect of issues to which the Deputy is referring. As he will be aware, on 27 February 2025 I referred issues highlighted in the protected disclosure under section 102(5) of the Garda Síochána Act to Fiosrú. I referred them for the purpose of having them investigated. I do not want to get into detail on the issues arising from that, but it is important, if somebody makes a protected disclosure and we have identified an entity to investigate it, that the individual engage with that entity so it can conduct and conclude its investigation.

Deputy Matt Carthy: This is important for public confidence. It is also important for gardaí, either now or in the future, who might be inclined to make a protected disclosure. I am not asking the Minister to make a judgment call on anything that was done previously. That will happen in time. What I am asking today is this: if a member of the Garda takes it upon himself or herself to make a protected disclosure to the Minister's Department, is there a likelihood, as has happened in the past, that it will be referred to An Garda Síochána in a manner in which he or she could be identified?

Is there a likelihood, as has happened in the past, that it will be reverted to An Garda Síochána in a manner in which he or she could be identified? I will not even use up my time because that question has to be answered today.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: If a protected disclosure is made to the Department or to me as Minister for justice, I will do what then Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee, did in the first instance, which is refer it promptly to the Office of the Protected Disclosures Commissioner. That is the important thing to do because it is not for me as Minister to determine the process of investigation or how a disclosure should be investigated. It is important that protected disclosures get to the statutory entity that will look at who should investigate it.

There can be situations where there is communication between the OPDC and a Minister and issues will arise in respect of it. However, ultimately, what happened in this case was that the issues highlighted in the protected disclosure were referred to Fiosrú for independent investigation. It is important that the issues referred to Fiosrú for independent investigation were thoroughly investigated, but it takes two individuals for that to happen. There is the State entity receiving the information-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: With respect, the Minister is not answering the question.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: -----and the person making the protected disclosure, who needs to engage with the investigator for the investigation to be concluded.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I am talking about how the Minister and his Department would deal with it. That is very disappointing.

Departmental Contracts

2. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration further to his previous evidence to the Oireachtas justice committee concerning the number of providers arising from the cancellation of pre-contract accommodation agreements, and in light of the Comptroller and Auditor General's report identifying legal proceedings involving five providers, to account for the difference between those figures; the status of each of the remaining cases or agreements referred to by him; whether any additional settlements or payments have been made in respect of them; and the total financial exposure to the State arising from the cancellation of these agreements. [70965/26]

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy for his question. At the outset, I will identify the savings that have been made as a result of decisions and policies put in place by the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, and me. The Deputy will be aware that, in 2024, the expenditure on accommodation for Ukrainians by the Department was €1.16 billion. As a result of decisions made by the Minister of State and me, in next year's budget, we are looking for just €257 million in the budget for accommodation for Ukrainians.

In 2024, IPAS accommodation cost €1.005 billion and, in 2025, it rose to €1.27 billion. In 2026, the allocation was €1.1 billion and 2027 will see further reductions of more than €250

million on IPAS accommodation compared with the 2026 allocation. The decisions and policies being put in place by the Minister of State and me are saving the State money by reducing our expenditure.

The Deputy highlighted the Comptroller and Auditor General's report, which referred to 14 IPAS accommodation contracts that were not proceeded with in 2025. I will not go into the detail about why they were not proceeded with, but I have said publicly previously that the main reason I did not proceed with them was a concern for public safety. The Deputy who represents areas will know public safety concerns were a real issue in 2024 and 2025. As has been indicated in the report of the Comptroller and Auditor General, proceedings were initiated against me by five providers. Others threatened to bring them and there is other litigation by a person who did not have a pre-contract accommodation agreement, but still says we should have proceeded with a commitment. The total value of those contracts was over €100 million and as has been indicated by the Comptroller and Auditor General, there have been settlements in respect of three of them and two cases are outstanding. I will not get into the detail of the amounts paid in those settlements because other cases are ongoing.

Deputy Gary Gannon: That leaves us in a difficult position because we are talking about a serious amount of public money, which has not been accounted for and we cannot find. We had a back and forth about this on 3 March in the justice committee. I asked the Minister a number of questions and some discrepancies remain in his answers. I asked at that meeting if there was a contingent liability and the Minister said he did not believe there was at that point. The Comptroller and Auditor General has expressly found that these agreements created significant contingent liabilities for the Exchequer. Will the Minister explain the discrepancy between what he told the committee on 3 March and what we discovered in the past week?

He also told the committee in March that there were potentially nine outstanding cases. The Comptroller and Auditor General has found five. The Minister referenced a further case in his contribution. Will he tell us about the rest?

It is also important to say that this is a significant amount of public money. The Minister has talked about savings to the State based on his decisions. What are the actual costs of those decisions and what are the real savings, as opposed to the nett, which the Minister has told us about?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: When I am before the Oireachtas committee on justice, I am not before a court of law. The Deputy can ask me a question about anything and I will try to ensure I give him as much information as I can. What I said in the committee meeting was that I thought there were eight cases and certainly fewer than ten. I was not certain at the time. However, there are five cases. I am aware there is another case as well so it is around six cases. I do not think I should be enormously criticised for that. Otherwise, when I come before the committee, I will be extremely reticent and not try to be of assistance to the committee. I think the Deputy would prefer me to be as open as possible before committee.

I will not get into the settlement amounts. They have been categorised as accrued expenses and the Comptroller and Auditor General identified that in his report. Ultimately, though, this information will be available in the public domain, once the other cases have been resolved. It would be totally inappropriate for me to now say what was paid in other cases when individuals

are suing me on the basis that they want me to open IPAS centres in certain areas, or if not, to pay them the money they would have made in respect of them. That is in effect what the cases are about. I am going to defend those cases.

Deputy Gary Gannon: What the Minister told the committee and the public, in his own words, is that there are be €120 million of savings. Clearly, that will not be the case. This comes back to a significant cost to the public, paid for by the Exchequer. While people may be suing the Minister, the costs are borne by the public and we have a right to know what those costs are, based on bad agreements, which we never went into.

It is important to say, the committee is absolutely not a court of law, but we as public representatives and spokespeople on justice have a right to scrutinise and ask questions and have an expectation of responses. I do not believe the responses the Minister gave to the committee captured what the Comptroller and Auditor General captured in his report last week. Was the information available at the time?

We are talking about an extraordinary waste of public money. We do not know the figure but we are talking about people being paid money for contracts that were never fulfilled. Do we want IPAS centres to be opened? Where there is a need, maybe, but we do not want public money going into the hands of people who did not provide a service and for us not to be able to establish the cost of that to the Exchequer.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Had I entered into the pre-contract agreements, the State would have been exposed to more than €100 million in payments. I did not go ahead with them because I had a fear at the time for public safety in respect of the issues. That is why I did not proceed with them. With the greatest respect, the consequence, although it might not have been the intention, of what I did was to save the State from having to spend more than €100 million. Individuals who claim they had pre-contract agreements wanted to enter into proceedings against the State. Some did while many did not. There are six cases, five of which are pre-contract and one other I am aware of. Others threatened to bring a case. The divergence between what I said in the committee and what is the situation is not that different. I said there were eight, maybe nine and certainly fewer than ten cases, so we are talking about a difference between eight and six. I will certainly be more reticent the next time I am before the committee. This is about ensuring public money is protected, and although it might not have been the intention, the effect of this decision was to save the State money.

Refugee Appeals Tribunal

3. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration the number of appeals currently pending before the International Protection Appeals Tribunal. [70838/26]

Deputy Matt Carthy: The previous system has a backlog. What is the current backlog and, more important, what actions are the Minister and his Department taking to ensure the backlog is reduced, if not cleared, by the end of the year?

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Colm Brophy): It is a central priority for me and for the Minister that Ireland's immigration system is firm, fair and effective. The number of international protection applications had been rising over recent years, reaching 18,500 in 2024. In 2025, application numbers fell by approximately one third. The number of applications received up to the end of August 2026 shows a further reduction compared with the same period in 2025. Over the same period, there has been a significant increase in investment in the international protection system. Combined with digitisation and process re-engineering, this has facilitated a major increase in processing capacity and demonstrates a strong commitment to reducing the number of cases on hand. The International Protection Appeals Tribunal, IPAT, more than doubled the number of appeals closed from 3,100 in 2024 to 6,300 in 2025. As of 1 October 2026, IPAT had already closed 6,902 appeals this year, exceeding the total number of appeals completed in the whole of 2025. As of 1 October 2026, IPAT had 21,203 appeals on hand.

The increased resourcing of the international protection system has been particularly evident at IPAT in recent years, with the Tribunal's budget increasing by 95% between 2023 and 2025. The number of administrative staff at IPAT has increased from 37 at the beginning of 2023 to 88 currently. The number of whole-time members has increased from three at the beginning of 2025 to five currently while the number of part-time members has increased from 44 to 134 over the same period. In addition to measures aimed at improving processing more generally, an operational plan between Ireland and the European Union Agency for Asylum provides quasi-judicial support to the International Protection Appeals Tribunal to assist decision-making and reduce the number of cases on hand.

Deputy Matt Carthy: We are told that there are 21,000 cases under appeal. This was entirely predictable. How did the Government allow this to happen? How did we get to these unprecedented levels? The answer is that the Department has prioritised PR over efficiency. I have been in radio studios with the Minister of State when he has spoken about the reduction in the timeframe for international protection applications but he never refers to the fact that the timeframe for appeals has actually been extended, leading us to now have 21,000 people awaiting appeals. I am sure there is a concern that, as the new Tribunal for Asylum and Returns Appeals essentially takes over the IPAS system, the IPAS system will be permitted to become a complete mess, if it is not already. Has the Department carried out any analysis of the cost impact of the lengthy appeals processes that are now in place? If so, what was the outcome?

Deputy Colm Brophy: As the Deputy will know, we have discussed this on many occasions in the past. The growth in appeals has been triggered by the fact that we have increased the processing time. Obviously, the number of appeals will grow as a result. As I indicated to the Deputy in my earlier reply, we have put in the resources. The Minister and I fully intend to ensure that system continues to work and that we successfully process those appeals in conjunction with what is now taking place under the pact. Under the pact, we have seen a significant reduction in processing times. Both of us and the staff involved, whose numbers have increased substantially, are firmly committed to getting through the backlog and processing these applications as quickly as possible.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I have a couple of supplementary questions. Does the Minister of State accept that delayed appeals mean increased costs as longer stays in IPAS accommodation result in higher costs for the taxpayer and longer periods of uncertainty? He has mentioned the figures for this year, including the completion of 6,900 appeals. I might have missed him saying it but is it not a fact that up to 30 staff were brought in from the European Union Agency for Asylum to assist in clearing that backlog? How many of those staff are still operating and supporting the Department? It is my understanding that those support arrangements are due to expire on 31 December 2027. What is the plan for after that? Does the Minister of State envisage the appeals backlog being cleared at that stage? It would be useful for the House to have answers to those questions.

Deputy Colm Brophy: Significant resources will be applied to the appeals process to reduce those numbers over the course of this year. It is very important to note that we have an ongoing relationship with the European agency in supporting our work. I accept the Deputy's point that, the longer people are in a process, the more it costs. That is the reason the Minister and I were absolutely focused on making the necessary changes to the process to deliver those faster processing times and the associated savings, as we are currently working to do. We are really beginning to see the impact of that. By the way, at every single opportunity, the Deputy stood up and opposed this process, saying it would not work. The reality is that, this year, we will probably see fewer than 10,000 people coming into our country. The figure was more than 20,000 just a few years ago. We are absolutely committed not only to successfully delivering the new system-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Minister of State blames the migration pact for those numbers increasing then.

Deputy Colm Brophy: -----but to ensuring that the people already in the system are processed as quickly as possible.

Prison Service

4. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration the proposed process and timeline for the two new prisons in the Glen, Cork city. [70856/26]

Deputy Thomas Gould: Will the Minister update the Dáil on the processed process and timelines for the development of two new prisons at the Glen, Cork city, on the site of the former Cork detention centre?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy very much for his question. There is no plan for two prisons at the Glen in Cork city. There is a plan to extend the existing prison. We need greater prison capacity because we have overcrowding in our prisons. For the purposes of answering the Deputy's question thoroughly, I will give him the statistics from today. We have 5,444 people in custody in our prisons, meaning the system is at 114% of its capacity. There are 364 people in Cork Prison, which is regrettably at 120% of its capacity. As I am sure the Deputy will agree, it is clearly the case that we need greater capacity in our prison system.

The proposed project for the extension of the existing Cork Prison is part of the accelerated delivery programme for which I have managed to get the agreement of the Minister for public expenditure, Deputy Chambers. While it is still at an early planning stage, planning for the Cork Prison project is continuing. The new prison facility on the site of the old decommissioned Cork Prison will be a large extension of the function of the existing prison and will deliver capacity for approximately 100 women and 230 men as part of the accelerated prison infrastructure programme. I understand that people have been appointed to provide consultancy services in respect of demolition and that preparations are ongoing. The Prison Service is awaiting tender outcomes to inform a final decision. The target for project completion is 2031 but considerable progress is being made.

From speaking to individuals and councillors in Cork, I am aware that a proposal has been made in relation to the protected structure status of the old Cork Prison. That issue will obviously have to be given consideration as well.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I am glad the Minister has mentioned that issue. Cork City Council unanimously voted to have the old Cork Prison, which was known as the detention centre, declared a protected structure. I will give the Minister some of the feedback. Thomas Kent, the only 1916 leader to be executed outside of Dublin, was executed in that barracks. This is hallowed ground for republicans. After being arrested, Terence MacSwiney, the Lord Mayor of Cork, was locked up in that detention centre. He said that he would rather die than give up the Lord Mayor of Cork's chain. Multiple republicans have been executed and detained in the old Cork detention barracks. The Minister is now talking about demolishing it. This is Cork's Kilmainham. The republican history of this building is of vital importance to the people of Cork and to the people of this island because it is where republicans were held and executed for their beliefs.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I am not involved in the process that is ongoing in Cork City Council in terms of the register of protected structures. That is a matter for the councillors in Cork.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Will the Minister respect it?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: It is a matter for the councillors in Cork city. The fact that it had not been put on the register of protected structures to date is instructive. It is obviously not incompatible for the history of Cork Prison to be preserved while ensuring that we have an extension of the prison to deal with the overcrowding that exists therein. For people in Cork who find themselves in prison, it is important that we have appropriate facilities in place.

I will engage and any decisions on the future of the old Cork Prison will be considered in light of the outcome of the relevant processes. As this project's planning process proceeds with the relevant authorities, it should be emphasised that there will be stakeholder engagement as part of the overall planning process. I know that Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan wants me to meet local groups on what is happening there and I will indeed do that. We do not need to turn this into an issue of crisis or conflict. I will listen to what local people have to say in respect of it and it is not incompatible with ensuring that we get a prison developed.

Deputy Thomas Gould: That makes no sense. How can we demolish a building and say that that is not incompatible? The Minister is talking about levelling the old Cork Prison. Imagine if someone came in here and said we would level Kilmainham Gaol. There would be uproar. Former Deputies Frank Aiken and Dr. Séamus Fitzgerald set out to identify Thomas Kent's cell and they succeeded and preserved his cell. This is hallowed ground for republicans all across this island but especially in Cork.

I will refresh the Minister's memory. Permission was granted for the demolition of O'Rahilly House. It was then added to the register of protected structures but was demolished anyway. As a result of that, the Minister said, "The act of bulldozing the building was completely against the historical interests of the people of Dublin and Ireland." He also said, "We need to go around the country and ask local authorities to identify those properties within their jurisdiction that are of historical importance, so we can preserve our vital revolutionary history." The Minister has one rule for O'Rahilly House. Is there another rule for republicans in the old Cork Prison? This should not be demolished. This should be saved, not just for Cork, but for our history. Can we not remember our history? For the Minister to demolish this is an act of destruction and is wrong.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy for quoting me. Unfortunately, people did not listen to me at the time because had it been the case that people had put the old Cork Prison on the register of protected structures, the Deputy would not have to raise the issues we are raising here today. I will listen to local people on it. There is a process ongoing in Cork City Council. That process has to play out.

In terms of the heritage of Cork Prison that Deputy Gould has identified, I am surprised that it was not put on the register of protected structures if it is such hallowed ground as the Deputy has referred to. It was not put on it. I will take these factors into account. I want to ensure that we preserve our heritage, whether it is republican heritage or whatever it is, and the extraordinary history we have in this country. However, I also have to look to the future and what the needs of the people at present are. At present, having indicated at the outset that there is 120% capacity in Cork Prison, I have to do something to ensure we expand that. The prison-

Deputy Thomas Gould: There are greenfield sites that the Government could start building on.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I have not finished yet.

Deputy Thomas Gould: There are greenfield sites the Government could build on.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: The prison needs to be extended and there is an opportunity to do it promptly.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The Government has land it could build on.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Question No. 5 taken with Written Answers.

International Protection

6. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration if his Department maintains records of security expenditure on a centre-by-centre basis in respect of all International Protection Accommodation Service, IPAS, accommodation centres; and, if so, the name and location of each centre, the security provider engaged, and the total amount spent on security services at each centre for each of the past five years and to date in 2026, in tabular form. [70296/26]

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Last week, we learned that the Minister of State's Department paid out about €100 million on IPAS contracts that were never used. I put in a parliamentary question recently, the reply to which showed that the Department had paid about €2.6 million for security for unoccupied State-owned IPAS centres. This money was spent on empty IPAS centres. At the time, I also asked how much we were spending on other IPAS centres and the reply said that the Department did not have that information. When will the Government stop incinerating tax payers' money?

Deputy Colm Brophy: I thank the Deputy. The State is currently providing accommodation at 297 IPAS accommodation centres around the country, located in every county, in a combination of commercially contracted and State-owned accommodation centres. I clarify for the Deputy that in all IPAS operating accommodation centres, whether they are commercially provided or State owned, the centre management and providers are responsible for day-to-day operational arrangements on the site, including staffing, catering, health and safety, utilities and security arrangements.

Security costs and service provision for commercially contracted centres are included in the overall contracted rate with the service provider, and all contracts negotiated now provide for an all-inclusive rate that covers all services on the site, including security. Security for operating State-owned IPAS centres is also provided as part of each site's facilities management contract. As such, my Department does not hold details of individual security contracts and service providers and does not procure or pay for these services directly.

When my Department agrees a contract for accommodation management services at a property, there are specific requirements across a range of dimensions that must be met by the provider. In terms of security, these include security to be provided on a 24-hour basis, the provision of CCTV and compliance with the licensing requirements of the Private Security Authority, PSA.

All IPAS accommodation centres are subject to oversight arrangements through the Department's centre management and compliance team and inspected by HIQA, departmental officials or external inspectors commissioned by the Department. The inspections and oversight arrangements examine the quality of the accommodation services and also whether centres are fulfilling their contractual obligations.

Security is also provided at two State-owned sites that were used as IPAS accommodation. This security was provided because of criminal damage caused at those locations on previous occasions. I know that this data has been supplied to the Deputy.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I do not believe that that answer is good enough, given the current environment and the name the Government has for wasting money. While security is lumped in with the overall contracts for these individual IPAS centres, it is important that the Chamber hear what level of funding is going towards the specific objective of security. What is even the average component cost for security in these contracts? If the Government cannot measure how much this is costing, how can it manage this? No private business across the country would shrug its shoulders and say it did not know if asked how much does this component or element of the process cost. It is really important that the Department find out the security component of each contract so as to be able to work it out for all of the IPAS centres and give a total figure, as well as working out an average figure. It is not good enough to say we do not know how much it is costing.

Deputy Colm Brophy: I will repeat to the Deputy that we enter into a contract, and we have been going through a process of renewing all of these contracts and delivering really substantive savings to the taxpayer by ensuring that the rate card for IPAS centres and the cost to the State of providing them have been substantially reduced. As part of that, we sign a contract with service providers to provide an inclusive service to the State for IPAS centres. The service centre must be provided for within the obligations that the provider signed up to in the contract, including a comprehensive, wraparound package of services involving everything from welfare needs, food needs, requirement needs and accommodation needs to security needs. It is a single package that is provided to the State. I am very pleased to say it is provided at an increasingly lower rate because of the excellent work that the Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, and I have ensured is taking place to reduce the overall cost of providing IPAS accommodation to the taxpayer.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: How does the Minister of State know it is a lower rate? He cannot even compare and contrast it with security costs in the private sector. He does not have a specific number for security. He does not have an estimated number for security. He does not have an average across all of these. Basically, the Minister of State is saying he is getting a better figure on the basis of saying he does not know how much this costs. This country is sick to death of TDs asking questions about costs and the Government saying it does not know. It is not good enough.

Last week, I found out that there were 240 bathrooms in the national children's hospital that needed to be redone because they were not done to the right level. We found out that €100 million had been paid for contracts that were never exercised. There was €2.6 million for security for IPAS centres that are empty at the moment. Hundreds of millions of euro are being wasted in this country that could be spent on increasing the income of individuals, increasing public services to individuals or increasing the infrastructure in this country.

The level of waste is not tolerable. I have put this question in twice and the answer today from the Government that it does not know how much this costs is wrong.

Deputy Colm Brophy: I am sorry, because I genuinely believe that, underneath it all, the Deputy is able to comprehend things and work them out. It is fairly straightforward. If something is costing the State less to provide at the moment than it did in the past, we are having a saving. Not even in the Deputy's world of make up can he turn that on its head and say it is costing us more.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Minister of State does not-----

Deputy Colm Brophy: Sorry, but I did not interrupt the Deputy. The situation is straightforward. We have a wraparound contract. We have a rate card with service providers. They provide a range of services to us. Included in that is security. What has been taking place from the Department's point of view, led by the Minister and me, is meant to ensure that we are saving the taxpayer money year on year on this, and the figures clearly show that that is the case. We are now paying less for IPAS. We are paying less on each of the contracts. We have negotiated successfully a reduction in those figures. That means, right across the board, we are saving the taxpayers money so that we can use it in a way that we believe is for the best purposes. That was what the Government was doing yesterday in its budget.

An Garda Síochána

7. **Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration the assessments undertaken by his Department and An Garda Síochána regarding the need for increased Garda resources and Garda visibility in rapidly growing constituencies, such as Kildare North. [70464/26]

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: It was welcome news yesterday that the Minister was able to secure an additional 1,000 gardaí as part of budget 2027. What I raise specifically today is Kildare North, which has the lowest Garda numbers *per capita* nationally. What assessments will be undertaken by the Department and, indeed, the Garda in deploying more gardaí to the likes of Kildare North?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank Deputy Ó Cearúil for his question. The issue of Garda policing and Garda resources in Kildare North is an issue which the Deputy consistently raises with me.

At the outset, I, too, welcome the fact that resources were put in place in yesterday's budget for the recruitment of 1,000 new gardaí in 2027. I am pleased to say that we will get close to, if not reach, 1,000 gardaí recruited in 2026 because we have two more attestations. I will not have the final figure until later in the year.

As of the end of August 2026, there were 14,683 gardaí allocated to communities nationwide. They are the most important resource. There are 534 of these gardaí assigned to the Kildare-Carlow division, which includes Kildare North.

Deputy Ó Cearúil asked what factors were taken into consideration when the Commissioner was deciding where his resources should go. I will give the Deputy them presently, but it is important that I let the Commissioner do that work. That is the Commissioner's function. He

is the expert when it comes to policing. The Commissioner has the data when it comes to policing. It is not a good idea for me, looking over the Commissioner's shoulder, to try to say I would like some more put into constituencies for political reasons. The Commissioner will consider a range of factors when allocating the resources. These include commitments and undertakings outlined in the annual policing plan, crime trends and workloads, operational strategies, population and demographic trends, geographical factors and personnel matters across all Garda divisions and specialist units.

Within Kildare, there are 147 gardaí assigned to Kildare town, 112 gardaí assigned to Leixlip and 171 gardaí assigned to Naas. I also note that 30 probationer gardaí were assigned to the division in 2025 and a further 41 new gardaí have been assigned so far in 2026. Those numbers are reflecting the Deputy's concern and, I hope, dealing with it.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: I would not suggest that Deputy O'Callaghan would, as Minister, interfere with the Commissioner's role and I appreciate the separation there. However, it is incumbent on me to raise these issues, particularly in light of, as the Minister mentioned, the additional numbers for Kildare.

Twelve of those probationary gardaí this year were assigned to the Leixlip district, and it is welcome news. However, I am fortunate to have a great relationship with gardaí on the ground in my constituency and ten gardaí are leaving Kildare. They are being transferred. Therefore, we have only two net additional gardaí in the district. This is having a huge impact on local policing. The gardaí want more resources and want more colleagues on the ground.

Kilcock, Celbridge and Maynooth, for example, are huge towns, all with part-time stations. It is a hub-and-spoke approach with Leixlip. It would not be tolerated down the country in other counties for towns the size of Maynooth, Kilcock or Celbridge not to have full-time stations. We need a review of how the hub-and-spoke and, indeed, how individual stations operate.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I can appreciate and understand the Deputy's concern and wanting to have more gardaí in Kildare. Obviously, every Deputy in the House is saying that to me. I am dependent upon getting in more members of An Garda Síochána. The good news for the Deputy and, indeed, other Deputies is that recruitment is going extremely well this year. We have had three intakes so far in 2026. We had 215 trainees enter in the first intake, followed by 201 on 4 May and 201 on 27 July, and there is a further intake scheduled for 19 October. The numbers are increasing. The more we can get numbers into An Garda Síochána, the more I see more people passing out and the more opportunity the Commissioner will have to allocate Garda resources to Kildare North.

I assure the Deputy that I am aware of the issues he has highlighted. No doubt the Commissioner is aware of those issues as well. Taking into account the factors that I have highlighted, particularly the demographics, I can see the need for extra gardaí in Kildare.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: As I said at the beginning, I acknowledge the work that the Minister has done in increasing Garda numbers throughout the country. It is extremely welcome. We need to be open with people around the significant increase in Garda numbers.

I also appreciate that every TD in here would love to have more gardaí in their constituencies. That is a fact of life. However, in looking at the allocations, we need to look particularly at part-time stations in commuter belts in counties such as Wicklow, Meath and Kildare, where there has been significant population growth. In Maynooth, for example, when I was first elected to the local authority, its population was approximately 12,000. It has now gone beyond 20,000. Celbridge is at over 24,000. Kilcock had a population of 8,000; it is now up between 14,000 and 16,000. These are significant towns that need significant resources. I would ask, in dealing with the Commissioner, that there be an assessment of towns that are growing significantly and what to do with these part-time stations and the resources in the future.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: There has been a lot of success by the Garda in Kildare North recently as well. In May, gardaí from Kildare North community engagement and Kildare North crime seized two semi-automatic pistols, 39 rounds of ammunition and a scrambler bike during an operation in Maynooth. If you look at Operation Thor, which began some ten years ago, there is a positive trend in Kildare. In the Kildare-Carlow Garda division, burglary and relational offences fell from 279 instances in the first half of 2025 by approximately 21%.

The gardaí are doing a good job and that is why the Deputy wants them there. The Deputy recognises that they are doing an excellent job. It is all dependent upon getting the numbers up. I am pleased to be able to say that, by the end of the year, we will have the biggest force ever. I believe that we will either get to or close to 15,000 sworn members of An Garda Síochána by the end of the year. Of course, there are 3,500 staff members doing work in the station that leave gardaí the ability to go out. I hear what the Deputy says, but recruitment is going well.

Question No. 8 taken with Written Answers.

Sentencing Policy

9. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration the way in which he plans to address the concerns of a campaign (details supplied) which has advocated for sentencing reform and victims' rights in Ireland. [70447/26]

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I wonder if the Minister could address the concerns of the Justice for Martin Lynn campaign, which has advocated for sentencing reform and the rights of victims in Ireland.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: With the Deputy, I had the privilege of meeting Sharon Lynn and Bryan Gallagher on 25 June of this year in respect of the Martin Lynn sentencing framework.

This issue arises from what are referred to as one-punch deaths, which are very tragic situations that develop when a punch is thrown and a person dies. The person who has been punched falls on the ground, hits their head and dies as a result of it.

The issues that are being highlighted by the Martin Lynn campaign are in respect of the sentencing of individuals who are subsequently convicted of manslaughter for that type of

criminal act. The campaign wants to see greater transparency and the experience of victims and families within the criminal justice system recognised.

Obviously, the courts are independent, but we are also able to transpose laws from the EU and create our own laws, which the courts then have to take into account. One of the big issues is the Criminal Justice (Victims of Crime) Act 2017, which transposed the EU victims' rights directive into our law. Section 8 of the Act provides for victims to receive information in relation to their cases and also distinguishes between general information, supports and additional case-specific information. In January of this year, I secured Government approval for the drafting of the judicial council (amendment) Bill. The general scheme will empower me as Minister to request the Judicial Council to develop sentencing guidelines for particular areas of crime within a specified timeframe. This will put in place a statutory procedure whereby we can seek sentencing guidelines in respect of certain types of crime.

It is important to acknowledge that, in January of this year, a 31-year-old man was sentenced to six years in prison for killing Martin Lynn in an unprovoked one-punch attack near his home in Whitehall, which is why the Deputy is raising this issue here today.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: This is the first opportunity I have had to congratulate my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Ardagh. I know she is going to do a lot of work on youth justice and I look forward to welcoming her out to Finglas, Ballymun and Kilmore where we would be delighted to get additional resources, which I am sure she will be able to deliver.

The meeting we had with Martin Lynn's sister and Cian Gallagher's brother was heartbreaking. It showed the futility of an assault of that nature, that a one-punch attack could lead to the death of someone. I commend the bravery of the two families, who have stepped forward to try to turn their own personal tragedy into reform.

I note the Minister's comments on the general scheme of the judicial council Bill. The campaign is hoping that when that legislation is in place, the Minister will seek advice and guidelines from the council with regard to assault to avoid some of the variation in sentencing. The Martin Lynn sentencing framework puts real certainty around the issue of assault.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: My recollection of that meeting with Bryan and Sharon was that the inconsistency in the treatment of particular cases caused them concern. I understand the concern in that respect. Every case is going to be different. If somebody is charged with manslaughter, it is not like a murder charge where the person is convicted and there is a mandatory life sentence. A judge has to take into account a whole series of factors when it comes to imposing a sentence on an individual convicted of manslaughter in circumstances such as those outlined. Obviously, there may be different factors in many different occasions or instances that happen. We are always going to have variation between sentences for manslaughter because it depends on a whole variety of factors. However, it is the case that judges provide very detailed sentencing judgments as to why a particular sentence is being imposed, but that does not take away from understanding Sharon and Bryan's desire to see greater consistency.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Bryan and Sharon have not only called for greater transparency around sentencing, but they have also launched a walk away campaign to try to reduce the level of violence in society, particularly male-on-male violence. I commend them for that.

The Minister has made a number of reforms, which give hope to people like Sharon and Bryan who want to see further reform. In March, the Judicial Council adopted sentencing guidelines for offences under section 40 of the Domestic Violence Act. There is still work to be done, and I ask the Minister to continue considering the very detailed proposals put forward by Sharon. As the Minister said, broader action on male-on-male violence, a more victim-centred criminal justice system, the framework Sharon has put forward, and clearer sentencing guidelines will benefit everybody in society. I ask him to continue his work on that.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I will certainly continue considering how this matter can progress. As the Deputy identified, it is not just the criminal justice system that needs to be invoked in order to try to confront this problem. It is often the case that when a punch is thrown, the person does not realise that the punch is going to result in the death of the other person. To a large extent, it is the action or the consequence of a person getting stunned and their head hitting the ground that causes their death. It has devastating consequences for the deceased and deceased family. It also has devastating consequences for the person who probably did not intend to kill the person. If they did intend to do so, they would have been charged and convicted of murder.

There is a warning and education campaign that has to be put in place. Regrettably, it is young men between the ages of 16 and 28 or 29 who find themselves in this situation. Sometimes, they can be older. They need to be warned of the consequences of throwing punches. It can have fatal consequences and people need to be aware of them.

Prison Service

10. **Deputy George Lawlor** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration the number of Irish citizens and non-Irish citizens who are currently prisoners within the Irish prison system; and a breakdown of all prisoners' nationalities. [69742/26]

Deputy George Lawlor: This question is in the context of the continuing pressure we face on prison accommodation.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank Deputy Lawlor for his question. Earlier, I told Deputy Gould that, at present, Irish prison capacity was at 114%. The number I gave a few months ago was 5,444 or around that, so there is overcrowding in the Irish prison system. It is also the case that I have put in place measures to remove from Ireland persons from other jurisdictions who can, near the end of their prison sentences, be deported back to the countries from which they came.

As regards the Deputy's question on nationality, the Irish Prison Service has advised me that while it records the nationality of people in custody, this information is self-reported and the service does not routinely record citizenship. Accordingly, the requested information in respect of Irish and non-Irish citizens is not available, but I can confirm that, on 30 September, there

were 5,480 prisoners in custody. Of those, a total of 4,477 self-reported as Irish nationals. This means about 82% of the total number in custody self-reported as Irish nationals and approximately 18% as nationals of other countries.

The approximate figure of 18% of the total population who self-identified as non-Irish nationals is in line with the previously reported figure of approximately 18% from November 2025. This reported proportion of non-Irish nationals in prison has increased by approximately three percentage points since November 2019. It is important to put this in the context of the Central Statistics Office, CSO, estimates. The number of non-Irish nationals as a percentage of the overall population rose by nearly four percentage points and is now around 16.3% as of August 2026. There is a correlation between them, and obviously the age cohorts may explain why there is a slight difference. However, I will come back in the supplementary with what I am going to do with a unique identifier, which will give us more specific information.

Deputy George Lawlor: I thank the Minister. It is a bit strange that the Government, the Department or the Irish Prison Service does not know the nationality of the prisoners within the curtilage of the prisons. This is not about deporting all foreign prisoners, but where appropriate and lawful, serving a sentence in a prisoner's home country would reduce the pressure on Irish prison places and would certainly improve our situation. Prisoners may also have better access to support services in their home countries. The benefits to the Irish situation would be clear.

How many prisoners have been transferred out of the Irish prison system under international prisoner transfer agreements in each of the past five years, if the Minister has indicative figures on that? Are there barriers preventing a greater number of prison transfers, including prisoner consent, foreign state co-operation, legal challenges or administrative delays? These are important questions in the context of the crisis we face in our prison system, in that we could essentially have prisoners serve their sentences, where possible, in their home countries.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I am just looking for the actual figure, which I may not have in front of me, but already this year, I have deported a significant number of prisoners who are non-nationals and can be sent back to their countries of origin.

I do not have the statistics and so I am hesitant about giving them to the Deputy but it is certainly over 100 or 150 or so. If people who have been convicted of offences, which are obviously serious offences because they are in prison, are coming near the end of their sentence, I will avail of the opportunity to move them out of Ireland and serve them with an exclusion order. I do not have the exact statistics for the Deputy but I can come back to him in respect of that. The data is fairly accurate because it is self-reported data. While the Prison Service records the nationality of people in custody, this information is self-reported. I would have thought it was relatively accurate. The criminal justice system will benefit from more data. That is why I am moving through with the introduction of a unique identifier that will get us lots of data across the criminal justice network.

Deputy George Lawlor: The Prison Service would certainly benefit from more data. Has the Minister personally conducted an assessment on how many prison places could potentially be freed up through a more active use of prisoner transfer or repatriation agreements? There

are obviously benefits to a system that is at 114% capacity. There is serious pressure on our prison system that brings so many difficulties and problems for the prisoners who are serving their sentences. There is also the cost to the State. One of the latest figures was €103,000 to house a prisoner in the Irish prison system. A transfer programme could financially benefit the prison system and provide a better service for the State and the people who are incarcerated. I believe we need to look at it more seriously. It would benefit the prison system, the prisoners and indeed the prisoners who would be repatriated.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I assure the Deputy that it is happening. I have given instructions to the Prison Service and An Garda Síochána, which effects the deportations, when people are coming towards the end of their sentence, although it will not apply or be appropriate in every situation for capacity to be created where appropriate through removing people from the prison system. The law was amended earlier this year in the miscellaneous provisions Bill to give an opportunity to extend that to a greater time towards the end of their sentence. There is also the other provision, of which the Deputy is aware, where prisoners can apply to have their sentence served in another jurisdiction, generally in their home jurisdiction. In most instances, I would permit and facilitate that but not always because sometimes it is appropriate and important, notwithstanding the nationality of prisoners, particularly somebody convicted of murder and who has a life sentence imposed on them, that they serve their sentence here and are under supervision of the Irish Probation Service and Prison Service.

Deputy George Lawlor: The Minister is absolutely correct.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Darren O'Rourke): Táimid críochnaithe.

Legal Aid

11. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration if any amendments to SI 303 of 2026 have been made to bring his recently announced changes to the legal aid scheme into force. [70647/26]

Deputy Gary Gannon: Have any amendments been made to the payment structure of SI 303 of 2026? If they have been made to bring these recently announced changes into line, this obviously pertains to the changes to the legal aid scheme.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Deputy Gannon's question arises in respect of the concession on foot of the request from the Law Society that I change the payment structure so that the payment would be split up. I proposed and have implemented a new payment structure that will see an initial payment upon request of €320 with a final €200 payable on receipt of the final order or 12 months after the initial assignment. My Department has put in place administrative arrangements to give effect to that split fee arrangement. I confirm to the Deputy that both initial payment requests for €320 and final payment requests for the €520 have been processed and paid to a number of solicitors. I do not see it as necessary to change the statutory instrument but regarding the practical issue, it is happening at present. Administratively, people are being

paid the €320 for the first hearing and the €200 will come at the end of the case or after 12 months, whichever is the first.

While the Deputy has raised the issue of the new scheme, I should point out that since the commencement of the new system, as of 2 October, 2,400 new certificates, which are invoices for payment for legal aid, have been issued in respect of the District Court. That is with an approximate value of €1.25 million. Of the cases concluded under the new system since 1 July, approximately 75% concluded with one appearance only in court and 99% concluded cases were finalised within five appearances. Previously where a case concluded in one appearance, the solicitor would only be paid €240. Now they are paid a fee of €520 for that one appearance. That is why I think it is an appropriate and good system from the point of view of solicitors. The most important thing is from the point of view of court users. It will make the system more efficient.

Deputy Gary Gannon: To be clear, the Minister has not actually changed the statutory instrument to reflect the concessions. That has not happened yet.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: No.

Deputy Gary Gannon: That is interesting but I want to focus on the other point that the Minister made. He has made this point before about legal aid certificates being given out. I think he said 2,000 there.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Some 2,400.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Some 2,400. The Minister also knows that a legal aid certificate can be issued without a solicitor being present. He knows that certificates are often issued without a solicitor being present and that judges were granting legal aid to some unrepresented defendants, despite there being no solicitor named on the certificate. That means that the certificate may have been given. How many of those 2,400 certificates have solicitors actually named on the ticket? There has obviously been a variance between what has been said by the Minister and his Department and what the solicitors themselves believe is the reality. The Minister is using that figure but I do not think it is reflective of what he is hoping to present it as being.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: The figures the Law Society referred to with regard to the drop related to what was happening in July. Being frank, in July there was widespread disruption in respect of the legal aid scheme in the District Court. That has now changed. Approximately 36 solicitors who resigned from the scheme have been reinstated. Last week, 11 solicitors were reinstated. In terms of the 2,400 new certificates that have been issued, my understanding - I have looked at the schedule and I get the Excel spreadsheet - is that every single one of them, to my recollection, has a solicitor attached to it. One can go down through it and see the solicitors who are assigned to it. There are more solicitors coming back into the scheme. It is an efficient system. It is working. I do not want to have a row with solicitors. They play a really important part in the administration of justice but the new scheme is working. It will work for solicitors but, most importantly of all, it will work for the public and court users.

Deputy Gary Gannon: There is absolutely no way one can look at our court system at the moment and think it is working effectively. I am not even going to go into the ins and outs of where I think the Minister is right or wrong. We are at a point where there are industrial relations disputes across the country. Every time a Minister or a union takes to a platform, they encourage the other side to get around the table and negotiate. I cannot for the life of me understand why four months into this dispute, the Minister is saying he is unwilling to negotiate. It makes his own Department an outlier with regard to every other industrial relations dispute in this country. I do not think there is exceptionalism as much as the Minister may feel there is. To my mind, it is not just about the Law Society. There are solicitors the length and breadth of the country. There are two outstanding issues. One is that they do not want to have multiple cases tried on the same certificate. Often, they are going to be tried in different courts. That is very much the case. If the Minister does not believe me, he should have a look at that.

The second is when it comes to complex issues in relation to children, mental health, and potentially addiction. The Minister said he is willing to be open to that. At four months in, can we not just get around the table and talk? What is happening around the country, whether in Dublin, Cork, or Mayo, is a shambles, and the Minister can fix it. People should not be asked to work for free.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Nobody is asking solicitors to work for free.

Deputy Gary Gannon: On the six occasions, solicitors in the court are the only ones not being paid.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: In the budget yesterday, I procured €123 million for the legal profession in respect of the criminal legal aid scheme. They are not working for free. The Deputy can see the statistics about their earnings. I have no issue with that but my priority is to make it efficient for the public. On the negotiations, I have negotiated with the Law Society. Today, I sent a letter back to it. I got a letter from its president, Rosemarie Loftus, last week. I replied to it today. I sat down with the Law Society before the new scheme came in on 1 July. My officials have sat down with them on many occasions.

Since the new scheme, I sat down and negotiated and discussed it with them. Deputy Gannon's question was about the change I introduced. That change was introduced as a result of the Law Society and me sitting around the table.

Deputy Gary Gannon: It has not been changed.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: The change now is that, administratively, people can be paid in split blocks. That is now happening as a result of what the Law Society said in respect of me.

Deputy Gary Gannon: You did not change it.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: In terms of the multiple certificates, it is the case that the system was being abused. People were getting 50 or 60 certificates for one accused before the court.

Deputy Gary Gannon: There were three.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: It was never intended to be like that.

Deputy Gary Gannon: There were three instances.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I can assure Deputy Gannon there were much more than three instances.

Question No. 12 taken with Written Answers.

Legal Aid

13. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration the total expenditure incurred by the State on criminal legal aid in respect of persons aged under 18 years in each of the years 2023, 2024, 2025 and to date in 2026; and the estimated amount of that expenditure attributable to juveniles who had previously been convicted of one or more criminal offences. [70303/26]

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The right to defence is a key legal right in any liberal democracy to make sure individuals can challenge a prosecutor in relation to a particular case. However, how it is delivered is a key issue, and is a key issue at the moment. We have the ongoing battle between the Minister and both solicitors and barristers over this particular issue but we also have a high level of recidivism among young criminals. Does the Minister know how much money we are spending on this at the moment?

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Catherine Ardagh): Under the Courts Service Act 1998, the management and administration of the courts is a matter for the Courts Service, while the allocation of court business, the scheduling of cases and the management of court lists are matters for the Judiciary, in particular the Presidents of the various courts. It should also be noted that under the Criminal Justice (Legal Aid) Act 1962, it is the courts, through the Judiciary, which are responsible for the granting of legal aid. The Department has no involvement in the granting of free legal aid or the assignment of solicitors. As was outlined, that is done by the judges. These matters are handled entirely by the courts.

I am advised the expenditure of criminal legal aid is not held in such a way as to identify defendants under 18 years or those with previous convictions of one or more criminal offences. As the Minister pointed out, unique identifier codes may help in the future. Therefore, it is not possible to provide the information sought by the Deputy regarding the estimated amount of expenditure attributable to juveniles who had previously been convicted of one or more criminal offences.

It is important to stress in this context that the Government's approach to tackling youth offending is primarily through youth diversion and early intervention. Yesterday, the Government announced another €11.5 million towards our youth diversion strategy. The youth

diversion strategy 2021-2027 emphasises early intervention, prevention, family support and community engagement. That will be continued in the new youth diversion strategy. It targets behavioural change so the cycle of offending by young people is broken, and it operates a graduated response, ranging from diversion to, as a last resort, detention. As offending increases in severity, so too does the criminal justice response to address youth crime. The Government has fulfilled its commitment in the youth justice strategy, and we are now working towards the next youth justice strategy in 2027.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: This is the "I do not know coalition Government". I asked a question earlier about security in IPAS centres and the Minister of State said, "I do not know."

Deputy Colm Brophy: I did not say I do not know.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Deputy Lawlor asked the Minister about the nationality of people in prisons and the Minister said, "I do not know." I just asked how much the State is spending in relation to young people receiving free legal aid, and the Minister of State said, "I do not know." How in the name of God is the Government meant to manage the taxpayers' money if Ministers' instinct is to be oblivious to the way they are spending it? For well-paid individuals, to not even be curious as to the answers to any of those questions is absolutely bonkers, and it is at the heart of the reason of the dysfunction of this Government and the waste of taxpayers' money.

There are a lot of issues in relation to this. How does the Government track the recidivism among young people and the amount being spent in terms of free legal aid for young people? How does the Government even manage trying to help those young people stop in their recidivism if the Minister does not even know how much the Government is spending on that? The fact that the Minister is in a battle with the legal profession on this particular issue and the response of the Government is "I do not know" is shocking.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: Obviously, we are moving towards a more digital age, and as part of that, across Departments, including the Department of justice, there is a move towards data collection and evidence-based approaches to all our policy in the future. That includes, as a huge part of the youth justice strategy, the unique identifier number that will be rolled out across Departments.

In terms of youth justice, we have seen an extra €11.5 million in this budget. In last year's budget we spent a record amount of €43 million. The Government's approach to tackling youth offending is primarily through youth diversion and early intervention. Our core Exchequer funding and dormant account funding shows how important that is. When we spend money on youth justice and youth diversion, it works. Since 2017, we have seen a decrease of nearly 35% in youth offending despite a correlating 20% increase in the population of that cohort. As part of the next strategy, we are going to target early intervention. We already have the nationwide roll-out of youth diversion projects. We have 92 youth diversion projects. We have four targeted youth diversion projects. We have a really sustainable bail supervision project, and all this will be doubled down on in the next youth justice strategy.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Minister for justice is in a battle with the legal profession at the moment. It is one on which his reputation is dependent upon. We understand the Minister for justice seeks to be the Taoiseach of this country very shortly yet one of the issues the Minister is focusing on is one that the Department does not know. The reason I asked this question is that there are potential solutions to the battle the Minister is in with the legal profession. One potential solution is a public defence office. This has been mooted by other people who say we could actually deliver our legal responsibilities around providing aid to individuals to make sure they have a defence as a defendant, and we could save money on it. As far as I know, there are tens of thousands of people on an annual basis receiving free legal aid. There are tens of millions of euro being spent on it. I will not ask the Minister of State what it is because I expect she will say "I do not know."

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: It is €123 million.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Has the Minister ever looked at the cost of a public defence office? Are there any feasibility studies? Is there any research happening in the Department in relation to that possible solution?

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: I thank the Deputy for that, and I will bring that solution back to the Department. We sometimes see type offices across Europe. A lot of European offices come from a civil law basis, where the law is codified, whereas in Ireland, the UK and other commonwealth jurisdictions, we have a common law system. So, it is a little bit trickier to use continental models when we do not come from a continental background.

Regarding criminal legal aid reform and civil legal aid reform, we saw in the budget huge amounts of money going towards civil legal aid. It is a very generous system. The Minister is in negotiations with stakeholders. Stakeholders were involved in putting together the reforms in relation to the criminal legal aid. The matter is now before the courts. We are waiting for a judgment on 13 October. There are continuous negotiations with the Minister and various changes to the system have already been made. Hopefully, things will come to a solution. We saw more solicitors reinstated onto the panel last week. In rural Ireland, more of the criminal solicitors have come back. Obviously, there is still an issue in Dublin but, hopefully, we will see a resolution.

Citizenship Applications

14. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration if he will abolish the proposed extension of the residency requirement by three years for citizenship; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [70618/26]

Deputy Paul Murphy: I ask the Minister to draw back from his very divisive proposal in terms of the change of citizenship rules. It is an answer to a problem that simply does not exist. It will punish migrant workers in this country. These are migrant workers who, among other things, are staffing our health service. We will all lose as a consequence, and it looks like a very Trumpish policy of effectively trying to clamber to the top of the Government on the backs

of some of the most vulnerable people in this country. It will not improve things for anybody else in this country.

Deputy Colm Brophy: I thank Deputy Murphy. The Government, the Minister, and I, very much recognise the really incredible contribution migrants make to Irish society, to communities and the economy, no more so than in our own constituencies.

The programme for Government contains a commitment to continue to implement a firmer and more sustainable migration system which protects the integrity of the State's immigration framework. In that context, the general scheme of the Irish nationality and citizenship Bill 2026 proposes a number of reforms to the citizenship process.

Citizenship represents, I believe, the fullest expression of membership of Irish society. It is important that the legislative framework governing access to citizenship is robust, fair and sustainable. The proposed changes do not seek to restrict integration or exclude migrants from Irish society. Rather, they are intended to ensure that citizenship reflects a genuine and lasting connection to Ireland, an understanding of the State and its institutions, and an ongoing commitment to Irish society.

The Government has considered whether five years remains the most appropriate period for establishing the durable connection to the State that citizenship is intended to recognise. The residence period requirements in other EU states were considered in determining the revision to residency period requirements contained in the Bill. The current residency requirement has remained substantially unchanged since the middle of the last century, despite profound changes in migration patterns, labour mobility and international travel. While the proposals may affect the timeframe within which some individuals become eligible to apply for citizenship, they do not affect a person's entitlement to reside, work, study, establish a business or establish a life in Ireland in accordance with the terms of their immigration status which they would hold.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Since it is the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, who goes out and sticks the boot into migrants day in, day out, announcing one performative cruelty policy after another, I do not know why it is the poor junior Minister, Deputy Brophy, who is sent in here to defend it. It happened last week in the debate on citizenship and migration and here we are again. I do not know why the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, cannot be responsible and defend the policy he is out promoting on the airwaves.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I was in Luxembourg last week.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Why will he not answer the questions in here today? Why is he going to make life harder for nurses who have come here and are contributing to our society? He is going to move the goalposts for them. These are people who want to integrate and to be citizens. They are paying taxes and contributing. What problem is this addressing? Why did the Minister come up with the idea that we need to change the goalposts and make it harder for people to be citizens? Why do we have to become more draconian than most European states? Why do we have to become a lot more draconian than the countries Irish people emigrate to such as Australia and Canada, where a period of three to five years is the norm?

Deputy Colm Brophy: Regardless of what the Deputy might like to think, imply or say, the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan and myself are absolutely at one on this. This is a policy which both of us are bringing forward. It is a policy which at its heart is about introducing a modern, progressive system in relation to citizenship, that is fair for our country and for people going through the process. The combination of measures we are looking at includes a civics element whereby people will have an understanding of the country in which they are living; an element around language whereby people have an ability and competency in English, Irish or Irish Sign Language; and we intend to look at the residency period. The Deputy is correct that the residency period is quite different across different countries. I do not disagree with him. I happen to think that we are strengthening that connection through citizenship by increasing the period of time for which somebody would be in the country before citizenship is granted. Citizenship is a privilege for anybody in any country to acquire. It is not a right. It is not something that is just bartered away because somebody spends a certain number of years in a country. Citizenship is far more important than that.

Deputy Paul Murphy: If the Minister of State is at one with the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, then shame on him, too. Shame on him also, stepping on the backs of the migrant workers who hold up our health system. He says this is about introducing a moderate, progressive system. What is not moderate and progressive about the system that we currently have? Again, I ask the question. What is the actual problem? Why has the Minister decided to do this? This is not a general topic of discussion in society. There is no one clamouring for this change. It seems to me it is purely a political, Trumpish, divisive measure designed to distract from all the problems the Government is responsible for. Ireland will be the only country to have this level of restrictions in terms of salary, social protection and the number of years being here. It will be the only country in the EU to have that.

Why this wealth test for citizens? What is wrong with low-paid workers? Why should low-paid workers, who give so much to this country, and who also pay tax, have less of a right to citizenship just because they are on low pay? Do the Ministers think that kind of discrimination is okay?

Deputy Colm Brophy: I refer the Deputy to what I was saying to him earlier. A Government has an entitlement to look from time to time at the laws and regulations that govern the society in which we live. We have not made changes to our citizenship process in this type of area for decades upon decades. There is an absolute right for Irish people, through their elected representatives, to look at it. We are introducing legislation. We have proposals in that legislation. There will be a full process of engagement through the Houses of the Oireachtas, which will look at all aspects of it. What the Government believes it is doing is not actually looking to make it more difficult for someone to become an Irish citizen but to make sure that it is a deeper and stronger engagement when it happens. I do not think it is in any way wrong to ask people to have proficiency in a language in a country in which they live, to be able to contribute to it, to have knowledge of its civic society and how it works, and to be resident in the country for a significant period before they get citizenship. I do not see what is so ridiculous, unfair or wrong about those simple requirements.

An Garda Síochána

15. **Deputy Peter Roche** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration if his Department has assessed the impact of significant population growth in rural areas, including in County Galway, on policing requirements; and whether consideration has been given to the adequacy of current Garda numbers assigned to these areas in light of increased population levels and service demands. [70638/26]

Deputy Peter Roche: I thank the Ministers for being here. My question is around Garda numbers in east Galway and Galway in general. Over the last three attestation ceremonies of 700 recruits, Galway only secured four gardaí. I refer to the contexts of population growth, geographic spread, and the numbers of gardaí we received.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank Deputy Roche for his question. His concern is to try to ensure that he gets as many Garda resources as possible into Galway and particularly Galway East. I can understand that. It is a desire shared by virtually all Members of this House. In order for that to happen, we are dependent on getting numbers into An Garda Síochána. I am pleased to say that at the end of August, there were 14,683 sworn members across the State. I think by the end of this year we are going to get to, or be very close to 15,000 sworn members. That will be a significant achievement for us.

In terms of how the Garda Commissioner determines where the resources should go after passing out ceremonies, he decides that based on a whole variety of factors. He takes into account the national policing plan, local and national crime trends and workloads, policing arrangements and operational strategies. Of course, local population trends are taken into account. In Galway, the high visibility policing strategy has been rolled out. My understanding is that it has been going very well since it was introduced. The enhanced Garda presence in Galway city centre and Salthill will support a proactive and robust policing approach to public order offences, antisocial behaviour, drug dealing, aggressive begging and shoplifting.

The Deputy is concerned about the number of allocations made after passing out ceremonies recently. It is important to point out that there are gardaí arriving in Galway as a result of transfers. I am informed by Garda authorities that 25 gardaí have been transferred to the Galway division since the end of 2025. That is an interesting statistic. It shows that many gardaí want to go back to Galway or just go and live in Galway. When the Commissioner is taking the allocation into account, he is obviously going to have to take into account that a number of transfers have gone back there.

Deputy Peter Roche: I thank the Minister. We in Galway cannot help that people are attracted to our county. The most local stations to me are Tuam and particularly Bearna Dhearg, which is only two miles down the road from where I live. The support we get from both those Garda stations is compelling. Our local garda is a man of the community and a man of the people. He is always there to provide support. I commend An Garda Síochána for the outstanding support my community gets when the need arises.

Sometimes people are quick to judge and say they are enough gardaí on the streets or that they are not getting the best service. I can attest to the fact that I have never found the gardaí

wanting in that regard. I commend them. They deserve every bit of support they get from Ministers and the Commissioner.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: It is good to hear that somebody such as the Deputy who is aware of what is happening in local communities is prepared to be here and commend the work of An Garda Síochána. It does not surprise me. That is the response I get from virtually every Member of Dáil Éireann. They are extremely pleased with the service provided on a local basis by An Garda Síochána. The biggest demand I get in the House is to get more gardaí into the constituencies represented by the people here. That is a very positive message. In some parts of the world people do not want police forces in their communities and regard them as an antagonistic law enforcement entity. Fortunately, that is not the case in Ireland.

As of the end of August of this year, there were 641 gardaí assigned to the Galway division. As of the same date, there were 131 Garda staff assigned to the division. There were 25 community gardaí and 40 roads policing gardaí assigned to the Galway division. I am conscious of the desire of the Deputy to get more gardaí into Galway. We want to ensure there are more gardaí there and I will take that into account.

Deputy Peter Roche: It is fair to say that my ask in the question around resources is a result of communities asking me those very questions. As I said, we all depend on the gardaí at some time or another and we are very quick to ring them when we are in trouble. We contact them and get support around a community or family funeral, traffic management around parades and other community celebrations. There are times when it is a little unfair or a burden on gardaí when they are criticised for doing roads policing. It is a very difficult balance. When they are present in the community, as the Minister referenced, at times there is an almost begrudging community spirit. In the context of community support, most of them lead by example, and long may that continue.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: It is a very demanding and challenging job. People want gardaí everywhere. There are now many more units in the force than we had before. Traditionally, we did not have cyber units or the other specialist units we now have in An Garda Síochána and which are absolutely necessary. The most important unit is the garda on the beat or the community garda because people want to see gardaí in their community.

At the end of August, there were 310 gardaí in Galway city, 53 of whom were assigned to Salthill and 58 of whom were assigned to the Deputy's local station in Tuam. There were 75 assigned to Loughrea and 52 assigned to Ballinasloe. I am pleased to hear that gardaí are doing a very positive and good job in Galway. That does not surprise me. They depend on community support because a police force cannot be successful or effective unless it has the support of the community it polices. That is the secret of the success of An Garda Síochána, namely that the community wants to work with the force and see it succeed.

Closed-Circuit Television Systems

16. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration if he will provide an update on the operation and expansion of community CCTV schemes; the supports available to local communities and local authorities seeking to establish or expand

CCTV in areas experiencing persistent antisocial behaviour and crime; and if barriers to the approval or implementation of such schemes are being addressed. [70693/26]

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Deputy Roche called for more gardaí in constituencies. I would love to have more gardaí in Dublin Bay North. I welcome that the Minister was present earlier in the week at the safety day regarding warnings about fireworks. With Halloween coming and fires across north Dublin, I ask for an update on community CCTV in areas experiencing persistent antisocial behaviour and crime. Is consideration being given to the installation of CCTV cameras, such as solar CCTV, that cannot be easily damaged by fires being lit underneath them?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy for his question and for being present at the event to launch the fireworks awareness campaign earlier this week. People need to be aware of the danger and devastating injuries can be caused by fireworks. We saw an example of it at the Dublin Fire Brigade training centre on Monday. We need to warn young people that if fireworks inflict injuries on them those injuries can and will be long term and devastating.

The Deputy wants to ensure that there is more use of CCTV material in his constituency. I share that view and want CCTV used throughout the country. It is a very effective mechanism to detect and deter crime. Its installation and operation must be carefully planned and competently managed, ensuring compliance with data protection law and regulations. Part 5 of The Garda Síochána (Recording Devices) Act 2023 relates to public CCTV. I am in the process of commencing that.

Before I came to the House to deal with these questions, I signed statutory instruments in respect of the recording devices (amendment) commencement order for Part 5 and sections 6 and 7 and the ministerial order that sets out a code of practice for Part 5. I signed that ministerial order on 5 October. All of those orders will come into force on 14 October. I believe they will significantly improve the manner in which gardaí can use CCTV footage for the purposes of investigating the law and also act as a deterrent. I heard what the Deputy said about ensuring that the cameras are properly protected and cannot be vandalised.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Aontaím go hiomlán leis sin. Táim an-bhuíoch as ach níl sé maith go leor. Across north Dublin, we have had fires in playgrounds, public toilets and astro pitches. Taxpayers are paying local property taxes and tax and the amenities need to be protected. We are watching taxpayers' money go up in flames.

Almost every year, a fire is lit on the green in Greencastle Crescent, Coolock. I have spoken to residents who do not want a fire. Why can we not install a community garden or something made of concrete in the area where the fire is lit every year so that it cannot be attacked? I will engage with the office of the Minister on this. The residents should be protected. They want to be able to enjoy Halloween without having to put cardboard and wood on their windows to protect them from the blazing fire. I fought hard for CCTV and have confirmation from Dublin City Council that there is no issue with it, but the difficulty is the roll-out. One can buy a solar CCTV camera online for €50 and provide automatic replies to a local community safety network.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta. Aontaím leis ar an gceist sin. We spent huge amounts putting amenities in our communities, including playgrounds for children. Unfortunately, we have seen examples where they have been vandalised. That type of behaviour is unacceptable and the people doing it need be aware of two things: first, that they are destroying their local community and it is damaging their self-interest; and, second, that they will be thoroughly investigated by An Garda Síochána.

It is important that we have CCTV cameras in place. It is also important that we as an Oireachtas send out a very strong message that attacking and vandalising local amenities is not acceptable. Until we put pressure on younger people who are involved in that activity to realise that it is socially abhorrent to do so, we will find ourselves facing these issues. We need stronger deterrents and investigation from An Garda Síochána. I committed to using CCTV and I believe it will assist us. The regulations I have signed are part of that.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: When the Minister was a young lad, he might have heard messages on building sites that warned people that they were on private property and were under CCTV control. North Dublin has experienced high population growth, alongside recent persistent problems with antisocial behaviour. I ask the Minister's officials to chase this up with the local authorities across the constituency I represent. It is not acceptable for a playground or toilet to be installed and burned down days later.

I welcome the youth diversion programme progressions. Other countries have youth diversion programmes and work in school programmes. Getting to people at their early years of development is key. The people of north Dublin deserve these amenities. It is not acceptable that they are burned down. I again refer to Greencastle Crescent, Coolock. We know Halloween is coming and people are collecting wood. If the area could be monitored to prevent a bonfire, my constituents would not have to put wood and cardboard on their windows.

12 o'clock

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I hear what the Deputy is saying and I am happy to engage with him in respect of it. It is important to point out that, yesterday, an additional €11.5 million in funding was allocated for youth diversion projects. Those projects are available throughout the whole country, including in the Deputy's constituency. I am sure they will be availed of for the purpose of trying to deter those young people who decide to go down the pathway of criminality. It is our job to try to deter them. If we do not deter them and they persist, we need more serious sanctions for them.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: The Minister is still only a young fella.

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

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

An Ceann Comhairle: I welcome to the Gallery pupils from two national schools from County Mayo: Attymass National School and Carramore National School. They are here at the behest of the Minister, Deputy Dara Calleary.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Mayo for Sam.

Before I proceed, I want to remember the ten people who lost their lives in the Creeslough tragedy four years ago today. I want to express solidarity with their families and friends and the entire community. Four years on, they are still waiting for answers and justice. They deserve just that.

Tar éis 11 lá, tá muintir Gharbhachaidh fós ina seasamh go daingean chun an tsíocháin a chosaint. Ní mór don Rialtas éileamh ar Stát-Rúnaí na Breataine stop a chur leis an máirseáil Oráisteach seo. There have been 11 days of fear, anxiety and sleepless nights on the Garvaghy Road. A dark cloud is hanging over families who fear that 28 years of peace could be torn apart. The British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Chris Bryant, has still not intervened. He has allowed this situation to fester. He should have acted on day one, and he must act now. He must use his powers, do his job and bring this crisis to an end. There cannot be an unwanted Orange march down the Garvaghy Road. This issue was resolved 28 years ago and we are not going back to the past.

The residents have made their position crystal-clear, and I stand in support of them. People across Ireland stand shoulder to shoulder with them, as does this Oireachtas. Many people within the Protestant community in the North have spoken out in solidarity. Political figures and others from the United States, Britain and across Europe have added their voice. There has been an outpouring of support that crosses borders, and religious and political traditions, united in defence of dignity and equality. The residents are not standing alone. They should not, however, have to stand vigil for another night to defend their right to live in peace. Their patience must not become an excuse for inaction. Their resilience must not become permission to leave them indefinitely in fear and constantly on guard.

The Taoiseach described the Parades Commission's decision as "incomprehensible and wrong" and he is correct. I agree with him but condemnation must be followed by action. Last week, at Hillsborough, the British Secretary of State put forward a proposal and then he simply walked away, leaving everyone in limbo. The British Secretary of State now updates his X account more regularly than the residents, whom he has not spoken to since last Thursday. We must remember that it is the residents who live with the consequences. After 11 days of this, the case for direct intervention is now unanswerable. A small minority seeks to drag everyone backwards and undo 28 years of progress. They are damaging community relations, undermining trust and threatening hard-won peace. They cannot dictate the future. Peaceful arrangements on the Garvaghy Road and right across the North must remain secure. No one should be allowed to unravel them. The objective is unequivocal. There must be no Orange march down the Garvaghy Road and an end to the fear that hangs over this community.

When did the Taoiseach last speak to the British Prime Minister and the Secretary of State about this crisis? What concrete action will he take today to secure the British intervention needed to bring this intolerable situation to an end?

The Taoiseach: I dtús báire, first, I welcome all those from the two schools in Mayo. Congratulations on winning the All-Ireland and Sam Maguire. I wish them an enjoyable tour here this afternoon.

I too want to remember all those who lost their lives at Creeslough. Our thoughts are with the families who have been bereaved.

I also want to remember all those who lost their lives following the horrific attack by Hamas on innocent people on 7 October 2023. We have to acknowledge that it was a horrendous terroristic attack, which we should remember. Many innocent people from all over the world were brutally murdered and violated on that day. That led to horrific consequences subsequently, which we have also condemned.

I am on the record in relation to the Garvaghy Road situation and my views on the Parades Commission's decision are well-known. My view is that we do have to resolve this through the wider lens of community relations. It is not as simplistic as the Deputy has put forward. I met with her on this issue last week. It is not a simple matter of making a declaration and it all goes away. There is a history of hurt around Drumcree. We know that. It requires a lot of sensitivity from all of us in leadership positions. We want to protect the gains of the peace process for people across the island. We all have to contribute positively to finding a way through what is a very, very difficult situation.

The Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy McEntee, met the Northern Secretary of State on the evening before last and she has remained in direct contact with him. The Deputy knows a court case was taken and judgment is awaited in that regard. I remained in contact with the Prime Minister, Andrew Burnham, in the past 48 hours. There had been discussions during the course of past week, in which the Orange Order and the Garvaghy Road Residents' Coalition participated. Those discussions ended without agreement. I acknowledge that. I still believe that we need a mediated resolution. That is the wider lens through which I am looking at this. There has not been a march down the Garvaghy Road. The current stalemate is not acceptable. I take the Deputy's point on that.

There will always be challenges to the decisions of a public body. I believe in the Parades Commission, and I always have believed in it going back over the past number of decades. Many parades were resolved, and many happen all over the North and, indeed, the island. The Secretary of State had already announced an independent judge-led review into the decision-making process and organisational governance of the Parades Commission before this determination. I supported that process. The Right Honourable Sir John O'Hara KC will lead this review and we await his findings. That is not insignificant in and of itself. I have been in constant contact with the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade as well.

I do not understand why the Deputy is having a go at the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in the way she has. If we want to persuade people, we have got to try to work to persuade them. I do not agree with the approach she has taken. We must be conscious that the talks that have happened could result in an outcome if we maintain dialogue and we will see--

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: In the complexities of the Irish question and the North, there is one simple reality and we have to have a very clear-cut, unequivocal enunciation of it, which is that the rights of the Garvaghy Road community to live free from sectarian harassment are crystal-clear.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: There is no debating that. We are not mediating that away. We have a responsibility to assert that without equivocation. I am focusing my remarks - and I believe the Taoiseach should focus his attention likewise - on the British Secretary of State for the simple reason that he is the person who can intervene now to call an end to this march and to allow the space for the considerable repair work that will have to be done on the Garvaghy Road, across Portadown and farther afield.

We are now facing into a very dangerous limbo and stalemate. There is a responsibility on the Taoiseach to apply all necessary pressure on the British Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to intervene now and to put a stop to what is a dangerous and now lingering limbo situation.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy knows that a further appeal by the residents was heard in the court of appeal and the court has reserved judgment. There is also a responsibility on the Deputy. Some of her actions over the past week were not ones that contributed or would-----

Deputy Máire Devine: Where were you?

The Taoiseach: -----contribute to a satisfactory resolution of the issues, not just for now but into the future. I am looking around the corner and I am looking ahead but I am not so sure the Deputy is. She is looking at the here and now for her own electoral reasons. I hate to say that, but that is the conclusion I have come to.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Oh for God's sake, would the Taoiseach ever stop-----

Deputy Máire Devine: Shameful.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: -----and stand up for the nationalists.

The Taoiseach: I did not interrupt anybody. My commitment to Northern Ireland does not need any lectures from anyone here.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: The Taoiseach needs to listen to the nationalist people in the North

The Taoiseach: As Taoiseach, I have been responsible for the largest-scale investment by any Government in the Republic into Northern Ireland and that will continue.

An Ceann Comhairle: Do the Deputies want to hear the answer?

Deputy Máire Devine: Jesus.

The Taoiseach: I want to make a point, if I would be allowed and not have this constant interruption and heckling when Members do not like the message. When Deputy McDonald uses language like there will be reckonings and so on with the stridency that she did, that has consequences too-----

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: The Taoiseach should make it clear to the British Government that a march should not be allowed to go down the Garvaghy Road.

Deputy Máire Devine: Time up. He has nothing to say.

The Taoiseach: ----which could impede a resolution of this, which would mean no marching and no parades down the Garvaghy Road, because nobody wants them.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Absolute rubbish.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: In the last election, Fianna Fáil was crystal-clear that if it was returned to government, pensions would increase by at least €12 per week every year. It is in the party's manifesto in black and white. The Government broke its promise to pensioners in last year's budget and did so again this year. The additional €10 announced yesterday does not even cover the cost of inflation. As if the broken promise was not enough, the Government spent the past few weeks cynically trying to manipulate pensioners, briefing to the media that pensions would increase by €7.50 weekly. The Government did not care about the huge anxiety and stress that this would cause. It just wanted to make the €10 increase sound generous by comparison. Nobody is falling for the Government's deeply obnoxious spin.

If the Taoiseach had turned on the radio this morning, he would have heard older people living alone who are furious. Eighty-year-old Noel rang into "Today with David McCullagh" earlier. He described how when his wife died, his household income dropped by half. Older people who are heartbroken by the loss of their loved one should not face financial stress. Noel described the €3 increase in the living alone allowance as a joke. I ask the Taoiseach to not insult the intelligence of pensioners by trying to tell them otherwise. Three euro would not even buy a cup of tea in a café. It would just about cover the cost of a pound of butter in the supermarket. That is the level of support pensioners living alone have got from this Government: the equivalent of a butter voucher. The living alone allowance has not been increased for five years. After all of that time, when costs across the country have soared by 30%, the Government increases the payment by a miserly €3.

Eighty-five-year-old Colm told Ireland AM yesterday about how he feels the cold and goes to bed at 8.30 p.m. to stay warm. Older people like Colm, who have worked hard all their life, should not be living in fear of rising prices. They should not be going to bed early because they cannot afford to heat their homes. That is the reality for many older people in Ireland. It is a shameful indictment of the Government. There was a time when Fianna Fáil had the backs

of older people and when it stood up for men and women who worked so hard to build this country but those days are gone because pensioners have been bitterly betrayed by the Government in its budget. How can the Taoiseach justify such a small increase in the living alone allowance? Why did the Government break its promise to pensioners again?

The Taoiseach: Fianna Fáil does have the back of pensioners and always will, and our coalition colleagues likewise. The Government has increased pensions by €10 per week. We have a commitment to reach €350 weekly by the end of the term of this Government and we will fulfil that commitment. We cannot look at any payment in isolation, as the Deputy has done with the living alone allowance. It has to be looked at in the context of the pension increase and the permanent increase in the fuel allowance. For many people, this will result in about an €18 increase, to try to help them to get through what is a very difficult period. We have also reduced the impact of carbon tax on heating oil, for example, which will benefit elderly people in particular. Across the budget and particularly regarding social protection, we have provided for people and older people in particular. We are looking at an increase of €2 billion in the social protection budget this year. We will be up at over €31 billion on social welfare. That reflects huge increases over the past four to five years. The bulk of that is on pensions, disability, invalidity and so on. The cost-of-disability payment made yesterday is a permanent breakthrough because it is additional to existing payments. It is not a once-off; it is there permanently. The next issue is working with the organisations as to how best we design how that gets paid into the future. That is not insignificant.

Back in 2017, the living alone allowance was €9. It is now €25 as a result of the increase. We are going to progressively increase that. It will cost €300 million plus in 2027. The period for keeping a deceased person's pension will increase from six weeks to ten weeks to try to help people who are bereaved. We are also potentially increasing the number of single pensioners eligible for the fuel allowance by 10,000 with changes to the means test.

We have also significantly expanded the carer's allowance more generally in terms of the income disregard, with a huge increase of 80%. Two very big decisions have been taken in the two budgets we have had. One was on the carers and the cost-of-disability payment will be a very significant decision. It has been talked about for decades and now for the first time ever, we have a cost-of-disability payment.

The pensions are above the rate of inflation with the €10 increase last year and this year, as well as other supports that we have provided in other areas.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The Taoiseach should listen back to Noel on "Today with David McCullagh" and hear exactly what he had to say about living alone allowance. He was not speaking just for himself but for countless pensioners living alone across the country who feel the badly let down by the Government. The Taoiseach has not answered my question as to why pensioners were promised in the Fianna Fáil manifesto in black and white, a increase €12 a week every year if the party was returned to government? The Government broke the promise last year and it has broken this year. Why was that promise given to pensioners? Why have they been let down? Why can they not rely on what Fianna Fáil promised them? Why has the Government broken that? Why is the Government not keeping its word to pensioners? Inflation has increased since the election. The cost of living has increased since the election.

If anything, they need more than €12 weekly, such as the €15 we proposed. Why was that promise broken?

The Taoiseach: The Deputy's attitude is spend, spend, spend. He does not care about the economy. He does not care about the resources that we need to allocate to social protection. An increase in the social protection budget of €2 billion is quite substantial. The €10 pension increase is above the rate of inflation.

Deputy Gary Gannon: It is not.

The Taoiseach: We have a clear commitment in the programme for Government on pensions that we will fulfil over the lifetime of the Government. This is the second budget of five that we will deliver in this House.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The Government said €12 in every budget.

The Taoiseach: We are in government with two other groups, Fine Gael and with the group of Independents.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Is it their fault or Fine Gael's fault?

Deputy Ged Nash: It is Fine Gael's fault.

The Taoiseach: We have made a commitment on pensions that we are going to fulfil. Because of the situation in Iran, we extended payments last year. We have responded in an agile way to try to help people get through what is a very significant pressure point on families because of external international factors such as war and conflict.

We cannot look at one element of social protection in isolation-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: -----as Deputy O'Callaghan was endeavouring to do.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Bacik.

The Taoiseach: We have to look at it in the overall context of what we have done in the two budgets-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up, thank you, Taoiseach. I call Deputy Bacik.

The Taoiseach: -----covering pensions, covering disability-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Bacik, on your feet, please.

The Taoiseach: -----covering the carer's situation-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up. Deputy Bacik, on your feet, please.

The Taoiseach: -----which has dramatically improved-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Taoiseach, time is up. Thank you very much.

The Taoiseach: ----- but which the Deputy is ignoring because of the fact that it represents a dramatic improvement.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Bacik-----

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The Taoiseach is ignoring his promises.

An Ceann Comhairle: If Members do not stand when I call their name, I am afraid we are going to have to penalise the clock.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Yesterday, as it lashed rain, the Ministers for Finance and public expenditure dropped their budget for next year. We might call it a pathetic fallacy that it was pouring rain as the Government's plans were revealed. Indeed, the word "pathetic" is appropriate in many ways because the money the Government says will go back into people's pockets could barely buy a chocolate bar a week in reality. It is a KitKat budget from a TikTok Tánaiste.

Deputy Colm Brophy: Did the Deputy work that one up herself?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Did Deputy Nash write that for Deputy Bacik?

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The alliteration.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: In seeking to please everybody, the Government has ended up pleasing nobody, especially not the Minister for missing culture cards, Patrick O'Donovan.

In seriousness, this underwhelming budget has failed many: the PAYE workers the Government forgot last year; the public sector workers still left without any pay deal; the commuters facing a 15% increase in public transport fares; and renters facing eviction into homelessness. What the Government produced will come as cold comfort to workers like Martina, who contacted me today to ask how the Government could think that €4 a week was helping her, a worker who earned €33,500 per annum and who got up to work. She says that everything has gone up hugely and asks what the likes of her are to do this winter. For people like Martina, the Government has not made it any cheaper to heat her home or to commute to work or school. It has put a pittance on the budget for Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, retrofits and taken only €43 off the €1,500 cost of a home heating oil refill. The freezing

of funding for active travel means that in real terms the Government has slashed budgets for walking and cycling measures.

With this week's budget, the Government had a choice. We know that geopolitical circumstances are challenging, particularly thanks to Trump's war on Iran, but Ireland is a country with unique opportunities. We have booming corporation taxes, an abundance of wind off our coasts and a talented, educated population. This means that the Government could have invested to lower bills, decarbonise the economy and improve living standards for all. It could have imposed a windfall tax on the companies and data centres that were profiteering during this energy crisis. It could have invested heavily in renewables and a retrofitting revolution to bring down household bills and curb carbon emissions. It could have provided a targeted energy credit to the half a million households already in arrears on their energy bills. The Labour Party had proposed all of these measures. Instead, struggling households will pay through the nose to heat their homes this winter and they will pay again when the Government's failure to decarbonise leaves them footing the bill for fines levied on us when we miss our climate targets.

Yesterday's budget was pathetic and the Taoiseach owes people an explanation. Why is the Government spending more than €200 million on capital gains tax cuts for the wealthiest when hundreds of thousands are in arrears on energy bills? Why did the Government choose not to impose a windfall tax on the energy corporations and data centres enriching themselves with the misery of people who cannot heat their homes? Why did the Government not introduce targeted energy credits for struggling households, as the Labour Party had asked?

The Taoiseach: I disagree fundamentally with Deputy Bacik's analysis of the budget. She is hardly blaming us for the rain, is she? It is melodramatic to say that, as it lashed down last evening, we dropped the budget.

The budget is quite substantial. Deputy Bacik knows that one of the significant features of the Irish taxation system, which has been acknowledged by the OECD and others, is that workers tend to go on the highest rate of tax at a relatively low income level. We addressed this in yesterday's budget through moving the band to €46,500. I take it that Deputy Bacik is in favour of that. Will she please articulate whether she is or is not?

In addition to that, we also introduced a tax credit of approximately €250, in terms of two tax credits of €125 each. In terms of public service pay, which Deputy Bacik referenced, we have provided €1.2 billion for 2027. By any objective metric, both of these measures combined form a basis for entering into negotiations on a new public service pay deal. In my view, there is no basis for industrial action or for disrupting people in education, health or anything else when that platform is there as a basis for negotiation on a new pay agreement. We will negotiate in good faith, like we did for the last number of pay agreements. We have also expanded the public service quite significantly over the last five to six years.

One cannot look at the budget in isolation. Over the last five years, we have increased the number of social houses by 59,560. That is a massive change since 2020. In 2025, 9,000 social houses were built. This year, the figure will be over 10,000 and we are budgeting for 11,000. If we look at the ten years to 2020, there has been a sea change in terms of the Government getting back into building social housing, which is taking pressure off private housing. We are also building affordable housing for people. The number of drawdowns by first-time buyers

has been significantly higher over the last five years because of our housing interventions. It is unprecedented. That is still a big focus of the Government. This year, €20 billion will be spent on infrastructure through capital allocation because we took a decision last year to focus on infrastructure and to focus on housing and other parts of the economy.

We will deliver five budgets, not just one. People cannot look at any one in isolation. That is the context here. Workers do benefit significantly. If we had not taken the measures that we did, workers would have certainly been much worse off. No one can argue this in terms of disability, with the cost-of-disability payment and other measures. In terms of childcare, we now have a clear pathway to get down to the €200 a month cost of childcare over the next number of budgets.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: The Taoiseach keeps saying that this is one of a series of budgets and he keeps asking people to wait, but that is just not good enough for households that are struggling now. The Taoiseach asked about Labour policy. Labour has consistently called for the indexation of tax bands, as the Taoiseach knows, and as we did in our alternative budget this year.

The Taoiseach says that the Government is ready to engage on public sector pay. Why does the Minister, Deputy Chambers, not simply give Kevin Callinan or any union leader a call? Why does the Government not engage to avert industrial action?

The Taoiseach spoke about the Government's interventions on housing, but in this budget, its signature housing intervention will simply add €5,000 to the cost of a house. It is an inflationary measure.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Instead, the Government could have taken radical action and adopted sustainable solutions. For example, in our budget, Labour proposed that the State should bulk buy targeted, free, plug-in solar units to lower bills for those most in need, a practical and tangible measure that had been taken in Germany. That is the sort of intervention that could have helped to lower household bills and meet our climate targets. Instead in this budget, we have seen no ambition, no urgency and no effective action-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. The Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: -----either to reduce bills or to curb climate change.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy is wrong there. The Minister, Darragh O'Brien, has, since last February, made very significant efforts on simplifying the operation of the grant schemes for retrofitting solar and so forth. In fact, because of our efforts over the last four to five years - the previous Minister, Eamon Ryan, did good work here - over 290,000 homes have now been retrofitted. Since the Minister, Darragh O'Brien, simplified and enhanced the grants, there have been 100,000 applications. I agree with Deputy Bacik that the most effective way to permanently reduce the cost of energy is to assist people to retrofit, to insulate and to install solar. With this budget, the Minister will have up to €800 million to spend next year on these

measures for households, farmers and businesses. We must keep our focus on that. It is a far better way of getting an outturn in terms of some of the proposals that have been put forward.

Deputy Charles Ward: Buncrana swimming pool closed in April 2015. This was meant to be for temporary renovation works but it has never reopened. It is now 11 years later and the people of Buncrana and Inishowen have no swimming pool or leisure centre in the second largest town in Donegal. That is a clear example of Donegal being the forgotten county yet again. The population of 40,000 people on the Inishowen Peninsula need a leisure centre but it has been closed for 11 years. Some of the largest schools in Donegal are on the Inishowen Peninsula and the children there have to travel to Derry to avail of a swimming pool, which is a ridiculous situation. Consider the senior citizens of Inishowen, who at one time used the Buncrana leisure centre but have been unable to do so for the past 11 years because it has been closed. Some of them are no longer with us.

A leisure centre is a massive part of a community, yet Inishowen does not have one. That is simply wrong.

I understand that €2 million is being allocated to the project's detailed design phase, which will go to tender, and that is welcome. My concern, though, is regarding the co-funding element and Donegal County Council having to raise commercial rates over a four-year period by up to 21% when businesses in Donegal are already struggling with a cost-of-living crisis. Even then, that will not be enough for the swimming pool because we cannot know the projected cost of the build, given that inflation is currently increasing.

In May 2022, we were given the cost of the build as €7.7 million. Donegal County Council needed to co-fund €3.9 million of this amount, but it was revised again in May to €12.5 million, with Donegal County Council having to fund over €5 million of this total. This will continue because the project needs to rise now. If we do not get this done, it will become too expensive. There has been a 50% rise in four years.

Donegal County Council is in a unique position where it is at a disadvantage. It is in the middle of a defective concrete crisis that it is trying to get through. It has 2,400 of its own housing stock affected, as well as its own public buildings. The people of Inishowen need good news and delivery. There has been a sitting Minister of State with responsibility for sport over there for the last two years, and yesterday €22 million was provided in the budget for the Ryder Cup. Money is also being provided for the 2028 European Championship, but there is nothing in the budget for the swimming pool in Buncrana.

Donegal County Council is in a dilemma, therefore, where it has to co-fund an element of this project but it does not know what it is going to cost. It could need between 20% and 30% co-funding. We need to make sure that this comes to pass because the co-funding model does not work in this case. Will the Taoiseach intervene and help us get a leisure centre in Buncrana?

The Taoiseach: The bottom line here is that the Minister of State, Charlie McConalogue, has been very committed to this project. As the Deputy knows, he allocated €2 million to Donegal County Council, which I think the Deputy should have acknowledged-----

Deputy Charles Ward: I did.

The Taoiseach: Okay. That was to ensure that we would have a complete detailed design for the project. Donegal County Council estimates that it will have that in quarter 1 of 2027. Some €3.9 million had originally been allocated, I think, to the project, which would bring that to about €5.9 million. However, every county council has to match up to 30% for a large-scale sports infrastructure allocation. That is not new, and it is not specific to Donegal.

I do not think the Deputy should take a cheap shot at the Ryder Cup. The Ryder Cup is a national event. It will reflect Ireland.

Deputy Niall Collins: It is global.

The Taoiseach: I know it is global. The Limerick man has gone global now.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: The Deputy-----

The Taoiseach: That is certainly how Limerick looks at it. No, he is right.

Deputy Dara Calleary: He is-----

The Taoiseach: The point I am trying to make is that it is something from which not just Limerick, but the entire nation, will benefit, I think, through the profile of the country during the Ryder Cup, tourism and so on. The mid-west will benefit maybe more than others. The point I am trying to make is that it is a big global event and a good thing for the country. All the analysis by the sport officials of the Department indicates that it will yield a lot more for the country.

The large-scale sport infrastructure fund is where this is at, really, in terms of getting these facilities - the swimming pool and leisure centre - off the ground, and we will work to deliver this, but we cannot pick and choose and say that one local authority has to provide matching funding and another does not. I do not think that is feasible. We have been supporting the council in respect of mica and the challenges it has had in that regard.

By the way, we have invested a lot in Donegal right across the board as a Government. We will continue to invest in Donegal from the enterprise side in the creation of jobs and through the shared island initiative and health, particularly by linking North and South in respect of health and other measures that are quite impactful on the quality of life of people. This is particularly the case for people in Inishowen. I have been there, and at the Altnagelvin hospital, and I am aware of how people benefit directly from our investment in the cancer centre and the cardiovascular centre there. It is likewise with our investment in Letterkenny. We have more to do, gan dabht, but we will do it.

Deputy Charles Ward: After 11 years, there is no leisure centre and 40,000 people are without a basic facility. What I am saying to the Taoiseach is that this Buncrana leisure centre is going to become more expensive every year it is not built. We need to do something right now to make sure this can be delivered. I understand what the Taoiseach is saying, but the co-funding model is putting Donegal County Council under immense pressure. It is dealing with

a humanitarian crisis and trying to deliver a defective concrete blocks scheme. Its own housing stock is affected.

I am telling the Taoiseach that we have to put something in place. We need to see what a plan looks like and to find a way. I do not care who cuts the ribbon. If Charlie McConalogue is there cutting the ribbon, I will clap and I will be so glad that this leisure centre has been delivered in Buncrana. Right now, however, there is a question mark over when we are going to get this done. If we do not stand up and say honestly that it is not going to be delivered unless something extraordinary is done to help, we will not get it done. It is not going to take much. Under the co-funding model, Donegal County Council is going to be substantially short. It will need help. Can the Government help?

The Taoiseach: The Deputy knows that this project has now gone to the design stage. The county council hopes to be back in quarter 1 with a completed detailed design. That is a very significant step forward. We will be reopening a new large-scale sport infrastructure fund. The Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, has special responsibility for sport. We are committed to this project, but the framework that applies to all local authorities will apply equally to Donegal.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: This morning, I was in the Westgrove Hotel in Clane with the County Kildare chamber, where there were 60 businesses represented. I was giving a keynote speech on the supports for SMEs that the State was providing and some simple use cases for AI by small and medium-sized enterprises, which really transform their businesses.

In February, the Government published the Digital Ireland: Connecting Our People, Securing Our Future strategy, which was a significant policy developed by the Government. The strategy looked at the digitalisation of public services and the use of AI, which is due to go across Departments, trying to identify efficiencies and ways in which the Government can deliver services to the public in a better and more practical manner.

Some elements of the strategy have already come into being. The AI regulation Act, enacted in July, brought into being the AI Office of Ireland - Oifig IS na hÉireann - with Paul Byrne as its first chief executive officer. He has taken to the role extremely well. The first AI sectoral champions have also been appointed. I commend the Minister of State, Deputy Niamh Smyth, in particular, for her work.

On Wednesday of next week, we will have the International AI Summit, which will be one of the key events of the EU Presidency this year and also one of the largest international AI events taking place not only in Europe, but globally, in 2026. While there are extremely positive developments here, what is key for any type of policy like this is how it is being tracked. How do we track delivery, particularly when it goes across Departments and is not specific to, for example, the Department of enterprise, where AI actually sits? This is where we can realise substantial benefits, particularly when it comes to public services.

There is a need for greater sectoral adoption. The sectoral champions have been appointed, but we need to ensure that our SMEs are adopting AI properly. We had the Microsoft AI

diffusion report, which showed that Ireland was first in Europe for AI adoption and third globally, which is significant. However, real adoption is very different from simply using AI. Somebody logging on and putting a query into ChatGPT or Copilot is very different from someone creating an agent to help run a business, whether for payroll or whatever else.

The risk with that, and something we have to be really cognisant of, is tokenisation. As companies such as Anthropic, which operates Claude, and OpenAI look to float publicly, either later next year or the year after, there is a chance that the cost of using AI will increase significantly, not just for SMEs, but also for the State. We need a strategy to look at how we will tackle that if it does come into being. If we are trying to get our businesses to adopt AI, then we need to ensure that they can afford it.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. I know it is one that is dear to his heart and he has put a lot of work into it and done a lot of research on it. Clearly, the digital Ireland strategy was published in February with the aim of strengthening Ireland's position as a digital leader and a global hub for applied AI innovation. To cut to the Deputy's point, implementation is driven from the centre of Government to ensure a coherent, whole-system approach. It is overseen by the Cabinet committee on economy, trade and competitiveness.

A cross-departmental group, led by my Department, tracks the implementation and progress across all 90 deliverables and reports to the senior officials' group on digital and AI, including detailed quarterly progress reports. As the Deputy knows, the strategy has about 90 deliverables.

A new strategy, AI for Care, was published in April, so there is a lot of progress being made. A free online AI skilling platform, *Already.ie*, was launched in April, with phase two to follow shortly. A new AI cybersecurity risk assessment and guidelines for AI adoption in the public sector were published by the National Cyber Security Centre in June. New Rinn research centres in AI and quantum science and technology were announced in July as part of the new €460 million Research Ireland Rinn research centres launch. Ireland's AI Factory Antenna was launched in July, supporting SME access to supercomputing infrastructure. The new AI Office of Ireland was established in August as a national co-ordination point under the EU AI Act and as the host of an AI regulatory sandbox. It will also play a key role in improving AI literacy.

The International AI Summit, which I know the Deputy pushed very strongly for under our Presidency, will take place next week. That is now a flagship event in the EU Presidency. Very significant global CEOs have accepted the invitation to attend and speak. It is an opportunity to showcase Europe and Ireland's ambition to harness AI for growth and competitiveness in a way that is consistent with European values.

Yesterday's budget was significant. People talk about a lot of things but one of the more significant parts of yesterday's budget was the allocation of €150 million for a three-year programme to strengthen skills resilience across the economy, including in respect of AI and digital skills. That is through the utilisation of the National Training Fund. IBEC and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions had called for that. We have responded now in a very comprehensive way.

My Department will prepare an overall progress report, which we will publish early next year, showing the progress achieved across all aspects of the digital strategy.

On the Deputy's latter points, this is a matter we will keep under constant review. I take the Deputy's point. There is still a journey to go here regarding how all this plays out in terms of bigger companies, flotation and so on.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: It is important to acknowledge the work of the Irish Government by comparison with that of our counterparts across Europe and, indeed, globally. We are at the forefront of adopting AI and trying to make progress, and the Taoiseach has outlined much of the progress the Government has made already. I very much welcome the €150 million allocated from the National Training Fund. The relevant Minister, Deputy Lawless, will be spearheading that.

A policy I developed, which I spoke to the Taoiseach about previously, was on retraining people within their jobs, if a job is at risk, rather than after or before the fact. It would be great to see if the €150 million could be used in this regard. Progress is happening at the Cabinet subcommittee and the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment is doing an exceptional job regarding AI but I would like consideration to be given to putting the AI portfolio under the Department of the Taoiseach in future, as it relates to all Departments, not just the Department of enterprise. While there is obviously a focus on SMEs, there is a focus on healthcare, public services, etc. It might be something to consider in the future.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy. Increasingly, people want more activities to be under the aegis of the Department of the Taoiseach, and I understand that. We do have a co-ordination role across Departments. I accept the Deputy's point that there is a need for a whole-of-government approach. In fact, the Minister for public expenditure has a significant role in the application of AI to public service provision and customer service for those who avail of Government services. There is huge potential in terms of delivering public services more efficiently and effectively, and in terms of retraining and redeployment within the public service.

Rather than see AI as a threat, we should see it as an opportunity for everybody working. We have expanded the public service very significantly. There is now an opportunity to regard AI not always as a threat and a danger but as an opportunity to deliver services.

In the medical world, AI has huge potential. We need to embrace that in terms of getting better outcomes for patients and administering our health service more effectively and more efficiently because we have been lagging in terms of the digitalisation of our health service. This gives us an opportunity to catch up.

Financial Resolutions 2026

Financial Resolution No. 8: General (Resumed)

Debate resumed on the following Financial Resolution:

THAT it is expedient to amend the law relating to inland revenue (including value-added tax and excise) and to make further provision in connection with finance.

- Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy James Browne)

The Taoiseach: Tá an cháinainnéis a d'fhógraíomar inné ina cuid de chlár cúig bliana Rialtais agus críoch le próiseas ar leith oibre a lean ar feadh sé mhí. Is éard atá i gceist leis an gcáinainnéis ná athbhreithniú agus costáil ar obair uilig an Rialtais agus féachaint chun cinn ar chostas an chláir oibre Rialtais a bheidh le déanamh ar feadh roinnt blianta eile amach romhainn. Ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil agus aitheantas a thabhairt do na baill Rialtais go léir agus na mílte oibrí sa tseirbhís phoiblí a rinne obair dhian éifeachtach ar an gcáinainnéis seo, chomh maith leis na hionchuir ó eagraíochtaí agus saineolaithe taobh amuigh den rialtas.

Go bunúsach is éard atá i gceist le rialú ná deiseanna a chur ar fáil don daonra agus roghanna a dhéanamh. Cé go gceapann páirtithe an Fhreasúra gur féidir le gach duine an méid atá uathu a fháil, chun a bheith macánta fírinneach tá teorainneacha ann. Caithfidh an cháinainnéis seo a bheith inbhuanaithe. Cé go bhfuil faoiseamh mór dírithe ar theaghlaigh agus ar ghnóthaí, ceapaimid go bhfuil cáinainnéis atá cothrom, agus a chabhraíonn le gach duine, curtha i bhfeidhm againn. Tugtar cabhair agus tacaíocht réadúil do chách, forbraítear seirbhísí poiblí agus déantar deimhin de go bhfuil Éire réidh chun dul i ngleic le dúshlán mhóra na linne seo.

This is a budget that provides substantial support for people at a challenging time. It expands vital public programmes and it invests in Ireland's future with both urgency and ambition. It is a balanced budget. It is a budget that is both responsive to very real needs today and responsible in taking action so that Ireland can navigate a period of deep economic uncertainty in Europe and the wider world.

In recent years, we have seen an ongoing series of economic shocks and disruptions. The fact is that they point to a world that is becoming much more uncertain and unpredictable. Many traditional assumptions that we have held about international trade, energy supply, technology, climate and geopolitics are in question. Recent developments have reinforced this reality. These range from rising trade tensions and conflicts that have exposed vulnerabilities in energy markets to rapid technological change and threats to international values and institutions that are central to Ireland's interests. It is clear that these are not just temporary disruptions. They are having lasting impacts and will continue to affect our society and our economy in different ways in the years ahead and the decades ahead. That being said, our economy is showing ongoing resilience. The most accurate measures of the domestic economy show that we outperformed predictions this year and should secure decent growth next year as well.

In spite of the number of questions available to them, the number of Private Members' motions and the amount of Opposition speaking time, it is remarkable how rarely the Opposition ever mentions economic growth. It never does. It simply takes it for granted that the economy will look after itself while it looks to clean out the cupboard. Yet it is growth delivered by a dynamic export-led economy that is the core of all new measures that can be delivered next year.

Before anything else, before any budget measure, the single biggest concern of workers is to have work. Ensuring high levels of employment is a bedrock of this Government's policies. As the independently reviewed background to this budget shows, our actions to increase and protect employment have ensured that Ireland has the highest level of employment in its history.

However, we cannot be complacent. We cannot take our economic success for granted. The core foundation for jobs, employment and funding public services is the wider economy. Acting to ensure that it is strong and resilient in the face of new challenges requires constant attention. We are addressing this through a range of measures, which I will outline.

The world is seeing major price increases, largely driven by conflicts, and we have to do what we can to sustainably help people. The budget provides all who rely on the State for their income with increases in line with or above inflation, while also delivering significant tax changes to benefit those who work. These combine with action to help businesses which are under pressure. In spite of the centrality of the economy and employment to everything, the debate so far has completely ignored these points.

The Opposition appears to believe the economy and employment are irrelevant. It has no policies beyond demanding dramatically more spending. This is to be paid for through higher taxes as well as cutting provision for the investments we need to sustain high employment, more housing, better public services and sustainable energy. The contributions so far have accused us of being Scrooges, miserly and insulting. Above-inflation income measures have been described as less than nothing. Perhaps the most remarkable attack has been the claim that seeking to ensure that public money is well spent is an Elon Musk-like attack on public servants. These absurd and pre-scripted attacks ignore the substance of the many issues our country faces. They are not about trying to solve pressures being faced by people but simply about trying to exploit them.

The facts show that the budget delivers significant increases in spending on services and supports as well as investment, yet it also ensures that we continue to provide for ongoing investment needs and resources to respond to more difficult economic conditions. It provides aid to workers and families ahead of rising prices while investing in protecting the jobs and growth we need to give people decent incomes and fund the public service. In contrast to Opposition contributions, the comments of the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council are substantive and serious. They deserve a response. The council is absolutely correct to say that we have to show restraint and avoid allocating all available revenues. We have to be conscious that some of these revenues may be temporary, and acknowledge there is a limit to the capacity of the economy and public services to absorb increased spending and tax measures. As we respect this opinion, expressed by others as well as the council, we have rejected many of the escalating demands we have heard during this debate for extra permanent spending.

It should also be acknowledged that total gross expenditure has remained very static at about 33% of modified domestic demand, which is the most accurate measure of the economy's strength. Allowing for the growth in the economy, total spending has remained and will remain consistent over the period 2022 to 2030, using forecasts from the Department of Finance, which have been independently reviewed. We have also brought in a surplus and have increased the funding put aside for future needs, especially for economic investments to underpin employment. Paying a further €1 billion into the Future Ireland Fund in 2027, which brings the total allocation to €7.5 billion, is a significant measure and a signal of our commitment to protecting against economic risks.

However, we must reach a judgment on the balance between this restraint and being responsive to the very real impact which international events have had. This especially concerns significant increases in the cost of living. The ability of families and businesses to

cope with rising costs is limited. The significant extra help we have provided is succeeding in protecting high levels of employment as well as household incomes. The inflationary impact of the spending has been and will be limited, with inflation in line with the eurozone average, in spite of our reliance on imported energy. In addition, various measures are directly linked to addressing dramatic spikes in energy costs, which can be reversed. We are also pushing forward investments designed directly to increase indigenous businesses and protect sustainable, long-term revenues for the State. Major investments in energy, housing, transport and other areas are essential for expanding the productive capacity of the economy and underpinning fiscal stability.

We are conscious of risks and the need for sustainability. The Minister, Deputy Chambers, is pushing forward actions to improve the speed and efficiency of investments and maximise the impact of public spending and these are already having an impact. The balance we have reached in this budget shows significant restraint, particularly when set in the context of wider demands. The combination of growth, high employment, an overall surplus and rising reserves signals to the wider world and to investors that Ireland has a resilient economy and a responsible fiscal position. Our bond yields today are significantly better than traditionally stronger economies, keeping down costs and making spending more sustainable. Should we need to be more restrictive, we will be. We will certainly not be adopting the Opposition's demand that we rip up all restraint and spend everything now.

As I have said, this budget provides significant improvements for workers and family incomes, expands critical public services and advances critical investments. The incomes of the poorest in our society and older people are protected through a range of increases in key payments. Increases in social protection are ahead of price increases and additional payments will help one-parent families, low-income working families and families with children and will significantly increase fuel-related payments. The first-ever dedicated cost-of-disability payment will support almost 250,000 people. It is an important start to a new approach I promised last year. Together with actions in the areas of education, health and transport in this budget, it marks an important moment for developing supports to help people with disabilities. These range from the new €500 payment, through to the development of new services and the expansion of practical assistance such as vehicle adaptation and a significant expansion in special education. The simulating welfare, income tax, childcare and health policies, SWITCH, analysis of social protection changes confirms that they will reduce the numbers at risk of poverty and contribute to our wider target of reducing child poverty, particularly when taken with actions in other areas.

The programme for Government that our parties agreed has marked a decisive move towards aiding people on low pay and low incomes, especially people on fixed incomes and those who rely on State support. European Union and OECD reports have shown that our budgets have involved highly progressive measures which have directly helped those most in need in our society. While direct State support to ensure decent incomes for people is a consistent part of our budgets, people in work and those who pay the taxes which help to fund these supports must also be our concern. We have had limited tax measures for them in recent years, but the impact of rising costs made it important that we deliver a substantive measure of tax changes to benefit people in work. We simply do not accept the argument of much of the Opposition that we should ignore the bulk of workers or claw back everything which benefits above-average workers. These tax reductions are fair and proportionate and a recognition that all

workers deserve a break at this time of high and rising costs. Significantly, we have addressed a consistent issue with our tax system whereby people were going into the higher rate of tax at far too low an income level.

Regarding public sector workers, we have now signalled very clearly our willingness to reach a new pay agreement. We have always rejected the ideologies of those who seek conflict or who belittle the role of public servants. That is why we have been willing to expand the number of public service positions and implement substantial pay agreements. What no one can expect us to do is to accept unilateral preconditions before discussions or to give up our right to table proposals. Any dispute on this basis serves no positive purpose and simply delays negotiations which we have shown, time and again, that we always approach in good faith. A dispute would be totally unwarranted, given our willingness to talk and the provisions we have made, including the tax cuts we have decided on. I hope we can see some progress soon. I also say to Deputies that some of the comments on this matter which we have heard in this Chamber have exposed a near-systematic refusal to respect that we must be responsible stewards of public money. To call for the Government to effectively be quiet and just meet any demand is not a serious contribution. I hope we will hear less of this in the days and weeks ahead.

During our time in government, we have steadily implemented a dramatic increase in State support for an area that is one of the biggest costs faced by working families in particular. This year, more than 277,000 children are benefiting from the national childcare scheme because of our sustained commitment to developing the sector and reducing costs for families. Next year, we will again cut the cost of childcare. It will be reduced by a quarter in September. This is a benefit of more than €2,000 in a full year. Crucially, we are going further than this to support more places, to train more people to work in the sector, to expand provision specifically for children with special needs, and to expand free childcare places for low-income families. We are taking another major step forward towards our goal of ensuring that affordable, accessible and quality childcare is available in all communities.

We also believe there is a need for a wider range of actions to give children the best start in life, help to break cycles of disadvantage and help those who need extra help.

1 o'clock

Over the years, I have seen how much our country has benefited from a wide range of actions to increase inclusion and opportunity in education. We have succeeded in achieving one of the highest school completion rates in Europe and reducing educational disadvantage through a sustained commitment and we will build on this. In our most disadvantaged communities, we will implement further measures to help children to stay in school and benefit from it. DEIS plus will be further developed and an additional 100 home school liaison posts will be created. All research shows that since DEIS was originally introduced well over a decade ago, it has played a significant role in enhancing school completion rates in the Republic. When the shared island unit commissioned research from the ESRI on differences in completion rates North and South, it showed clearly that completion rates in the Republic are far higher than rates in the Northern education system. As a result, the shared island unit allocated funding to the Northern Ireland Executive to work on a joint programme, RAISE, to try to enhance school completion rates in Northern Ireland through shared experiences and learnings. That is an important metric for us as a society. In addition, direct capitation payments will rise by 24%

in primary schools. That is on top of a very significant increase last year. They will also rise by 9% in secondary schools.

As Minister for education, I successfully argued for the development of a new approach to special education, creating the first dedicated classes in mainstream schools for those with higher needs, particularly those on the autistic spectrum, and a new type of role with the hiring of special needs assistants in mainstream schools. We have to keep improving special needs provision, ensuring appropriate supports and a focus on the needs of the child. That is why, next year, over 2,300 new SNA posts will be created, over 1,300 new special needs teachers will be hired and work will move forward to ensure that key blockages in the system are overcome. That will bring the total number of SNAs to 28,000. That is quite a significant expansion. Even in the last five years, the growth in the number of special needs assistants has been exponential. This gives the lie to the assertion that there have somehow been cuts to SNAs and all of that. There have not been. We have also brought in the therapy in schools service. We are now recruiting therapists for special schools. That is well under way and it is having an impact. We have more to do there but we are very committed to it. This year's education budget is significant in terms of the huge expansion in the number of places for children with additional needs.

During and since the pandemic, we have implemented a national programme for expanding access, quality and new services in our health system. The benefit of this is being seen in lower waiting times, improved patient outcomes and the addressing of long-neglected areas. Health will once again benefit from increased funding for critical services. New public health measures, like the shingles vaccine programme, will benefit thousands. The further systematic extension of mental health services will proceed. Because we believe in helping people to be at home as long as possible, the expansion of home help support has been sustained through recent years and this will continue. Home helps empower families to make their own decisions and maximise the amount of time people can spend in the comfort of their own homes.

Health will be the most funded public service area by far next year. The needs of the population deserve this. International pressures on health costs are felt here as well. It is important to say that the Government will continue to support the Minister as she works to ensure that the public benefits fully from the extra funding and posts created. Looking back over the last 20 years, there has been a very significant enhancement of lifespan in Ireland. It has been quite dramatic when compared to any other European country. This is because of our investments in cancer and cardiovascular healthcare over a 25- to 30-year period. It is yielding very significant results in terms of outcomes for people. We are living longer and, as we do so, our quality of life is much better. We need to maintain that. Technology and the application of AI will be very important in that. Of course, we will continue in terms of the scale of public funding, which is now very significant. The number of modern facilities that have been developed is significant. We need to do more but that means dealing with continuing major overruns, which are unacceptable. We cannot have habitual overruns in the public health system. That would undermine the progress we have made on health outcomes.

With regard to public safety, we have to enforce the law, especially in respect of those crimes that can damage the quality of life in communities. Measures taken in the last year are ensuring that the number of gardaí working in the community is maximised. Next year, a further 1,000 gardaí will be recruited and will form part of a sustained effort to target crime where it has the

most impact. In addition, through a range of community supports, including sports facilities, we will further invest in community-level initiatives, helping to sustain the social capital that is such a unique and positive part of Irish life.

Part of this investment in Ireland's future will continue to be the shared island initiative, which is, by some considerable measure, the largest-ever investment in building understanding and connections between all parts of our island. It is funded entirely by the Government here. The sad reality that we have seen in recent days is that the challenge of building understanding and a common sense of a shared future is far from complete. It can often seem that people are more interested in speaking to their own side than finding ways of leaving division behind. Indeed, there are many who appear to believe that there is no place for calmly engaging with others. Many commentators can often seem mainly interested in stereotyping people and demanding loyalty to the party line. People who are genuinely serious about changing things or achieving long-desired outcomes do not see discussions as simply a minor break between press conferences and speeches. As people talk about not returning to the past, we should remember that we could never have achieved anything without good faith negotiations and looking for opportunities to seek discussions rather than reckonings. Today, more than ever, I believe that sustained, substantive and respectful engagement is the only way forward. Next year we will spend a further €200 million through the shared island fund. We will push forward key infrastructural projects and go much further in funding projects that address critical issues. We will build on the annual report on the economies North and South that we began this year. This is the first-ever systematic approach to understanding this critical area. I will also prepare a number of specific initiatives designed to mark a significant step forward in understanding key social, economic, legal and other issues.

Housing will continue to be a defining challenge of this generation. A rising population, rising employment and many social developments have led to a long-term crisis in supply and affordability. This is felt not only in Ireland, but through much of the developed world. The only way of delivering the homes that people need is action across a complex range of issues including legal reform, training, infrastructure, tax and direct support. Brick by brick, we are putting in place a step change in home construction. It is still far too difficult to find a home to rent or buy, but facts show the impact of our sustained determination to get homes built. European Union figures state that Ireland is one of the few countries in Europe that is succeeding in increasing the rate of home building. We now have the fastest rate of home building across Europe. Within this, the number of new homes going to first-time buyers is up because of a range of new supports. The budget will allow State investment of almost €12 billion in housing. This will allow for far more social houses to be built. The rent tax credit will be increased to €1,150 per year for a single person and €2,300 for a couple. Rent-a-room relief will increase. Tax relief through the help-to-buy scheme for first-time buyers is also being increased by €5,000 from €30,000 to €35,000. These are only a few of the measures that will keep the momentum in housing supply and support people to find a home to buy or rent.

As I said earlier, we believe action is required to ensure that Ireland's economy remains strong and prospers in the face of many deep challenges. We cannot take success for granted. One of the most important issues we must address is the need to find ways to scale indigenous companies so they form a wider base for our internally-trading companies. Our budget is providing for a €1 billion investment programme led by the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund to help Irish firms with scaling up. Multinational firms have played a major role for over 60

years, since the Governments of Seán Lemass and Jack Lynch introduced a pro-enterprise and outward-looking tax policy and committed us to seeking to become a trading nation. Multinational firms will continue to be an important and valued part of our economy, but we must do more to increase the number and scale of significant and innovative Irish firms.

There are many elements to this. One part is addressing the active disincentives to keeping businesses here and reinvesting capital gains from significant sales. That is why the reduction in capital gains tax is important and I am pleased to see that this has been widely welcomed by groups which are focused on building Irish businesses and enterprise.

We also have to continue to support the security and development of our world-class agrifood sector. A broad base of family farms is key to quality production as well as the lifeblood of many of our communities. That is why we are implementing a series of substantial measures to support farming. We will be implementing measures to aid intergenerational transfers, to keep farms in families and help a new generation to earn a good income. The urgent problems of this moment require targeted supports and these will help farmers with the triple challenges of the costs of fuel, fodder and fertiliser. We believe that farmers are increasingly the leaders in transitioning to lower-cost sustainable energy and protecting the environment. Time and again, farmers have shown a willingness to act if given the right supports. A combination of improvements to the targeted agriculture modernisation schemes, TAMS, and to the SEAI grants will provide generous support for installing lower-cost secure energy on farms, something which reflects a cross-Government approach.

Cleaning up key waterways while protecting our world-class and sustainable dairy sector is a priority for us and an additional €21 million will next year fund specific water quality and biodiversity schemes in partnership with farmers. We will continue to ambitiously fund Ireland's transition to secure, affordable and environmentally sustainable energy. Ireland's progress in decoupling growth and carbon emissions is very clear and providing funding to go much further is a core part of the reserves we are providing for. We are taking measures in relation to carbon taxes to recognise the reality of current pressures, while also protecting the core principles behind this. Anyone who thinks you can address existential climate issues without any consumption taxes is not being serious. That is why I am surprised that those parties in the Opposition which claim to be most concerned with this issue signed a joint letter on climate with the largest Opposition party; a party which is a loud and inflexible opponent of any carbon-linked taxation.

It is important to note that we have signalled our intention to support fishing communities and a long-term future for another sustainable and high-quality indigenous industry. The allocation of an additional €20 million to begin implementing our plans is a major step forward.

For every part of the Irish economy, the haulage sector represents an essential partner. Its costs matter to us all and the impact of fuel prices has been profound. This is why we are reducing the excise on fuel for hauliers under the road transporters support scheme.

At this critical moment in shaping our economic future, we are taking action to further invest in education and training. We are providing a further €50 million a year for the next three years, which is €150 million in total, through the National Training Fund for an AI skills and resilience package. We are also acting on a cross-Government basis in relation to developing skills to understand and, where appropriate, adopt artificial intelligence. The debate on the

need to protect privacy and address safety issues with frontier AI models is a very serious one. However, it is a very different issue from the use of AI in relation to a wide range of practical applications. Enterprise-based applications which perform limited but important tasks are a reality. This is where we need to ensure we have the skills required to make use of AI to improve services and protect competitiveness. As part of our Presidency of the European Council, we will shortly host a major conference on AI which will explore this issue.

As we look at the economic challenges of today and the years ahead, we would do well to remember the words of Seán Lemass when he addressed a post-war meeting of what became the OECD. He said, "We cannot ... win for our people the high and rising standard of living we wish them to have merely by the temporary patching up of our own national economies." For him, international co-operation in strong, rules-bound organisations was essential; in fact, it was the only route to progress for countries like Ireland. That is as true today as it has ever been. That is why we will continue to be a Europositive Government, seeking opportunities to strengthen the European Union as it faces continued attacks from the right and the left. We strongly reject the corrosive Euroscepticism of half of the Opposition in this House.

Our allocation to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade will ensure that we continue to build on the exceptional work being undertaken at this moment by Ministers, diplomats and officials to move Europe's agenda forward. This Presidency will mark a significant step forward in the level and depth of Ireland's work for a shared prosperity among the nations of Europe.

At a challenging moment in international affairs and with major needs for social and economic investment, this budget is both balanced and ambitious. It addresses key social and economic issues through sustained action both next year and beyond, while also providing significant direct assistance to families and businesses under pressure today. It rewards work by delivering increased take-home pay for all workers, while also using resources to help those who need support. Increased pensions and social protection payments, a range of measures for people with disabilities and a major cut in childcare costs will each make a difference, as will a programme of expanding important public services. Home building will grow further, including the largest-ever programme of social home building. Direct support for renters will increase. Critical investments will be made to secure our economic future and we will take steps to support dynamic and scaled indigenous businesses. We will do this in a way which protects our ability to respond to economic shocks and vital public supports. It is a balanced, fair and ambitious budget. It will help people with rising costs, but also provide a foundation for securing a strong economy, high employment and quality public services.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach. Before I call the Tánaiste, I ask my colleagues to join me in congratulating the Tánaiste and his family on his latest addition. I am sure this is not the most flexible job in those circumstances but congratulations.

Tánaiste and Minister for Finance (Deputy Simon Harris): I thank the Ceann Comhairle. I am delighted to be here today and I thank her for her kind wishes. I am pleased to join the Taoiseach and Cabinet colleagues for these statements on budget 2027. The Government sees this budget as the next step in the trajectory of delivering on our programme for Government. It is a path to securing Ireland's future. It is a path that brings us to a place in which work is rewarded, economic success is tangible in the everyday lives of our people and the public

finances are invested in building the infrastructure and services that our country needs to thrive. It brings us to a place where everyone, regardless of circumstance, can get ahead and provide for themselves and their families, a place where we build homes, schools, healthcare facilities, childcare places and transport and energy capacity - the infrastructure that a growing country needs. It brings us to a place where businesses can prosper, create jobs and generate wealth and where farmers can profitably produce a safe and sustainable food supply. It brings us to a place where we invest in the Garda and in the Defence Forces to keep our communities and our country safe and secure. Underpinning all of this, it is crucial that we drive faster delivery with less bureaucracy and better value for every euro.

I am pleased to have the opportunity today to further outline the measures introduced in budget 2027 and the rationale for them. I am sharing time with the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment, who will outline in more detail how the measures we have taken will assist businesses and farmers. I will not list again every measure that the Minister, Deputy Chambers, and I announced yesterday, but I want to take the opportunity to restate a few important themes. Before doing that, it is worth pausing to reflect on the context for the budget. This is a budget that is being delivered at a time of exceptional uncertainty. The energy price shock continues to put households and businesses under pressure. The instability in the global environment has particularly severe consequences for a small, open economy such as ours. Across the world, borrowing costs are rising. We cannot pretend these things are not happening. We cannot imagine them away. We are not immune. Similarly, we should not be paralysed in the face of them. We need to consider their implications, analyse their effects and react. We need to think of both the short-term and long-term consequences and then plan accordingly.

That is exactly what this budget represents. We are in a position to deliver a budget that strikes that balance because of the remarkable resilience of our economy. Even with all the external shocks we have faced, we are one of the fastest-growing economies in Europe. We have a falling ratio of public debt to national income. We have rising incomes. We have a labour market that has been running at full employment for the longest stretch in the history of this country. When we think of where we have been in the past two decades, this is an astonishing accomplishment. From the depths of financial crisis to the shocks of Brexit, the pandemic and the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, we have rebuilt our economy together and we have restored our public finances. This momentum needs to continue. Next year, we hope to add another 53,000 jobs to the economy. Our economy is projected to grow by 3% in terms of domestic demand. As I said yesterday, by the end of next year and using this metric, our economy will have grown by a fifth since the Covid pandemic. That is a remarkable statistic in any context. In the context of the last few years, it is genuinely exceptional.

Countries do not find themselves in such a strong position by accident. It is because over successive governments and across many years, we have together gotten the big decisions right. In uncertain times, it is more important than ever that we continue to make the right choices. Yesterday, as part of the budget, my Department updated its projections for the public finances. This year, we expect a surplus of €6.7 billion, rising to €9.5 billion next year. Of course, I am very conscious that some see these figures and ask why the Government is not spending more and saving less. No one anticipated that the pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine or the conflict in the Middle East would upend the global economy. If we had listened to those who always want to just spend more and tax less, we would not have had the resources to respond

to these challenges. We would not have been able to protect our people. We would not have been able to protect our economy.

We would have mortgaged our kids' future for short-term political gain. It is precisely because we have managed our public finances in a responsible way that we have been able to react with flexibility and speed to the latest shocks. Running surpluses is not about keeping any bean-counter happy but about protecting our people against downturns, about protecting our from austerity, about protecting public services, about projecting jobs and about making sure we can continue to invest. Some of the tax revenue we receive from large companies may not be around forever. That is why we set up the Future Ireland Fund to set aside some tax receipts while we have them to invest for the future and to pay for costs that we know are coming. It is not a rainy day fund; it is a fund for demographic change that will happen in Ireland. As I have said previously, I see no good reason our children should have to pay the full costs of our old age. We have a chance to help avoid that and we will. The positive state of our public finances means I have decided to transfer an additional €1 billion to the Future Ireland Fund. This brings the total contribution for next year to €6.8 billion on top of the €23 billion that has already been transferred into funds like this. This reiterates this Government's commitment to reinforcing our economic resilience.

Running surpluses and keeping the public finances safe gives us the capacity to respond as necessary when shocks happen. The most pressing challenge facing families today is, of course, the energy price shock. Government is acutely aware that people are struggling with rising prices and we have not hesitated to step in to try and help ease that burden. Even before budget day, we had made €1.3 billion available in supports cutting the rate of excise duties on fuel, delaying scheduled carbon tax increases and extending the fuel allowance season and we put in place support schemes for the haulage and agricultural sectors that are so important to our economy. Of course, no government can fully absorb the impact of a global energy price shock - no government should try to do that - but we have demonstrated time and again that we stand ready and willing to act when the circumstances demand action.

After seven months of conflict in the Middle East, the world has changed significantly and even if the conflict were to end tomorrow, the consequences for energy markets would reverberate for some time to come. In these circumstances, it is right that Government continues to provide support. That is why, alongside the budget, we have announced that we will extend the reduction in excise duties on fuel until the end of February followed by a gradual restoration over the next four months. Extending this measure represents a substantial financial commitment on the part of Government. Because we have strong fiscal buffers, it is a cost that, thankfully, we can absorb. Restoring rates in a gradual and phased manner means families will not face a sudden cliff edge during the winter months and that they and businesses can plan. These measures have made a real difference. I often hear people ask why did we do this on fuel and what about this and that. We know that by doing this on fuel, we have suppressed inflation growth in the economy by approximately 0.6%, and whether you have a car or not, whether you use diesel or petrol or not, the package we have put in place has helped more generally in managing inflation across the economy. Lower prices at the pump relative to where they would have been means lower prices in the shop relative to where they would have been.

We are also taking further action on carbon tax. We are cutting the tax on kerosine and natural gas. The rate of carbon tax on these products will be reduced back to where it was in 2023, down from the €78.50 per tonne that had been scheduled. We are saying that these rates will be maintained for the lifetime of this Government. I told the House yesterday, and I repeat today, there will be no increase in any form of tax at the pump or in people's homes during this winter. We should acknowledge, though, that every choice Government makes comes with a cost. Budgets are about making decisions. They are about striking a balance. Carbon tax is used to fund retrofitting, fuel poverty supports and agri-environmental schemes. Many people, though, do not have an easy alternative to home heating oil and natural gas. Some are facing a real challenge and it is right that we take action to help without undermining those long-term environmental commitments but we also need to be honest with people.

Ireland is one of the few countries in the European Union that has a derogation from what is called emissions trading system, ETS, 2. If Members propose going too far in relation to carbon tax, and it is their right to propose whatever they want, they need to be honest with people about the effect. That will result in transferring billions of euro from the coffers of Irish taxpayers to European coffers. That is the effect. There is no consequence-free decision. People can go to public meetings, monster meetings or whatever meetings they want to, but if they stand on a stage and promise the farmers of Ireland that they are going to magic away the carbon tax and it is not going to have an effect on the contribution we have to make to the ETS, they are not telling the truth. Let us have an honest debate on carbon tax. I would much rather that we continue to keep control in this House and in this Government on what we can do with carbon tax revenue and keep our ETS 2 derogation than have to pool our resources at a European level and lose the level of national autonomy that we currently have. It is important that people do not mislead farmers, hauliers and the public at this moment of cost-of-living challenge.

We must also continue to work hard to decarbonise our economy. We know that the two recent shocks to energy markets are evidence that we have got to move away, if any further evidence was needed, from our reliance on fossil fuels and towards renewable sources of energy. Dependence on fossil fuels leaves us exposed to external forces we cannot control and the best way to insulate future generations is to build a greener and more sustainable economy. That is why we are investing more in the ESB to boost capacity. It is why we will transfer €2 billion to EirGrid over the coming years to invest in the resilience of our energy grid. It is why we made a decision yesterday to extend the VRT relief for electric vehicles for another two years and increase the subsidies for retrofits.

The energy transition is the long-term project but we can take action today to accelerate it. In this budget, we are making further changes as part of that wider transition. We are helping to support micro-electricity generation enabling you to earn more without paying any tax on any energy you might sell to the grid from solar panels. We are reviewing cleaner aviation fuel and the cycle-to-work scheme and what more might be possible in those areas. The Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment has secured a significant expenditure package to underpin the delivery of secure, sustainable and affordable energy and reduce our reliance on imported fossil fuels.

Energy is perhaps the most visible pressure that households are facing but the cost of living is a multifaceted challenge. Temporary supports are necessary. They help, but they are by their

nature not a lasting solution. The most effective tool that Government has for assisting the cost of living is by giving people back more of their own money. We have one of the most progressive income tax systems in the world. That is something we should rightly be proud of but, at the same time, people in the middle can sometimes feel as if they are being asked to shoulder too much of the burden. Over this and future budgets, we will work to change that. We have made clear that the budget wants to reward work and support people. That is why we announced a personal income tax package of €1.3 billion and in line with the programme for Government, we are committed to adjusting income tax bands and rates so workers do not find themselves paying more in tax simply because their wages have risen, they have got a promotion or they have done a few extra hours in overtime.

It is entirely right and appropriate that when it is feasible to do so Government takes action to help taxpayers hold on to a bit more of their own money. I acknowledge there are different ideas around tax on income but Members should be clear that if they want to take thousands of more people out of the USC, that will be a very dangerous situation for this country. A third of workers already do not pay any tax on their income. That is okay. They are low-paid workers. That is a progressive tax system. However, if Members want to narrow the tax base further, they have got to be honest. They are transferring the tax burden further up towards the squeezed middle. They are saying to the garda married to the nurse and to the teacher in a relationship with a civil servant that they will ultimately have to pay more or they need to come out and explain where they are going to cut public services. In the challenging economic days, 45% of workers were not in the income tax brackets and we are now at approximately a third. We need to be responsible that we do not narrow the tax base because all narrowing the tax base means is jam today and more pain tomorrow and we can never go back to that as well. We believe this is the right balance to take.

By the way, people like to compare did a lower-income worker get this versus a middle-income worker. First, the tax system is progressive. Second, the budget is progressive. The documentation shows that. However, we also have to be honest that if people are on a lower income, they can, thankfully and rightly, avail of other supports such as the fuel allowance, the working family payment, the back to school and education allowance, a SUSI grant or the child support payment. There is a certain group of people who can get nothing and do not want anything other than getting a little bit of their own money back and we have to be truthful about that. A person working 39 hours a week on a factory floor on the minimum wage will see their income rise by more than €1,300 next year under this budget and anybody suggesting that this is not a budget for all workers clearly has not read all of the elements in the budget or totted them up because it is quite clear. Lower income workers will see their income rise €1,300. We are helping businesses absorb that with changes we have made to PRSI as well.

We are also increasing the tax credit for renters. We are reducing the cost of childcare. We are bringing down the cost of buying first homes through allowing people to get more of their own money back through the help to buy scheme.

Progressivity matters to this Government. Our officials have done an assessment and we published it yesterday. Those on lower incomes gain the most from the full suite of measures from tax to the minimum wage, welfare and pension increases and we should acknowledge that. We should have an honest debate. Much of the discussion in this House takes place in a vacuum of calls for more and more and ignoring what is going on in international markets.

Many countries now have to borrow at interest rates of 5% or more. Thank God we do not, but we must be conscious that we can never take that position for granted. That is why we have to continue to plan for the future. It is why we have got to strike a balance. It is why we have to invest in key areas such as childcare and early years.

I welcome the progress we have made on our programme for Government commitment to reducing childcare costs and getting over the lifetime of this Government to that commitment. That is a real saving for so many parents and families in the time ahead.

I am also pleased with what we are doing for education in increasing the number of teachers and SNAs, providing additional capitation funding for our schools and capital funding for our schools building programme, as well as having a real focus - rightly - on special education facilities and places. As many of us are aware, October is dyslexia awareness month and this year's theme is "Effective teaching changes lives". That is why as a Government, we are pleased the Department of Education and Youth has secured funding as part of this budget for three initiatives which will help support young people with dyslexia. The first is the literacy associates pilot programme, with graduates of DCU's Master of Education in dyslexia support and up to 40 schools initially to announce the quality of literacy teaching. In addition, we will soon launch a revised assistive technology scheme which will remove barriers to accessing the curriculum for children with dyslexia. In 2027, we will introduce a new accredited course on inclusive education, which will include a pillar on enhancing literacy and numeracy practices in schools to include a focus on dyslexia. I know all of us in government thank and acknowledge Minister of State, Deputy Moran, who has shown real leadership in this area, speaking openly about his own experience of dyslexia and the challenges he faced in education and throughout his own life. By sharing his experience and championing greater understanding and support, this helps to ensure others do not face those same barriers in silence.

In my Department, we are seeking to champion financial literacy. This work is in the context of introducing our new investment account. I was glad we could outline in more detail our plans for this account yesterday, which I hope will give people the opportunity over time to build up their own financial resilience. Investing should never be the preserve of the wealthy or only open to those with access to expensive financial advisers. This is about changing that and making investing simpler, clearer and more accessible for people. The Government's role is not to tell you how to manage your money but to make sure we put a tax system in place that makes it possible for you to make the best choices for you and your family. Our new investment account will open on 1 July 2027. We will legislate for the detail of it in the finance Bill, and I look forward to having the opportunity to discuss and debate that in this House.

This budget is about helping people with the here and now. It is about helping people with the resources we have while also planning for the road ahead and protecting Ireland and its economy, and therefore our living standards into the future. It is about a budget that supports households and businesses in an appropriate, affordable and meaningful way today, while investing in our long-term climate transition so that we reduce our exposure to future energy shocks. It is a budget that rewards work and effort and enables people to keep more of their own money. It is a budget that gives people the opportunity, maybe for the first time, to put their money to work for them. It is a budget that is being delivered at a deeply uncertain time but this country is well-placed to face the challenges ahead. Our public finances are in good shape and we are one of the few countries in Europe now running surpluses. Our economy is

strong and resilient, and our labour market is at full employment. This has given us the scope to respond to today's needs while also planning for tomorrow's musts.

The budget sets out an ambitious and optimistic but realistic path forward, built around rewarding hard work, risk-taking and innovation.

Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Peter Burke): I welcome the opportunity to speak on my Department's budget for 2027 and on the work we are doing to support the Irish enterprise sector. A thriving enterprise sector is not built on one intervention or one budget measure. It is a product of many factors carefully considered over time to create the right environment for businesses to invest, innovate and create jobs. While we would all love to have a silver bullet, long-term success depends on getting a wide range of factors right, from skills and infrastructure to access to finance, innovation and competitiveness.

Some would have you believe there are easy answers and obvious solutions, but delivering a stronger economy requires many different levers to be pulled carefully. Through targeted investment and sound policy-making, we are creating the conditions for businesses to grow, jobs to be created and for Ireland to face 2027 from a position of strength. The measures I will outline today are built on four priorities. The first is helping businesses to access the capital they need to start, scale and compete. The second is investing in innovation, productivity and the technologies that will shape the economy of the future. The third is a critical focus on tourism and regional development and, finally, is strengthening our competitiveness. I will also touch on some of the key changes made by the Tánaiste, Deputy Harris, regarding taxation and supporting the agricultural sector.

Improving access to finance remains the Government's priority. Following the strong success of the growth and stability loan scheme, I have secured approval of €0.5 billion for expansion of the scheme, bringing the total size to €1 billion and extending its availability until June 2029. I am delighted to confirm this funding will be available from our pillar banks from this Friday, so SMEs should engage with their bank and apply as soon as possible. In addition, and in conjunction with the Tánaiste, we have announced €1 billion for the ISIF start-up and scaling investment programme that is being developed in co-operation with Enterprise Ireland. This will be transformational and will provide ambitious Irish companies with the capital they need to scale, innovate and compete internationally. An additional €4.5 million has been allocated to our local enterprise offices, LEOs, including measures to help small businesses invest in energy efficient equipment, reducing operating costs and supporting the transition to a more sustainable economy.

Budget 2027 provides an additional €3 million to Enterprise Ireland for the establishment of Start-up Ireland, a key priority under the programme for Government and the action plan for competitiveness and productivity. I am delighted to officially launch the commencement of Start-up Ireland next week, and look forward to the ambitious journey of supporting 1,000 start-ups over the next four years.

Access to finance alone is not enough. We must also ensure Irish businesses can develop and adapt the technologies that will drive future growth and identify where future markets will go. Budget 2027 provides an additional €6.5 million for the disruptive technologies innovation fund. Universities can provide a unique environment where new technologies can be tested, refined and de-risked in ways that are often difficult for commercial organisations operating

under day-to-day market pressures. This makes the disruptive technology fund critical to the Irish business eco-system.

Funding of approximately €30 million will be available to support Ireland's participation in the European Space Agency. During the first half of this year alone, almost €13 million worth of contracts were awarded to Irish companies, with four Irish companies winning the first ever European Space Agency contract.

The National AI Office commenced operations in July this year. Budget 2027 provides an additional €2.3 million for the office, bringing its total allocation to €3.8 million. Artificial intelligence presents an unprecedented opportunity for businesses and society, with many AI companies choosing Ireland to locate their European headquarters. We will play an important role in the safe deployment and regulation of the technology, while supporting innovation and economic growth. The budget also includes a landmark €300 million from the National Training Fund, which will be used to upskill and reskill our workforce and AI over the coming five years.

Furthermore, additional resources provided to IDA Ireland in 2027 will progress the next generation's strategic sites initiative, helping to advance the deployment of up to three large-scale strategic sites in position for Ireland to invest in opportunities in sectors such as semi-conductors and life sciences. These will be key investment positions which will capitalise on the opportunities of tomorrow.

Support for Irish businesses is about more than industry. It is about supporting sectors and sustaining jobs and communities right across our country in both urban and rural settings. Tourism remains a key contributor to regional economies across our country, with over 46,000 SMEs active in the tourism sector. Budget 2027 provides €1.4 million in additional funding to Fáilte Ireland to support sustainability and accessibility improvements across its property portfolio. In addition, €5.25 million will be allocated to support digitalisation, regional and tourism infrastructure, and enhance tourism data and analytics capability. We know many tourists now research and book their trips using generative AI, and we need to ensure our tourism SMEs are coming up in these searches. I am also providing an additional €2.3 million to Tourism Ireland to support the implementation of the action plan and market diversification, helping to grow revenue from key European markets, expand international connectivity and attract high-value visitors to our country.

With the delivery of both our culinary and accommodation tourism strategy next year, 2027 will be an exciting year for Irish tourism. We have sufficient untapped potential in this vital sector, particularly in the midlands and less mature markets, which will be the focus of future investment.

Investment depends not only on financial supports but also on confidence in the institutions that underpin our economy. The National Standards Authority of Ireland, NSAI, will receive €1.2 million in current funding to increase its capacity to assess the certification of modern methods of construction products and systems. The NSAI will play an important role in ramping up housing construction at scale. I am also providing additional current funding to strengthen a range of regulatory and labour market institutions, including the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, CCPC, the Workplace Relations Commission and the

Labour Court. I will bring forward new legislation next year to empower the CCPC to impose tougher fines for breaches of consumer law.

I welcome the pro-business taxation measures announced as part of budget 2027 by my colleague the Tánaiste, including the key announcements on the research and development tax credit. We will work together with the key sectors in developing a new €15 million scheme for rural pubs, acknowledging their contribution to rural economies in our small towns and villages across our country. The Tánaiste has also extended a number of important measures that support entrepreneurship, including the employment investment scheme, the start-up capital incentive and start-up relief for entrepreneurs, the angel investor relief and the knowledge box development regime. Investors require certainty, and having a well-resourced, efficient and predictable regulatory tax system is a key part of our offering for foreign direct investment and domestic business growth.

I acknowledge the Government's decision to increase the national minimum wage by 75 cent per hour in line with the recommendation of the Low Pay Commission. It is imperative that we support workers' incomes while also strengthening competitiveness through measures that provide greater certainty for employers, including the removal of the 2029 living wage timeline, alongside broader actions to reduce the cost of doing business. Working with the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Dara Calleary, we have increased the weekly earnings threshold for the lower rate of employer's PRSI from €552 to €600. This means that more workers, particularly those on the minimum wage and slightly above it, will qualify for a reduced rate, helping to ease the cost pressures on employers while supporting job creation and retention.

I am also glad that one of the key recommendations of the cost of business advisory forum will be implemented, as we cut red tape for employers by replacing real-time revenue enhanced reporting requirements with a more practical monthly reporting system. This is a common-sense measure and will be well-received by the SME sector. Across the Department and its agencies, work is underway to simplify and improve how businesses access supports and services. It is imperative that we do things simpler, lighter and faster, and in the Department we are taking simplification seriously. For example, I have gone through all grant processes linked to local enterprise office, LEO, funding streams and reduced the number of questions asked by more than half in some cases. Businesses' most precious resource is their time and we need to ensure that we are not asking for information that is not necessary, especially for some small grants.

I finish by noting some of the important tax changes to our farming community, another crucial sector of importance to the indigenous economy. Regarding succession farm partnerships, the Tánaiste has committed to a removal of the three-year holding period for applications made from 1 January 2027 onwards. He is also increasing the associated tax credit available for five years from €5,000 to €10,000 for succession partnerships registered from and including 1 January 2027. VAT on respiratory vaccines for livestock will be reduced from 23% to 9%. In 2027, we will see an expansion of the accelerated wear and tear allowance for farm safety equipment. The farmers' flat-rate VAT addition will be increased from 4.5% to 4.8% in 2027. This will provide full compensation for flat-rate farmers for their VAT input costs. On the spending side, alongside this overall package, it is welcome that the fuel income support

scheme is being extended to cover a further five-month period this year in recognition of the continuing pressures on that sector.

It is easy to argue that every challenge can be solved with more spending but building a strong economy requires more than writing larger cheques. The revenues that fund our schools, hospitals and public services do not appear by accident. They are generated by successful businesses, entrepreneurs and workers right across our country. The measures announced in this budget reflect careful choices and clear priorities. Every euro allocated has a purpose, to support enterprise, create opportunity, strengthen competitiveness and deliver lasting economic benefits. Our responsibility is not simply to spend more, but spend wisely. The increased funding secured for my Department will help ensure that Ireland remains competitive, innovative and an attractive place in which to do business, work, invest and visit, both in 2027 and in the future.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Seán Canney): I echo the words of the Tánaiste and my colleague the Minister of State, Kevin Boxer Moran, about dyslexia, and acknowledge the work they have done and continue to do, which we will continue to do together in government. When I stood here this time last year, I told the House that when my fellow Teachtaí Dála in the Independent group had the courage to support the establishment of a new Government in January 2025, we did so on the basis of an agreed programme for Government, a blueprint for change to be delivered over the course of five years. While in opposition, we as Independent TDs highlighted, among others, issues affecting carers, those with disabilities and fuel poverty but we also knew that to achieve what was required, we needed to work in government. On that basis, we agreed a programme for Government with our coalition partners. Budget 2026 was the first step on that road to addressing some of these issues, a key part of a five-year programme.

What I, or anybody else in this House, did not know at that time was how very unstable the geopolitical environment would be and how it would impact not just us here in Ireland, but across the entire world. Budget 2027 is the second year of that programme. We have worked hard to have a solid economy, which has been built over many years. In this budget, we want to continue to protect our economy into the future, while also providing ease to many hard-pressed people. This Government is determined to protect our economic progress, to protect our people, protect jobs and also to protect our future. The overall package is worth €8.5 billion and it aims to positively impact everyone across the country, to the heart of our communities. As an Independent TD and a Minister of State attending Cabinet, I look forward to continuing to work with our partners in government while the measures outlined in the programme for Government are being implemented.

I know all too well that people are finding the increased cost of living very tough. Budget 2027 has sought to address that challenge through various methods. The cut on excise duty on petrol and diesel will remain fully in place until 28 February 2027 to give people additional certainty over the coming months. From that point, there will be a gradual and responsible restoration of excise in four phases, with a full restoration not occurring until 30 June 2027. This is alongside the extension of the reduced National Oil Reserve Agency, NORA, levy until 31 December and the extension of the diesel rebate scheme until the end of December.

We have also decided to reduce the rate of carbon tax on kerosene and natural gas for the lifetime of this Government. Home heating oil and natural gas is a huge cost for families and this measure, taken with others, will help those who are most hard-pressed during the winter period. Last week, fuel allowance payments began issuing to more than 465,000 households across the State for 28 weeks. That figure represents approximately 26% of all households. We have increased the fuel allowance by €5 per week, which means an overall payment of €1,204. The scheme has already been expanded this year to make it available to more households. The weekly single income threshold will rise from €534 to €640.80, allowing thousands more older people to qualify for support and enable them also to apply for the warmer home scheme. The living alone allowance will be increased to €25 per week, benefiting more than 259,000 people. This was an important addition to the budget for my Independent colleagues and I.

Some of the people who make a real difference every day in the life and our society are carers. We remain committed to having the means test abolished over the lifetime of Government. Last year's budget was the first step in achieving that. Budget 2027 will see income thresholds increase again by €150 for a single person and €300 for a couple to €1,150 and €2,300, respectively. Budget 2027 is also prioritising increasing income tax bands for workers. The entry point at which workers start paying the higher rate of income tax will rise from €44,000 to €46,500. Tax credits will also rise by €125.

For a household with two earners bringing in a combined €100,000, the changes will amount to an annual saving of about €1,500, while a single person earning €50,000 will be around €750 better off annually. Importantly, the working family payment income thresholds will be increased by €30 per week, with a €6 increase in the weekly rates for child support for children under and over 12 years of age.

The area of disability was a key issue for my Independent colleagues when we were negotiating the programme for Government. I am delighted to see the cost-of-disability payment being introduced as part of this budget, and I commend the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Calleary, for his work on this. The lump sum payment of €500 will help bridge the gap between the current weekly disability allowance and the cost of living with a disability today. In my own Department of Transport, I am delighted to confirm €6.5 million funding for the vehicle adaptation scheme in line with the Government's national human rights strategy for disabled people. The new scheme will support drivers and passengers who require adaptations to enter, exit or operate a motor vehicle. It will open for applications early next year and, importantly, it does not replace the disabled driver scheme. I also welcome the increase in earnings disregard for disability allowance and blind pensions by €10 to €175 per week. There will also be an increase of €10 per week across all social welfare payments.

There are also changes to the capital acquisition tax thresholds that apply to gifts and inheritance. The group A threshold is increasing from €400,000 to €420,000 and the group B threshold from €40,000 to €44,000, with the group C threshold increasing from €20,000 to €22,000.

Hauliers, logistics, private bus and coach operators, farmers and farm contractors, and our fishery sector are key to our economy. Since the conflict in the Middle East began, we have worked with representatives of the groups involved in these sectors in making sure that they are supported. The fuel support package was confirmed earlier this year as a result of ongoing

and continuous engagement with those in the transport, farming and fishery sectors who were under real and immediate financial pressure. That engagement continues with these sectors, which are vital to our economy. Within my own Department, and along with the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, I hold regular meetings with representatives of these groups. We extended many of these measures as autumn approached, and we have moved further in budget 2027 to support this sector. The cut to excise duties on fuel will also be extended.

Within my own Department, the road transporters support scheme will be extended for a two-month period, with an estimated cost of €73 million. This scheme has been vital to support the sector. The fuel income support scheme for farmers and farm contractors will also be extended to December 2026. An EU exceptional aid scheme will be introduced to compensate farmers impacted by higher fertiliser and energy costs, with €15.3 million in EU funding being topped up by 200% with €30.8 million in Exchequer funding from the existing Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine allocation.

The programme for Government commits to bringing down the cost of childcare to €200 per child per month. This is a key area for me and my Independent colleagues, and I recognise that childcare costs are a burden for people to bear. From September 2027, no parent will pay more than €550 per month per child for all children up to and including senior infant level. We have increased the amount that childminders can earn tax free. Currently, that stands at €15,000 per year, and it is to rise to €20,000. In addition, the limit on the number of children that may be cared for while a qualifying childminder claims the relief is being removed.

There is support for families who have students in third level education. There is a permanent reduction in the student contribution fee of €150. There are also fee discounts for families who have multiple students in third level education and an increase in SUSI maintenance grants by 4.5% from January, which is a move that will benefit 150,000 students and their families.

It is widely recognised that we need to move to more sustainable energy sources. Our current geopolitical situation has underlined that fact. New and enhanced energy grants opened yesterday, helping households make their homes more energy efficient and reduce energy bills. The new supports include a €2,000 boiler scrappage scheme for eligible fossil fuel heating systems; a €600 home battery grant; up to €9,000 for solar photovoltaic, PV, and battery systems for eligible households receiving certain social welfare payments; fully funded solar PV and battery systems under the warmer homes scheme; new attic and cavity wall insulation grants for homes in housing assistance payment, HAP, and rental accommodation scheme, RAS, tenancies; solar PV and solar thermal grants extended to homes built and occupied before 2025; and enhanced supports for businesses investing in solar PV panels, heat pumps, and solar thermal systems.

Our small and medium enterprises are central to our economy. They are feeling the pinch, too, and I have seen and heard this message coming loud and clear from meetings I have attended with them. The employer PRSI threshold rises from €552 to €600 per week, meaning that businesses will save between €650 and €700 a year per eligible employee. This will ease the cost of the minimum wage increase for SMEs. The standard rate of capital gains tax has been reduced from 33% to 31%. A number of enhancements have also been introduced to the research and development tax credit in the budget. The relief from tax on certain start-up companies has been extended by four years to December 2030.

The Minister, Darragh O'Brien, will outline the main budgetary allocation of the Department of Transport. I have already mentioned the introduction of the vehicle adaptation scheme, but for me, road safety is a key priority, and I have made it a central theme of the EU Presidency as I lead out on the transport portfolio. Just two weeks ago, I was delighted to welcome my EU colleagues to Dublin Castle for the EU informal transport Council meeting. We held productive discussions around road safety and how connected and autonomous vehicles and intelligent transport systems could support efforts to make Europe's roads safer. I will be instructing the Road Safety Authority to ring-fence €20 million to deliver important road safety awareness, education and promotional campaigns. This is an increase in €2 million in funding from 2026. The allocation for national, regional and local road networks and road safety measures is €1.784 billion. Funding will also enable key milestone projects like the Galway city ring road to develop.

I have recently signed regulations to raise the age limit for e-scooter users from 16 to 18 years of age, make helmets and high-visibility clothing mandatory and double the fees for detention and storage of seized e-scooters. Further work is being progressed on the registration of e-scooters. Earlier this year, we banned the use of scramblers in all public places, and I have also signed new regulations that double the charges payable by owners of scramblers seized and detained by the Garda.

Work is continuing in the area of road safety. Multiple learner permit regulations will come into effect next month. Local authorities across the country are currently in the middle of consultations on introducing 30 km/h speed limits in built-up areas with a view to having them legally operational by March 2027. I have also recently brought the National Vehicle and Driver File, Road Traffic and Roads Bill 2026 to Second Stage. This Bill will modernise the National Vehicle and Driver File.

At the end of the day, all of these regulations and other legislative measures are about making our roads safer, getting people back to their loved ones safely, and reducing road deaths and serious injury. Since taking up this role, I have met with many road safety advocates who have lost loved ones or have suffered serious injuries, and each and every one of their personal stories has been profound.

The increased funding for public service obligation, PSO, services means that we will be able to expand and enhance public transport services across the country in 2027. There will be 140 new or enhanced services introduced next year.

I am also pleased to see huge progress in another area under my remit, namely, the Irish Coast Guard. A sum of €137 million has been allocated to supporting maritime transport and safety. This will fund the operation of the Coast Guard as it works to save lives and protect our natural environment, support the operations of the Commissioners of Irish Lights and the State's marine casualty investigation functions.

Ports are also under my remit, and I was delighted to put the revised national ports policy out for consultation earlier this year. I hope to present a new policy to the Government later in 2026 following a thorough and inclusive consultation.

There are many more important additions in budget 2027 for the agricultural sector. The amount of income from agri-environment schemes disregarded in the means test for farm assist and State pensions will increase from €5,000 to €7,500.

2 o'clock

VAT on non-oral medicines for livestock will be removed. In housing, the help to buy scheme will be increased by €5,000, providing additional assistance to people seeking to purchase their first home. Of course, there will be support for rural pubs in the form of a €50 million support package, which is most welcome. The rural dweller pilot under the rural social scheme will expand the number of places to 500, which is good news for rural Ireland.

I started my speech by talking about how my Independent colleagues and I entered government with a firm eye on shaping the future of our people. We wanted to effect long-term change that was sustainable to our economy. We cannot introduce every change overnight, especially in the uncertain times we are in. Budget 2027 is the second of five budgets where we will introduce long-term, effective, targeted changes for our people. This is another step along the way in implementing the programme for Government.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Ba cheart go mbeadh tús áite tugtha d'oibrithe agus teaghlaigh sa cháinaisnéis seo. Ina ionad sin, áfach, níl againn ó Fhianna Fáil agus Fine Gael ach a thuilleadh den rud céanna arís. Fágann an cháinaisnéis seo an lucht oibre níos measa chun freastal orthu siúd ag an mbarr. Níl fis ná samhlaíocht sa cháinaisnéis. Níl aon mhórsmaointe inti le dul i ngleic leis na dúshláin atá romhainn nó le leas a bhaint as na deiseanna. Tá sé léirithe arís eile ag Fianna Fáil agus Fine Gael nach bhfuil sé ar a gcumas an Stát a chur chun cinn agus Éire níos fearr agus níos cothroime a chruthú.

I listened very carefully to the budget speeches delivered yesterday by the Ministers, Deputies Harris and Chambers. I was wondering if the two men would come up to the mark and meet the clear challenges before them, if they would bring vision, purpose and real solutions for workers and families. God knows, people need that now more than ever. This is a wealthy State. The economy is very strong, yet something does not quite add up for people. People know that something is very badly wrong. Despite that wealth and economic strength, too many ordinary people - workers, families, our young people - are locked out of prosperity and opportunity. Too many households are under enormous pressure just to get by. People are exhausted, and who could blame them? Prices keep going up, the bills keep rolling in, the rip-off is never-ending and people are sick of it. They are sick of working harder than ever but still falling further behind.

This was a year of record tax receipts. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael never tire of boasting about the massive surpluses. The questions that people ask themselves every day, and that they ask now after this budget, are very simple. Why is it so expensive to live in Ireland and raise a family? Why can working people not afford a home? Why are renters paying rip-off, record rents? Why are hospitals overcrowded, accident and emergency departments under daily pressure and close to a million patients on waiting lists? Why are people with disabilities left behind? Why are kids with special needs left without a school place or left waiting for assessments of need or therapies? These were the questions on my mind as the Ministers read out their speeches. As Simon Harris's 45 minutes rolled into Jack Chambers's 45, as they talked in millions and billions, I was not just angry. I wondered how painfully out of touch with the lives of ordinary people they could possibly get.

A Cheann Comhairle, we have now had a decade of the Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael partnership Government. This is the 11th Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael budget. I realised that I had listened to a

different version of the same budget 11 times now. Sure, the Ministers change, the numbers and speeches change. The one thing that never, ever changes is that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael always put those at the top first, the golden circles ahead of the ordinary workers and families of Ireland, the people who actually create the wealth. As the Ministers' speeches gave way to the arrogant racket of applause and back-slapping from the Government benches, I wondered if that was really it. Here they are with their billions and billions, with their record surpluses. Is this the best they could do? A gone-before-you-get-it budget, devoid of imagination and ambition, so disconnected, the product of an inability to listen or to understand what workers and families are going through. There is nothing here that says "solutions". Instead, people got half measures, tinkering at the edges or nothing at all. If the Ministers' aim was to show people again that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael did not have the answers or the ideas to meet the challenges or opportunities that our people faced, then they got an A1, top of the class and job done.

Deputy Simon Harris could not stop saying that this would be a budget for those who got up early and worked hard. Who exactly was he talking to when he said that? It certainly was not the majority of workers, the 1.5 million workers he left behind yesterday with his tax changes. What he gave them was €200 - not even a fiver a week, a pittance that will be wiped out with just one household bill, and he acts as though people should be grateful. Did the Tánaiste think they would jump for joy when he unveiled a second budget in a row that left ordinary workers worse off? This is actually an insult to those workers. We showed the Government a fairer way to give every single worker a real income tax boost, by abolishing USC on the first €40,000 for every worker. The Government ignored that, again. A full decade after Fine Gael promised to scrap the USC entirely, the tax brought in by Fianna Fáil when it crashed the economy - does the Taoiseach remember that? - those opposite have barely made a dent in it.

What do the Ministers think families struggling to keep up with soaring prices heard from them yesterday? Two weeks ago, the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance stood here, puffed out his chest and told people not to worry because "help is on the way." What help? There is no dedicated cost-of-living package. More than 300,000 households already cannot pay their electricity bills. A million households are on the hook for further energy price hikes, and there is nothing to help them pay their bills. We asked the Ministers to provide the €400 energy credit. They could not find the money for it, they say, but they did find the money for generous tax breaks for their pals in high places - the developers, landlords and bankers, all the usual suspects. There is no sign of a windfall tax to hit the bumper profits of the big energy companies, which squeeze every euro they can from their customers. They let them off scot-free and did not put a glove on them.

What of the 700,000 families who rely on home heating oil to keep warm? After months of standing back and refusing to help, what does the Government come up with? A miserly €43 cut on a fill of oil that now costs €1,600. That took some neck. It could have removed all of the carbon tax from home heating oil. That would have delivered a substantial price cut. For Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, it seems that these families simply are not worth that effort.

It is the same when it comes to families who rely on a car. Petrol and diesel prices are through the roof. They are up to €2.20 a litre in some parts of the country. That is a huge daily pressure on households. The Government did nothing to get those prices down. It could have

delivered a further 10 cent per litre reduction. That is what Sinn Féin proposed. Now we know that the Government has learned nothing from the mass protests in the spring. We know it is not listening again, because it is prepared to allow people to continue to take that hit.

Maybe none of this makes a difference to the people in this Chamber, all of whom are very well paid, but it means a hell of a lot to the person out there trying to build a life, to parents trying to provide for their kids, to families trying to keep the show on the road, to pensioners trying to pay their bills and to young people wondering if they will have to leave.

Yesterday, after the Minister announced his dead-end budget, I asked myself what the point of this Government was. How is it that it is always lost on it that it is the Government's job to make ordinary people's lives better? Its job is not to continually feather the nests of those at the top. That is the Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael way and it is written all over this budget again. The Government could and should have made better choices. It could have shown some courage and broken the mundane cycle of a century. It could have put workers and families first. It has the money and could transform things, but it does not want to. That is the truth.

In fact, the Government acts as if providing investment for the things that really matter to people is somehow reckless and a waste of public money. Let me tell the Government that nobody is asking it to build thousands of bike sheds - we will leave that to you guys. We are talking about building homes that people can afford, investing in our health service so that people get care when they need it, investing in our schools, making life affordable, building communities, lifting children out of poverty, driving opportunity and opening prosperity to everyone. That could be done. Once again, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have proved beyond doubt that they will never ever get us there.

I want to ask the Tánaiste as well as the Minister, Deputy Chambers, what they think our young people heard from the budget, the seven in ten of Ireland's sons and daughters who are now looking at leaving for a better life abroad. What did the budget say to them? At the election, the Tánaiste told young people that the Government would abolish student fees. After the budget, students will pay €350 more today than when he made that promise. The Tánaiste takes these people for fools. Let me assure him that they can do the maths. They know that at the rate the Government is going, it will take 16 years to scrap student fees. That means that children who are not yet born will be preparing for the leaving certificate before we get there. Sinn Féin would have immediately cut student fees by €1,250 and completely abolished them by September of next year because that would be the right, progressive and strategic thing to do.

What of the young renters of Ireland? They will get a measly €150 while rents continue to spiral out of control. This penny-pinching is in stark contrast to the Government's tax breaks for big developers or the sweetheart deal for vulture funds that it has disgracefully and shamefully continued in this budget. We know the one; it is the one that allows them away without paying one single cent of tax on their rental income.

I had to laugh at the Taoiseach, Deputy Martin, earlier. I assure him that I do not generally laugh at him. He spoke about being responsible stewards of public money in a very lofty, high-minded way. My God. Is that his definition of being a responsible steward of public money? I would guess that the public are not one bit happy, if they actually realise, that these funds get away without paying a single cent in tax on their rental income. Our proposal - the responsible

proposal - was to end that scheme. That would have raised €335 million, which would have paid for €10-a-day childcare with change left over. That was another big promise that the Government made before the last election.

Our young people, including young parents, see the Government choosing the big boys over the public good. This budget as regards housing is not about young people. Rather, it is a blueprint for the continuation of the crisis that is pushing them out. We simply cannot have another generation of our young scattered to the four corners. We have had too much of that in the past. Young people must be able to build their futures here in Ireland. This is where they belong. This is their country. This is their home. Their talent, creativity and skills will take us forward. We simply cannot lose them.

We stand here today not only to criticise the Government's nowhere budget but also to plant a flag for our young people and their future, a future beyond the stifling roundabout repetition of broken Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael policies. Enough of going around in circles. Our young people deserve their chance and opportunity to build a good life here in Ireland, and we will keep fighting for them and never, ever give up.

What does the Government think people with disabilities heard yesterday from the budget? It does not come even close to giving them the support they need and to which they are entitled. How many times have they stood in the rain outside the Dáil to protest and try to get the Government to listen? After all of the consultations and heel dragging, the Government has come up with a lousy €10 per week. That will not even begin to make a dent in the additional expenses that people with disabilities face every single day. A €500 lump sum payment - one, by the way, that excludes people with disabilities who are working - is wrong. Furthermore, it will not be paid until the spring of next year. Meanwhile, the cost of disability scheme is pushed out again until 2028. The message from the Government to the disabled is always, "Wait, wait, wait, struggle, struggle, struggle".

The budget is often viewed as something that happens in a political bubble, but the choices have real impacts on people's lives. I remember very clearly the austerity budgets after the economic crash. I remember how, when times were lean and the cupboard was bare, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael acted at a razor-sharp pace and had real energy and decisiveness when it came to delivering vicious cuts for working people. There was no limit to their imagination in doling out the pain, when they scrapped the bereavement grant and cut respite care and jobseeker's allowance for young people.

In a time of abundance when the State has never had so much money, where now is the same pace, energy and imagination from Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil to improve the lives of working people and our young? Could it be that, in the end, it is not the economic circumstances that matter but that Government parties that have clung to power for a century simply have no interest in delivering for workers and families? The Government is wedded to politics that are all about protecting the privilege and wealth of those at the top. That is never going to change.

I want to speak to all of those left out, forgotten and abandoned by this budget, and they are many. You deserve so much better than this. We are on your side. We have your backs, and will continue to fight your corner and will not stop because we know we can shape a better country and future. Life in Ireland can be affordable. We can build the homes that our people

need. We can have a healthcare system that works, affordable childcare, education that is open for every child, and opportunity for our young people.

I know that, right now, that could seem really far away, but Ireland is a great country, we are a great people and our best days are yet to come. Do not give up. Do not lose hope. It does not have to be Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael budgets and governments forever. On this side of the House, we will keep working hard to build the strong republican alternative, to win people's trust and confidence and to show them how things can be different and better and how we can have an Ireland – a united Ireland – that puts workers and families first. God speed that day.

Deputy David Cullinane: I said last night on the floor of the Dáil that Fine Gael represents a privileged class. Every single year, when the Government produces a budget, it proves me right. Fine Gael is supported in that by Fianna Fáil and their Independent colleagues who came to their defence last night, as they will over the next number of days when votes are called on this budget. This is the second budget in a row where a majority of workers have been shafted by the Government. The Tánaiste and his colleagues spent months hyping up this budget and raising people's expectations. The Tánaiste said that this was going to be a budget for workers and, Trump-style, talked about a big tax package. What was in that big tax package for the majority – some 1.5 million - of workers? It amounted to €5 per week, or a total of €250 a year. When the Tánaiste, the Taoiseach and others in the Cabinet signed off on this budget and that €5 increase, I am sure they knew it would be wiped out by increases. If they did not know that, it shows how out of touch they are because the people we represent, including those workers I mentioned, are the same people facing increases in their mortgage, rent, insurance and grocery payments. Everything is going up, including the price of fuel. Meanwhile, the Government says the support these people need is €5 per week.

I will remind the Tánaiste who we are talking about in this regard. It is the childcare workers, special needs assistants, people working in the retail sector and those who do Trojan work for us in the health, education and public services, as well as those in the private sector. They are the people who also get up early. They keep this country going. They keep small- and medium-sized business going. However, the best the Government could do for them was €5 per week.

Yesterday, Deputy Doherty was correct in describing this budget as an insult because that is what people are saying to us. Yesterday, I spoke to a lady who asked me what happened to all of the election promises of both Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil. All their talk about cutting the cost of childcare and third level fees as well as supporting people through an energy crisis has disappeared like snow off a ditch and been replaced with minimalistic approaches. That is what people saw in this budget because the Government represents a cosseted, privileged class.

Financial resolutions were taken on the floor of this Dáil last night, two of which related to investor tax reliefs that will cost taxpayers €1 billion over five years. They concerned capital gains tax and capital acquisition tax. Imagine framing a budget and thinking what this State needs is more tax relief for investors. Imagine what €1 billion could have done. How many special needs assistants and additional staff in our health services and schools could have been recruited? Imagine what more could have been done to reduce the cost of childcare and all the other things that could have been done with this money. Instead, the Government decided, as it did last year in its budget, to put wealthy individuals, golden circles, investors, vulture funds,

banks and all of those big, powerful and wealthy institutions first over and above ordinary working people. What the Government does every year is deepen inequality and strengthen privilege in this State. It is truly shameful.

When it comes to home heating oil, Deputy Pearse Doherty and we in Sinn Féin were outlining to the Government for a long time the need to abolish the carbon tax, which would have saved families €183 on a fill of their tank. The Government only did a quarter of that. It is another insult and piecemeal measure. Families will save €43 with this move. In fact, the Tánaiste could not even get his figures right when he first talked about this proposal. Again, the Government has left those people high and dry.

I remember the election campaign. Sinn Féin put forward strong policy positions in that campaign, and I hoped the Government would implement them. Childcare is one such example. We were the party that called for the cost of childcare to be €10 per day or €200 per month. Simon Harris rowed in behind that plan and made big pledges that he was going to do it. What has he done, however? He capped it at less than €500. Again, we see minimal interventions and minimal increases.

I have talked to a lot of people who cannot access childcare. They say the reason they cannot access childcare is that they cannot recruit staff, and the reason they cannot recruit staff is pay. Childcare workers are the same workers who have been shafted in this budget and will get €5 per week. The Government makes an absolute mess of everything it touches. It has forgotten the promise it made on childcare.

Renters have been shafted again with the increase of €150. We proposed a doubling of the tax refundable credit. The Government only increased it by €150. Not a single cent of additional capital funding was allocated for housing. I have spoken to young people and their parents about this. I have two young boys myself, one of whom is in college. I fear for the ability of young people to own their own home and live and work in this country. We all want them to have the best. We want all of our children to have the best. Young people tell me they will never be able to afford their own home. Every time they hear the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste talk about turning a corner or how housing is the biggest challenge of our time, they see house prices and rents increasing and more people who cannot afford to pay their mortgages. That is the reality. The help-to-buy scheme has increased house prices by €50,000 over the past two years. The Government is chasing price increases. You could not make it up. My eldest son, Emmett, who is now in his second year in college, would be the first to say that maths was not his strongest subject in school, but he knows when he is being taken for a fool. Imagine the Government saying to young people in college that it is cutting their fees when, in fact, they are paying €350 more per year than they were when the promise to abolish fees was made. Young people will not be taken for fools. They can see through all of the spin in the budget.

Healthcare is, obviously, one of my areas of responsibility. I looked at the budget and it is more of the same. The Government has not properly funded the healthcare system and there is nothing new in this budget that will address the real problems. If the Tánaiste were in touch with the reality of what it is like for most people, he would know there are almost 1 million people on acute health waiting lists as well as some 250,000 people on community and primary care waiting lists. We have record numbers of people on trolleys. Yet, the Government cannot

seem to get a grip with any of it. We spend a huge amount of money in healthcare but we do not get the efficiencies or outcomes.

When I said at the start of my speech that the Tánaiste represents the cosseted, privileged class, how right I was because for two years in a row, he has delivered a budget for vulture funds and the wealthiest people in this country. He was not prepared to put any additional taxes or windfall taxes on the big energy companies, the banks or those big companies that can afford to pay more tax to enable people to have a better quality of life. He is just not in a position to do it. The Tánaiste says there is no alternative when, of course, there is. Sinn Féin produced an alternative budget. In fact, with all the hype I heard from the Government over the course of the past number of months, I thought some of our proposals might have been implemented, but that was not the case. We wanted the USC on the first €40,000 of income to be abolished. That would have put real money in people's pockets quickly. It would have been much fairer than the Government's proposals, which instead benefit the highest earners. We called on the Government to do more on the price of fuel, diesel, green diesel and home heating oil. Instead, however, there are piecemeal approaches from the Government.

We also proposed an energy credit of €400.

We also proposed additional capital spending in health, housing and other areas to build the society we need with schools, hospitals and infrastructure. The reason I say every year that the Tánaiste represents a cosseted, privileged class is that every budget I see from the Government deepens inequality. Every budget I see from the Government shafts ordinary working people. They know it and see it, and they are not impressed at all. We needed a Government that would look after the majority of people and give them hope. I am referring to those young people I spoke about who just want to live here, own their own home, raise their families, and not have to think about emigrating. They want hope, and they are not getting it from the Government. That is why we in Sinn Féin work tirelessly every single day to convince people that there is a better way and that a different government, led by Sinn Féin, is what this country needs to better support workers and families and give them the break they deserve.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I read an article in the *Irish Independent* this morning that focused on the winners and losers of the budget. The first line of the article came from an anonymous Minister who said that the best metric of a good budget is that it is forgotten by lunchtime on Wednesday. I think that is an absolute shame. It is indicative of the absence of ambition from the Government that it would seek to advance a position that a good budget is one that people simply forget the next day. We all know too well that people will not forget this budget the next day. The bills still come through the door. People will see if they have gained an extra couple of euro here or there. People who are really struggling, really cut to the bone and really stressed about the next energy bill coming through will know that the Government has abandoned them. Apathy should never be seen as a measure of success, but that is what this Government is relying upon. It is hoping that with a few things here and there, people will not notice that we are being mismanaged and they are being failed. It was already being conditioned long before the budget when various Ministers would step forward and say this new idiom, "Sure, we're not going to be able to solve every problem." The implication of that

is maybe the Government could pick one or two and solve those, but this budget will do none of those things.

When we get the budget every year, I look to see what the greyhound test will be. Sure enough, this year, funding to the greyhound industry again got increased. At the same time, women coming forward to domestic violence services still do not have access to domestic violence refuge beds. There is luxury in this budget, but it is not going to the people who are hardest hit and most pressed to the bone. I represent communities that have been destroyed by drug-related intimidation. It was referenced in the High Court this week that children are being indoctrinated into crime. I thought it would have been taken seriously. It is destroying not just a community like Dublin Central, but it is happening in rural Ireland. Last year, the drug-related intimidation programme this Government initiated received €320,000. I am sure this year's figure will be announced in the next couple of days, but it will not be anywhere near what the greyhound industry is getting. That is a measure of choices and we pay for those choices in innumerable ways. This budget had the capacity to expand, to be innovative and to do great things for people in this country, but it has gone past and that simply will not happen.

When I read through the budget yesterday, I was flabbergasted by the fact that the 320,000 households struggling to pay their energy bills will not receive an energy credit. That is shameful. We have a scenario where people are getting loans of money to pay for their energy bills. The Government simply says it is too complicated to target that at low- and middle-income earners, despite the fact we have had years to achieve it. The Social Democrats brought forward a motion last week for a windfall tax to pay for those credits. In a time of abundance and a time of international unease - we all recognise what is happening in the Strait of Hormuz - we are told that windfall energy companies can blossom in their profits while 325,000 households are in energy arrears, terrified about the next bill that comes through the door.

Fianna Fáil promised that pensioners would receive an extra €12 per week in the budget. When our party's deputy leader, Deputy Cian O'Callaghan, pressed the Taoiseach on that today, the Taoiseach replied that Fianna Fáil is part of a coalition with Fine Gael and the Independents. The implication was that nasty Fine Gael made Fianna Fáil stop fulfilling its promise to pensioners.

This budget should not be measured by how quickly people forget about it. That is the problem time and again. In this time of abundance, we have Government parties that lack ambition. When this time of abundance ends, what will the people of Ireland have for it? We still live with energy insecurity. Childhood poverty is still at very high levels. We have people choosing whether to heat their homes or to put food on the table to eat. This is the Ireland we are living in. I do not doubt that there will be good things there.

When a family that is struggling to pay for childcare heard yesterday that there is to be a reduction in the cost of childcare, inevitably they would have thought it is a great thing. However, it will not happen until September of next year. Most of the measures will come in in January. This budget is a failure of ambition. It is a failure of the Government. I have no doubt it will be repeated next year.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Year on year, budget after budget, in my day-to-day speaking to people in my constituency, what I see coming through in people's lives, in their frustrations and in their fear is that their lives are unstable, uncertain and insecure. They do not know what will

happen to their one-off payment next year. They do not know what will happen to their job, their small family business, their crèche place, or their disabled child when they are not there to care for them. They are so tired of being unsure and afraid about their future. The story of this Government for so many years has been the story of spin in the media, repeated announcements of the same schemes, and broken promise after broken promise. I cannot count how many glittering announcements I have seen from the Government on military radar, a system we will not have in operation until 2028. Meanwhile, the recruitment and retention crisis in the Defence Forces persists. There are glittering announcements on basic income for the arts, while applicants from May continue to be left in the dark about whether they were successful in their applications. Fanfare around extending statutory sick leave or issuing culture vouchers is good enough to grab headlines but not enough of a priority to actually follow through on. If we want people at home to have faith in the State, to work hard, to care for each other and to trust that those they elect have their interests at heart, we cannot continue to see empty words and broken promises. I believe, as the Social Democrats have always believed, that leadership in politics is about honesty. It is about knocking on a door, having a conversation with someone and telling them exactly what you will do. It is not about sweet words at election time and the endless cycle of "will they or won't they?" on budget day.

The headlines from the Government about record funding for the Arts Council is an ironically creative interpretation of facts. The increase to Arts Council funding - the first in the lifetime of this government - is 1.7%. We know that if you are not getting more than the rate of inflation, you actually have less to spend. This means less for grants for artists, less support for arts programmes in our communities, and less for the culture which contributes an untold amount to the Irish economy and the richness of our lives. Be it basic income or Arts Council funding, every year we see thousands left disappointed not because their applications were not good enough, but because the money and support was not there. The crisis in our night-time economy continues to be ignored as venues are faced with thousands of euros in licence fees that are the results of an outdated system not built for them.

Do phobal na Gaeilge agus na Gaeltachta, ciallaíonn an easpa maoinithe nach bhfuil aon bhealach acu le forbairt agus fás agus le cur leis an tsárbair atá á déanamh ag meáin na Gaeilge, TG4 agus Raidió na Gaeltachta. Más mian linn freastal ar phobal na Gaeilge agus tacú leis an teanga, ní leor cúpla focal in óráid. Teastaíonn cúpla punt sa bhanc. The failure to provide security and certainty in these areas, and the failure of Government to follow through on what it says, means artists giving up on the arts. It means filmmakers closing their production company. It means another dance floor shutting its doors. It means that all of us miss out.

Workers and SMEs are being lauded as big winners in this budget. However, when we look at the measures that have come through, it is very clear that the real winners are the big businesses that will reap most of the benefit of the tax breaks, not the small companies in Ireland that continue to tread water or the workers who do not know what their future holds. This uncertainty and insecurity means choosing to let staff go, to cease trading and not to create new jobs.

For workers, insecurity means not knowing if they can pay their bills, have a family or buy a home, or even whether they will have a job.

While we have full employment, it seems that every week another group of workers for the multinational companies that call Ireland home are made redundant and stonewalled by their

employer on redundancy. Yesterday, the Minister for public expenditure said that the Government presented this budget from a position of strength, and that this strength stems from the hard work and dedication of the Irish people. It resides in the talent and ambition of our youth. The hard work of people up and down this country needs to be rewarded with recognition of their rights and contributions as workers, real action to promote collective bargaining and follow through on commitments to a living wage and paid sick leave. What they have is more delays and more broken promises, all while we face the biggest public sector strike in years due to the refusal of the Government to come to the table and talk about pay.

There are clear signs that there are problems on the horizon for our young people, and that they are facing huge issues accessing the job market, which need to be addressed proactively. Labour displacement from AI is not a remote threat. It is here and it is causing redundancies and a massive decrease in entry-level jobs and the quality of work overall. This budget was an opportunity but, once again, workers, pensioners, young people, families and artists are left wondering what the future holds.

Deputy Rory Hearne: This should have been a budget of hope for housing and hope for our young people that they can have a future here, that they can buy a home and that they can rent securely and affordably. However, the budget, just like the Government's housing plan, has no coherent strategy and no vision that can solve the housing catastrophe. The budget will just deliver higher house prices, higher rents and higher homelessness. It continues what the Government has always done, which is what the developers and the investor funds lobby it to do.

Who will the budget really benefit? It will not be the younger generation struggling to buy a home. It will certainly not be the thousands who are in homelessness. It will be the same people who have benefited from every Fianna Fáil and Fianna Gael budget, namely, the investor fund landlords, big developers and the banks that have seen their profits soar in the middle of this housing and cost-of-living catastrophe.

IRES REIT, Ireland's largest vulture fund landlord, has tripled its pre-tax profit this year and thanked the Government publicly for the rental changes that allowed it to hike scandalous rents that will just gobble up the miserly rent tax credit. The developer Cairn Homes has had a 75% jump in profit. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have been in government since 2020, and since then we have seen the median house price increase from €250,000 to €396,000. A total of €146,000 has been added to the median cost of a home. How the hell are young people, workers, carers or any normal people able to try to find the funding to build a home in a cost-of-living crisis? Of course, of what is being built in Dublin absolutely nothing is available for sale.

What has been built in terms of affordable homes that people can buy? Just 935 affordable purchase homes were built by local authorities last year. When half a million adults are stuck at home this is an insult and it shows the Government's housing plans are not actually about delivering affordable housing but about pumping the market. The budget is illusion and spin. There is spin that the Government is helping people to afford a home but what are the measures actually about? They are about inflating house prices. Really, they are aimed to help to increase the profit margins of investors and developers. Higher rents and higher house prices are not an unfortunate and unintended outcome of Fianna Fáil and Fianna Gael policy; higher rents and higher house prices are the intended outcome. They are the Government's policy, based on the

market ideology of incentivising private supply, which will at some point lead to lower rents and house prices.

What this shows is that the Government is utterly captured by market interests. It is funnelling over €2 billion a year of public money into the private market and into the profits of landlords and emergency accommodation providers. What a shocking waste of public money. There is €500 million to landlords in HAP, €500 million to emergency accommodation providers, another €500 million on a VAT cut for developers and investor funds, €250 million on the help to buy scheme, hundreds of millions of euro in apartment subsidies and the REIT tax break. I could go on and on. It is a mirage. The Government is pumping the private market and not investing in delivering affordable housing.

What is really shocking and shameful is that the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste just stood up here and spent half an hour reading out 19 pages of a budget speech and not once was homelessness mentioned. We had page after page of priorities and actions but no mention of anything to tackle the highest level of homelessness in the State. It is to the Government's utter shame and embarrassment that it refuses to acknowledge this. Actually, I wish it was. Fianna Fáil and the Taoiseach said previously that Fianna Fáil is the party with a social conscience. The budget showed once more that Fianna Fáil and Fianna Gael care so little about the 5,830 children in homelessness that it does not even merit one mention in 19 pages of budget speeches. There is no investment in preventing homelessness or no ban on evictions. The Government does not care for our most vulnerable. When it does trumpet in terms of homelessness, it states we have record levels of spending on emergency accommodation. It is not spending on homes for those who are in homelessness but hubs, bed and breakfast accommodation and hotels. It is only Fianna Fáil and Fianna Gael who could dress up spending €500 million on dealing with its own failure as somehow a good thing.

Last night, the Government voted against making housing a human right. We in the Social Democrats believe that housing is a human right. This is the difference between us and the Government. We have solutions that will get the state building affordable homes and clearly we need a change of Government to get it.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Last Thursday the Labour Party released our alternative budget, entitled *A Future We Can Afford*. It sets out a clear, fully costed, alternative path for our country based on our socialist and social democratic values. It sets out our ambition to develop an active State that will provide a sustainable and affordable future for all. In our budget document we set out our key priorities on energy, incomes and child poverty. It sets out pathways to drive down energy bills and take effective climate action, to protect incomes from the cost-of-living crisis, and to end child poverty and homelessness.

Our Labour Party proposals are honest, fiscally responsible and ambitious for our society and economy. As our finance spokesperson, Deputy Nash, has said, it is possible to devise a budget that is both fiscally responsible and socially ambitious. It is about making the right political choices and this is the honest truth. Speaking of honesty, earlier the Taoiseach attacked Opposition parties, saying we never mention economic growth. This is not true of the Labour Party. We are the party of job creation, the party of work, and a party that believes in sustainable growth.

Unfortunately, yesterday the Government did not make the best political choices for sustainable growth in our society and our economy. Its budget measures, as Deputy Nash said, are premised on a profound dishonesty. For instance, there is a failure to face up to the fiscal reality that just three companies pay nearly half of all corporation tax and that the Irish economy is so desperately dependent on a small number of products. Ireland is unique in that our economy is growing fatter from Manjaro but if global consumers fall out of love with weight loss drugs, we are in trouble. Not only this but the Government has not acknowledged the serious underfunding of the health and education budgets. We have seen no attempt in the budget to develop long-term sustainable measures to build homes, take necessary climate actions, reduce household bills and target child poverty. The money the Government states will go back into people's pockets could barely buy a chocolate bar a week.

Meanwhile, the Government's fiscal strategy continues to gamble with the country's money. When the money ran out for schools and hospitals, thanks to underfunding last year, it cobbled the cash together by taking money from other Departments. When the public sector pay deal ran out months ago, in June, it snubbed the unions representing workers across our vital public services. The Minister, Deputy Chambers, must now engage urgently with unions whose members are struggling. The Government's failure to take PAYE workers seriously has led us into industrial action this week, with more substantive strikes due next week. This failure to engage is symptomatic of the Government's approach more generally of plastering over the gaps with short-term measures and being unable to plan beyond the end of the month.

Unfortunately, far too many families across Ireland are also unable to plan for the long term because of the Government's failure to protect them sustainably. The Government has failed to think big. As Deputy Sherlock said yesterday, it has failed to use the firepower of financial surpluses to make real change. It has failed to address the real issues facing communities and households in any effective way in what is a distinctly underwhelming budget with no ambition and no vision.

In tonight's debate and over the coming days, my Labour colleagues will speak further on what the Government's failure to think big means for so many different areas, including for social protection, childcare, justice, education, disability services and much more.

I now want to address three glaring issues where the Government has clearly failed, and has failed in this budget in particular. These are the climate and energy crisis, the housing crisis and the poverty gripping childhoods across Ireland. On climate and energy, the Minister of State will know, as we all do, that the cost of energy is biting hard. It is outrageous that so many families are in arrears on energy bills, struggling to heat their homes while energy companies make enormous profits yet in its budget, the Government chose not to adopt Labour's proposal to slap a windfall tax on the big corporations and data centres that are profiteering during this energy crisis. That tax could have funded targeted energy credits for households struggling to pay bills. We have set out that plan in detail to help the nearly 500,000 people already in arrears. These are people like the pensioner who contacted me in despair, saying she does not know how she is going to afford to heat her home at all this winter. If households, families and individuals, like that pensioner, are struggling today, we know that this winter will bring untold further suffering.

Yet this Government failed to reduce home heating bills in any sustainable way. It put only a pittance in the budget for Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, retrofits. It is just

2% at a time when applications have doubled. Just a month since the National Transport Authority, NTA, announced that fares would go up by an average of 15% in January, the Government did nothing to make public transport and active travel more affordable at a time petrol and diesel prices have exploded. This is not just bad climate policy; this is bad economic policy too. Every €1 invested in public transport generates €4 for the domestic economy. It makes no sense to make it more expensive to take a bus or a train or to cycle a bicycle. This Government has also frozen active travel funding again this year, amounting to an equivalent funding cut of 22% since 2020 when inflation is taken into account. That is shameful.

In his speech yesterday, the Tánaiste asked us not to infer that his resolve to decarbonise had dwindled but the Government's actions speak for themselves. On the one hand, it is continuing to subsidise fossil fuels. On the other, it is making it more expensive to use public transport. It is not helping households to reduce either transport or energy bills. It has no ambition on climate. Its strategy for tackling the energy crisis, like its national economic strategy, depends on a handful of Silicon Valley libertarians and, indeed, authoritarians in Tehran, Tel Aviv, Moscow and Washington DC. In an era of global conflict and global warming, the best the Government can come up with is fossil fuel subsidies that cannot keep pace with inflation. We know the sustainable way to cut the price of carbon is to cut carbon consumption, and not to take short-term measures that merely keep fossil fuels from getting even more expensive for a week or two.

By contrast, Labour's plans to drive down bills would also accelerate Ireland's transition to renewable energy. For example, we have called for a radical measure, which is a €500 million investment in free plug-in solar units for households that would cut their bills by €150 per year and help meet climate targets. We have seen it done in Germany. Let us get on with it here. Labour would deploy some of the Apple tax windfall to turbocharge retrofitting, street by street, across urban and rural communities. We need a retrofitting revolution on the scale of the rural electrification programme of old. That is the level of ambition needed on climate and on energy.

This Government's many failings on housing go far beyond a lack of ambition on retrofits, and the failing is most glaring in homelessness. A further 1,500 people have been made homeless since the Government's previous budget. Close to 6,000 children are now in homelessness. Yet there is such a poverty of ambition when it comes to the Government's measures on housing in the budget, with barely a mention of homelessness in either Minister's speech yesterday. There were other terrible mistakes as well, including the slashing of tenant *in situ* funding last year, no child and family homeless action plan yet and no updated homelessness prevention framework. Of the funding going to emergency accommodation, 70% is going directly to private providers. This means the Government is paying a high price for the failure to prevent homelessness, but children in homelessness are paying the highest price of all.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: Hear, hear.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: The housing crisis is touching every sector of society. Staff cannot be recruited to keep schools and hospitals running because they cannot afford to live anywhere nearby. Pensions are stretched because older people are forced to rent well into retirement. House prices and rents are soaring. The root of the problem is a lack of supply, but the

Government is fuelling the affordability crisis. Its big-ticket measure in this budget, the increase for the help to buy scheme, will, regrettably, simply put up house prices even further. It is an inflationary measure. Raising the rent-a-room tax-free ceiling risks becoming a rent hike dressed up as relief for homeowners. Building more homes is the real solution this crisis needs.

Where is the Government's big thinking? Indeed, where is the Minister for housing? He needs to transform the Land Development Agency, LDA, into a State construction company to drive construction at scale, as Labour has argued. He needs to create a radical reset in housing and get on with it. People want more homes, not more hare-brained schemes or more beds in sheds, or as the Tánaiste calls them, detached auxiliary dwellings. The acronym is DADs, but it is more like duds in reality. There are no real solutions for families and young people struggling so hard.

With that in mind, I want to raise an issue at the nexus of the housing crisis and the crisis of violence against women. For months, the Labour Party has campaigned for the introduction of a safe fund, a three-year, €3 million non-means-tested fund administered by Women's Aid to provide immediate financial support to enable victims to escape a violent home. The Minister, Deputy Jack Chambers, and the Taoiseach both signalled a welcome for this idea. Women's Aid records that nine women have been killed this year, already more than the total number of femicide victims last year. Sadly, the difference between an escape and a life saved and remaining trapped and even losing life can be heartbreakingly mundane. It can be money for a taxi, a flat deposit or a new phone. We only see an increase of €5.3 million in funding to Cuan and no sight of a safe fund. Let us contrast that with a €15 million handout being thrown at rural pubs without any clear purpose yet, beyond the Tánaiste's vague desire to keep pub doors open. I hope the Minister for justice will confirm that a safe fund will be made available, because we know how serious this is.

I have spoken already about the serious scourge of child homelessness and child poverty, and it is shocking that in a country as wealthy as Ireland, one in five children lives in poverty. The Labour Party wants to make eradication of child poverty a national priority. We would commit €770 million to end child poverty, create a second tier of child benefit and provide direct support to children who need it most. The evidence is clear, so why has the Government kicked this measure down the road again? We have also proposed the extension of free GP care to all children aged under 12, a further expansion of hot school meals, which must be high-quality and nutritious, a universal back to school clothing and footwear allowance, and a reversal of fee increases on State exams and school transport.

Children get just one chance at childhood, but the Government is squandering it. Its childcare fee caps are much higher than the €200 limit it nabbed from our election manifesto and our promise of a universal public childcare scheme, and those caps will not even come into force until next September. There is nothing there for families struggling even to find a childcare place, and nothing for foster care amid a serious crisis in the care of children.

In reality, the Government has no coherent plan in this budget. We have seen some really shameful measures. There has been a disgraceful reduction in real terms in the allocation for overseas development aid as war rages across the world. Only a tokenistic increase was made in the living alone allowance after older people were promised €7 more per week. There was a failure to extend the domiciliary care allowance to all under-18s. No clear change was made

to pupil-teacher ratios. The investment in special education falls well short of established need, not that anyone believes the education budget is anything more than a fiction anyway.

What has the Government done? It has introduced a €230 million capital gains tax cut, an extortionate price tag for a measure that will narrow the tax base. It is crazy to reduce wealth taxes and introduce savings investment schemes when people are struggling and the economy is already hot. It is almost as wrong-headed as last year's disastrous insult to struggling PAYE workers of the notorious VAT cut for burger barons and chicken chains. This year again, the Government's priorities are skewed. Its budget may offer some concessions for investors, contractors and golfers, but it offers very little for PAYE workers and struggling households and hard-pressed children and families.

It does not have to be like this. Ireland is a country of unique opportunity. With the right political choices, we can develop the active state that Labour believes in, which takes responsibility for the welfare of its people. It would be one that can build homes, tackle poverty, address a cost-of-living crisis and provide public services that leave no one behind in health, whether in childcare, education or disability services. It would be a state that harnesses AI and new technologies to guarantee decency, equality and respect for all workers, and a state that takes the necessary climate actions, not just to bring down bills, but to secure a future for our children and our grandchildren as the world is burning. That is our Labour vision, and it is a future we can afford: a future for all and an Ireland for all.

3 o'clock

Unfortunately, the Government has squandered that future and, in this underwhelming, short-sighted, short-term budget, we are seeing very little vision, no ambition and nothing for those who are struggling now in a cost-of-living and cost-of-energy crisis.

Deputy Brian Stanley: Despite providing for expenditure of €126 billion, €20 billion of which is capital, the Government's budget fails to address the key issues affecting workers and householders. Nowhere is the failure in Government policy more clear than in the area of housing, as evidenced by the €2.2 billion allocated for rent supports, the housing assistance payment and rental assistance scheme, and to pay for homeless accommodation. The fact is that none of that provides one brick or one trowel full of mortar. It is simply money that has gone down the tubes and that goes down the tubes every year.

The €3 billion for new affordable-to-buy, cost-rental and social housing allows for no increase in the number of new builds – not one additional home. The fact that we need to increase supply is a huge issue. Nothing has been done to slow down the galloping rent increases. The removal of the rent pressure zones in March has led to galloping rents and they need to be halted.

In the area of education, while there was a measly €150 annual reduction in fees, they went up by €500 last year, so there is an increase of €350. On class sizes at primary level, I do not see any detail in relation to a reduction.

In the area of energy, the 2% increase for the SEA for energy upgrades of homes will not keep up with construction inflation. Fewer homes will be done. There is no sign of an improved solar grant, which many of us called for and which I advocated for, particularly for

households with incomes under €75,000. This is an easy win to reduce energy consumption and help middle- and low-income households.

There is no energy credit to help households with incomes under €75,000 that are in arrears. There are 330,000 households in serious arrears at the moment, and that situation will get worse.

Can I ask the Minister of State about the money for Ukraine? I have no problem with money for humanitarian purposes, but we have provided €670 million over the past four years and, in July, there was a further cheque written for €125 million. We were told €100 million of this is for non-lethal military equipment. I would like to know what that is. There has been no Dáil debate on it and no Dáil vote that I can remember. Who monitors what it is spent on, or are we really fuelling a brutal war here? As I said, I have no problem with humanitarian aid for Ukraine in light of the invasion by Russia, but we are supposed to be a neutral country.

In the area of healthcare, there is a substantial allocation of €29.1 billion and that is welcome, but there is no detail on improving delivery. For example, in dentistry there are problems with the dental treatment services scheme, public dentistry, the school scheme and the treatment benefit scheme. In Laois, two of those schemes have collapsed, and the school dental scheme is years behind in seeing children.

With regard to bed shortages and critical care, we have 289 beds per 100,000 population. The EU average is 511. There is a 40-bed unit planned for Portlaoise, but there is no money allocated for it. Given the growing population in the county, it needs to be delivered.

On mental health, we need substantial improvements because we are way behind in our spending in that area.

I would like to focus for a minute on local government. Rural roads are falling into disrepair due to the effects of climate change and the lack of basic maintenance because the cash is not there for the municipal district crews to carry it out. If we take Laois, and just take the local improvement scheme applications, we note there is a backlog of over 50, with no funding for them. That is just in one county.

In the budget overall, if we look at the gap between rich and poor, or between a person on the lowest income and someone on €125,000, we see that gap has increased slightly again, to €1,209 per week. It continues to widen.

On the tax changes, a couple on €150,000 per annum gains €22.32 per week. A couple with two children on €30,000 is in reverse. They are down €1.01. The figures are from an analysis by Social Justice Ireland economists.

Why did the Government not impose a tax on the assets of the vulture funds? Why did it not increase local property tax on second and third homes or put some charge on them? We have to make choices here. Why did it not increase the bank levy on banks' super-profits, end the tax breaks for corporate landlords, tax the super-rich or the super-profits of the energy companies, or introduce windfall taxes like Portugal has done?

Overall, the Government has failed on the big issues, namely housing, workers, taxation and healthcare.

Deputy Seamus Healy: The cost-of-living crisis is having the greatest impact on middle-income families, low-income families and social welfare recipients, and budget 2027 has failed these families and prioritised the golden circle of the rich and powerful in society. Last year, it was the burger barons and the big developers who got the golden handshake. This year, the reduction in capital gains tax from 33% to 31% handed almost €200 million to very wealthy landlords and property owners. These include the 11 Irish billionaires who are wealthier than 3.5 million Irish people combined.

On housing, the budget shows that the Government is wedded to the failed housing policy of the past that has created almost 18,000 homeless people, including over 5,500 children. The talk of the Taoiseach, Tánaiste and various Ministers that housing is the Government's main priority is just that: talk. Private developers are interested in making profit, not in building houses for ordinary people. They never have built, nor will they ever build, enough houses for the population. We need an emergency programme for the construction of social and affordable houses by county councils on public land. What we got instead, of course, was more non-taxable income for landlords through garden sheds for rent, allowing landlords to receive up to €16,000 in non-taxable income for landlords, while tenants have no rights at all and landlords have no requirement to register with the Residential Tenancies Board, RTB.

There is no increase in the income limits for social housing. Current low limits condemn families to renting forevermore at exorbitant private rents. This is a large and increasing cohort of families who are just above the income limits but do not earn enough to be approved for a mortgage or, indeed, to save for a deposit. Some have been on the county council housing lists for years, only to be taken off because they slightly exceed the limits. These limits must be radically increased immediately. In fact, the Taoiseach promised to do that when I asked him about this some time ago.

On disabilities, the Before We Die campaign has described the budget as a betrayal of ageing parents. It has expressed “profound anger and despondency” following the announcement of budget 2027, warning the following: “The Government's allocation for residential disability care abandons thousands of ageing parents who face the terrifying prospect of dying without knowing who will care for their adult children.” This budget maintains the crisis-first emergency residential system, reacting only when a parent or carer becomes unwell or dies. The campaign had asked for an emergency fund in budget 2027 for residential places. The Government did not provide it. It should have.

Last year, the Government made families supporting a person with a disability worse off by €1,400. This year, it had the opportunity to right that wrong with a weekly cost-of-disability payment. This weekly payment was recommended by various reports and by all involved in disability services. Disabled people, as the Minister knows, face extra costs of anything between €11,000 and €15,000 per year. Indeed, the Tánaiste himself said in the human rights strategy, that “access to the same services and supports as everybody else is the least disabled people can expect”. The Government's answer is €500 as a lump sum. It is another broken promise, leaving people with disabilities €900 worse off over two budgets.

This budget does not include the urgent policies needed to meet its own child poverty targets. There are 200,000 children living in poverty in Ireland, and that is shameful in a country as rich as ours.

There are 200,000 children living in poverty in Ireland and that is shameful in a country as rich as ours.

There is no mention of an increase to child benefit and it has not been increased in ten years, nor is there any mention of a second tier of child benefit for poorer families, which would benefit large numbers of poor children. It should be done.

Deputy Charles Ward: I welcome that the budget finally introduced a cost-of-disability payment, something I have been calling for since I was elected. Disabled people face significant additional costs and are at far greater risk of poverty. It has taken the Government too long to introduce the cost-of-disability payment. That said, the lump sum of €500 to be paid in March next year does not cut it. It is an insult because people with disabilities are already €1,400 worse off than they were this time last year with the removal of essential supports in last year's budget. A €500 lump sum does not even begin to cover disabled people's costs. They are worse off than they were last year. It is simply appalling. It is as though the Government is not listening. The Government said the payment will be made following the process of developing a payment. However, it was in negotiations with people. Disability organisations have already made it clear. The Government knew what they wanted and said and it did not listen. There should be a payment of €55 every week to cover the additional costs they face at a minimum.

I also welcome that childcare costs will be capped at €550, but, again, it does not go far enough. It is a far cry from the election promise of €200 per month. More than 1,500 children over the age of three in Donegal remain on waiting lists for childcare places due to ongoing staffing challenges, yet nothing has been done to address that. I welcome the allocation of 2,000 SNAs, but the budget does not seem to do anything to address the 996 teaching posts that are currently unfilled. More than 400,000 children are currently sitting in overcrowded classes that are in excess of the European Union average, which is 19 pupils per class. The Government continues to do nothing to address this, while it gets worse. That seems to be the pattern. Nothing ever comes down; it always goes up. The Government allocated just €491 million in additional expenditure to the Department of Children, Disability and Equality for public services, in comparison with the €871 million in additional expenditure allocated last year. It seems to be cut and there is a trend. One in ten children are deprived of basic necessities and 200,000 children are living below the poverty line in this day and age. Right now, 5,659 children are homeless and instead of trying to ramp up and help, the Government is scaling back.

The same has happened with public transport. The Government allocated public expenditure of €93.5 million in comparison with €282 million last year, which is nearly a 50% cut. Instead of ensuring citizens have access to affordable transport, the Government expects the public to foot the bill. Public transport fares will increase in January. In Donegal, where there is awful public transport, barely enough rural services to provide any help to the rural community, it is shocking. It shows again that Donegal is the forgotten county and priorities are not with the people in rural Ireland. It is no wonder that people are looking at emigrating because we cannot provide the public services we need. We need infrastructure and the Government keeps cutting places. Children and families are suffering. What does this tell us going into the future? We want to build a future for families, but with the way things are, the

budget shows a real lack of respect for the working people of Ireland. The Government is deaf to it.

I know what the long-term plan is. It is that next year the budget will improve, as it will the following year and then the Government will buy the people. However, the people will be awake to it. They will learn because the Government has done absolutely nothing for the people of Ireland and it will continue in that way. It will only look after itself, not the people of Ireland.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: The Government takes €29.70 per sq. ft from people who want to build their own home. That is not all it takes. What else does it do? These are people who are working. They go to work and to afford a home today, people have to be on the high rate of tax. They pay tax to qualify for a mortgage. They then qualify for a mortgage, which these days lasts 30 years, but they not only borrow the price of the house. They also have to borrow the taxation the Government is taking on the house. They are repaying the mortgage and an average mortgage now is between €400,000 and €500,000. The Government taxes people in fuel taxes while they are going to work. It taxes people coming home from work, while they are at work and now it will tax them while they sleep, for the next 30 years, while they put a house over their family's head.

I got a message today that has shaken me. It was from a person who will remain nameless. He said he is a father and, with his wife, has three children. He earns €1,200 per week and his wife also works. He said he pays big tax and they have a mortgage. Last year, with the rising costs of trying to get to work and pay their ESB bills, they had to get a credit card to put food on the table and the two of them are working. His children get food at school, which they say is not nice, but they know they have to eat it because of the family's tight circumstances. He said he does not know what to do and asked why the Government is so disconnected and why they look after people who are able to work, but do not, while they look after the vulnerable people who cannot work, and do not have an issue with that. He said he is now looking at an insurance policy that says he is worth more dead than alive, which might save his family. He is 30 years old. He asked if I could give any hope to him and his family.

The only hope I can give this person is the reason Independent Ireland was set up. I have been in business all my life. I have been on the road since I was 15. I have been educated by life. I have had many good people around me and I have learned hard lessons the hard way, but these hands, thank God, have been able to feed my family, build our house and give us security. Tomorrow, I will be using these hands again to try to support my family.

There are 11 in my house and I am a building contractor. We have only one hope. The reason Independent Ireland was set up in the first place was that we wanted people like that person who contacted me, community people, regardless of where they are employed. If they are community people, they have their communities at heart. If you work for your community, that means you work for everyone in your area. They are the people Independent Ireland want in government. That would ensure that the Government was governed properly by people of need. We want community people, whether urban or rural. We want community people with a business background. Regardless of their employment, we want business people and community people. That is what Independent Ireland is about. That is the only chance we have of rebuilding this country and putting people in charge who will not only challenge the

Departments and make them accountable, but also bring in a business model for growth and one that works for people who are struggling, who work every hour that is given to them and who still cannot survive. They see people in this country who never wanted to work a day in their lives and who never will, people who are messing around with the system and who have never been investigated to determine why they say they cannot work even though they can. Many of the vulnerable people in this country, people with disabilities, are working. What did the Government do in the last budget? It took €1,400 off them. It then gave them back €500 in this budget.

If the Government was a business, it would be bust with all of the mistakes and poor decisions it is making. It is being advised by Departments but those officials are advisers; it is the Government that implements these things. If the advice Ministers are getting is not accurate and correct, they should man up or woman up, say it is wrong and the system is not working, get that official out of the Department and get someone in who will advise that Minister for the working people and the people who are at risk of homelessness at the moment, who are the working people in this country. It is the squeezed middle who are the worst off in this country. They qualify for nothing. They work every day they are given. They are our front-line workers. They are the people in our shops and in hospitality. These are people who are working every hour given to them.

That is the only hope I can give to anyone in this country. That hope has to stand with the 30% of people in rural Ireland who give out but who do not vote. They are keeping Government Members in their jobs. The 46% or 47% of people in urban Ireland who do not vote are also keeping these same people in here. They do the maths. I have a message for the people in this country who do not vote. The Government loves them. It actually thinks they are the best thing since sliced pan. They love them because those people do not vote and are going to secure Government TDs' jobs for the rest of their lives. What those in this country who do not vote, whether as a protest or otherwise, are doing is putting hardship on everyone in this country by allowing these Deputies to be elected.

The mood is changing now. It has taken years but the mood is changing. People who have voted these people in for years, decades or generations have seen the light. Although it has taken this, the things that happened over the last 12 months and the protests, they now see what these people are.

This is not only about the Government. These people are in our local authorities as well, where they stand up for the parties that are creating hardship. I ask the Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael councillors across this country to make a stand for the people they were elected to represent. Regardless of the positions they hold, I ask them to stand up and make sure that these Ministers and backbenchers do not return to this House because they do not reflect the hardworking honest people of this country. The Government loves non-voters. If they want to keep hardship in this country, they should keep doing what they are doing and not vote, as they are part of the problem as well.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Blame the voters. That is a good start.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: It is do-little all the time.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: You are name-calling, Richard. That is all you know how to do.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Have respect for the Chair, Mr. Do-Little.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Just a second now. The Minister of State's side of the House has had its say. Deputy O'Donoghue was having his say. Would the Minister of State mind showing him a bit of respect?

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Over the last ten years, this Dáil has become increasingly distanced from the people it is supposed to serve. On a range of different issues, the political establishment is completely disconnected from its citizens. For example, 80% of the population wants a stricter immigration system but the majority of TDs in here oppose it. The majority of people opposed the referendum to delete mothers from the Constitution but the majority of TDs supported it. The majority of people opposed the censorship of hate speech Bill but the majority of TDs supported it. The majority of people oppose gender ideology and yet the majority of TDs here support it. The majority of people oppose getting rid of Irish neutrality and the three-day wait for mothers and yet the majority of TDs in here are in support.

This budget is another example of the disconnect that exists between people and the TDs in here. The majority of people are desperately demanding a reduction in the excruciating cost of living in this country. They are asking the Government for practical solutions to the pain they are in. The costs of fuel, of energy and of running a car, van or tractor have been the single most important political issue in this country for the last seven or eight months. There are 320,000 households in the country that are currently in arrears with their electricity bills. Families feel they are being assaulted by the Government due to sky-high fuel prices. Are their lives today any different from their lives yesterday because of this budget? Is the price of petrol, diesel or agricultural diesel lower? Is the price of electricity lower today than it was yesterday? It is not. Incredibly, the Government has completely ignored the biggest burning issue facing the people of Ireland at the moment. I cannot understand how the Government is not getting this. Did it not see the country convulsed by protests for the last seven months? Did it not see the ports, the oil refineries and the streets that were blocked? Why has this not led to a result for those people in this budget?

Who is the Minister of State working for? Who pays his wages? Who is he legally, democratically, morally and constitutionally responsible for representing? Is it the EU? Does he represent the NGOs? Is he representing the ghost of the Green Party, which still seems to haunt Government policy on these issues two years after it was decimated? The Minister of State is democratically, legally, morally and constitutionally responsible to the citizens of Ireland. He is responsible to the mothers and fathers who are running their households and trying to pay for extremely dear commutes. He is responsible to the elderly, who are rationing fuel because of their inability to pay for more. He is responsible to the small business owners who have invested blood, sweat and tears in trying to keep their businesses going. What is the result? Of the €1,300 net gain for minimum wage workers, the vast majority is coming out of the pockets of small business owners. Only a token amount is coming from the Government.

The biggest issues affecting the people of Ireland are being completely ignored by those in the political class who are paid a big salary to represent them.

We are in the jaws of a housing crisis, yet €50,000 in VAT is charged on every single home being built in this country. That charge makes it unaffordable for most people. It also results in a viability issue. Significant numbers of builders are unable to build houses in this country because it is not viable to do so but the Government's response is to add €50,000 in VAT to the cost of each home. Builders not being able to build during a housing crisis is akin to food being exported from a country undergoing famine.

It is absolutely crazy.

Other issues the Government has not focused on are issues of waste. In Aontú, we propose solutions to reduce the amount of money being spent on IPAS. We oppose the spending of military funding towards Ukraine. We want an audits of all of the NGOs, so that NGOs that are simply lobbying the Government or duplicating services would see their incomes cut. We want a reduction in administrative and in agency staff within the HSE and we want accountability injected into the system. Every year, hundreds of millions of euro are being spent in compensation through the State Claims Agency. That level of accountability would reduce that significantly and mean there is more money for income, infrastructure and services.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I welcome the progress that has been made and I want to highlight those areas again. The first is disabilities and the €500 cost-of-disability payment. The Independent TDs and myself fought hard for the measure and we are pleased to see that has been established. I would like to see more but, obviously, it is a step in the right direction. I would also like more targeted measures, especially for those with disabilities who are working as they sometimes feel excluded from benefits even though they are benefiting by working in terms of their dignity and mental health. I was speaking to some of them on the phone this morning and, sometimes, they feel they would be better off not working as they are excluded from this. I know there is a working group on a permanent cost of disability and I look forward to it reporting as quickly as possible. I have already contacted and spoken to people who are self-employed. They are asking that very question: why should their cost of disability disappear simply because they are working? It does not. The cost for them on transport, the medical equipment they need and on specialist equipment does not disappear just because they are working. The cost of adapting their home does not disappear. I welcome and thank the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, for the announcement regarding vehicle adaptations. It is in line with the rights those people with disabilities deserve. The long-term disability payment needs to be brought in as soon as possible.

As I am addressing the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, today, I will push for marine and nature-based solutions for flood defence and efficiency and looking at how concrete embedded with material that encourages marine life can dissipate wave energy and encourage the ecosystem. I would like if the money the Minister of State's Department got could be used to investigate nature-based solutions for flooding. We are coming into winter and we need to look at it now and to be proactive on it.

On the budget and the money allocated for artificial intelligence, we need to look at what is happening across the world with social media companies and to act now. The money provided to the national counter disinformation strategy and fact checking media is good but we could

quickly push social media companies to do something. We are seeing AI-generated slop with the same script being pushed in countries to cause divisions in communities. I welcome that some social media companies are saying "this is AI-generated content" but they should also add the country of origin it is coming from. There are people with AI videos at protests causing division but we are not showing where the account that is posting that video is from or what deeper meaning or agenda is behind it, causing division in our society.

Anyone who comes to this country who is willing to contribute to this country is welcome. However, people's minds and opinions are being polluted with AI-generated slop from different countries, not from the country they are coming from. We need to look at this and put pressure on the social media companies. Some of them allow you to click on the profile and see the country of origin. I have been targeted by accounts saying they voted for me and when I clicked on the country of origin, it is India or Sri Lanka and I know they did not vote for me. We need to look at where these diversions are coming from, put that money to good use and show people they are being controlled or influenced by an agenda they need to be aware of. The small writing saying something is AI-generated is not enough. It needs to take up a third of a video as people are constantly on their phones and consuming media. People deserve to know where that media is from and if it is real. The EU AI Act already includes transparency obligations on this.

I welcome that platforms are already beginning to label AI-generated material but if a video is AI-generated, it should be clearly visible at the top. I have had constituents ringing about me AI-generated videos of senior politicians and of myself and asking me if they are real. AI is getting better. We need to be ahead of the game and show people what is real and what they can factually believe. I am not suggesting that somebody abroad should be prevented from commenting on Ireland. It is about transparency and allowing the people of Ireland to know where the information they are getting is coming from. It can improve if we do it right.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Since last night, the talk about this budget has been about the miserly increase that was given to old age people living alone. It is €3. You would not get a cup of tea for €3. You certainly would not get a cup of coffee. You cannot buy a bar of chocolate for it, or you certainly will not get much for it. It is shameful. It would have been better not to mention it all, or not say anything about it.

Consider what the Government has done in the past couple of years. A €2 billion loan was given to Ukraine in January of this year. That was on top of €670 million that was given in different ways. President Zelenskyy was given €125 million one day. The Minister, Deputy McEntee, went over with €40 million at the height of the protest. She gave it to Ukraine while the protests were happening here.

Every shilling and euro that is given to our own people has to be accounted for here. The day we came in here - Tuesday, 29 January - the agenda was changed from whatever it was to be and we were to debate becoming part of the EU fund of €90 billion for Ukraine. I tried as hard as I could to find out how much we would have to pay and how much our part of it would be. I could not find out that day and I am sure no one else found out because I even spoke here in the Chamber and asked to see how much was our part. I was told it was just 2%. Yet, 80 TDs came in here at the behest of the Taoiseach, Micheál Martin, and the Tánaiste, Deputy

Harris, and they voted to be part of this fund without knowing that day. I know now that it was €2 billion.

We are talking about giving an extra €3 to someone living alone. Consider the cost of home heating oil. People's hopes had been built. They have not bought kerosene for the past couple of months because they were hoping the Government would do something because it said it would do something. What it has actually done is it has given them is €50 off a fill of oil that will cost €1,500. It has gone up from somewhere between €700 and €800 last year.

Day after day, we are begging the Government to do something on green diesel for the construction sector. The Taoiseach promised it last May. The Tánaiste promised it as well. The Minister, Deputy Heydon, said the Government was working on it. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, respectfully told me the Government was working on it and yet nothing has come out in the budget. They were left behind on 5 May when others got payments. They have got nothing, zilch, yet. I am worried they will not get anything at all.

In case the Government does not know, the building of houses is going to slow down next year because there is less planning on the way. The other thing that we all have been crying for in places like Kerry is that people cannot build a house for themselves. There are two reasons for this. The first is they cannot get planning. The second is they cannot afford it.

Then there is the cost of rent. Normal going for rents now is €1,600. People cannot afford that. That is €400 a week. The people could get planning on their land but they are being forced into the market, driving up the price of housing inside in towns as well as all the other things.

I have nothing against the Ukrainian people. They are not wrong. It was the Government that was wrong. It was the Taoiseach who was wrong and gave all this money out at different times to Ukraine and he left his own here. The remains of it are to be seen. There is-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank Deputy Healy-Rae and call Deputy Mattie McGrath.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: -----€3 for a pensioner living alone. That is what he gave them.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: We are here the day after the budget, what I describe as "the Fine Gael budget". Cá bhfuil Fianna Fáil? An bhfuil siad imithe completely? Is it completely gone. Its stamp is not on this.

The Government had the resources to be ambitious but instead opted for a series of modest measures that would be quickly swallowed up by the huge cost-of-living crisis. Despite record tax receipts and substantial budget surpluses, families, workers, pensioners, farmers and small business people will continue to experience financial pressures. There was little for everyone. Like the curate's egg, good in spots but very little for everyone, and kind of robbing Peter to pay Paul.

The cost of living, fuel and energy are just so expensive. Why does the Government have to take almost 50% out of every litre of petrol? All I wanted when this crisis arose with Iran was a cap so that we would have it at €1.70 for diesel and maybe €1.60 for petrol and the

Government would cushion the rest out of its surpluses for the moment rather than giving back this in rebate schemes and all this baloney that is so difficult to traverse.

Fuel is not a luxury. It is a necessity for work, farming, business, education, healthcare appointments and daily life, particularly in rural Ireland.

Every increase in the cost of fuel drives up the cost of food and every other commodity. Despite repeated warnings from households, businesses and farming organisations, the Government failed to grasp control of these fuel costs and played into the hands of big business. Many working families will see any gains from the budget disappear like snow off a ditch.

One of the biggest disappointments in the budget was the failure to introduce a windfall tax. What has the Government against taxing the big people? Fianna Fáil used be a party of the daoine óga, of the small farmer, of the labouring working man and everybody else. Now it is beholden to Europe, to Ms von der Leyen, to the World Economic Forum and, above all, to the global capitals. In this case, a windfall tax should have been introduced, but the Government will not touch them. However, the Government does not mind putting its hand deep into the pockets of the ordinary working man and woman, but those ordinary working men and women are waking up to the Government and, by God, will it pay a price.

As to pensioners, an equal increase in social welfare payments and the living alone allowance are, of course, welcome, but they are miserly and a pittance when you see the cost of everything. Certainly, I have to welcome the extension of the bereavement grant. However, the money that they got was so, so little.

The carers were completely gobsmacked by what happened and the Government left them down in a bad way. One of the greatest concerns remains the thousands of ageing parents caring for adult children with disabilities while worrying about who will care for them when they are gone. That is an awful burden on most people.

The biggest challenge facing disability services is no longer simply funding, but staffing. We announced 4,000 places for special educational needs and, indeed, special needs assistants, SNAs. That is great, but we are not able to get them and we are not able to retain them. Education was poorly served by this budget.

Our basic, primary industry, which it always used to be and brought us out of three recessions, is agriculture. Overall, the Government is tinkering with schemes, moving money here and there. If you treated your farm animals, your stock or your crops like that, you would be a failure. The Government has less money in the budget for agriculture this year than it had last year and is mór an trua é sin. It is very serious with a Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, coming down the road that we do not know what kind of havoc it will be reek on us.

The Government is making contracts with farmers and they are going through all the hoops to sign up to schemes. Even as late as last September or August, they were told that the Government did not have money to pay for the straw scheme, yet the Minister found it some place else. It is robbing Peter to pay Paul again.

The basic problem here is this is our primary industry and if we have tough times, we are going to need produce. We are going to need food, and who is going to produce it? It will not be the people in the cities, but the farmers. The Minister, Deputy Heydon, has got a raw deal here. The Government has neglected agriculture.

Small business owners also got no break and they needed a VAT reduction to 15%. All the costs are on top of them - health and safety, the oil and fuel costs, energy costs, insurance, etc. - but the Government is giving them nothing. Fianna Fáil was the party of the small business, the small farmer and the working man but it has forgotten all about that in Micheál Martin's quest for a European stage and a worldwide tour. I do not know what he expects to be afterwards - something akin to the man above. He thinks he is God. He can walk on water but he will find out fast. When he walks Cork South-Central again, he will be on thin ice. Tá na daoine go léir ag fanacht-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: You should conclude.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: -----le Fianna Fáil, and waiting for Micheál Martin because he has turned his back on the Irish people.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 3.46 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 4.45 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 3.46 p.m. and resumed at 4.45 p.m.

Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I will be sharing time with Government colleagues. I am pleased to be given the opportunity to set out the details of budget 2027 as it pertains to the Departments of Climate, Energy and the Environment and Transport.

First, from an overall budget perspective, this budget focuses on the cost of living and taking the pressure off workers and families. It will deliver significant tax reductions, thereby increasing that income for families and individuals by up to €1,500 per annum. The budget will help with the cost of energy and fuel support for people with disabilities, lower childcare costs and increases right the way across social protection and pensions. At the same time, it will support enterprise and economic growth, giving businesses the competence to invest, create jobs and strengthen our economy for our people. Effective management of our economy has and continues to bring benefits to our country. We now have over 2.8 million people working in Ireland, the highest since records began, and this Government will continue to prioritise jobs growth in our country.

The Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment is being allocated €1.28 billion in this budget to accelerate the transition to a secure, sustainable and affordable energy sector. This funding will allow my Department to continue to take climate action, reduce carbon emissions, improve energy efficiency, reduce the cost to businesses and households and facilitate the achievement of our national climate goals that are set out in the programme for Government. Government is acutely aware of energy affordability pressures, which have been exacerbated by the Middle East crisis. Last week, as colleagues will know, I hosted the EU energy ministers as part of the Irish Presidency, at which energy affordability across the bloc was a key area of discussion. This is a challenge facing all member states.

That is why here at home, we are taking action to help households and businesses with the cost of energy. Across Government, we have delivered a package of measures to help households and businesses with those costs, with a particular focus on those most vulnerable to the volatility of the price of imported fossil fuel. Enhancements to the fuel allowance,

increases to the living alone allowance and the child support payment changes to the working family payment income threshold, as well as the new cost-of-disability payment, will all help support households most at risk of energy poverty. As colleagues will know, about a quarter of our households receive direct supports relating to fuel. The extension of the temporary excise cuts in 2027 and cuts to carbon tax on home heating oil and gas will help to ease the pressures on households and businesses facing higher costs as a result of the volatility of those energy markets.

An extension to the road transporters support scheme also provides additional support to help commercial transport operators offset high diesel costs. There has been a very substantial allocation for next year of over €950 million to the Department's energy transformation programme, with a record capital allocation of over €650 million for the SEAI energy upgrade scheme which will be further supplemented by the ERDF funding. The cross-government national energy affordability task force has been working intensively on the energy affordability action plan, which informed some of the changes made in this budget. That will be published shortly, and that group will stay and remain in place.

Measures that have been brought forward include enhanced grants to help households and businesses to reduce cost, including a new fossil fuel boiler scrappage scheme with a bonus of €2,000, meaning there is now €14,500 to transition to a heat pump or renewable heat system.

Grants of up to €9,000 are available for solar PV and battery systems for eligible households with fully funded battery and solar available under the warmer homes scheme and the medically vulnerable scheme. These are all effective immediately. We are also introducing grants for solar attic and cavity insulation for many social welfare recipients and those on housing assistance payments and the rental accommodation scheme. Under the warmer homes scheme, which protects those at the greatest risk of energy poverty, we have now delivered nearly 40,000 fully funded home upgrades. That is up from a figure of 3,000 in 2019.

The total number of homes retrofitted in this country is 290,000. This year alone, we have received 100,000 applications, which is already double the number of applications in 2025. That is because we have made these grant supports more accessible and people are responding to it. They are delivering tangible savings for families and individuals. For example, having a home battery energy storage system with solar PV will save you about €878 a year against the cost of your energy. Further upgrades, including window and door replacements and heat pumps, when installed as part of a home upgrade, can save homeowners over €1,100 per annum. I welcome the increase from €400 to €600 for the exemption from income tax for the microgeneration of electricity from renewable energy sources. We now have over 200,000 homes with solar PV installed, some 120,000 of which were supported through SEAI grants.

The budget also allows us to continue to take significant action on climate. An allocation of over €170 million will support local authority climate action.

I am pleased to announce the overall funding allocation of over €5.5 billion to the Department of Transport, which is an increase of over €840 million on the previous year. This demonstrates our commitment to delivering a transport system that is safe, sustainable, accessible and connected. Transport is not just about infrastructure. It is about people and about how we get to work, access education, attend healthcare appointments, connect with family and friends and participate fully in our communities. This allocation provides the

resources needed to continue transforming our public transport network right across the country. The public service obligation is now over €1 billion, an 11% increase on the previous year. This will allow us to roll out a major expansion of new and enhanced services across the country. Approximately 140 new or enhanced routes will be delivered over the next year, an expansion of our public transport system that has not been seen in years. It is important to note that we have ensured the protection of about 1.5 million people who use public transport for free and are eligible for free or reduced fare travel.

Between the significant additional funding received through both the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment and the Department of Transport, we are doing our level best to target the measures at those who need it most while continuing to invest heavily in infrastructure to ensure that our people have access to safe, affordable and frequent public transport. In conclusion, I welcome the €6 billion that has been allocated to MetroLink, which is a project that will be starting very shortly. That is €6 billion in funding between now and 2030.

Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): I am pleased to have the opportunity to address the House about the total allocation of €1.298 billion to my Department in budget 2027 and to outline some of the measures that will support and develop the sectors for which I have responsibility. The sectors supported by the Department form part of Ireland's daily life, be it in turning on the radio to hear the news on the commute to work, attending or taking part in sporting or cultural events, or accessing high-speed broadband across the island of Ireland to communicate for work or business, stream a movie or take part in online gaming. These sectors help us to express who we are as a nation through the collective experience of the successes of our athletes, teams, musicians, artists and writers. The sectors under the aegis of my Department not only enhance our lives through mental and physical well-being but they also provide vital employment and a significant return to the taxpayers on the investment. They attract visitors to the island of Ireland to experience our culture.

In a world where global challenges can seem overwhelming, the work carried out by the Department and the bodies under its aegis is critical in raising spirits, creating a positive and vibrant cultural experience, providing ready access to online communication and ensuring dependable information through independent media. The current allocation for 2027 is €848 million. It provides for the full-year cost of the basic income for the arts scheme; increased funding for bodies including the Arts Council and Sport Ireland; and the funding to stage the Ryder Cup in 2027 and UEFA Euro 2028. It also includes continued support for the media sector.

The capital allocation to the Department in 2027 is €450 million. The reduction from the NDP allocation of €701 million in 2026 arises from the completion of the build-out stage of the national broadband plan. This was the most ambitious telecoms project in the history of the State and arguably the most significant since rural electrification for many parts of the country. This landmark project has entered its final stages on schedule and on budget. Next year's capital allocation will also allow for continued capital investment in local and regional sports facilities, our national cultural institutions, arts centres and the national sports campus, as well as the development of a new public warning system.

In relation to broadcast media, I have maintained overall funding at the existing 2026 levels as we seek to consolidate the significant increases in funding which our public service broadcasters and the wider media have benefited from over the last number of years. For RTÉ agus TG4, the past number of years have seen significant increased levels of public funding. In 2021, when the Future of Media Commission report was published, RTÉ's funding amounted to €196 million. For RTÉ, the 2027 allocation in public funding will be €240 million. This is made up of €66 million in direct Exchequer support and €174 million in projected licence fee collections. The overall funding is less than envisaged by the Government in 2024. However, the sum available reflects the overall funding available to other Departments. It is also in the context of progress made by RTÉ in the delivery of its strategy. While progress has been made across a number of issues, I am not happy that we have seen sufficient progress in delivering the smaller, more agile organisation that was to be delivered. Under the strategy, RTÉ sought to reduce staff by up to 20% between 2025 and 2029. The reduction in staffing is pivotal to the RTÉ strategy to transform to a more streamlined and agile workforce and transition to increase investment in independent productions. I intend to update the Government shortly on the delivery of the RTÉ reform programme, including on progress made and what is yet to be achieved. I will also update the Government on proposed reforms to licence fee collection and set the scene for funding beyond 2027. The Government will keep the issue of the resources needed by RTÉ under review.

More generally, over the past six years, supports for the wider media sector have also grown, with a 50% increase in funding to €34 million. Supports have been broadened from TV and radio to now cover public interest journalism and digital transformation across the wider media. I am pleased to confirm that all of these supports are continuing for the year ahead.

The provision of €412 million for the arts and culture programme will allow for the continued development of Ireland's artistic and creative strengths and talents at home and abroad. The permanent basic income for the arts scheme, which I announced this year, will have full support for 2027 at €34.4 million. This scheme is the envy of the world and it was a priority for me to bring it in on a permanent basis after the conclusion of the pilot. An independent cost-benefit analysis on the pilot published last year shows the economic benefits of the scheme and in particular the benefits to artists' well-being and the greater freedom that they have to create a new art.

I am allocating an additional €3.8 million to the national cultural institutions. These institutions currently welcome over 4 million visitors annually. This will address a number of needs across the institutions and also serve to increase education, learning and outreach programmes. Having delivered the cultural programme for Ireland's Presidency of the European Union, Culture Ireland has been allocated €8.8 million in 2027 to help to develop and sustain Ireland's artists. It will support the staging of the Canada-Ireland 180 initiative, a major 2027 cultural event marking 180 years since mass migration from Ireland to Canada.

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Helen McEntee): I am pleased to set out the significant investments we are making in budget 2027 across the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Department of Defence. While these two Departments have different responsibilities, they share an important purpose. They are about Ireland's place in the world. They are about how we support and protect our people, how we promote our interests and our

values internationally, how we contribute to peace, security and development, and how we prepare our country with confidence for the opportunities and the challenges ahead.

Our influence in the world comes from the relationships we build, the values we uphold and the practical contributions we make to addressing some of the great global challenges of our time. Since 2020, the Government has increased the allocation for Irish Aid and we are continuing that commitment this year. The Department's overseas development aid budget will increase to €855 million, an increase of €14 million on the funding announced last year. With this, we will maintain our focus on tackling global poverty, particularly in Africa. We will support vital humanitarian assistance in Palestine, Ukraine and Sudan, and we will continue to show leadership on food security and nutrition, particularly at a time when conflict and extreme weather are putting millions of people at risk.

5 o'clock

We will also continue to put human rights and gender equality at the heart of Ireland's development programme. Last month in New York, I co-hosted an event with the Malala Fund focused on the appalling situation facing women and girls in Afghanistan. Today, I can announce that we are providing €3 million for programmes supporting women and girls in Afghanistan, with specifically €2 million focused on girls' education.

Closer to home, we are continuing to invest in peace and reconciliation on this island. We know the importance of civil society organisations working on the ground, supporting communities, building relationships and helping to sustain the peace that has been so hard won. We are increasing the Department's reconciliation fund by €1 million, bringing total funding to more than €11 million for next year. The projects supported by this span a wide range of communities. As the events of the last week have shown, the work to build trust and strengthen partnerships continues to be vitally important.

We are also investing in our relationships with the Irish diaspora. In this area, which the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, will outline in more detail, our international development and our diaspora play a particularly important role. Irish communities are an enormously important part of our national story, and so, working through hundreds of organisations, the immigrant support programme supports vulnerable and under-represented people. Budget 2027 provides an additional €2 million, bringing the overall support programme to €19.5 million, which is its highest ever level.

As Ireland responds to a more uncertain global trading environment, we must also invest in our economic partnerships. The Government's action plan on market diversification and the sports diplomacy strategy have received an additional €1.2 million to make sure that we help Irish businesses to broaden their reach and develop new markets, and that we strengthen our international, economic and cultural relationships.

Of course we are investing in the Department's most important service for Irish citizens, namely, our passport service. We expect demand to increase by 25% next year. Thanks to significant reforms, improvements in recent years, as well as additional funding this year, we will ensure the service is prepared to meet the additional demand that we expect next year.

As Minister for Defence, I am determined that Ireland's response to change is to approach it with confidence, ambition and a serious investment in our future. That starts with our people.

That is why people and our Defence Forces personnel are at the heart of our defence investment for budget 2027. We are providing funding for a net increase of 400 permanent Defence Forces personnel, including specialist roles, bringing funded strength of up to 8,300 personnel by the end of next year. I believe there are reasons to be optimistic. Last year saw more than 16,500 applications to join. By August of this year, there were 14,000 applications. That tells us that there are thousands of people across this country who are interested in serving and who see the value of a career in the Defence Forces. We want to turn that interest into new recruits and that is why we want to make sure that this budget provides specifically for them. There will be €3 million more to progress our recruitment campaigns. We are providing up to 100 additional civilian and civil service roles across defence. We are budgeting an additional €3 million for the healthcare needs of our Defence Forces personnel, and we will continue through this budget to invest in accommodation, training, maintenance and operational facilities in Defence Forces installations across the country. We will support the implementation of the Reserve Defence Force regeneration plan, including the expansion of the Naval Service Reserve and the establishment of an Air Corps reserve.

Our clear ambition is to grow our Defence Forces and to give our people the support, equipment and facilities they need to serve Ireland. We are backing that ambition with significant investment, with our capital investment in defence next year the highest ever in any one given year at €340 million, which is an increase of 13.3%. This will allow us to continue the modernisation of the Defence Forces across land, air, sea and cyber. It means investment in our radar capability programme. It means replacement helicopters. It means modern communications, force protection, cyber capability and modern equipment for people serving in our Defence Forces. It is also about building the Defence Forces that Ireland needs for the future.

I want to place particular emphasis today on strengthening our maritime security, which is a priority for this Government. Our seas are fundamental to our economy, our connectivity and our security. The nature of the threats that we face is changing. Through this budget, we will continue the implementation of the maritime security strategy and its action plan. We will operationalise access to the EU's common information-sharing environment, increasing our maritime awareness through intelligence gathering and information sharing. We will continue our maritime security research programme, bringing together expertise in areas including maritime cybersecurity surveillance, energy security and maritime domain awareness. We will achieve the initial operating capability of towed array sonar on our Naval Service vessels as part of the wider subsea domain awareness programme, and we will introduce counter-drone capabilities on our Naval Service vessels. We will continue investing in the infrastructure that our Naval Service needs. That includes the continued revitalisation of the naval base, with a major dredging project costing more than €6 million to be completed next year.

We are also strengthening our international relationships with new defence attachés, three of whom I met today, from London, Paris and Washington, where they will provide further opportunities to deepen that collaboration with key partners, including on maritime security. This is a long-term commitment to rebuilding and to strengthening Ireland's maritime capability. Our investment in resilience does not stop at our coastline. Budget 2027 will further enhance our cyber capabilities, supporting the work of the joint cyber operations unit. It will provide additional investment in national resilience, emergency planning and preparedness. In particular, it will provide a significant increase for our Civil Defence; support its wonderful

volunteers; expand its capacity; strengthen its vehicle fleet, particularly for responding to severe weather events; and support the over 3,000 different capabilities or missions that it has. These investments are about being ready, recognising that the world around us is changing, and making sure that Ireland is prepared to respond.

Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I am glad to be here today to discuss the budget allocation for sport. As everyone in the House will agree, it is very hard to quantify the impact of sport and the joy it brings to our communities across the country. Over the past year, we have seen Troy Parrott's miracle of Budapest, Mayo's long-awaited all-Ireland success in Croke Park and Mark English, who is from my county of Donegal, winning a European 800 m gold medal. Sport unites communities and brings people together from different backgrounds and beliefs under a single shared passion. From a Government point of view, it is something we value very dearly. That is once again reflected in the very strong budget of just over €302 million we have allocated for the sports programme in budget 2027.

The allocation for Sport Ireland is just under €165 million. Of that, €122 million is current funding, which is a 6.3% increase overall for Sport Ireland and the key programmes. Within that, we have €1 million ring-fenced for hurling and camogie games development. That is something we commenced last year and are building on again this year to see hurling and camogie brought across the country as our national signature game, and to try to ensure it is strengthened. We have also allocated a €1 million increase in funding to the Gaelic Players Association, to support our intercounty Gaelic games players, and €1 million in additional funding for the League of Ireland football academies project, bringing the total funding for that project to €4 million. I said last year when we announced the €3 million funding for the football academies that it was a vote of confidence in football in this country. That vote of confidence has been justified and has been rewarded in terms of the work we are seeing with our League of Ireland academies across the country. We are once again building on that now with an additional allocation, making a total of €4 million allocated for that next year.

We have also allocated an increase of 5.3% for our national sporting bodies, our national governing bodies of sport and our local sports partnerships in counties across the country. That 5.3% will ensure they are supported for the massive work they do in building participation rates across the country, and taking that through all the way to high performance and excellence. We are increasing and allocating 5.3% to the high performance funding within Sport Ireland to bring us towards the Los Angeles Olympic Games. There is also €500,000 ring-fenced for the IRFU to work with it on the great work it is doing in building women's and girls' rugby development across the country. That is something we want to support. There is also €3.4 million in capital funding for the national sports campus and towards the national velodrome, the national badminton centre and the national cricket centre, and we will continue to build on that work over the course of the year ahead.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Neale Richmond): This is a good budget that realises that many people around this country are facing very real challenges. Not only is the Government able to respond to those challenges in the here-and-now, but we are able to do so in a way that does not jeopardise or mortgage the future of the next generation. I appreciate that at a time when people are wondering about the cost of

filling a tank of oil or whether they will be able to put diesel in the car or afford the weekly shop, which are real concerns, they are asking, quite understandably, why the Government is spending €14 million extra on international development. There are two very clear reasons. First, it is the right thing to do. When we see the abject levels of poverty and deprivation in the global south, we know we have a proud tradition in this country of development going back to Irish Aid, which was set up by Dr. Garret FitzGerald in 1974, and to our rich history of missionary and development work. Second, and crucially, it is in our interests. All the issues that we talk about here on a daily basis, and that come to our constituency office, such as the rising cost of fuel, food security, irregular mass migration, spread of disease and extremism, stem from global insecurity. The way we address that global insecurity at source is through a proper international development programme.

I am proud that last year, Ireland was one of just two EU member states to increase its development budget. We are the first so far to indicate that we will increase ours. That is a testament to the 76% of Irish people who are in favour of ODA.

As the Minister, Deputy McEntee outlined, we have also budgeted a €2 million increase to the emigrant support programme. This goes to organisations and groups who work with the most vulnerable Irish people, including those who were unfortunately forced to leave these shores for economic and societal reasons many years ago and now find themselves facing very real economic and societal hardship and, in many cases, real concern about immigration status. We will support those groups while also promoting the very best of Irish culture and bringing together Irish business groups from around the world who want not only to invest in and trade with their home country but also to make sure the next generation of Irish people who may move abroad have a really, good warm welcome abroad and, more importantly, are in a position to move home in due course.

Deputy Pa Daly: Before the Minister of State leaves, I want to acknowledge the increase in the emigrant support fund. I saw its impact myself over at the Coventry Irish Society. Fair play to the Minister of State for giving some extra resources to them. They do such great work in the west midlands.

Budget 2027 was billed as a budget for working people, however. It was going to help households with the cost of living, tackle the housing crisis and prepare Ireland for the future. Hope was on the way. When we strip away the spin, there was only what people have come to expect from this Government: the same old promises and the same old failures. We have record surpluses and resources, but we also have record rents, house prices and housing costs, and some of the highest electricity bills in Europe. If we have never had so much money, how come so many households are struggling? For the second year in a row, 1.5 million workers have been left behind. The Government wants people to celebrate a tax package that is worth, in effect, €250 for the year or about €5 per week. It is not even enough to cover the recent commuter fare hikes. The cost of energy, rents and groceries are soaring. This is not a budget that makes housing affordable, tackles other priorities such as the energy rip-off or makes people feel like we are turning a corner. It confirms that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael will throw workers and families under the bus to satisfy the corporate bottom line. The cynic in me says that they are not giving much in this budget or next year's, but that before the next election, there will be more given away to buy the next election.

When it comes to energy, we are paying the highest prices in Europe, enduring years of increasing bills while the energy companies have posted enormous profits. Another budget and another year of the same with no real plan to tackle the energy rip-off. The Government boasts about a package which is worth a few euro a week but what is the value of that when we are being hammered by electricity bills? The Government is patting itself on the back but there is round after round, with customers of ESB, SSE Airtricity and Electric Ireland customers seeing energy prices rise. Households are absorbing all of those increases while the Government is sitting back and waiting, and there are no energy credits. This is the reality of the so-called cost-of-living response, which was a priority for the electorate. The Government has failed to get a grip on energy costs. Where is the cheaper energy that should have been provided? Where are the retrofits and heat pumps? The Government is way short of its own targets. Where is the offshore wind revolution? There will not be a blade wet for about ten years. Ireland remains exposed to volatile gas markets.

The Government did have choices in this budget. It could have reintroduced energy credits, imposed a windfall tax on excess energy profits, forced data centres to pay their fair share for the enormous strain they are placing on the grid, or accelerated renewable energy delivery to tackle the root cost of high prices. Instead, the data centres, energy companies and large investors breathed a sigh of relief while families struggling with energy bills, commuters, students and public sector workers sweat it out.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: In a Government budget that has disappointed and failed to deliver for the vast majority of people, the budget that the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan presented for culture, communications and sport this year is the biggest disappointment to those for whom it is relevant, and the biggest failure to deliver. Last year the Department presented a budget of €1.5 billion and this year the package is only €1.3 billion. The details are so sparse, we do not exactly know where the downfall will be. When will it become apparent which cultural and sporting bodies are facing cuts to their budgets, or the impact on core funding for national governing bodies to run programmes on the ground?

Everybody knows the League of Ireland is my grá and I wholeheartedly welcome the increased funding for the League of Ireland academies. However, my and Sinn Féin's focus is to deliver for all sports in every corner of the State. That is why we provided €50 million over and above what the Government would spend every year in the large-scale sports infrastructure fund, LSSIF, in our alternative budget. Some of the approved projects have been sitting there since 2018, with nine construction projects approved under the 2018 programmes yet to commence, not to mention most from the 2024 round. This is delivery at a snail's pace by a Government where sport is an afterthought, unless of course there is a photo opportunity.

If ever there was a scheme that rang alarm bells for sectoral investment, the unprecedented demand for the large-scale sports infrastructure fund in 2024, with applications across multiple sports totalling €665 million, should have been a wake-up call to the Government. With our additional €0.25 billion funding in a Dáil term, Sinn Féin would clear the LSSIF backlog and open a new round that would be actioned - not endless announcements but actual sports infrastructure being delivered, allowing sport to grow and thrive, and enhancing and enshrining participation for generations to come. As the old saying goes, "Build it, and they will come".

The Minister, Deputy O'Donovan's promised culture card, which was a cheaper, pale imitation of Sinn Féin's leisure card scheme that we launched two years ago, was not delivered. It was the only thing that got him positive headlines in the past two weeks and he could not even get it over the line. Maybe storming out of budget meetings with Government partners is not the way to do things. In our alternative budget, we have allocated to €15 million to show that we could commence the roll-out of an activity card scheme, providing €130 worth of free after-school sports, arts and cultural activity starting with junior and senior infants. More money would be on the card and more activities, including sports, would be available. Budget 2027 has an overall theme of leaving young people and families behind. Sadly it is no different here, under the collective remit of the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan and the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue. They are still burying their heads in the sand when it comes to dealing with the TV licence. They are clapping themselves on the back for investing in the basic income for artists scheme but the reality is that thousands of people are being left disappointed. The money is not there to cope with the demand and those who applied in May are still facing uncertainty as to whether they will be approved. The Ministers are leading people down the fairy trail with broken promises relating to their supposed culture card.

There was an open goal to deliver for the protection and longevity of sport, by seriously investing in sporting infrastructure. Once again, the Ministers missed the net. The Department's press conference at 3 o'clock was overshadowed by the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan's press statements, interactions with Government colleagues, his power plays with the junior Minister regarding who is the actual gaffer, and his suitability for the position of Minister. The focus should have been on the Ministers' failure to deliver a vibrant budget for culture, communications and sport. All they have done is hit the crossbar and miss targets, deliverables and opportunities.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael's budget yesterday was quite the achievement. They somehow managed to fail ordinary workers and families from the cradle to the grave. It is welcome that costs for families have been reduced but childcare costs would already be €10 per day if the Government had implemented Sinn Féin's plan, which was published more than two years ago. The Ministers act as if third level fees of €2,350 are a thing to be celebrated. In reality, they simply charged more last year only to give €150 back this year. Parents and students see through the Tánaiste's bogus budget strokes. The carbon tax reduction on home heating oil is sufficient only to address the price increases of the past week, and the Government failed to support people heating their homes across the board as there were no energy credits. Having left people with disabilities €1,400 worse off last year, the Government offers just crumbs from the table at €10 per week, the same meagre offering it made to our pensioners.

Our farmers, the closest thing we have to heavy industry, got nothing on green diesel or rebate allocation in 2027, which is €61 million down on the current expenditure. Are we to trust the Government to protect the CAP? There is an insufficient 79 cent increase on the minimum wage yet insufficient support for small to medium-sized businesses that are struggling to stay open. Movement on the USC is a far cry from the Tánaiste's party's pledge to abolish it, which has been unfulfilled for a full decade. This budget is some achievement in failing the people. The Government has failed bitterly through this budget and through the serial waste of taxpayers' money. There is no accountability in Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael in

government. I see it weekly between bike sheds, children's hospitals and endless IT projects. I see the waste of public money weekly at the Committee of Public Accounts. The taxpayer is not getting value for money.

Sinn Féin's alternative budget outlined a different path: €10-a-day childcare; reducing and working on abolishing third level fees; USC abolished on the first €40,000 for all; an increase of €1.10 in the minimum wage alongside a €250 million PRSI rebate for businesses that are struggling to keep the doors open; €400 energy credits for families; a real payment to address the cost of disability; a €15 increase in pension payments; and enhancing and safeguarding CAP.

That is what the Government could have done. It might think that people have things too good, but after this budget I am more convinced than ever that the Government's days in government are well and truly numbered.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Maybe after the recent spat following the announcement of sports capital grants, the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, could use some of that money to argue for the inclusion of a new sport in the Olympics in 2028, that of kite flying, given the Department he is in. Maybe he could also send over the senior Minister.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: The prize for best line of the day anyway.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: He might enjoy that one. Kite flying happened and there were nice glossy announcements. I remember the TikTok picture of Deputy Cleere dancing like a DJ and celebrating the announcement of the €100 culture voucher. Where is it now? I do not see the Deputy in here praising it because it does not exist. In some ways, the Government managed to build up people's hopes and then dash them and make promises disappear. Perhaps we could bring magicians into the Olympics. Some large sporting festivals here had that in the past.

The Government has managed to slash €5 million from the arts and culture capital grant, €5 million from the Gaeltacht capital budget and a fifth from the heritage capital budget, when built heritage is in need of protection and should not, like Moore Street, be left to decay or be demolished. The Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, said at a press conference that he might need to step on people's toes. He has already done that. He stepped on artists' toes and those who are crying out for arts spaces. He stepped on the toes of young people who thought they would have a culture card. As others have said, it is a watered-down version of our budget. These things were announced but never happened.

Maidir leis an nGaeilge, tá a lán nár tharla chomh maith. Tá sé cosúil go bhfuil an mhéar fhada lárnach á léiriú don phobal teanga. Ní raibh euro breise ar bith ón Aire, an Teachta O'Donovan, do TG4. Ní raibh euro breise ar bith ón Aire, an Teachta Naughton, don Ghaeloideachas. Ní raibh ach pingíní ag teacht ón Aire, an Teachta Calleary, don Ghaeltacht. Mar a dúirt Conradh na Gaeilge, is é seo an t-ardú is lú in aon cháinaisnéis le dhá Rialtas anuas. Mo náire sibh.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: The Minister has left me somewhat astonished by how the Government has managed to spend so much money yet achieve so little for hard-working

families across the State. It really is something to behold. When the Minister made a commitment in the run-up to the last budget to reduce childcare costs to €200 a month, that was our plan and the Government was welcome to take it and more than welcome to implement it, but it did not do so. I now have parents in Longford-Westmeath who are not only struggling to find childcare places but are put to the pin of their collar trying to pay for those places every single month. They believed the Government. They wanted it to do this. They would have been grateful if the Government had implemented something.

Regarding those who come through my door in desperate need of affordable housing, I do not see anything in the budget in respect of additional capital. I do not know how I will go back and explain that to my constituents. I am not even in government; I am in opposition. I do not know how members of Government will go back and explain that to their constituents. Regarding older people who come through my office doors, how is an increase of €3 per week in the living alone allowance justified? It is literally the price of a packet of firelighters. You would not even get a cup of tea or coffee in a local café for that price.

Some 700,000 households rely on home heating oil. What the Government has done for them is bordering on insulting considering the amount they are paying in additional money this year to fill a tank of oil. All the families who have been waiting for the Government to do something in the budget - Lord knows, it indicated often enough that it would do something meaningful for them - are looking at empty oil tanks in their back gardens. The Government has come forward with a pittance while it is still handing over millions and millions of euro to developers.

I genuinely do not know how the Government members will go back, look the people who elected them to this House in the eye and justify what they have done. I do not know how they will have that conversation with disabled constituents, whom the Government has left high and dry and threw under a bus last year in the budget. The Government has come out with something that is disconnected from the financial realities of the cost of living with a disability.

I wish the members of Government luck. I would not like to be in their position going back to their communities to try to explain what it is they have done. I think they will need every ounce of luck.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I would like to begin by giving my overall reaction to the budget. I truly believe the budget lacks the infrastructure we need to deliver the transformative change we need in this country, in particular given that there are 17,000 people who are homeless and will remain so throughout next year because the budget does not deliver enough for them. Some 400,000 children are being taught in overcrowded classrooms. There are a million people on hospital waiting lists, including a young man in my constituency who has told me he has been in pain, waiting three years for knee surgery. He cannot hold down a job because he cannot stand for long enough due to his knee. Nothing in the budget will transform those people's lives. That is my overall reaction to the budget.

I listened to the Taoiseach's speech earlier and was depressed afterwards. The immaturity from the Taoiseach regarding the budget and the Opposition's comments on it worried me. The Taoiseach said the Opposition appears to believe the economy and employment are irrelevant and has no policies beyond demanding dramatically more spending. The Taoiseach completely dismissed any concerns we have. I fundamentally think the economy is crucially important.

Employment is crucially important, but it is about what kind of economy, society and sustainable growth - green growth or growth in a circular economy - we want. We fundamentally care about these issues, but the leader of the Government has come out with remarks that the Government will certainly not be adopting the Opposition's demand that we rip up all restraints and spend everything now, as if that is a message we are sending to him.

He said that, in spite of a number of opportunities, it is remarkable how rarely the Opposition ever mentions economic growth, and that it never does. The Taoiseach is clearly lying on the floor of the Dáil when he says the Opposition never mentions economic growth. It is plain and simple misleading lies from the Taoiseach about the Opposition and our approach. It is a kind of immaturity in politics.. We are getting it from the top, that is, the Taoiseach, in that there is an attitude that the Opposition has no ideas, solutions or policies and can be dismissed. The citizens of this Republic deserve better than that.

We need maturity in our politics. We need to be able to acknowledge when the Government does well. The Government needs to be able to acknowledge when the Opposition puts forward reasonable critiques, ideas and solutions. I ask the Taoiseach and Government to reflect on those kinds of simplistic remarks that may have been grand during Bertie's government of the 1990s but certainly do not stand up today. I urge the Taoiseach to reflect on some of his remarks.

I welcome some of the changes that were made, including the expansion of the contraception scheme. We would have gone further but welcome the changes. The health committee discussed the shingles vaccine, and I welcome the changes there. In terms of the expansion of counselling home supports, there are things in this budget that are welcome. As I said, it is not delivering the kind of transformative change we need.

Regarding Sláintecare, we are not going far enough in terms of reducing out-of-pocket costs. There is no change to the medical card or drug payment scheme or expansion of free GP care, something the Social Democrats have put forward. We had a 20-point plan in the Dáil on how to reform GP care, expand access and increase capacity. There is nothing in the budget to do that, despite proposals from the Opposition and the Taoiseach saying we have no ideas.

I have some concerns that I want to flag in the time available to me. Some of the current issues in health are not addressed by the budget.

The DOMINO scheme in Cork University Hospital, CUH, has been significantly curtailed as a result of 80 nursing and midwifery vacancies. Newly qualified nurses in Cork and Galway are not getting posts despite being trained and invested in by the State.

I will read two headlines from today's edition of *The Echo* in Cork. The first is, "Almost 100 patients in limbo after melanoma screening services paused at CUH", while the second headline reads, "More than 1,000 people on trolleys at Cork University Hospital last month". A headline from RTÉ also details concerns on the closure of a diabetes clinic in Mullingar. We have all of these issues that need to be addressed.

One issue that Deputy Quaide and I have been raising but has not been addressed is that of healthcare workers with long Covid. There is nothing in this budget for them. There is a real crisis in this regard and a solution is needed. A small number of workers are affected, one of whom travelled from the midlands to my clinic in Cork two weeks ago. She is a single mother

living alone with her son. Her payments are going to be cut off in two weeks' time. She is going to be left on the disability allowance of €254 per week. She has a mortgage of €800 and will be plunged into poverty. She says that she has gone from the front line to the breadline because of the decisions of the Government. She got Covid in January 2021 after the Government's "meaningful Christmas" and has been left abandoned. We need a solution. It is a small group of workers in question. Please act.

Deputy Liam Quaide: Across the country, families are paying the price for years of political failure to resource disability services properly. Parents in their 70s and 80s are still providing round-the-clock support. Children wait years for therapies. Adults who want to live independently are denied personal assistance. Families struggle on with little or no respite. Too often, the State waits until a family reaches breaking point before it steps in, which is usually at a far greater cost than if support had been provided earlier. Too much disability funding is still front-loaded into costly crisis placements, which are increasingly provided by private companies developing services according to commercial opportunity rather than planned community need. Supports that could sustain people to live at home are crudely rationed and then huge sums are found when crisis hits.

The Government led in its budget announcement yesterday with 489 additional residential care packages, but that number includes children, adults and people moving from nursing homes and institutional settings. While those transitions are badly needed, this announcement does not represent 489 new homes for people awaiting residential support. According to the Department's breakdown, there will be 212 new placements, including 100 planned placements and 112 urgent placements, along with other enhanced supports.

In May, families packed the Clayton Hotel Silver Springs in Cork for a public meeting of the Before We Die campaign. They mobilised again in huge numbers at the Helix in Dublin two weeks ago. More than 2,000 adults with an intellectual disability live with parents aged over 70, and some 500 live with parents over 80. These parents have spent decades caring for their sons and daughters and fighting for therapies, school places and respite. They are asking the Minister, Deputy Foley, where their sons and daughters will live and who will support them when they are gone. They have gone on radio and television and come into Leinster House in this regard. They have met Ministers and the Taoiseach. They have spoken publicly about their private anguish and uncertainty. After all that, however, this budget provides 100 planned new residential places. Many of these families are asking what more they can be expected to do to get an adequate response from the Government.

The current system is inhumane and chaotic. A family reaches breaking point, the HSE scrambles for a placement and a disabled person can end up far from home, effectively exiled from their community, sometimes at extraordinary financial cost to the State. There is no leadership or forward planning. Thousands of families are being denied basic peace of mind about the future.

The €500 one-off, cost-of-disability payment announced yesterday also falls miserably short of the unavoidable financial burden of living with a disability. The payment of €500 equates to €9.62 per week. Earlier this year, I raised the case of a disabled woman who had to stop home dialysis because she could no longer afford the energy bills. She returned to hospital dialysis, which meant less independence, more arduous treatment and greater financial cost to

the State. We proposed a permanent cost-of-disability payment of €40 per week to be built on over subsequent budgets.

While the Government has increased the carer's allowance income disregard, the means test remains. People can give up years of work and financial independence to provide full-time care while entitlements still depend on what their spouses or partners earn. It is grossly unfair to treat people who are doing the State an enormous service as if they are charity cases.

The Government has announced 57,000 additional personal assistance hours, but multiples of that are needed. A personal assistant can be the difference between someone working, studying and participating in their community or depending on family for daily support.

Disability supports do not begin and end with the disability budget. What happens in the wider health service has a huge impact on disabled people and their families. In the roll-out of the ill-fated progressing disability model of service, large numbers of children whose needs were deemed non-complex were redirected into primary care, which remains drastically under-resourced. Last year, a parliamentary question I submitted identified a child waiting 13 and a half years for primary care psychology in what was supposed to be an early intervention service. When I followed up this year, the longest psychology wait was still more than ten years. There were waits of almost ten years for occupational therapy, more than six and a half years for physiotherapy, and almost five and a half years for speech and language therapy.

The Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, has refused to commit to population-based staffing targets for primary care services. When a child is waiting five, six or ten years for an early intervention service, that service may as well not exist for the child. Essentially, it is a phantom service. A failure to rebuild primary care will deepen pressure on disabled families and specialist disability services.

I welcome the Government's reduction of the wage subsidy scheme threshold from 15 hours to eight. We would go further by restoring the subsidy to 70% of the national minimum wage, protecting key secondary benefits-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy should conclude.

Deputy Liam Quaide: -----when disabled people take up work and funding a €5 million disabled entrepreneurship and self-employment fund.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call the Minister, Jennifer Carroll MacNeill.

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): As I walked into the Chamber, I heard the Opposition spokesperson and Cathaoirleach of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Health, Deputy Rice, describe the Taoiseach as speaking lies when he challenged some of the rhetoric around the Opposition analysis of the budget-----

Deputy Pádraig Rice: No, he said we never mentioned economic growth.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister without interruption.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Sorry, but that is precisely what the Deputy said and I am entitled to defend the Taoiseach and the wider Government. The Deputy is the Oireachtas health committee's Chair. Shortly after that, he described today's headlines as part of his budget analysis on what the health spend could and should be. He comes from a region where we opened a surgical hub last week, which is staffed and ready to service patients. He has articulated challenges in the delivery of health services arising from what he says are vacancies. Notwithstanding that, he is the Chair of the Oireachtas Committee on Health, which will question me about maintaining budgets, reducing overtime and sticking to budgets next week and the week after. The Deputy is aware that the region he is from, and from where those headlines he quoted as part of his budget analysis originate, has hired twice as many people as it had budget provision for without addressing agency or reducing overtime.

Deputy Mary Butler: Hear, hear.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: It did not recruit in a way that was strategic to ensure that the graduate nurses, whom we know need to be hired every October, had places. We know the surgical hub needed to open. The region did not plan or hire strategically. The vacancies to which the Deputy alluded come from a hospital that has recruited 233 people just this year, which, in many cases, is two or three times the recruitment level in equivalent hospitals around the country, so forgive me if I challenge the analysis of how money is allocated and where spending goes. I wait with bated breath for reform ideas from the Opposition on where we might save money and how we might better allocate resources for the future.

I recall a debate in November last year on blister packs where members of the Deputy's party accused me of cruelty for making changes. Let me assure the Deputy that we held the ground on public spending. We made sure that there was more money to do more on community pharmacy and we held the line with the agreement that had been reached rather than throwing more money after something where we already reached an agreement with private operators. The Deputy's party and others came into the Chamber and looked for more money for private operators in addition to the agreement that had been reached.

Over the year, we have recouped €4.4 million in inappropriate claims made by pharmacists, €2.5 million of which was recouped in 2026 by my Department and the HSE operating under my instructions. We recouped more this year in inappropriate claims than in the previous five years combined. That €2.5 million covers the free contraception scheme that we managed to extend for the women of Ireland.

There is a logic to budgeting. We put more money in, but we expect to get productivity out. We expect recruitment to be strategic. It is important that we defend the budget, the approach taken and the reform agenda. There is a time to call "Stop" on the inconsistency of analysis, and that is today.

We have been able to deliver a budget of €29.1 billion, which is an additional €1.6 billion in current funding. It is an increase from last year and is more than the rest of the Government was able to spend. We have a 6.2% uplift, whereas everybody else is at in or around 5.9%. Every euro invested by the taxpayer and the patient, who are the same person, deserves to be used in the most efficient and effective way for our patients. We will be able to recruit a proportionate number of approximately 3,000 more people next year, dependent on strategic

recruitment, reducing agency staff and management of overtime. It is not a target. It has to operate within a pay budget. Two regions have done that this year and four have not. We will get there.

We will strategically expand access through a two-year programme that we will announce in two or three weeks' time to try to address dental problems in children in schools and on orthodontic lists. We will extend free contraception at a cost of €2 million. We will commence the introduction of the national shingles vaccination programme, which is an exceptionally expensive vaccination. We would like to get that to those who are immunocompromised and over-80s in the first instance and then roll it out through different five-year cohorts until we get to those aged 65 years. We will do that as quickly as we can and at the best price for the State.

We will expand our virtual care capacity to help people avoid hospital admission and get better care in the community. We will expand our successful surgical hubs across Wexford, Limerick and Galway and we will open more theatres in those hubs.

We will continue to build on the reforms enabled by the public-only consultant contract. It is easy to announce reforms, but it is much more difficult to implement them. In September 2025, we started at zero fully rostered consultants in hospitals and zero Saturday clinics. Now, one year on, we have Saturday clinics in neurology in St. James's Hospital. Cavan hospital is holding weekend and evening cardiology sessions. Endoscopies are being done on Saturdays and in the evenings in University Hospital Kerry. We are seeing Saturday lists in scoliosis in Children's Health Ireland, which is reducing outpatient waiting times to nearly three months. Those Saturday lists will continue to grow in 2027. We will publish transparently a productivity hub for every hospital so that every hospital and the people around it can see how much money has gone in and what the output is in terms of inpatient day cases. We have increased the budget of our hospitals by well over 50% and our staffing by 13%, and activity has gone up by 16%.

I wait for the day this year where we have that analysis of what ideas can come from different hospitals and where we are seeing different ways of making better procurement savings so that we have more money for pay and other matters. It is a question of where the savings can be made in terms of time.

I commend this approach to the House.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I am pleased to confirm that, in budget 2027 and working with the Minister, Jennifer Carroll MacNeill, I have secured an additional €108 million for mental health services, bringing the annual budget to more than €1.657 billion. This represents a 7% increase in funding for this year, for staffing growth equivalent to 285 additional posts, along with a range of new services. However, it is not acceptable to me that ring-fenced posts for mental health funded in budget 2026 or 2027 would be delayed or suppressed by overspends elsewhere in the health service.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Exactly.

Deputy Mary Butler: I will be working with the Minister to ensure that there are very tight controls on the 285 new posts and the 300 posts funded for this year. We will be clawing back

the funding not spent on the 300 ring-fenced posts for this year, combining it with an additional €15 million for this year, holding it centrally and only distributing it to the regions as posts are actually hired for. It is simply unacceptable to me that the 2026 budget of just shy of €1.6 billion, which was not overspent as part of the overall health budget, would be penalised for good, prudent management. From the roll-out of the clinical programmes across the country and from the staff that have been recruited around the country to support people with mental health, we can see the importance of this funding being ring-fenced and recurring.

I will outline some of the important highlights. Building on the crisis nursing teams I announced last year for the model 4 hospitals, such teams will now be established in our busiest model 3 hospitals, which are in Louth, Naas, Mayo, Sligo and Wexford, and also Connolly Hospital Blanchardstown, providing crucial out-of-hours support to people presenting in crisis.

In the community, budget 2027 will provide two new crisis resolution teams, one each in Wexford and north Tipperary, and six new drop-in Solace crisis cafés, one each for Carlow, Louth, Wexford and north Tipperary and two more for Dublin, giving people experiencing a crisis an alternative to attending an emergency department. We will also provide an additional 24 suicide crisis assessment nurses, SCANs, to complete the roll-out to the eight remaining counties. This will make the SCAN a truly nationwide programme.

We are significantly strengthening early intervention for children through four new Jigsaw youth mental health services, with one each in Kildare, Dún Laoghaire, Cavan-Monaghan and Sligo-Leitrim, which will operate a hub-and-spoke model for the coverage. The new locations will extend Jigsaw services to approximately 135,000 additional young people and will increase national coverage from 75% to 95%.

In specialist services, we are providing 40 additional clinicians to establish a new ADHD pathway within child and adolescent mental health services, CAMHS, and to increase capacity in mental health intellectual disability services for children with complex needs, the kids who fall between the services and are not really sure which service is best for them.

Building on previous investment, I am providing a further €1 million package for Traveller-specific suicide prevention initiatives co-designed with the Traveller community. This brings our annual total investment in this area to €4 million.

A new specialist team for adults with eating disorders will be located in Limerick, an adult dual diagnosis team will be located in Tallow and an early intervention team in psychosis will be located in Donegal, which has been identified as one of the areas with the highest level of psychosis.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: There is nothing in this budget that would do anything to change the minds of workers in this country who are planning to go out on strike on 14 October and 21 October. Any reasonable look at it would say it is a good reason to get organised and mobilise for those public sector strikes because the Government has not responded to the legitimate demands and needs of working people, be they public sector or private sector, or those who are struggling with the cost-of-living and housing crises facing this country. When the Government refuses to listen to workers, they need to take to the picket lines to force it to listen. That is really all that is left to do after this budget.

The Government's tax changes are supposedly to benefit workers. We have the now tiresome and insulting phrase about people who get up early in the morning to go to work, but the Government has completely failed to deliver for those people. The changes to the higher band of taxation will not affect in any way the vast majority of workers because most of them do not earn enough to benefit from changes to the higher band. The small changes in the USC will be so marginal that, for many, we are talking about 0.5%, less than 1% or maybe a little bit over 1% in terms what they get. However, that is against a background where Fórsa estimates that workers lost 5% of their income over the period of the last pay agreement, which expired at the beginning of this year. Then there has been a break because there is still no agreement. The Government does not want to talk about pay with the unions, which the unions are quite rightly demanding. Then we look at the forward projections for inflation and the cost of living.

What did the Government say on pay? It said it had put aside €1.2 billion. It does not mean much to people when they hear those big, universal figures, but what does €1.2 billion mean?

We costed in our budget what would be required to give workers a 10% pay increase to make up for the 5% they lost, the six months in this year where there has been no pay deal, and to give them something against the cost-of-living increases expected over the coming period. It would cost €3.1 billion. When ICTU says there is not enough in what was announced yesterday to match the legitimate demands of workers, it is 100% right. In fact, there is enough to cover about one third of the pay demands. By the way, 10% would not be a massive pay increase for workers; it would just about compensate them for the loss of income they have endured under the last pay agreements and as a result of the cost-of-living crisis over recent years and the projected rates of inflation and cost of living over the coming period. So get out your placards and get your pickets organised, because the Government is not listening and has not allocated enough to actually address the cost-of-living crisis for workers.

This lesson should be followed by everybody else, including private sector workers. We should be looking at what the students are doing in France at the moment. We should be looking at what young and old people are doing in Spain. They are getting out on the streets and saying they are not taking any more of evicting an 87-year-old woman through no fault of her own, while landlords are creaming it in with extortionate rents. Students in France are unwilling to accept underfunded and under-resourced schools. Let us take the lead of the Spanish young people, students and protesters, and of the students in France, and let us get out and mobilise in support of public sector workers who are striking because this Government is only interested in doing favours for the corporates, the energy companies and the landlords who are profiteering and benefiting from the cost-of-living and housing misery that ordinary people have suffered.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I was talking to a secondary teacher, who is a single parent, who will be on strike next week. One of her children is in primary school. She said the reason she is going on strike is that the cost of living is just too damn high. These are her words. She is really careful with money but it is all scrimp and no save. She goes to Lidl and Aldi, the discount supermarkets, and she has changed the whole diet of the family, but now she is being forced to pull her kids out of the GAA. She cannot afford the fees even though the family is all sports mad. There are no after-school activities and no chess club because she cannot afford it. There are no holidays.

This gives us an idea of the situation of a so-called professional worker in this country. There was a campaign afoot over the weekend to pretend that the cost of living is not an issue anymore, citing the inflation rate going down. The inflation rate actually went up on last year. I do not have time to deal with this matter but the teacher I spoke to said she has a life of constant stress. She goes to sleep stressed and wakes up stressed. This is why there is a real enthusiasm now. I have been talking to teachers. Those people on stealth rotas are enthusiastically signing up after yesterday's budget. We have never seen anything like it. We had the patronising from the Minister yesterday, telling people not to go ahead.

Most public sector workers are women. There is a gendered aspect to the budget, obviously. We need to look at France, where school students are taking to the streets in revolt over school conditions. In Spain, there is a revolt over landlordism and the housing crisis. Absolutely nothing changes in this country or anywhere else through polite budget submissions. It never did and it never will. It is power that yields results. We saw this with the fuel protest, which helped a certain number of people around one issue but it did not help the whole of society. We need the trade unions, AMLÉ, the students and disabled people coming together as a powerful force to demand that the budget surplus is used to pay people decent wages and incomes.

There is €200 million in capital gains tax cuts to the rich. There is €1 billion being taken from the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund to dole out to businesses. It should be used for housing and nothing else in this country, to be frank. There are also cuts in corporation tax. The men's sheds organisation wrote to us last week. This is a positive community-based initiative to deal with male depression and loneliness. It wrote that sheds may have to close because the Government has not funded the organisation.

As I was coming here today I was listening to RTÉ and I heard the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, making a total twat of himself as usual. There was the sports washing last week. Then he accused a well-known feminist like myself of being pro-Taliban. Seriously, mediocre men in power need to watch themselves. Now he has made an announcement to RTÉ workers. He is putting a gun to the head of RTÉ to cut wages and conditions or it will not get €20 million. This is an absolutely disgraceful carry-on the day after the budget and it should be roundly condemned by all here. It is disgraceful behaviour.

Deputy Seán Crowe: Like other speakers from the Opposition my assessment is that, once again, those at the top come first while working people and families are told to wait. The people who have been ringing my office and the people I have met today are saying they are disappointed and they feel let down, and that it was more of the same with nothing really in it for them. They are asking whether anything will change. The common thread for most people is that they say they do not know what world these people live in. These are ordinary people who meet me on the streets and these are their responses when I ask them how they did in the budget.

The irony is that we are told Ireland is a wealthy country, that the economy is strong and that the State has record tax receipts, yet ordinary people seem to know that something is clearly wrong. If we talk about society, there are pillars that pull us together. One of the key pillars is a roof over people's heads but we are not succeeding in this. We only have to walk out the

door here and we can see people sleeping rough. For those of us with a constituency office it is the main issue for people coming in; it is housing, housing, housing. We are not fixing this.

Another issue for people is that their children get a good education. If children have special needs, we would like to think that in a normal society in a wealthy country they would be able to get an assessment and that the system would not be broken. People who get sick should know there will be a bed in the hospital and there would not be a million people on the waiting lists. These are all the services that people rely on. We say we have one of the most successful economies in the world yet people are not feeling it and this is the sad part about it.

I am speaking as a Member of the Opposition but people in government would say the same. We are not feeling it. The economists are giving out that too much is being spent but the reality is that people are not feeling it in their own lives. While we have a successful economy, the big question people ask is who that successful economy is for. It would appear from the way the budgets have been going that those who are doing well are those at the top, who have been doing well for decades. They are the ones doing well and others feel that they have been left behind. The well-off are getting better off with the wealth that is there, while for those at the bottom it is getting worse and worse. It is wake-up time for the Government. It had choices but it did not follow through on those choices.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: My wife and I recently went through the rigmarole of trying to secure a childcare place for our youngest son. It was an absolute nightmare. Thankfully, we are sorted now, 18 months later. Putting myself in the shoes of a parent with a child in a childcare facility that is not in core funding, or worse, a parent who has not been able to get a place, I would have been seething listening to yesterday's budget announcements.

6 o'clock

The €200 reduction in childcare fees will no doubt be welcomed by parents whose children are in facilities that are in core funding, but those whose children are not have been forgotten about. I get emails from parents every week who are petrified that their childcare provider will pull out of core funding and they will be left paying a second mortgage. There is a service in Knocklyon that was taken over by Tigers, one of the large corporate providers. Not only has there been a serious deterioration in the quality of the service since the takeover, with constant room closures, staff leaving because of the work environment and the removal of any flexibility in hours, but parents have also been left with the threat that the service will withdraw from core funding hanging over their heads. It is a source of constant anxiety for them. Another provider in my area, Chuckleberries, did withdraw from core funding in 2024 and fees are now upwards of €1,600 a month before the national childcare scheme, NCS. Just last week, parents and children attending the childcare facility in TU Dublin in Tallaght were informed that the service will be shutting its doors.

Where are those parents supposed to send their children now? There are just not enough spaces in Dublin South-West, and certainly not ones that most parents can afford. What did the childcare provisions in yesterday's budget do for those parents? It did absolutely nothing. The only way the Government can address the issues we are seeing in the early years sector, whether it is costs for parents, the availability of spaces or the pay and conditions for workers, is to take up the Labour Party's universal public childcare model. It cannot happen soon enough, but unfortunately we have seen absolutely no hope of that in this budget.

A couple of months from now, vulnerable households up and down the country are going to be feeling the impact of the Government's failure to provide targeted energy credits in yesterday's budget. I understand the measures taken in terms of the carbon tax and excise duty, but if we are honest, it is little more than tinkering around the edges. Is €43 in savings on carbon tax really going to move the dial for those relying on kerosene and spending €1,500 to fill their tank? The worst effects of Donald Trump's war in Iran are still being felt, and in the months ahead, it is more than likely that any reductions that come from those tax cuts yesterday will be eroded as prices carry on rising. The Government has undermined one of the key funding mechanisms for a just transition, and for helping less well-off households to reduce their dependence on fossil fuels and keep their homes warm, while at the same time offering only momentary, almost tokenistic support that will mean nothing once wholesale prices catch up.

It is perfectly reasonable to reduce the tax burden on the fuels that people rely on in an effort to soften the impact, of course, but that should have been accompanied by the Labour Party's proposal for a €400 energy credit for households earning less than €80,000 a year. The Government is chasing the price and that is a fool's errand. As my colleague, Deputy Nash, said in his budget speech yesterday, the answer to carbon tax is less carbon. It is about more heat pumps, solar panels, batteries, retrofits and electric vehicles. With Ireland leading the EU delegation at this year's COP, which is happening next month, there is nothing in this budget to suggest to me that this Government recognises the urgency with which we need to help households to decarbonise.

Then we have the public transport fare hikes. It would have taken €70 million a year to prevent public transport fares going up. We are spending €100 million a month at the moment subsidising petrol and diesel. People need support, of course, but why is it not being extended to public transport users? The Government made a big play about the income tax cuts announced in this budget, but for middle-income earners who use public transport to get to work, half of any gains they have made in terms of tax cuts will be swallowed up once those fare hikes come in in January. We are discouraging people from using public transport and prolonging our reliance on expensive and volatile fossil fuels in the middle of a cost-of-living and climate crisis.

The active travel budget of €360 million has not changed since 2020, meaning this amounts to a 22% decrease in real terms. In 2020, active travel actually amounted to 20% of the capital transport budget. Today, it is down to just 8.6%. If we were to take 20% of the 2027 capital transport budget, that would have been €835 million. Imagine the transformative effect that could have had for active travel schemes around the country. The Government could have prevented these fare hikes. It could have protected those at risk of energy poverty, transformed active travel around the country and shown that it is actually committed to reducing our exposure to fossil fuel price shocks, but it made a political choice not to.

Deputy Mark Wall: As my colleague said, it is said that politics is all about choices. Once again, this Government has demonstrated that it is not hearing the voices of so many people who call this country their home. I want to go through the choices made and highlight those that could have made a difference to these people. Like many representatives over the last 24 hours, I am deeply disappointed in the totally inadequate €3 increase in the living alone allowance. This payment had not been increased in a number of years, and the Government

thought that €3 was enough for older people living alone. Older people living alone are already facing higher rates of poverty, with at least 30% living in poverty compared to a national average of nearly 13%. The Government must also acknowledge that previous once-off measures were the only thing keeping this figure from increasing, and without these measures, the percentage would have risen to 40% living in poverty. A sum of €3 would not even buy a cup of coffee, let alone help older people with the cost of living.

Many older people will also be disappointed with the €10 increase in the State pension. At least €15, which is what the Labour Party had proposed in our alternative budget, was needed to help older people and carers with the cost of living. The €10 does not even match the rate of inflation. The domiciliary care allowance, DCA, was left out of any increases by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. As we all know in this House, it is a vital support for many families in keeping up with the additional costs of providing care to a child with additional needs. The question has got to be asked: why was this payment left out? Why is the Government leaving these families worse off? I have heard from hundreds of carers this week alone who are calling for urgent reform of this payment and on the Government now to seriously look at extending the age of eligibility for this payment from 16 to 18 years of age. The Minister for Social Protection will know I have been raising this issue continuously in the House and now I can share the opinions of almost 2,000 families who want and, most importantly, need this change.

Disabled people are facing additional costs in the thousands of euro, yet the Government only started the cost-of-disability payment at €9.62 per week. That is nowhere near enough and represents just 17% of what organisations like the Irish Wheelchair Association, IWA, were calling for. While I acknowledge that this is the beginning of a much-needed payment, it is starting at an extremely low base. In the Labour Party's own alternative budget, the payment would start at €30 per week. I also want to highlight that this payment is being missed out by a number of groups of disabled citizens. This is particularly important for older people who have recently moved from the disability allowance and the invalidity pension to the State pension. I have already been contacted by a number of older people who received long-term disability payments and are now not eligible for the new cost-of-disability payment. The Government must recognise that for many of these people, their disabilities are lifelong and do not disappear because they go on to the State pension.

It is also extremely worrying that the Government did not include households on the DCA as a qualifying payment for the cost-of-disability payment. This is a payment for children with severe disabilities and such caring households are faced with a lot of additional costs, particularly around accessing vital therapies and energy. This is an awful oversight by the Government and I urge the Minister for Social Protection to address these oversights.

I want to acknowledge the great work done by foster carers in this country, but, once again, the Government has forgotten about the great work that they do. There is nothing in this budget for those foster carers, and we know how important they are and the care they give right throughout the country at the moment.

Childcare, as the Minister knows, is a huge issue for many families in our area. Places like Newbridge and Kilcullen have become childcare deserts because of the lack of available spaces. County Kildare has the lowest level of community childcare provision in the State, with just eight providers. This is why I continue to call for the towns of Newbridge and Kilcullen to be prioritised as part of the new childcare pilot scheme that the Government has

announced. However, this budget does nothing for those who are without a childcare place. This is not just about affordability; it is also about the availability of places and it is, of course, also about the staff. Without addressing these issues in tandem with childcare fees, the Minister is not addressing childcare. While I welcome the reduction in childcare fees, this is far off the €200 per month childcare fees promised by this Government. This is a measure first proposed by the Labour Party, and I am glad to see many other parties copying our homework. However, we are the only party to have a fully costed plan for a public system which works in real partnership with providers, lowers childcare fees and pays a fair wage for educators.

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon): Despite a sustained period of global volatility, Ireland's economy continues to be strong and resilient. That is due to the hard work of the Irish people and, in the case of my own area of responsibility, that of farmers, fishermen and women, foresters and agri-food businesses across our rural and coastal communities. As a Government, we are tasked with using available resources to support households, boost resilience and strengthen our economy.

It has been a difficult year for the sector, and that is why budget 2027 will provide support in the here and now while also advancing key priorities for the sector in the year ahead. Alongside an allocation of €2.344 billion for my Department in 2027, between now and the end of the year we will put €77 million in much-needed support in farmers' pockets in response to the significant rise in the cost of critical inputs, such as green diesel and fertiliser. This will come through an extension of the fuel income support scheme for a further five months and €46.1 million to provide the maximum allocation possible under the EU exceptional aid measure for fertiliser.

That is a fact which seems to have been totally discounted by some Opposition spokespersons. Deputy Kenny – it is good to see him here – seems to be suggesting that we should defer paying the money that we can pay to farmers in the coming weeks and months to massage the figures for 2027, as he tries to mislead people that somehow there is less money in the budget allocation than there actually is.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I am not misleading anyone.

Deputy Martin Heydon: What is wanted by most farmers, even those who support Sinn Féin, is for us to pay those supports as soon as possible. I am determined to see that money reach their accounts before the year end.

Alongside these immediate supports, budget 2027 will be the latest step in delivering tangible action in priority areas such as water quality, animal health and welfare, generational renewal and on-farm investment. Animal health and welfare are inextricably linked to farmers' incomes. Chief among the issues impacting on farmers' incomes and well-being is the scourge of bovine tuberculosis, TB. Thankfully, backed by a significant financial allocation and buy-in from across all stakeholders, my new bovine TB action plan is working. Compared with this time last year, 10% fewer farm families are restricted by bovine TB. That is over 500 farm families who are not afflicted by a reactor and are not locked up right now but who would have been if we had not acted with the new plan.

Given that the plan is working and the numbers are declining, I have been able to increase the ceiling for compensation by an additional €500 per annum. That is an increase of 16%. The plan is still an intensive drain on my resources at €142 million for 2027, but it is an example of what happens when clear priorities are set, invested in and delivered.

I also want to acknowledge the support of the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance, Deputy Simon Harris, in supporting my proposal to reduce the VAT on non-oral respiratory vaccines, something which makes sense for both the animal and the farmer.

TAMS has also been one of my top priorities. In 2024, my Department spent €55 million on it. Next year, we will have a budget allocation of €93.35 million for it, our highest ever allocation for it and a really significant investment. It will allow me to support farmers in delivering across a range of areas like generational renewal, farm modernisation and farm safety. We are also halfway through the nitrates derogation extension. Delivering on water quality and the nutrient storage many farmers need are central parts of what TAMS is trying to do. With 400 different headings in TAMS and a number of competing priorities, I will continue to carefully manage this significant allocation.

I recognise the great enthusiasm among farmers for on-farm solar energy investments, and I will continue to engage with the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, in relation to improved alignment with SEAI schemes for on-farm solar energy investments.

I have always said that generational renewal is key to everything I do in the Department and, while the next CAP will obviously be one of the main vehicles to support my ambitions on generational renewal, I am not waiting around for that. The Commission on Generational Renewal in Farming made 31 recommendations. One of the key ones was the succession partnership tax credit. It is an incentive that was not getting the take-up I wanted. Working with the Tánaiste on the tax side, we have taken away the three-year wait at the start, which was a significant impediment, and doubled the annual ceiling from €5,000 to €10,000. This will sit alongside €470 million worth of tax supports provided annually, the biggest single intervention we make as a Government in generational renewal.

To drive improvements in water quality, in addition to the significant funding under TAMS for nutrient storage, I will be increasing funding for Farming for Water and other biodiversity European innovation partnerships, EIPs, from €10 million this year to €31.6 million next year. This will not only support those farm families participating in the schemes and undertaking significant action but will also allow me to open the Farming for Water EIP next year.

We also have supports for the tillage and livestock sectors, as well as funding secured for TAMS. There is the €20 million for the Berkery report. I am working with the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, in supporting our fisheries sector. I am also working closely with the Ministers of State, Deputies Collins and Grealish.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Timmy Dooley): I join colleagues in commending this budget to the House. Together with the Minister, Deputy Heydon, and my fellow Ministers of State, Deputies Grealish and Collins, we have been successful in achieving one of the largest budgets for the seafood sector, which falls under my responsibility. We have over €174 million this year. That includes, as the Minister

has rightly identified, an additional €20 million to support the work of the seafood programme, which was established under the auspices of an independent chair, Mr. Michael Berkery, to try to address the very significant loss to the sector as a result of quota cuts. The quotas were reduced to conserve the stocks and allow for their regeneration, a necessary conservation measure.

The Government, including the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste, the Minister, Deputy Heydon, me and others, was very clear that we could not allow the coastal communities and the sectors in which fishing plays an important part, not just in the fishing effort but also in processing and aquaculture, to suffer such a significant cut over a short period. I am pleased that we have an allocation of €20 million. We will work with the sector to identify schemes that put money into these communities and allow them to get through the difficult period during which the stocks will be recovering. I recognise the engagement that we have had through the Berkery report with the seafood sector stakeholders.

Another significant measure is that the Tánaiste, in his budget statement, was very helpful in recognising that there are some taxation measures that need to be addressed, and we will work with him on that. The Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Calleary, has also recognised that the fish assist scheme is out of kilter with the farm assist scheme, and he is going to introduce legislation fairly quickly to address the imbalance that exists.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): I am pleased to announce significant new investment in drug services, inclusion health and health and well-being programmes across the country. These investments will reduce health inequalities and strengthen prevention.

A key priority for me has been securing investment to begin the implementation of the new national drugs strategy, which I will be launching next week with the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill. The harm caused by drug and alcohol use is one of the most significant social challenges, and I have secured an additional €7 million to expand drug and alcohol services across the country and address priorities set out in the new drugs strategy. Ten per cent of this funding has been ring-fenced for prevention and early intervention initiatives for children and young people. A sum of €3.45 million will be provided to the HSE health regions to expand services and address gaps in rural areas. A sum of €2.4 million will be provided to drug and alcohol task forces so they can respond to emerging drug trends and local priorities. I compliment the drug and alcohol task forces on the great work they do.

Additional funding will expand the DRIVE project, supporting individuals and families affected by drug-related intimidation and violence. I am also providing over €1 million for initiatives to support people with a dual diagnosis and other vulnerable groups, while strengthening supports for women with complex needs.

Today's announcement also includes important investment in inclusion health. We are investing €1 million in the Traveller community health workforce and expanding the Brighter Beginnings programme for Traveller children.

In health and well-being, I have secured €2.2 million for Sláintecare Healthy Communities to continue supporting programmes in disadvantaged communities. Expanding social

prescribing and supporting initiatives such as women's sheds strengthen social connection. It is important to keep people in our community for as long as we can.

Further investment will support a new stop vaping service and new stop-smoking posts in our maternity services. I have secured €350,000 to support our new tobacco-free Ireland strategy, which will be launched in 2027. This will support research on tobacco and nicotine products with the aim of addressing our stubborn smoking rates.

We are also enhancing breastfeeding supports and supporting initiatives in specialist obesity services for children and adults. I will have two strategies completed by the end of the year, one on breastfeeding and one on obesity.

This budget represents a significant investment in prevention, public health and community well-being. It reflects our commitment to supporting children and young people, strengthening families, reducing inequalities and building healthier, stronger communities across Ireland.

Deputy Martin Kenny: Irish farmers have been left behind with this budget, with a reduction in current expenditure of €61 million. I refer the Minister to table 2 – Ministerial Vote Group Gross Voted Current Expenditure – in the budget documentation relating to his Department.

It says the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine will see a decrease of 3%, or €61 million. The line below for Department of Children, Disability and Equality shows an increase of 7.1%, or €491 million. Are we to assume, if it is wrong on agriculture, that it is wrong on children as well? Is it not an increase for the Department of children?

Deputy Martin Heydon: Do you not want farmers to get €77 million this year?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Minister, you had your say.

Deputy Martin Kenny: We are given documentation on budget day which sets out what the budget is. We read that documentation and it tells us there is a decrease of €61 million.

Deputy Martin Heydon: You are misleading the House.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I am not misleading the House. I am saying what is in your document that you produced and distributed to everyone in the Chamber yesterday.

Deputy Martin Heydon: You know well.

Deputy Martin Kenny: Irish agriculture has gone through a very difficult year with rising input costs and severe weather impacting the sector. The Minister has an opportunity to provide assistance for farmers at this difficult time. The reopening of the fuel support scheme is some assistance in the short term but he has failed to provide any fuel support for farmers or contractors in budget 2027. It is only until the end of this year. Farmers will still be driving tractors on 1 January and the failure of the Government to cut the carbon tax on green diesel will penalise and tax the work farmers and farm contractors do because they have no alternative

but to use tractors, machinery and green diesel. Not only has the Government not provided supports in relation to green diesel in 2027, but it will increase the cost of green diesel on 1 January with the reintroduction of the NORA levy.

The proposed measures around succession partnerships will do very little for generational renewal or to attract new generations to take up farming as a career. We need to show the next generation there is a future in farming and that there are opportunities to make a living from the land. They need support in getting established in the agriculture sector. That is why we in Sinn Féin proposed in our alternative budget the reintroduction of the installation aid payment of €10,000 for each newly qualified farmer, which the sector demanded and which the Minister indicated he would work towards. That has not happened in this budget.

Last year the Minister announced funding for the beef and sheep welfare schemes with payment rates of €75 and €13, only to row back on this promise a few weeks later, after the budget, reducing the rate for both schemes. The Minister has failed to increase funding for these schemes in budget 2027, with no additional funding for any of the livestock schemes. It gave a modest increase in funding to TAMS, even though the scheme has been oversubscribed in the last year, with many families failing to get their applications approved. The Minister said he is prioritising nutrient storage. That is unfair to those farmers who wish to invest in other areas of their farm.

The tillage sector is in crisis. We have had a difficult year, with late selling seasons, reduced yield due to drought and, to top it all off, a poor price for grain this year. We need to increase the number of hectares in tillage. Unfortunately, the small amount of additional money will do little to support the tillage sector. Irish farmers expected more from this budget but, yet again, they have been let down by Government.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: First, I want to speak on early years. I have made this point many times and it is important to make it again. When it comes to early years, cost for parents is just one element and issue we face. Cost is irrelevant when we do not have the capacity, the childcare places and, especially, the workforce. We do not have a professional workforce that we are retaining as we should. That always comes down to pay. The JLC is not working. The Minister, Deputy Foley, said yesterday about €50 million will be put in place next year. We will go to the JLC, the talks will begin and it may end up in the Labour Court. It might be 50 cent, 60 cent or a euro. It is an embarrassing way to treat a professional workforce of early years educators and school-age care practitioners. While €550 looks good, it is irrelevant to parents who cannot find a place and it is irrelevant when we do not have the workforce. We have turnover rates in some counties of up to 50%. We need to sort pay, terms and conditions. That will open rooms that are closed and will support capacity by creating places as quickly as possible. It is also important to say it is unclear how many parents will benefit and actually pay €550 from September next year. I noted yesterday the Minister was not in a position to say how many parents would benefit. That is concerning

Childminder's tax relief looks welcome. It is something but it ignores the issue that childminders are leaving the sector. There are difficulties with the regulations and if we do not sort those difficulties, childminders will not register and we need not worry about a €5,000 tax relief.

Foster carers are disappointed with this budget. It looks like the Minister and Department looked at the cheapest measure in terms of extending the foster care allowance to 18-year-olds in second level education. That is a tiny cohort. We still do not have a State pension for foster carers. It is deeply unacceptable. We ask people to open their homes to look after the State's most vulnerable children and do the State's job for it. At the end of the day, they do not even have a State pension.

In relation to the mother and baby institutions scheme, the money is there and we should expand it and ensure every survivor receives some support and recognition through the scheme.

Minister for Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Norma Foley): I am pleased to outline key elements of the budget 2027 allocation for the Department of Children, Disability and Equality. I thank the Minister of State with responsibility for disability, Deputy Higgins; the Department's Secretary General, Kevin McCarthy; and all the senior officials in the Department who have worked hard with me on negotiating this budget of over €7.5 billion.

This year sees the disability budget exceed €4 billion for the very first time, which is an increase of €259 million on last year. Another €1.6 billion has been allocated to early learning and childcare funding, an increase of €164 million. The allocation for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, has been increased by €66 million to over €1.4 billion. This brings the overall figure allocated to the Department to over €7.5 billion, up 7% or over €527 million, on budget 2026.

Laghdóidh an cháinainéis seo an costas atá ar chúram leanaí do theaghlaigh. Is príomhbheart chostas maireachtála é sin. Cuirfidh cáinainéis 2027 maoiniú breise ar fáil chun feabhas a chur ar shaol na ndaoine atá faoi mhíchumas. Cuirfidh sí borradh faoi na seirbhísí do leanaí agus dhaoine óga a chuireann Tusla agus na hionaid acmhainne teaghlaigh ar fáil.

This budget will deliver on the early learning and care vision of the 3 A's: affordability, access to places and achievement of quality. The budget will make a real difference to parents and families. From those on lowest incomes to those facing highest fees, they will feel the difference in their pockets. We are increasing the national childcare scheme universal subsidy, which will save thousands of euro for many parents of children in early years and junior and senior infants. We are cutting the maximum fees that providers can charge, which will benefit some parents of children in preschool and school-age childcare services who pay the highest fees. I am making further changes to the income assessed thresholds for the national childcare scheme for parents on the lowest incomes. This is an anti-poverty measure which will benefit over 71,000 children.

The budget will support over 4,600 providers in core funding, with a further 35% increase of €175 million. This will bring the State's funding investment for the next programme year to €658 million.

In terms of achieving high-quality service and supporting early years educators, I have ring-fenced more than €50 million to support increases in pay for those who work in the sector.

The budget extends the access and inclusion model, which currently supports children with additional needs in the early years and education programme, to those aged under three. The number of services supporting children at risk of educational disadvantage under the equal start scheme will also increase.

Moving on, I will provide an overview of key measures for disabled people and their families. Additional funding of €269 million in budget 2027 will bring the total to over €4.1 billion. We are providing residential places for over 9,000 people and will deliver 212 new residential places for people with disabilities.

There will also be enhanced new placements and enhanced existing residential packages. There will be Tusla residential places for young people with disabilities, fair deal top-ups for older people with disabilities in nursing homes and funding for people with disabilities aged under 65 to move out of nursing homes. This amounts to 489 additional and enhanced residential placements and supports funded in budget 2027. That is a significant increase on the numbers that were made available last year, in particular for new residential placements. Funding will also be provided in budget 2027 for 1,500 new day service places for people with disabilities. This year we are recruiting over 1,000 extra staff in the disability sector and next year we will hire another 930 staff, bringing the disability workforce to approximately 24,500 people by the end of next year.

In this budget, we have also secured funding for 150 more staff for children's disability network teams to provide more therapy services to children with disabilities. Budget 2027 also provides funding for the development of two more community neuro rehabilitation teams. These teams change the lives of people who have suffered strokes or accidents or have lost neuro function through illness.

Supporting our most vulnerable children is a key objective for me as Minister. Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, will be hiring an additional 322 staff in 2027, bringing its total staff to 6,257, which includes 1,816 social workers and 1,473 social care workers. I am also very pleased to announce that there is funding in budget 2027 for a further ten family resource centres, in addition to the 15 I have opened in the past year and a half, bringing the network to 146.

We are very fortunate in Ireland to have a committed group of around 3,500 foster carers who look after children on behalf of the State. In this budget, I have made provision to allow foster carers to continue to be paid the foster care allowance rate for young people in their care who are in secondary school until their 19th rather than their 18th birthday, as is the case at present. A small number of young people may struggle in the transition from care to aftercare and they do not have the family backup that their peers may have to support them. Therefore, in the budget I will provide these young people with a one-year transitional aftercare allowance of €200 per week if they are not in education, training or employment so as to allow them to meet their day-to-day living and accommodation costs as they transition to independent adulthood.

This budget will also allow Tusla to double the number of multidisciplinary therapy teams from six to 12. We are putting in place support teams for foster carers, an issue consistently raised by those parents. Support teams will be in place to ensure that where there is a danger of a breakdown of a placement with a foster carer, support will be provided directly to them. We are also providing the necessary funding in budget 2027 to provide 26 special care beds for the small number of extremely vulnerable children in special care. There is funding in the budget for 33 more staff in Oberstown and this increase in staff will allow for more places to be opened.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister is sharing time with the Minister of State, Deputy Smyth.

Deputy Norma Foley: Sorry, I did not realise I was sharing time. That is my mistake. Those are some, but not all, of the elements in the budget.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I welcome a group of students in the Gallery who are guests of Deputy Cormac Devlin. You are very welcome. I hope you enjoy your time here in Leinster House and the debate.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Niamh Smyth): I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for the opportunity to speak about budget 2027, in particular the measures that support artificial intelligence, digital transformation and a regulatory framework that underpins trust, innovation and competitiveness across our economy. Artificial intelligence presents one of the greatest opportunities for productivity, competitiveness and economic growth. That is why I am particularly delighted to welcome the additional €2.3 million provided for our national AI office, bringing its total allocation to €3.8 million for the full year of operation.

The AI office, established on 31 July 2026, has already made significant progress in putting in place the structures, expertise and assistance required to implement Ireland's obligations under the EU AI Act. This additional investment will allow the office to significantly expand its specialist capacity across technical, regulatory, legal, communications and compliance functions. As implementation of the AI Act progresses, the office will continue to act as Ireland's central co-ordinating authority, ensuring that we have the expertise and capabilities required to support innovation while safeguarding citizens and consumers.

A key priority for 2027 will be the development of Ireland's national AI regulatory sandbox. The sandbox will provide a controlled environment where businesses can test and develop innovative AI solutions while engaging with regulators and understanding how the new rules will apply in practice. It will help to accelerate responsible AI adoption, support trustworthy innovation and provide greater certainty for businesses developing and deploying AI technologies.

Of course, AI literacy will be a central, key role in the office's work in the year ahead. As AI becomes increasingly embedded in workplaces, public services and everyday life, it is essential that businesses, workers and citizens have the knowledge and confidence to use these technologies safely and effectively. Budget 2027 provides the resources needed to develop AI literacy initiatives and build national capability, ensuring Ireland is well placed to benefit from the opportunities that artificial intelligence can bring.

The effectiveness of our regulatory programme is key to ensuring a stable, proportionate and innovation-friendly regulatory environment for the benefit of businesses, workers and consumers. A well-resourced and predictable regulatory system is also an important factor in Ireland's attractiveness as a location for investment, helping to provide certainty for businesses while maintaining high standards of consumer protection and market integrity. Based on that foundation, businesses can innovate and grow with confidence.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: Cuirim fáilte roimh na mic léinn, go mór mór mo dheirfiúr, Grace. Tá sé soiléir inniu nach ndearna an buiséad seo mórán do mo Dháilcheantar ná do Dháilcheantair eile.

In Dublin Mid-West, our bus services remain unreliable, with key peak-time routes frequently cancelled. Recruitment is taking too long and despite efforts to recruit drivers from South Africa, employment has been delayed because issues were not resolved in advance. I could go on about the buses, but I want to focus on our rail service. Peak-time trains serving Adamstown, Kishoge and Clondalkin are routinely overcrowded. I have received reports of multiple passengers fainting after squeezing onto packed trains, including one pregnant woman. It is not acceptable, yet we are told we must wait until next year for additional capacity in the form of second-hand carriages because the new battery electric carriages sitting in Inchicore awaiting safety clearance are earmarked for the northern commuter line. Our area must wait for the older diesel carriages to be cascaded down so the train lengths can be increased marginally. Of course, that is a temporary solution. It will not address the longer term challenge, when over 10,000 additional homes in the immediate vicinity are already in the pipeline.

We need DART+ South West, yet that project has been effectively pushed back by five years. The entire situation is frustrating for my constituents because all of this was foreseeable. Over a decade ago, a number of Independent councillors and I tabled hundreds of motions seeking to tie in housing delivery to transport, infrastructure, schools, playing pitches and community facilities. These motions were voted down at the time by an alliance of Sinn Féin, Labour, the Social Democrats and, at times, People Before Profit councillors on the grounds that they might delay housing delivery. That is an argument, but we are supposed to be building communities as well as housing. These councillors trusted Government agencies to deliver the supporting infrastructure. Our appeals to An Bord Pleanála were ignored. The Government has now instructed South Dublin County Council and other councils to rezone even more land, while councillors of all parties continue to doff the cap and approve additional zoning along with a rail line that already lacks capacity at a time when the city centre remains underdeveloped. Large software and pharmaceutical employers continue to concentrate in Dublin, placing even greater pressure on housing and social infrastructure.

I have little patience for Government or Opposition platitudes on this issue. To be clear, it is the Government that had the power to allocate more resources to public services in this budget and, unfortunately, chose not to. The same pattern is evident in policing. For years, I have called for meaningful consequences for serious antisocial behaviour, alongside greater parental responsibility, increased Garda resources and enhanced juvenile support. What has happened instead? While Garda numbers are increasing in the Dublin metropolitan region west, which covers Lucan, Ronanstown, Clondalkin and Rathcoole, the population is growing just as rapidly, if not faster.

I already highlighted a local school where bike thefts were reported and gardaí could not respond because a patrol car was tied up at the courts.

All across the service, resources are stretched. People understand they cannot have Garda patrols on every street but they expect a prompt follow-up and visible enforcement and investigations are struggling under the sheer volume. Meanwhile, many offenders appear to

commit repeated assaults, robberies and acts of intimidation before facing meaningful intervention.

I notice criminals have become more brazen and the excellent work of our gardaí is being undermined by a lack of personnel, vehicles and equipment. That is why we have to focus more on budgets and service delivery. People ultimately pay for these failures, one way or another. I welcome the comments from the Minister for justice regarding greater use of video evidence and pre-recorded statements to reduce Garda time spent attending court. That approach deserves a lot of attention but it has not happened yet.

Childcare is another area where this budget falls short. There have been measures to reduce costs for parents which are welcome but there is little to support providers themselves. The longer established childcare operators I mentioned yesterday are increasingly finding participation in schemes financially challenging, so they are pulling out of them. There is no meaningful plan to encourage new providers to enter the market to keep the existing provision open, or as I referenced the other day, to move towards some form of a State childcare network.

Healthcare faces similar problems in my constituency. There are still no meaningful incentives for GPs to establish practices in rapidly growing communities. In Adamstown, even the primary care centre has experienced delays in securing a GP presence. Services that were supposed to complement existing provision have in many cases simply been relocated from elsewhere. The story is the same in education. There is no serious focus on reducing class sizes. Primary school populations may be falling nationally but that is not what communities in Dublin West are experiencing with all the new housing. Especially at second level, parents are forced to send their children outside the community simply to obtain a school place.

There remains a shortage of public health nurses, occupational therapists, psychologists - you name it. When one area experiences a staffing shortfall, the resources are rarely redistributed equally, so communities are simply left to fall further behind with their developmental checks and necessary requirements. The common denominator is recruitment. To recruit and retain staff, we either need to increase the wages or reduce the cost of living.

I mentioned this budget was an inflationary budget that is going to push up the cost of living. We should instead examine targeted supports for key workers in high cost areas such as Dublin. It may be controversial and there may be a bit of pushback but no one can seriously argue that a teacher's salary stretches as far in Lucan as it does in Leitrim, or in Clondalkin as it does in Kerry. It is simply not true. Too many of our best trained workers leave Ireland and remain abroad. We are increasingly relying on overseas recruitment to fill critical vacancies. These workers make an important and vital contribution, particularly in healthcare, but has anyone ever properly evaluated the cost of losing locally trained nurses and teachers compared with the cost of recruiting internationally and then supporting family reunification, housing, education and public services costs? I would hazard a guess that it may be better value to retain the workers we have trained here while continuing to recruit internationally to expand capacity.

Budget 2027 includes a personal tax package worth roughly €1.3 billion, including the wider tax bands, increased tax credits, higher rent tax credits and a reduction in capital gains tax. Many people will welcome these measures; no one is going to refuse a tax reduction. However, responsible policymakers should ask whether some portion of that money could have been

invested differently. Even redirecting part of that package could have funded additional nurses, gardaí, teachers and essential public transport improvements.

Finally, I want to talk about the lack of a long-term vision. We have repeatedly introduced measures to help households cope with energy shocks but we have done far too little to ensure they do not happen again. At household level, we should dramatically expand retrofitting, solar panels and battery storage, including plug-in solar solutions where appropriate. We should remove unnecessary bureaucracy from grants, allow people to improve comfort in both winter and summer, and prioritise older residents living in inefficient homes, especially in social housing. However, we also need that vision extended beyond a single budget cycle. We need a serious national investment programme focused on offshore wind, grid expansion, interconnectors, battery storage, green hydrogen and wave and tidal energy. This is not going to be cheap. Grid upgrades alone could require between €10 billion and €20 billion and should be fast-tracked. Offshore wind will require a much greater investment, and the State could partner with private investors to retain a share of the resulting returns.

The other infrastructure - interconnectors and hydrogen investments - could run into tens of billions more. However, it is not monopoly money. If you borrow for it, you can imagine a future where Ireland saves those billions annually on imported fossil fuels. It would earn revenue from clean energy exports, would support energy intensive industries and would have sufficient renewable capacity to power data centres and get that money without controversy. Depending on assumptions, the payback period could be between ten and 25 years. It is an investment to reduce energy bills and create revenue for services and wages. It is a no-brainer. We are talking about €19 billion currently being spent but it needs to be much more and much faster. We can all talk for Ireland but we need to act for Ireland. We need to be bolder, bigger and build the infrastructure future generations will thank us for, because right now, they are going to curse us.

Minister for Education and Youth (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): Tá áthas orm a bheith anseo chun labhairt faoi bhuiséad 2027 mar a bhaineann sé leis an Roinn Oideachais agus Óige. While we are here today to discuss the important education measures in budget 2027, I wish to begin by extending my congratulations to the almost 74,000 candidates who received the results of their junior cycle examinations today. It is a milestone for each and every one of those students, so well done and congratulations to them.

In recent years, demand for education services has increased significantly. Since being appointed Minister for Education and Youth, my priority has been to move away from a reliance on annual supplementary funding and instead to secure a stable funding base that properly reflects the real cost of delivering education to 1 million young people across 4,000 schools and youth services in Ireland.

Having secured €646 million in funding earlier this year, I am now pleased to have secured an additional €712 million for 2027, bringing the Department's overall budget to €14.4 billion for 2027. This funding will put the Department on a more stable financial footing, allowing continued investment in our education and youth services. It will also help meet growing demand for special educational supports, assist schools to meet additional costs and provide more targeted resources for our children and young people.

The increased budget reflects the priority this Government affords to our education system. The programme for Government is ambitious in this regard and among my priorities to be progressed in the coming months is to deliver on our commitment to reduce class sizes. Officials in my Department are actively working to ensure capital funding will be available to ensure reducing the pupil-teacher ratio can be delivered.

One of the most significant changes in education over the past decade has been the rapid growth in demand for special educational supports. I have secured an increase of over €3.8 billion for 2027 to further strengthen supports for our children and young people with additional needs. This funding will pay for an additional 1,350 special education teachers and 2,340 special needs assistants, SNAs. In 2027, there will be over 52,000 dedicated staff to support children with special educational needs in our schools. This is the highest ever level of resourcing for special education.

Government recognises schools face increasing running costs and to meet this need, a total of €53 million is being provided for a permanent increase in mainstream capitation grant funding for our schools. This will see an increase in the mainstream capitation grant rate paid to primary schools of €68 per pupil from €274 to €342, and in post-primary schools of €40 per student from €406 to €446. Over the past four budgets, this has resulted in an increase of almost 87% in main capitation rates paid to primary schools and 41% paid to post-primary schools. Improvements to energy efficiency also help to reduce costs for our schools. In this regard, I will be announcing the next tranche of projects under the climate action summer works scheme shortly.

Education has the power to break cycles of disadvantage and to create opportunities for future generations. That is why an additional €6 million is being provided to expand the DEIS plus scheme. It will build on the existing DEIS policy framework by providing a targeted set of supports to schools with the highest concentration of children and young people at risk of educational disadvantage.

The home school community liaison scheme aims to improve education outcomes for students most at risk of experiencing attendance and participation issues in school. The budget provides an additional €9 million in funding for a targeted expansion of this scheme to support young people in schools.

The budget also provides funding to implement the programme for Government commitment to provide free period products in all of our schools.

As the OECD's Education at a Glance report stated last week, Ireland's teaching profession compares exceptionally well internationally. There are now more qualified teachers - 79,000 - working in our schools than at any point in the history of the State. Budget 2027 is delivering a further 1,617 teaching posts, including 810 additional posts at primary school level, including special schools, and an additional 807 teachers at post-primary level.

Earlier this year at the teacher union conferences, I spoke about how Ireland's education system has delivered world-class outcomes, adapted to changing societal needs and maintained a reputation that is recognised and envied internationally. I promised then to help school leaders focus on teaching and learning and, as part of budget 2027, I secured funding of €11 million for enhanced school leadership, including additional deputy principals in primary and post-primary schools for the 2027-28 school year. This funding recognises the vital role that

school leadership plays in improving educational outcomes by creating a positive school environment as well as motivating and empowering educators and learners within their school communities. This budget also provides funding to support small school clusters and pilot projects with school management bodies to support schools.

Our youth services are absolutely critical. In line with the commitment in the programme for Government relating to youth services, the budget is increasing the level of funding being made in this area by an additional €7 million in current funding and another €4 million in capital funding in 2027. This builds on the previous budget and reflects our commitment to continuing to strengthen our youth sector. The funding will sustain and expand existing youth services and support essential upgrades to youth facilities. We also have funding of €21 million for senior cycle reform.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth (Deputy Michael Moynihan): I congratulate the junior certificate students who got their results today and wish them the very best of luck. It is one step on the journey through school. I wish them the very best today and into the future in the decisions they make whether it is into transition year or on to fifth year.

Over the past year and a half, I have met with multiple children, families and school communities across the country and have seen at first hand how transformative the education environment can be. Those conversations I have had with schools, families and children have turned into action today in budget 2027 with a record €3.8 billion investment in special education. A decade ago, almost 70,000 children were receiving special education supports. Today, that number has grown to about 250,000 children and young people. Between September 2025 and September 2026 alone, we sanctioned almost 1,000 special classes and nine special schools. That is a record level of investment by any yardstick. I thank the school communities, leadership and the patron bodies that have engaged with us so fundamentally in relation to expanding special education right across the school services.

While the scale of growth has brought challenges, this is real progress in increasing specialised provision. Building on this, budget 2027 includes funding for 1,353 additional special education teachers and 2,339 extra special needs assistants, SNAs. This means that in 2027, we will have 24,000 special education teachers and 28,000 special needs assistants in our education system. I pay tribute to all of them who do such dedicated work, both the special education teachers and the special needs assistants, because special education would not work without their commitment and dedication. This will ensure that every student gets the right support in the right setting. I recognise that training for our teachers in special education needs is essential, so we will be funding a new accelerated training course in inclusive education next year. This will be key in developing expertise across all schools.

We also want to bring crucial therapies right to the classroom. A sum of €24 million has been provided for in the education therapy service. The Minister, Deputy Naughton, and I have been committed over the last while to support the further roll-out and graduated expansion of speech and language and occupational therapists into mainstream schools. I am also pleased to say that we have secured continuing funding of €92 million for the summer programme, more than double what it was just four years ago.

As Members all know, October is Dyslexia Awareness Month and this year the theme is effective teaching changes lives. As part of budget 2027, I am pleased to say that I have received funding for three key initiatives to help support young people with dyslexia. The first is the Literacy Association of Ireland's pilot programme with graduates of DCU's master of education in dyslexia which will initially support up to 40 schools to enhance the quality of literacy teaching.

We know that for high-quality teaching professional learning is key to ensuring good outcomes for students in 2027. We are going to introduce a new accelerated course on inclusive education to include a focus on dyslexia. A revised assistive technology scheme, which will remove the barriers in accessing the curriculum for children with dyslexia, will soon be launched. Something that many families have been raising with us over the last while is to ensure that the assistive technology scheme is launched.

There are a number of other major initiatives within the budget to ensure that we have specialised education at the very heart of Government. We will continue to invest and work with all of the education partners across the system to ensure the best outcomes for children.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I congratulate the junior certificate students as well and wish them the very best for the future.

Budget 2027 was an opportunity. It was an opportunity to finally put our children first and fix the cracks in our education system, but instead the Government has delivered a budget that fails on every single front. It fails our children, schools and parents.

We are now two years on from a promise contained in the programme for Government to cut the pupil-teacher ratio to 19:1. That promise has not been delivered. For four years, we have had no movement on it. Instead, the children of Ireland are guaranteed to continue to be in the largest class sizes in the European Union right into 2028. The reality of this budget is that the Government has refused to invest in reducing supersized classes for the fourth successive year. We should think about what that means. It means that children are being crowded out. It means that the vast majority of children with additional needs who attend mainstream classes are not getting the support they deserve because teachers are stretched to breaking point. It means that every child is denied the opportunity of the attention they deserve. We know that European average is 19:1. The Government committed to that target. Two years into its term, it has failed to deliver. It could have cut the ratio and benefited every child in every classroom. It chose not to. Budget 2027 fails our children.

While the classroom is overcrowded, the school bank account is empty. Schools are chronically underfunded. We see it every day with parents being asked to plug the gaps with voluntary contributions and fundraising. Schools should not have to run cake sales to cover basic running costs like heating, electricity and insurance.

Likewise, families are now crucified with the cost of digital devices. The Minister's response was to write a letter. Sinn Féin proposed real solutions such as increases to capitation grants, ancillary and ICT grants - nothing from the Government - and extending State insurance to all public schools. The capitation increases announced in this budget will be wiped out quickly by the rising cost of running schools.

Let us specifically talk about the youth services budget. The Government tells us that it cares about young people but the numbers tell a very different story. Sinn Féin provided €27 million for youth services. That was what those on the front line said that they needed. What did the Government provide? Just €11 million; less than half of that. That is not a commitment to our youth. That is a token gesture and a drop in the ocean compared to what is needed.

I want to raise an issue that the Minister did not mention. It is absolutely disgraceful that the plan is to hike up school transport fees back to 2021 levels at a time when so many people are locked out of that service. It is an absolute disgrace.

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I am very pleased to announce that I have been able to secure €5.9 billion for the justice sector for 2027. This will allow me to deliver a number of important priorities such as getting more gardaí on our streets, tackling the scourge of domestic violence and putting in place a fair and firm immigration system. I am also pleased to be able to announce that I have secured an historic investment in access to justice initiatives in the area of civil legal aid.

7 o'clock

Before I talk about the moneys we have secured, I will talk about savings that have been achieved in the Department through decisions made by me and the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy. The House will be aware that prior to me and the Minister of State coming into the Department, very significant spending was ongoing for accommodation for beneficiaries of temporary protection and international protection applicants. In 2024, Ukrainian accommodation costs were €1.16 billion. As a result of decisions made by the Minister of State and me, in 2026, that allocation went down to €606 million. We are forecasting further savings of €430 million next year such that the budget requirement for Ukrainian accommodation next year will be €177 million. Considering it was €1.16 billion in 2024, it is a significant saving. We have also been able to achieve that while ensuring we have not seen numbers of homeless Ukrainian people. We have done it through putting in place a mechanism to allow Ukrainian people to stand on their own two feet and secure and pay for their own accommodation.

Similarly, there have been significant savings in international protection accommodation. In 2025, the State spent €1.27 billion on international protection accommodation. Next year, for the first time in three years, we are budgeting costs that will be less than €1 billion and I think we will see even greater savings than that. The reason we have been able to do that is because of efficiencies in the processing system that the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, and I have put in place to ensure that applicants for international protection can have their applications determined in a prompt fashion. We have a fair migration system when it comes to international protection but it also is now firm. That is resulting in greater efficiencies and we are seeing the number of people seeking international protection declining.

One of my priorities is to ensure we see more gardaí on the streets. A visible presence of gardaí not only prevents crime but also provides the community with a greater sense of protection. The Garda budget of €2.58 billion will fund the recruitment of up to 1,000 new Garda trainees and includes €180 million in funding for overtime to meet the sustained demands of visible policing in our communities. In addition, capital funding of €183 million will provide new stations and hubs to further strengthen Garda services and facilities across the country.

I am acutely aware of the capacity constraints in our prisons - our prisons at present are at 114% capacity - and the challenges that can pose for prison officers, Irish prison staff and the prisoners themselves. An additional €36 million will allow for the recruitment of up to 220 prison officers and additional staff, along with a €20 million increase in funding to allow for 400,000 additional staff hours in our prisons. Furthermore, the investment of €95 million in capital funding will be used to deliver on my commitment to accelerate the delivery of 1,500 additional prison spaces by 2031.

In this budget, I have also secured €72.5 million in funding for the Probation Service to ensure we will also have effective community-based sanctions and other alternatives to custodial sentences. The Minister of State, Deputy Ardagh, and I have secured an €11.5 million increase for youth diversion projects bringing the total core funding to virtually €50 million. This represents a 30% increase in funding. This increase in youth justice funding will allow us to continue with the full-year costs of 92 youth diversion projects on a nationwide basis. The funding will also support the cross-sectoral need to address serious and prolific youth offending and provide for specific initiatives designed to address unsafe driving among young people, including the introduction of the reckless driving prevention pilot programme.

I have secured a historic investment in access to justice measures, including €14.5 million in funding to commence the implementation of key civil legal aid reforms that will include increases to financial eligibility thresholds. These were recommendations made by the former Chief Justice, Mr. Justice Frank Clarke, in his report on civil legal aid. The continued reform of our civil and criminal legal aid systems will ensure people can obtain legal representation when needed and supports this Government's commitment to access to justice for all. I have secured a 67% increase in funding to the free legal advice centres and €74.6 million has been secured for the Legal Aid Board. Overall, this represents an investment of over €90 million in access to justice initiatives, the highest investment in the history of the State in respect of civil legal aid.

Strengthening our borders and ensuring that we have a robust, rules-based immigration system have been priorities for me and the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy. This year, I have secured a budget of €9.5 million to provide funding for immigration and international protection programmes, including the removal of people who do not have a right to reside in the State. There will also be increased investment in additional staffing and resources across the immigration system with the aim of driving faster processing times, strengthening returns and making the system more efficient.

As a Government, we are committed in our unwavering support of zero tolerance of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, DSGBV, in our society. Funding has been increased to €84 million to support Cuan and services working to tackle DSGBV and the implementation of our zero tolerance strategy. This funding will provide more refuge spaces for families fleeing domestic violence.

The Ministers of State, Deputies Brophy and Ardagh, and I are committed to ensuring that the funding secured in budget 2027 will be spent building on the progress delivered this year across the justice sector while also meeting future commitments set out in the programme for Government. The moneys secured will continue to build a safer and more secure Ireland.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Colm Brophy): This budget ensures that we have a firm, fair and effective immigration system. It is so important to me and the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, that the system represents value for money.

As has been alluded to already, significant savings of €430 million have been made in the Ukrainian accommodation system as Ukrainians continue to integrate into Irish society and move out of temporary accommodation. My Department continues to lead on the design and delivery of exit pathways in line with EU developments while ensuring that Ireland continues to meet its humanitarian obligations in the area of temporary protection.

In relation to international protection accommodation services, IPAS, we have seen a reduction of €252 million in the budget allocation. This reflects continuing efforts made in the development of a more sustainable, efficient and cost-effective international protection accommodation system which has been at the core of the work carried out by the Minister and I since taking office. From my perspective, I am particularly pleased that we will be investing €10.9 million in funding for migrant and community integration initiatives enabling and improving community connections all across Ireland. This money will be spent right throughout Ireland. I have also secured continued investment in additional staffing and resources across the immigration system which will drive faster processing times, particularly in areas such as visa processing, permission renewals and the all-important area of citizenship. I want to make the system more efficient.

Furthermore, this budget includes an increased allocation of €10 million to the Tribunal for Asylum and Returns Appeals, TARA, the new international protection appeals body established earlier this year under the EU asylum and migration pact. This increased funding will allow us to accelerate the processing of appeals in the same way we have already done with the processing of initial applications. In doing this, we will also have secured a 46% increase in the funding for the independent human rights monitoring mechanism.

The budget allocation of €9.5 million for immigration and international protection programmes includes essential programmes for the removal of non-nationals who no longer have a right to reside in the State.

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy James Browne): I welcome the opportunity to address the House on budget 2027 and the unprecedented investment this Government is making through the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

This budget provides my Vote group with a record funding allocation of €11.9 billion reflecting the priority this Government places on housing delivery and related infrastructure development. The allocation will also fund vital expenditure in the areas of local government, Met Éireann and heritage, as well as in Tailte Éireann and An Coimisiún Toghcháin, which are important elements of my Department's Vote group.

Housing remains the Government's foremost priority. The simple reality is that we must continue to drive increased housing supply at scale to support economic growth and ensure that every household can obtain secure and affordable housing. We have made substantial and serious progress on this front, with record levels of public housing delivery and a growing

pipeline of new homes across the country. However, we know that much more remains to be done. That is why budget 2027 provides €7.75 billion in Exchequer funding for housing, comprising €5.6 billion in capital funding and €2.2 billion in current funding.

We are allocating over €3 billion of capital funding to support the delivery of approximately 12,000 new social homes, building on the strongest programme of social housing construction in the history of the State.

At the same time, we are continuing to tackle affordability challenges for aspiring homeowners and renters. Budget 2027 provides over €1 billion to support the delivery of 15,000 starter home supports through the first home scheme, the affordable purchase and cost rental schemes and the help to buy initiative. These supports are making a real difference, helping working households to access secure and affordable rental accommodation or to buy their first home. They are complemented by a number of important changes which this budget will introduce on the taxation side. The increase of €5,000 in the amount which can be claimed under the help to buy scheme will provide a significant boost to prospective first-time buyers and send a strong signal to home builders. Raising the rent tax credit to €1,150 for a single person and €2,300 for a couple will provide additional relief to those in the private rental market. In this context, I wish to highlight the 13% increase in funding provided to the Residential Tenancies Board to enhance its systems and improve protections for renters. This budget also provides total funding of €593 million for homeless accommodation in order that we can continue to honour the Government commitment to offer accommodation to all at risk of homelessness. This includes ring-fenced funding for the child and family homelessness action plan and the prevention framework, two critical pieces of work.

It is clear that increasing housing supply requires investment in our underlying infrastructure. One of the most significant provisions in this budget is the allocation of €586 million for housing-enabling infrastructure. This includes almost €350 million for the towns and cities regeneration investment fund and €225 million for the housing activation office and the housing infrastructure investment fund to remove barriers to development and unlock housing capacity across the country. The first round of housing infrastructure investment fund projects is expected to unlock lands capable of delivering tens of thousands of homes and this demonstrates clearly that investment in infrastructure is investment in housing supply. This is especially true of water infrastructure and budget 2027 includes an allocation of €2.35 billion for Uisce Éireann, comprising almost €1.5 billion in capital investment and €879 million in current funding. This allocation will support the continued operation, maintenance and upgrading of our national water and wastewater network. It will also fund new and expanded treatment plants, increase network capacity and improve environmental performance. Most importantly, it will support housing development by ensuring that critical water infrastructure is available where homes are needed. Alongside this investment, we are providing a further €224 million for wider water services programmes. This includes support for group water schemes and water quality initiatives throughout the country. These investments are about protecting public health, safeguarding the environment, strengthening climate resilience and supporting economic and population growth in communities across Ireland.

This budget recognises the importance of efficient delivery mechanisms. We are allocating €119 million for planning, including significant additional resources for local authority planning services and for An Coimisiún Pleanála, ensuring that the planning system has the

capacity to support housing growth and drive implementation of reform. This budget reflects a Government determination to maintain the momentum that we have started to build. It provides resources to translate plans and targets into homes and infrastructure. The focus now must be on delivery. I look forward to working with colleagues across Government, local authorities, agencies, approved housing bodies, AHBs, Uisce Éireann and the wider stakeholder group to ensure that these investments deliver real results for people across the country.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy John Cummins): Yesterday's budget demonstrates this Government's continuing commitment to delivering increased housing supply and ensuring that the benefits of our economic progress are felt in every part of the country. As Minister of State with responsibility for local government and planning, I particularly welcome the significant investments in these areas secured in budget 2027. These investments will strengthen local government, build capacity across the planning system and support housing and infrastructure delivery.

We are providing €755 million through the local government fund to ensure our local authorities have the resources they need to support communities, maintain vital services and invest in our future. This Government recognises that local authorities are the engine room of public service delivery. Budget 2027 will strengthen their capacity to do just that. We are continuing our commitment to fairness through the local property tax, LPT, equalisation fund, ensuring that every county can continue to provide high-quality services regardless of the strength of its LPT base. We are also providing substantial support towards local authority staffing costs, ensuring councils have the resources they need to deliver projects and services at a local level. The budget will also enable us to support local authority innovation initiatives and drive actions recommended by the local democracy task force. This programme of work will improve the efficiency and effectiveness of local government and enhance democratic accountability and engagement at a local level.

In the context of planning, this budget is about preparing for the future. If we are serious about building more homes, supporting economic growth and delivering critical infrastructure, we need a planning system that is properly resourced. That is why we are allocating €119 million to this area, including additional resources for An Coimisiún Pleanála and local authority planning departments. This funding will enable us to sustain and build on the substantial reforms and service improvements delivered in recent years. It will help to speed up decision-making, enhance consistency and clarity for those engaging with the planning system and support the delivery of housing and critical infrastructure. Ultimately, our intent is to ensure that our planning system is equipped to meet the challenges of a growing Ireland.

In budget 2027, we are strengthening local government, supporting our planning system and investing in the people and services that make a real difference in communities right across this country. I look forward to working with all colleagues across local government and planning sections to deliver stronger and better services for our communities and build the homes and infrastructure that we need right across the country.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan): I am delighted to confirm that the Minister for housing, Deputy Browne, and I have secured a significant increase for both the water quality section

within the Department and also the heritage section, including nature and biodiversity. Starting with water quality, a key goal of this Government and a key programme for Government commitment is to improve water quality and we have secured a budget of €86 million to do this throughout Ireland. This is a €14 million increase on last year and much of that will go towards the farming for water European innovation partnership, EIP. Under this programme the river basin management service within the Department, along with farmers the length and breadth of Ireland, will put in place key measures on farms to improve water quality throughout Ireland. The key here is participation at a community level. This is something that will not just improve the ecological status of our water but it will also improve drinking and bathing water right across Ireland. This is a key measure.

I also want to speak to the increase in our heritage budget. In this budget we have secured a €206 million fund for heritage. This is the first time the division has gone over €200 million and it represents a fourfold increase since 2020. That is something that we, as a team, are incredibly proud of because it means we can invest in our built heritage. We can invest in the iconic churches, castles and abbeys right across the length and breadth of Ireland to ensure that they are sound and remain secure and we can renovate them so that they can be enjoyed by the public for years to come. It also means that we can invest in our national monuments. Again, these are some of the most famous and well-known visitor attractions across the length of Ireland. We are establishing funds that communities and local authorities can apply for to ensure that these extraordinary monuments, these absolute beacons of our heritage, can be protected and secured for years to come.

We also have the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, and the funding secured for this service has increased to €112 million. This represents a fivefold increase for nature since 2019. This is extraordinary and it proves that this Government is committed to protecting nature and species and to nature restoration. The NPWS and its team on the ground has proven its value over the last number of years in particular, not just in enhancing our national parks across the country, which we are incredibly proud of, but also in protecting species and restoring habitats on the ground. I commend the front-line staff on their extraordinary dedication, especially over the past 12 months when we have seen the teams on the ground intervene to tackle invasive species.

Just recently in Ringaskiddy they located an Asian hornet nest which, if it had established and had not been caught, would have led to ecological devastation across Ireland. I am really proud of that fact. During the summer we saw their bravery in the likes of Killarney and Wicklow where they were battling fires on the ground and once again showing how dedicated they are to protecting nature, livelihoods, people and communities. I want to pay special tribute to them.

We are establishing a nature restoration fund. I, the Minister, Deputy Browne, and Ministers right across Government are committed to funding the nature restoration plan because, as I have said before and will say again, this is our key opportunity to turn the trend, save species, save habitats and restore nature right across Ireland.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): Investment in older persons' services has been a substantial priority for Government and as Minister of State at the Department of Health with special responsibility for older people, I am pleased to

announce I have secured over €3.4 billion in budget 2027 for older persons' services in the Department of Health and, with my colleagues in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputies Browne and Cummins and others, €169 million for housing application grants. These are record budgets and they represent substantial investment across homes, communities and residential care for older people.

Looking at a couple of items related to health, delivery of home support is increasing year on year. I have secured an additional investment of €123 million for this vital service. It will bring the investment in home support services to over €1 billion in value terms for 2027. With this significant increase in funding, we expect to deliver a total of 28.5 million hours of home support next year. This is more than has ever been targeted before and represents an increase of 1.8 million hours on the target in 2026.

Care close to home is broader than home support alone, and I am pleased to announce further investment in a variety of community supports for older people. These allocations include an additional €2 million for meals on wheels. That is on top of the €2 million we gave last year. In the last two years we have seen a 64% increase in funding for meals on wheels. It is now funded to €10.25 million. It is a hugely important service and something we really want to support.

I can announce funding of €627,500 for five new care and repair locations, and we are looking at a national roll-out of care and repair in line with the programme for Government. It is a free service. It is something that is hugely effective and Age Action Ireland will be a partner with the HSE in its delivery. They interlink with integrated care programme for older persons, ICPOP, teams. It is once again about that integrated model. There is €635,000 in funding to five additional healthy age-friendly homes co-ordinators. They are based in the local authorities and deal with people's housing requirements. There is €600,000 to support day centres. A sum of €610,000 for family carer supports and emergency respite. Family Carers Ireland will have €800,000 in terms of respite and we will see that grow. Then we have €2 million for the community support grant scheme. In terms of the housing adaptation grants, there is €169 million. There is €134 million of that for housing adaptation grants for private homes and €35 million for local authority homes. It makes enormous difference for both older people and disabled people in terms of being able to continue to live independently.

There is €1.5 million for the Alzheimer Society of Ireland. We had the FTD Brothers, Cian and Jordan Adams, with us last May. We are going to join the Genetic Frontotemporal Dementia Initiative. I am going to advance the establishment of a national dementia and memory centre. I have secured €600,000 in support for prioritising the national policy framework for adult safeguarding.

Nursing homes provide a huge and vital role, both private and public. I have secured an additional €97 million for the nursing home support scheme. This increase in funding will support the nursing home sector with inflationary and statutory cost pressures and provide for approximately 500 additional people to be supported under the nursing home support scheme. We also continue to deliver our public nursing homes.

This budget is really about strengthening community supports and nursing home provision for older people, and really recognising its essential role, bringing it back into the community. I commend this budget for older people to the House.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I have been wondering whether a budget can be shocking but not surprising, but that is where we are. People are genuinely shocked that in the middle of the worst cost-of-living crisis for a generation there is yet another budget that will mean they will be worse off next year than they were last year. However, the people are not actually surprised that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have proven themselves to be so out of touch in a way that lacks even a semblance of self-awareness.

Simon Harris laughably suggested that the budget was to support people who get up early every morning and go to work. What we actually got is people having to pay more regardless of how they get to work. Higher public transport costs have been approved by this Government and there are sky-high petrol and diesel costs. What seems to be lost on Government is that the cost-of-living crisis is actually getting worse. There was no acknowledgement of that in this budget. Hard-working people on ordinary incomes are being squeezed in every direction. With record surpluses, what did the Government deliver on electricity prices? It delivered nothing. On home heating oil it delivered the bare minimum. On petrol and diesel, there is nothing. On groceries, there is nothing. On rents, damn all, and whatever was given is going to be soaked up by landlords. On college fees, they are still dearer next year than they were two years ago. The €200-a-month childcare promise is still nowhere near delivered.

The Government has watched as more and more households are falling into arrears and debt as people who should be well-off are beginning to despair. The Government has made the decision to make their lives more difficult, with a minimal tax package that will not even come close to meeting the extra costs they are facing. Instead, the Government has directed unprecedented surpluses not at building houses or other critical infrastructure, but at giveaways to those who are already the wealthiest in society. The budget was absolutely shameful.

We know and have seen the evidence that the majority of young people do not see a future here. That should be a wake-up call for everyone who is in politics. The truth is that this is a wealthy state. The problem is not a lack of resources; it is a failure to distribute those resources fairly. We have a wealth distribution crisis. The great opportunities that are there to make things fairer, to start making progress on economic inequality, have been turned on their head. Instead, struggling, hard-working people are being fleeced, including through carbon taxes, so that the wealthy, the banks and the vulture funds can receive lucrative arrangements and the red-carpet treatment. That is indefensible. Sinn Féin will continue to challenge the Government to support workers and families, build housing and support communities.

One of the roles of Government in a wealthy state is to deliver a functioning justice system and to make communities safer, yet the Minister for justice is presiding over a crisis across the justice system. There are solicitor walkouts, court delays, overcrowded prisons, too few gardaí in our communities, gardaí who are untrained for key policing duties, a juvenile justice crisis and now, growing concerns over gardaí plans to withdraw from overtime. The latter is a prospect that could have profound consequences. There has been far too little progress on supporting victims of crime, including in relation to the criminal injuries compensation scheme and in ensuring access to civil legal aid. In migration, there is now a backlog of over 21,000 IPAT appeals that are driving up IPAS accommodation costs. There remains little transparency around IPAS contracts, no functional returns agreement with Britain and no meaningful effort to actually develop an all-Ireland approach to managing migration.

We have yet to see the full financial impact of the mishandling of the criminal legal aid dispute, which has caused delays and chaos in the courts. Questions remain as to the cost associated with the increased number of *habeas corpus* applications before the High Court. Taxpayers deserve to know the true cost of allowing such a dispute to escalate.

In this budget provision is made for the recruitment for 1,000 new gardaí, just as there has been provision in every budget of this Government, with no prospect that the number will ever be met. The Government has failed to take the measures that Sinn Féin has put forward to tackle recruitment and retention numbers in An Garda Síochána, and the result is an ongoing over-reliance on garda overtime. Looking at this budget, nobody will have confidence that any of these issues are set to be addressed.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, has left the Chamber. Before Deputy O'Donnell leaves, I want to say he gave a list of all the money being spent, as he is Minister of State with responsibility for older people. Last night I met with families of residents of Sarsfield Court dementia unit, which is being closed down under the watch of the Minister of State. Heather House dementia unit is not open yet. We have a crisis in dementia beds in the country. We have a crisis in nursing homes, and the Minister of State is outlining all the money going in. I am talking to people on the ground in my community who cannot get a bed for their loved ones. Maybe there is money there, but it is not going in where it needs to be.

Deputy O'Sullivan, who just left, talked about spending millions on protecting our national monuments.

In Cork, we have a site that should be designated as a national monument, namely the old Glen prison. This former detention centre is where Thomas Kent was executed and buried and where Terence MacSwiney started his hunger strike. Under the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, the Government is considering demolishing it. The Government is talking out of both sides of its mouth in the context of protecting our republican history and the legacy of the men and women who fought to free this country.

I turn now to the Minister and the Minister of State with responsibility for housing and local government, respectively. I never wanted to be an actor. During yesterday's proceedings in this Chamber, I was fairly sure I woke up like a character in "Groundhog Day" because, once again, the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance, Deputy Harris, announced the same derelict site tax that he announced last year. The Minister for housing, Deputy Browne, stated that he is going to have a war on dereliction. They said dereliction will be tackled. The Minister said that in April, May and June, and here we are again.

It is not often that I agree with the Minister of State for local government, Deputy Cummins, but yesterday he said - I will paraphrase - that this Government has given too much carrot. It has 100% given too much carrot and not enough stick. A total of €42 million is outstanding in derelict site levies and there is no way to collect the money involved. How is that possible? Millions of additional euro will come on stream this year and next year, but the Government's plan is to begin levying on 23 June 2028. The Government is a joke when it comes to dereliction. There is not a town, village or city that is not marred by dereliction. What are Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and their Independent buddies doing? They are looking after the speculators all the time.

Last week, the Comptroller and Auditor General's report detailed that half of the owners to whom Revenue wrote and who may have had to the vacant homes tax never replied. What did Revenue do? Did it chase them down like it chases any taxpayer? No. There was no follow-up. It did not even send out further letters. It did not chase them down. If a worker in this State did not pay their tax, is that the way they would be treated? The answer is "No". However, vacancy is being allowed and people are speculating all over the country. Ordinary workers are looking at going on strike because the Government will not give them proper pay and conditions and the pay increases they desperately need in light of inflation. At the same time, it is allowing millions of euros that could be collected via the derelict sites levy to go uncollected. In addition, it is not collecting the vacant homes tax. I could go on and on.

The Government cut the payment of people with disabilities last year and has come back this year with €500. We know that they need at least €1,200 to €1,400. Those people with disabilities who go to work get nothing.

This Government is once again failing pensioners, a number of whom have been on the phone to me today. They feel that they are invisible to the Government. Workers, families, pensioners and people with disabilities have once again been failed by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have not failed the vulture funds, banks and speculators, however. They took care of the lads again.

Deputy Máire Devine: Maith thú, a Theachta Gould. I am not going to say much about budget 2027 because it is fairly innocuous and boring, and does little for society, workers and families. As a matter of fact, it detracts from their budgets. All the members of the Government need to know is that when I was going through town earlier, I watched – a little gleefully – how leaflets that Government Ministers and TDs handed out were being handed back to them in disgust by members of the general public. The budget has not done the job the Government wanted it to do.

Regardless, I wish to address the Minister for justice, Deputy O'Callaghan, about youth services. The President of the Circuit Court, Judge Keenan Johnson, has likened the drug kingpins using children as their drug mules and front-line criminals to a cancer. During a case relating to two 16-year-old boys and a drug debt, intimidation, shooting, attacks on houses and torching multiple cars, Judge Keenan Johnson said that all State resources should be used to catch and lock those involved up. Life-threatening activities are widespread in pockets of my constituency of Dublin South-Central.

I am a member of the Donore Community Drug and Alcohol Team. We are aware of children as young as seven being lured into accruing drug debts and then pressured into performing criminal acts. The budget refers to a funding increase of €11.5 million that will bring the core funding for youth justice interventions to €46 million. The south-west inner city is heavily under-resourced in terms of this youth work in comparison with other parts of the capital. I urge all Members to read the recent report, *A socioeconomic analysis of Dublin's South West Inner City*, by Dr. Barra Roantree of Trinity College Dublin, which indicates that the crime rate in the west inner city is more than twice the national average and that crimes have risen sharply since 2023, with the number of serious crimes up more than 20%. Sadly, the number of drug poisoning deaths is at least twice the national average.

There is a SOLAS project in the area that targets the areas of Dublin 8, 10 and 12. This project operates the Rua and Targeted Response with Youth, TRY, schemes, which support young people whose lives have been negatively affected by the drugs trade. As I walk through my area, I watch as the childhood of these kids is being corrupted. We are watching and allowing it to happen. The TRY scheme began as part of the regeneration of St. Teresa's Gardens in 2017 and has since expanded. The Rua scheme is for a younger crowd. Both schemes need to be expanded and better funded. These are specific initiatives to which the Minister referred. They need funding. People in Crumlin, Inchicore and the Liberties are pleading with me in this regard. In turn, I plead with the Minister not just for a more visible Garda presence but also for peaceful communities and proper childhoods.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: I acknowledge the work of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael in the run-up to the budget. Delivering such an uninspiring budget when the State is running such a large surplus is something else. It is not that we are looking for the Government to spend for the sake of spending. Rather, we are seeking an acknowledgment that a large part of our tax revenue is built on sand and for the Government to take action in that regard. Tax revenue is built on transient corporation tax, without which there would be a major deficit. There is a clear lack of ambition on the part of the Government. Where are the big projects and plans to build a strong and secure future for Ireland? Where are the big politics and visions in this budget? Where are the measures to inspire workers and families across the State and provide some level of certainty for the future? The budget offers no hope to young people across Ireland who want to build a future. What we in Sinn Féin proposed was ambition. We proposed a change that would have given ordinary people a break and hope for the future.

The Minister spoke about the money and how grateful older people should be. Additional hours were also announced, but we cannot hire people right now to cover those hours. There is no point in announcing millions of additional hours because we cannot cover them. That is due to a lack of Government ambition. It is as simple as that.

I have already started to get emails from people seeking to know what they are going to do with €3. The increase to the living alone allowance was €3. I would not give that amount to a child to go to the shop because they would not be able to buy anything with it. People who are living alone might still have to drive their cars. The cost of heating and electricity is still the same. They cannot afford to live. The emails I am receiving are from people who are asking how they are going to continue to live.

There are a lot of people in energy poverty. We have spoken before about hidden homelessness, which includes those who couch surf. There are now hidden people in arrears. They would be arrears if they turned on their hearing, but they know they cannot turn it on. These are the people who are in a hidden energy crisis. These are the people who are going to go cold this winter because all they get is a measly couple of bob off a fill of heating oil. They simply cannot afford it. They will not be able afford it, and they will go cold and hungry. That is on the Government.

Deputy Daniel Ennis: The Government told us this would be a budget for workers and people who work hard. I looked at the measures announced yesterday and they made me wonder whether the Government has any idea who is working hard in this country. Does the Government think people who cannot afford to pay their energy bills are not working hard?

Does it think that parents struggling with childcare costs, grocery bills, rent, mortgages and transport costs are not working hard? These are the people who needed to see real change in this budget and, once again, they have been disappointed, left behind and forgotten about. This is another budget and another opportunity missed.

In the lead-up to the budget we heard big promises from the Government, particularly about childcare. The Tánaiste told us childcare was a priority for him in this budget, but what was announced yesterday falls far short of the huge change families and educators need and providers desperately need. Any measure that reduces childcare fees for parents is definitely welcome, but these measures will only come in a year's time and that will not help anyone, especially not the parents who are struggling in the here and now. Government promises do not match the reality of the system it relies on to deliver those reductions. We still have a childcare model in which, too often, public money intended to support parents and families instead flows towards investment company profits and eye-watering executive salaries. That is not a sustainable childcare policy. We need a system built around affordability and accessibility for parents, decent pay and conditions for educators and, most important, the highest possible standard of care for children.

The Minister noted yesterday that the fee reductions will only be available to services participating in the core funding scheme, before suggesting that parents should encourage providers to join the scheme. That completely ignores the reasons some services choose not to participate and leave the core funding scheme in the first place. Again, it shifts responsibility for fixing those problems onto parents. Parents should not have to lobby childcare providers to make Government policy work. If it were as simple as parents asking providers to stay in the core funding scheme, does the Minister seriously think they would not have done so already? As a parent who pays that second mortgage, I know families want the best care for their children. They want childcare they can afford and access. There is no point in bringing costs down if people cannot get in the door. It is not their responsibility to build the system. It is the Government's.

We will never genuinely deliver affordable and accessible childcare for parents, fair pay and conditions for educators, high quality care for children and proper accountability for taxpayers' money if we refuse to confront the fundamental problems of the current model. We cannot keep on throwing money at a burning house. We cannot keep promising affordable childcare without building a system capable of delivering it. If we want childcare that is affordable for families, fair for educators, focused on children and accountable to the public, we need a change in the model. Childcare is an essential public service. It is about time it were treated as such. The Government had an opportunity to do so, to reform the system and deliver real, lasting change to early childhood education and care. Instead, it once again chose short-term announcement over long-term reform. The Government seems more interested in making promises, putting more money into a broken model and declaring the job done than in fixing the system.

We see the same lack of ambition when it comes to child poverty. I see some of the worst rates in my constituency, which has some of the most deprived areas in the whole country. This is supposedly a wealthy country, yet we still have scandalously high levels of child poverty. It is absolutely disgusting. When I raised the most recent ESRI report with the Tánaiste in this Chamber, he acknowledged that child poverty in Ireland is far too high, but acknowledgement

alone is not enough. We need action and we need it now. The Government fell far short of addressing child poverty. Introducing a second level of child benefit could lift tens of thousands of children out of poverty while significantly reducing the poverty gap for children who remain below the poverty line. That is what we should be talking about when we talk about a budget that would make a real difference. It would mean more money for food, heating, clothes, school costs and all the everyday expenses families are struggling to meet. It would mean real, tangible change for children who have the least. Despite knowing the scale of the problem and having the resources to address it, the Government has once again failed to introduce real, targeted measures to tackle this. Child poverty is not inevitable. It can be fixed and the Government chose not to do so. The Government has to acknowledge that, year after year, it is a political choice whether to seriously invest in ending it. In a country as wealthy as ours, we can do better than this and our children deserve better.

Some 323,000 households are in arrears on their energy bills. That is absolutely shocking. A targeted €400 energy credit would make a real difference to those households, yet there is still nothing from the Government. Saying the measure is too complicated is a cop out. There is only €10 of an increase to pensions, which will not match rising costs. It will not help people with rising grocery costs and heating bills. Elderly people are still being forced to choose whether to heat or eat. People who have worked hard their whole lives are being treated like this.

The Minister will be aware that, for people living with disabilities, the additional costs can be up to €1,500 per year. We all know that, yet the Government's answer is a €500 token gesture. That is all. I cannot help but think of the people left behind because of this budget, those who will be worse off. The families and people who are most vulnerable have been forgotten about once again.

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Dara Calleary): Tá an córas leasa shóisialaigh iomlán lárnach sa mhéid a dhéanann muid sa bhuiséid seo. Tugann sé cinnteacht, slándáil agus seasmhacht do mhuintir na tíre ar fad in amanna éigeandála, i dtinneas agus sa tseanaois. Cosnaíonn sé iad siúd a bhfuil cúram de dhíth orthu mar aon leo siúd a thugann an cúram sin. Tugann sé comhfhiosacht dúinn in uile ghnéithe idirnáisiúnta idir tíortha aonaracha agus sa gheilleagar i gcónaí. This is my second budget as Minister for Social Protection. I continue to strengthen existing supports while making key progress on Government commitments. Next year's budget will see an expansion of €2 billion to bring it to €30.9 billion.

I am pleased to say we will be providing a full - 100% - Christmas bonus to almost 1.4 million people in 2026, investing €380 million to be paid from 7 December. For 2027, we are protecting core rates to ensure the spending power of those who depend on social protection payments is safeguarded. Social payment rates will increase by €10 at an investment of some €755 million. This means the contributory State pension will exceed €300 per week for the first time, increasing to €309.30. We are conscious of the difficulties with fuel prices and, while we cannot cover the full cost of price fluctuations in a market driven by global uncertainty, the fuel allowance is a valuable contribution towards it for some 466,000 households. I am increasing the rate of payment by €5 per week to bring it to €43. This means a payment of more than €1,200 for fuel allowance recipients in 2027.

I assure Deputy Ennis that we are focused on our child poverty target of reducing consistent child poverty to 3%. We saw a small improvement but it is not enough. I am absolutely with him on that and any percentage is too much. We have provided further increases of €6 per week on the child support payment for children, under and over 12. It will be paid at €64 and €84 per week respectively. For a family with one child in primary school and one in secondary school, that is an increase of €624 next year to just over €7,700 in child support payments. I am delighted the holiday hunger programme, which we ran as a pilot for the past two summers, will now be run on a permanent basis, benefiting more than 40,000 children.

I have done a lot of work on the cost of disability and I appreciate the contributions of many in this House. I thank all the Deputies who attended our summit and all who participated in the Oireachtas hearings. However, it is not only the Department of Social Protection that can assist here. It requires a concerted effort across all the Government. We have introduced this year, for the first time, a fund of €119 million to provide Ireland's first ever permanent cost-of-disability payment in the first quarter of 2027. This will be in the form of a €500 lump sum paid to almost 240,000 people who are currently in receipt of long-term disability payments. We will begin the work immediately on the design of the long-term payment, including the frequency. People are not necessarily happy with a lump sum, but I wanted to get it started in 2027 and that work will continue, including consultation and work across Departments, in particular the Departments of Health and Transport and, clearly, the Department of disability.

I am focused on the area of disability employment. I am reducing the hours threshold on the wage subsidy scheme, WSS, from 15 to eight hours and will extend coverage of WSS to those returning to work on a partial capacity benefit.

I am increasing the employment disregard to €175 per week for the disability allowance.

The working family payment will be increased by €30, which will be worth up to €18 per week in cash terms.

I have increased the rate of the fuel allowance means test for single pensioners. That is now 60% for a couple and it will mean that a single pensioner earning around €33,000 will now qualify for the fuel allowance, potentially opening the fuel allowance up to 10,000 additional people.

The living alone allowance has been increased by €3 to €25 per week. That is a €300 million investment in the living alone allowance during 2026.

The social welfare system is large and complex but we must not lose sight of the empathy that lies at the heart of it. I am increasing the duration of payment after death for pensioners who lose their partner, from six to ten weeks, and for the carer's support grant, I am ensuring that if the person being cared for passes away during the six-week period, their carer will still receive the grant.

We have given a very firm commitment to remove the means test for the carer's allowance during the lifetime of this Government. I have increased, in my two budgets, the carer's allowance disregard for singles and couples by 84%. As a result, a couple on over €126,000 can receive a full carer's allowance payment from next July.

As Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht, I want to give a quick overview of some of my areas. Working alongside the Minister of State, Deputy

Buttimer, I have secured an outcome of €628 million for the Department in 2027, which will provide €208 million for the rural development programme, €260 million for the community development programme and €160 milliún le haghaidh na Gaeltachta, na n-oileán agus na teanga. Cuidíonn an t-airgead seo le ceantair tuaithe i gach cuid den tír. Ní chuidíonn sé leis an nGaeltacht agus an teanga amháin, ach leis na hoileáin freisin.

The allocation for the rural development programme will provide €60 million to support projects that are approved under the rural regeneration and development fund, RRDF, and will provide for a significant increase in funding for the LEADER programme, with an allocation increase of €11 million to €43 million in 2027.

We will continue to fund the local improvement scheme, LIS, the outdoor recreation infrastructure scheme, ORIS, and the town and village renewal scheme, while the ongoing funding for Tidy Towns and agricultural shows will continue.

The Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, will speak to the local community development programme. Both he and I have worked on a number of areas of this. He will shortly give details of that, including confirming funding for our men's sheds.

Leis an leithdháileadh de €160 milliún don chlár Gaeltachta, beidh ardú i ngach cuid de chúrsaí reatha le haghaidh na Gaeltachta an bhliain seo chugainn. Tagann sé sin anuas ar an ardú de 29% ar an mbuiséad don Ghaeltacht anuraidh. Tá neart agus fuinneamh iontach sa Ghaeltacht. Cuidíonn an t-airgead seo go mór leis sin.

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Jerry Buttimer): Budget 2027 represents a very positive outcome for the Department, particularly for the community development programmes for which I have responsibility. I pay tribute to the Minister for his work in this regard.

This budget, as we have heard, is a €260 million investment in community development, which allows us to protect existing supports by strengthening programmes that make a real difference in the communities we represent across the country. A key priority for the Minister and me has been the community services programme, CSP. I am pleased that an additional €5 million, bringing its funding up to €64.4 million, has been secured. The CSP supports more than 400 community organisations and over 3,000 jobs, delivering vital services, particularly in disadvantaged communities.

As a Department, we have also secured €74 million for social inclusion measures, including almost €65 million for the social inclusion and community activation programme, SICAP. Importantly, €10 million, which was previously temporarily funded, has now been placed on a permanent basis for the future, providing great certainty for the sector. I pay tribute to the sector for the great work that they do.

We are continuing to support men's and women's sheds, increasing funding for the scheme to support national organisations and providing €2 million through the local enhancement programme to help smaller community groups with everyday pressures such as insurance or energy costs.

Turning to my responsibilities in the Department of Transport, I particularly welcome the significant outcome we reached regarding the public service order, PSO, with €1.042 billion

being secured - the highest ever, and an 11% increase. That uplift matters. It protects existing bus and rail services, but crucially, it gives us the capacity to expand the network. There are almost 140 new and enhanced services in the planning pipeline, and for next year, Connecting Ireland, BusConnects and new town services will be critical for all of us in this House. I am looking forward to working with the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, and the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and with the NTA to deliver the full ambition of the Connecting Ireland programme because we all know the importance of rural transport in communities. For communities up and down the country, Local Link and Connecting Ireland have been a new lifeline.

I am pleased that in our Department, the Minister, Deputy Calleary, and I work together, le chéile, on behalf of people in all parts of the country. This budget allows us to continue to work, invest in people in communities and connect people wherever they live.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I understand that the Ministers and I absolutely have our differences. They believe that the free market has all the answers. I believe in a planned economy. They believe we should keep vulture funds and large-scale investors happy at any cost. I believe in progressive taxation. Fair enough, we are on different sides in most debates, and I would not expect their budget to look like mine, but I was genuinely amazed and shocked when I saw the contents of this budget. It has effectively cut €12 from the fuel allowance. People who got the fuel allowance this year will get €12 less next year and all the while, the cost of fuel, the cost of heating your home, continues to rise. There are no energy credits and there is a cut to the fuel allowance. I genuinely do not understand it and I feel that we are going to be back here debating emergency measures. It is like the Government does not understand the stress and anxiety that that causes people. It do not understand that sound - click, click, click - that the meter makes when your electricity is about to be cut off. It is like the Government does not get that, but it is very real. Running people right up to the wire and then saying, "Ah, we'll have an emergency measure", has impacts on people. By the way, I think that is what the Government will have to do. I think it would have been better to give people certainty but that is apparently not how the Government works.

It is not just the poorest who will feel it most keenly. According to an analysis conducted by the Parliamentary Budget Office, almost every group and category will effectively be worse off as a result of the measures in this budget. That is why the Government's budget is being called the "Gone Before You Get It" budget. There are 500,000 household accounts already in arrears, people are already in debt and they do not have anything. Most ordinary people do not have anything like the savings that the Government keeps telling them that they should have, and they are living hand to mouth. They waited for the budget and were severely disappointed.

There is a €500 lump sum for people with disabilities. The Minister acknowledged this in his own contribution. They told the Government they did not want a lump sum because it really just adds up all of the miserable weekly payments of less than €10 and puts them in one lump sum. What they want is recognition for the additional costs of being disabled and a permanent cost-of-disability payment, yet there is to be more consultation. The Government knows what it costs. It has its own report. The Indecon report tells the Government, yet people must wait.

In the few seconds remaining to me, I want to talk about the €3 added to the living alone allowance. That is, quite frankly, an insult and I do not say that on my behalf. I say that on

behalf of an elderly constituent who contacted me this morning. He said, "If you're talking to him" - I said I will be this afternoon - "You can tell him that is an insult." Three euro a week. Do not dare expect people to be grateful for that.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: I struggle with this budget because it is a loveless, or sexless, affair. There is no real "rizz" to it. It is probably a symptom of the lavender marriage that exists in government between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. There seems to be a fiver here, a fiver there and nothing for you, look over there. In fact, the only interesting thing in the budget really seems to be the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan's, €20 million that essentially represents a defunding of RTÉ.

8 o'clock

It seems he has told RTÉ that it must play by the State's rules or the State will stop paying for play. Government must guarantee a well-funded public service broadcaster. The Minister needs to explain what is going to go and what is going to be cut. Is that cut going to affect news and current affairs broadcasting, because that is something we all rely on, particularly as Oireachtas Members seeking to get our message out there?

The attitude of the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, to RTÉ is symptomatic of the way this Government does industrial relations. Let us look at the all-out public sector strike coming next week. The Minister and I represent different parts of Limerick. This strike will have particularly bad effects for our constituency. For the last week or so, I have been inundated with people contacting me from Mary Immaculate College with regard to the cancellation of their graduation as a result of the work stoppage. It could very well, and probably will, result in this entire place grinding to a halt next week, potentially stopping us from doing our work and passing the finance Bill. The Government let the public sector pay deal expire and then the Minister, Deputy Chambers, used the budget speech to call out public sector workers while simultaneously failing to allocate sufficient funding to form the basis of a meaningful deal with them. At the same, we have had record pay hikes for semi-State bosses while ordinary PAYE public sector workers are effectively forgotten.

People are weary of this budget and of politics. To be frank, they are also weary of politicians. In my view, this budget could and should have been a chance for Government to tell workers, families and young people that it hears them and will back them. What we got instead was effectively a budget for those who can successfully bend the ear of Government. Lobbyists, property developers and corporate interests got what they wanted while struggling Irish households unfortunately had to make do with what was left.

This is not a workers' budget because the majority of the budgetary measures have very little to do with work. The reduction in the rate of capital gains tax from 33% to 31% will cost €46.5 million in 2027 and €186 million in a full year. For context, €186 million would build between 600 and 800 social homes. There has been a lot of talk about the €3 increase in the living alone allowance. I do not want to dump too much on the Minister, Deputy Calleary, because I genuinely believe he is an effective Minister but you could double that increase for what it is costing to tinker around the edges of capital gains tax for half a year. I welcome the increase in the disregard for carers but the means test has to go. The fact that the Minister has done something on the cost of living is tentatively welcome but we need action on a permanent cost-of-disability payment next year. To go back to my point on capital gains tax, inherited wealth

is a form of privilege. When it comes to budgets, our priority and the Government's priority should be to help those who need a leg up.

The situation regarding housing measures is similar. They will not benefit first-time buyers or renters. The €150 increase in the rental tax credit is going to be swallowed up by landlords. The raising of the cap on the help-to-buy scheme will, and already has, put up house prices. This is done at the behest of large property developers. We all know it. We were all lobbied by them. The increase in the rent-a-room tax relief from €14,000 to €16,000 means that anyone who is renting such a room is going to face a rent hike. The extension of the scheme to modular units means that you can now rent out your designated auxiliary dwelling, DAD - that is your garden shed to you and me - with no tenancy protections for up to €1,300 a month. If you are renting that unit out, you can earn that sum tax-free. For people my age, it is a case of moving out of your parents' home to move into someone else's garden to live in their DAD. What a future. Looking at the capital outlay on housing, there is, at best, stagnation. The budget for starter homes is €1 billion but the State only directly delivered 935 affordable homes last year when the target was 2,100. We all know the affordable delivery numbers are inflated and massaged because financial grants are counted rather than physical bricks-and-mortar homes. It seems that the Minister for housing drew the short straw in this budget because the €3 billion allocated for capital investment means the housing deficit is going to continue to grow. In real terms, this figure will amount to a cut on budget 2026 when you factor in construction inflation.

As has been usual over the last number of years, homelessness was barely worth a mention in the speeches. When you actually look at the budget document, you can clearly see why. Funding for homeless services is going to increase nominally but the small increase does not take inflation into account. Local authorities spend 18 times more on short-term emergency accommodation than they do on prevention or tenancy sustainment. Some 70% of that funding goes directly to private providers. There is nothing in this budget that gives any sense of things changing any time soon. It is important to note that we are almost halfway through October and we still do not have the updated homelessness prevention framework or the child and family homelessness action plan that has been repeatedly promised and delayed. We still do not have the HAP review. We have no dates for when any of these documents will be published. If you actually look at the budget document, it is very unclear whether any new money has been allocated for them.

On vacancy and dereliction, the 7% derelict property tax is welcome but it was first announced this week last year and the first filing deadline has been delayed until June 2028. That is way too slow. There are thousands of vacant and derelict properties currently sitting empty. Given the amount of uncollected levies at local authority level, that is a sin.

I will mention a number of things in respect of my own city of Limerick in the minute I have left. We still have no sign of BusConnects. It is still delayed until 2028. It was initially promised in 2025. We now have a fare increase that is 15% above inflation. Loads of well-populated urban areas in Limerick have no public transport. The Government should have front-loaded that in this year's budget. I would like an answer on the ongoing live monitoring of the CCTV system in Limerick. There is an additional €147 million in the Garda budget, part of the overall budget increase of €403 million for the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration. Will the live monitoring of CCTV in Limerick be funded from that budget? The

staff have been put on protected leave. We need assurance that those cameras will not be turned off. Mark my words, if they are turned off, we will have a feud again in Limerick.

An Ceann Comhairle: Before I call on the Minister of State, I welcome the guests of Deputy Heneghan who are here from Australia and north Dublin. I am not sure if the Government and Parliament in Canberra have ever been as exciting as ours.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Niall Collins): I am very pleased to confirm a total budget of €108.2 million for forestry, farm safety and the horticulture sector, for which I have responsibility. The forestry budget of €96.26 million will allow continued investment in the sustainable development of the sector through our forestry programme, the biggest and best funded programme we have had in this country to date.

The funding allocation will also support the increased promotion of forestry as an important land-use option for farmers looking to diversify and build the resilience of their farm businesses. It will also, crucially, continue to support forest owners impacted by the storms in 2025 through the reconstitution schemes, which provide significant funding to clear and replant damaged forests. The Government's continued investment in the forestry sector is critical to delivering the multifunctional benefits that forests and trees provide for us all.

For farm safety, the funding of €2.3 million provided in the budget will enable the Department not only to implement existing initiatives but also to develop new initiatives to improve safety on Irish farms and promote health and well-being in our farming community. Unfortunately, farming has a poor safety record. Any death is one too many, so in addition to the current expenditure I can say that capital funding for farm safety is being examined, and I am certain that additional funds will be identified for farm safety capital investment projects for next year. I am also pleased to welcome the extension and expansion of the accelerated capital allowances scheme for farm safety equipment to the end of 2029. The expansion includes a broader range of farm safety investments in addition to adaptive equipment for farmers with disabilities. The Government remains fully committed to improving health and safety on our farms and confronting farming's poor safety record.

I am pleased to have secured €9 million in funding for capital investment schemes for the horticulture sector for 2027 and €700,000 for horticulture development and promotion. The horticulture sector plays a vital role in producing fresh and local produce for consumers in Ireland. This role is even more important in the context of the weather conditions we faced this year, which are likely to become a more common feature in future years. I and my colleagues in the Department and in the Government are committed to supporting the sector towards a more profitable, value-added future, driven by sustainability and innovation.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Alan Dillon): Across my two ministerial portfolios in the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment and the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment, one message coming through clearly is that supporting enterprise, workers and communities must go hand in hand with building a more innovative, competitive and sustainable economy. Budget 2027 strikes that balance. It supports workers and families while recognising the very real pressures

facing businesses, particularly our small and medium enterprises, dealing with high operating costs, skills shortages and an increasingly competitive international environment. I welcome the taxation and expenditure measures announced by the Tánaiste and the Minister, Deputy Chambers, which support enterprise, reward innovation and help businesses to invest, grow and create jobs.

I particularly welcome the new €15 million sustainability measures for the rural pub sector. Rural pubs are not just businesses; they are employers, community hubs and an important part of our social life in towns and villages across Ireland. The Minister, Deputy Peter Burke, and I will work with our colleagues in the Government to ensure the measures provide meaningful support for publicans facing significant operating and trading costs.

The budget also backs entrepreneurship and innovation. The €3 million allocated to the start-up Ireland fund will strengthen our start-up ecosystem. An additional €4.5 million for our local enterprise offices will help our small businesses to reduce costs, improve energy efficiencies and embrace new technology. A further €6.5 million in the Disruptive Technologies Innovation Fund will bring investment next year to €37.5 million, and increased funding will also support Ireland's participation in the European Space Agency.

As Minister of State with responsibility for the circular economy, I particularly welcome the additional allocation of €155 million for circular economy development in 2027. This includes €30.5 million for landfill remediation and €12 million for local authorities' waste enforcement. Cleaning up legacy sites and protecting our public health are very important issues.

At its core, this budget is about creating opportunities for workers, small businesses and entrepreneurs, and creating an opportunity for communities in every part of Ireland to be supported.

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Marian Harkin): Budget 2027 represents a major investment and opportunity in skills development and inclusion, which are in my area of responsibility of the Department. For example, the budget provides the first year of a new €150 million National Training Fund commitment over three years to strengthen Ireland's preparedness for AI and technological change. This will provide significant investment in skills and lifelong learning, which learners, workers and employers across the country have consistently called for.

The Minister, Deputy James Lawless, and I have secured a record €466 million for apprenticeships, representing an additional €33 million on 2026. We are expanding capacity across key areas, with 89 different apprenticeships now on offer. This investment will help to meet the demand for critical skills in the areas we need so that we can deliver housing, transport, energy, healthcare and other key infrastructural projects. Since the formation of Government, I have permanently reduced the contribution fee for apprentices by 22%, with a 17% reduction in budget 2026 and a 5% reduction in budget 2027. This is real progress alongside, for example, the wage norms in the engineering industry. To give one example, for those in phase 6, the weekly payment is now €781, and that is for off-the-job training.

Of course, further and higher education is for everyone, and we are working hard to ensure there are enhanced access supports to help student parents, disabled learners and all those

facing additional barriers to participation. Today I am delighted to announce funding of €400,000 for a new Tuisceant lifelong learning award, details of which will be available later. We have also funded a workplace literacy initiative worth €2 million, which will help workers strengthen their literacy, numeracy and digital skills. I am particularly pleased to say that €500,000 is being provided for a new site at St. Andrew's Resource Centre in Dublin, which provides supports to prisoners, homeless people and those recovering from addiction to access employment in the construction sector through practical, accredited training.

Deputy Edward Timmins: As Vice-Chairman of both the Committee on Budgetary Oversight and the finance and public expenditure committee, I welcome the budget. Financial changes, as anyone with a grasp of finance knows, happen over a period of time. The budget covers just one year but the direction of travel is clear. It is rewarding work while at the same time protecting the less well-off. The budget is possible because of the massive taxes we earn due to full employment and because we support the multinational industry by, above all, being pro-business and giving corporations certainty. These multinationals are crucial to all of the spending we have discussed over the past two days. It is something that much of the Opposition does not recognise or understand. Without this, there would be no money for our health services, education, pensions or social welfare. We would become a poor country without wealth creation and investment. We must never take it for granted. I understand that, but I feel the need to state it explicitly here so that those who do not understand start to think about it.

Other countries look on and wish they had our public finances. We are a beacon of stability and display a sensible middle ground. However, we must not succumb to any pressure in relation to excess spending. That is why I welcome the Minister for public expenditure reducing spending growth to 6% for next year. In fact, I believe we should aim to reduce this spending growth to at least the sum of inflation and population growth.

I welcome the announcement of the new public spending efficiency task force and look forward to meeting its members at the finance committee. Of course we have challenges, but there will always be challenges. In the past, it was unemployment and the public finances. We solved both of those massive problems. This has given us a basis to solve all other challenges. When it comes to the finances of running a country, in an ideal world you run surpluses, reduce national debt, put money aside each year, invest in infrastructure, education and health, and support the most vulnerable in society and people who are working. That is exactly what this budget does.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: Students were not asking for luxuries in the budget; they were asking for the right to get an education without being pushed into poverty.

The Government can announce a reduction in the student contribution fee and present it as a major victory, but when the overall cost of going to college can run into tens of thousands of euro a year, once rent, transport, food, books and everyday living costs are included, we have to ask a very simple question. What difference does €150 actually make to a student who cannot afford to live somewhere? Targeted measures for families with more than one child in college are welcome. Any help matters, but targeted measures will only reach a proportion of students and families and the system remains heavily dependent on eligibility for SUSI supports.

Meanwhile, the accommodation crisis is getting worse. This is where the Government needs to listen very carefully to students. I marched with students last week. I heard their message loud and clear, which was to scrap the fees and bridge the gap in core funding. They said, "Students are sleeping on the floor. We will not take it any more." This is not a slogan dreamed up in an office. They are the words of young people who are trying to study while worrying about where they are going to sleep. Now we are being told that public land will be given to private investors as a major part of the solution to student accommodation. The Government says that its public-private partnership, PPP, programme will provide thousands in additional student places, but for whom? There is no point in building student accommodation if the students who desperately need it cannot afford to live there. What happens if a student is effectively priced out of a building with empty rooms? Do we really want a situation where a student is sleeping in their car or on somebody's floor, while a building beside them has accommodation that is simply unaffordable? That is not an accommodation solution.

When transport costs are rising for students who have not been provided with accommodation by this Government, the pressure becomes even greater. A student who cannot get a room does not stop being a student. They still have to get to college and they still have to eat and pay their bills. Has the Minister of State really listened to students? Students are telling her that the problem is not simply about a reduction in fees. The problem is the total cost of education. It is fees, rent, transport and food. It is the cost of simply surviving while trying to get a qualification. I want a commitment that public money will not be used to create opportunities for investors while students carry the financial burden. If public land and public investment are involved, then affordable student accommodation must be guaranteed.

What about apprentices? Apprentices are working, learning and building the future of this country. When will they see a genuine reduction in their fees? Education should not be a privilege for those who can afford it, so listen to students and do not just announce another measure. Fix the system.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: What was announced yesterday was a budget of too little, too late for too few. I spoke yesterday about how this budget was going to deepen energy insecurity and climate instability, and worsen rising household costs by continuing our reliance on fossil fuels and slowing the pace of retrofits.

I will talk today about some of the people I hear from in my constituency every week who will continue to be left behind by this budget. Before I do, it is worth pointing out who this budget did target and benefit. We have seen cuts to capital gains tax, a cut to the exit tax on exchange-traded funds, ETFs, and an effective cut on inheritance tax. These are tax cuts that will disproportionately benefit the most well-off in our society. Every budget is an exercise in balancing a difficult set of interests. There are so many people really struggling in our country right now, including people in energy poverty, people with disabilities and people with young children, whether those children are in crèche, school or university. These families are not likely to have the kind of money or capital put away who will benefit from cuts in wealth taxes. What money they have is going on fuel bills, crèche fees and the cost of caring.

Students continue to face extraordinary pressures from fees, rent and transport and food costs. These pressures are driving talented young people out of education or forcing them into

unsustainable debt. The Government's new sibling grant may generate positive headlines, but it will only benefit a relatively small number of families with two or more children in higher education. The Green Party believes there is a fairer approach. We would begin the process of abolishing the student contribution charge over four years, starting with families that earn under €120,000 per year. This would provide real support to lower income households and households in the squeezed middle that earn too much to qualify for full support but not enough to comfortably absorb a student charge of €2,350 for each child attending college.

There is an extraordinary number of vacant and derelict buildings in Ireland. In the midst of a housing crisis, this is like hiding food in a famine. The Government's announcement yesterday does not go far enough in addressing the crisis of vacancy and dereliction. It is all well and good to say that Revenue can use its full powers to collect vacancy and dereliction levies, but there is real frustration at local authority level that local government is left doing all the running on these charges. It is now out of local authorities' hands to even make arrangements with people who buy a derelict property to maybe waive a levy while it is being done up. The Government is well aware of these challenges. It hears it from chief executives of local authorities and county councillors but no answer to this issue was provided in yesterday's budget.

Affordable childcare means very little if parents cannot find a place for their child. Across the country, families are struggling to access childcare, as providers themselves face mounting pressures, with qualified staff leaving the sector and services closing their doors. Yet, this budget fails to provide a clear pathway to recruit and retain the childcare professionals on whom the entire sector depends. The Government continues to talk about reducing costs for parents but affordability and availability have to go hand in hand. There is little point in making childcare cheaper if there are no childcare places available for parents to take up. In its pre-budget submission, the Green Party proposed significant investments in childcare pay because supporting the workers in the sector is the key to supporting parents. We want the State to actively take on the wages of childcare staff, as it does for other education levels. This will help childcare providers keep costs down. Without a stable, properly paid workforce we cannot build the type of childcare system families need. There needs to be a clear pathway towards paying childcare professionals like teachers. Meanwhile, the election promise of €200 per month for childcare remains that - a promise. The Government's announcement yesterday leaves families still paying more than two and a half times that amount, assuming they are lucky enough to find a place.

Disabled people have the same right as every other citizen to live fulfilling, independent lives in their own communities, close to their families, friends and support networks. Too often, disability policy is viewed through the lens of cost rather than rights. Families and carers are expected to shoulder enormous responsibilities while disabled people face long waits for appropriate housing and residential supports. The Green Party believes that disabled people should have access to housing and residential places within their communities and not be forced to move away from the people and places that matter most to them. We also need to move away from a system that relies excessively on for-profit provision and towards one that is centred on care, dignity and public responsibility.

We also need a means-test-free carer's allowance. Too many carers - the majority of whom, as we know, are women - are forced to choose between participating in the workforce and

providing care for a loved one. This is neither fair nor sustainable. The Government's announcement yesterday of 489 new residential places falls far short of what is required. According to the Before We Die campaign, more than 2,400 adults with intellectual disabilities are living with a parent aged over 70, while 500 of those are living with a parent aged over 80. These figures highlight the scale and urgency of the challenge. Many ageing parents are living with deep uncertainty about what will happen to their daughter or son when they are no longer able to provide care for them. This budget does not provide the level of ambition needed to address that reality for too many families in this country. Those families deserve certainty and disabled people deserve the right to live independently and with dignity. It is essential that the State does more to realise that right.

We know from yesterday's budget what the Government thinks culture represents in Ireland. It represents support for greyhound racing and hare coursing. At the same time, our artists, writers and performers are left behind.

This budget also saw no increase in the basic income for the arts, that flagship project the Green Party delivered in the previous Government, which has so much potential to end precarious incomes and offer real stability for artists. These objectives were underpinned by a set of research that was built into the pilot programme undertaken by Catherine Martin in the previous Government. This Government should be seeking to increase participant numbers in each budget, to make it permanent and to raise the rate of payment for artists in line with inflation. Yesterday's budget will deliver bitter news for the many artists seeking to join the scheme and it signals this Government's intention to let this programme wither on the vine.

To wrap up, this will be remembered as the left-behind budget. The Government has left behind climate action. It has left behind energy independence and retrofitting. It has left behind commuters who are going to be left at bus stops for ghost buses and buses that arrive late and will, from January, cost more. It has left behind carers, parents and artists. This is reflective of this Government's attitude to these issues and to people who the Green Party have always fought for. This Government thinks that they can be left by the wayside when it is inconvenient to the core interest groups that it serves. I have every belief that people in communities across Ireland will prove it very much mistaken if it thinks it can get away with this cynical calculation.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on budget 2027. At the outset, I want to welcome the news about the shingles vaccine. I have been pressing for a free vaccine programme for a number of years, so I was delighted to see a phased programme announced for people aged 65 and over who are immunocompromised. The vaccine is well established but the near-€500 cost is a huge barrier for many older people, and this is a great start. It will make a huge difference to older people in Dún Laoghaire and indeed across the country. I hope the Minister will confirm the arrangements as soon as possible, and I know negotiations are under way in relation to it.

The cost of living remains a big pressure on households. Families feel it at the checkout, at the pump and, indeed, as the bills arrive. The budget makes an effort to respond to those pressures. Core social welfare rates rise by €10 per week, and the maximum childcare fee falls to €550 a month. The student contribution fee is cut by €150 for good, a permanent cut, and I particularly welcome the expansion of the fuel allowance. The payment itself rises to €43 a

week but the weekly income threshold for those aged 66 and over increases from €534 to €642. The Minister will know I have pressed for this, as it unlocks access to the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, fully funded home retrofit programme.

On income tax, the changes are very modest but are very welcome. I particularly welcome the direction of travel here, and that it is the Government's intention to remove everyone earning under €50,000 from the higher rate of income tax. People on ordinary wages should not be paying tax at 40%.

In the limited time I have available, I want to single out four measures: the new €500 cost-of-disability allowance; the increase in home care hours; the increased threshold for carer's allowance; and the increase for the care and repair scheme. These will make a real difference to people. Clearly, cost-of-living pressures need to be kept under review. If the international situation deteriorates further, more support will be needed.

Deputy Micheál Carrigy: Budget 2027 introduces a range of measures for older people, working families, children, people with disabilities, businesses, housing, infrastructure, farmers and fishermen, as well as education and energy security. It is about helping people who work hard to get ahead, not just to get by, and about providing support for those who are most vulnerable in our society. Some of the measures include the reduction in carbon tax on home heating oil, saving households €86 on a 1,000 litre fill. This is important heading into the winter months, particularly for people in rural Ireland and for older persons. While the war in Iran continues to have a negative impact on fuel prices, it is welcome to see support being provided to offset this cost. The fuel allowance has also increased to €43 a week, with wider eligibility for older persons living alone aged over 66.

Childcare costs will be capped at €550 a month from September for children up to senior infants, delivering savings of more than €1,800 per year. Supporting working families by ensuring that they can access affordable childcare is essential. Fine Gael has consistently worked to make childcare more affordable, while also ensuring that those working in the sector are properly supported. We also announced an increase in the higher income threshold from €44,000 to €46,500, alongside a €125 increase in tax credits. This will ensure that more people's hard-earned money stays in their pockets and works for them. It is important that we continue to undertake measures like this to see the threshold increase to €50,000 over the lifetime of this Government.

Furthermore, a new €500 cost-of-disability payment has been introduced. People with disabilities face additional costs in their daily lives, and ensuring that supports are in place to help reduce these financial pressures is both necessary and long overdue. Indeed, in my role as the chairperson of the Joint Committee on Autism, we saw additional costs of over €10,000 to €15,000 for a person with a disability. This measure is just a start as we work to put in a proper cost-of-disability payment. There will also be €20 million provided for the targeted waiting list initiative for assessments of need, along with 150 new multidisciplinary posts for children's disability network teams, CDNTs. This was also a commitment of the Joint Committee on Autism, in respect of providing this targeted private sourcing of assessments of need to cut the list. The Government has been working with relevant organisations to ensure that various supports for people with disabilities are delivered and implemented during the course of this Government, and I look forward to seeing these commitments delivered.

Deputy John McGuinness: If there was a real social conscience at the heart of this Government, we would have taken steps on this occasion to tax the banks that are making immoral profits. It is shocking to see that they get away with it once again. We would have taxed the vulture funds to ensure that they made a sizeable contribution to the economy and to society, because in both cases they were at the heart of the crash and in both cases they have got off scot-free. The Government has been light in relation to how they treat both of these banking organisations.

The €15 million fund for rural pubs is to be welcomed but what about the other rural businesses in real deep difficulty? If we were to take any of the high streets in the towns and in the villages throughout the country, we would see that shops are closing day in, day out. The owners will tell us it is the commercial rates, the insurance, the cost of giving employment and the cost of bureaucracy. Nothing has been done to stem the flow of closures in that sector, and that is extremely disappointing for me. Any help would be welcomed. That is why I support the measures in the budget. There is a direction that needs to be changed here, and that is a direction that makes those with the most money pay the most.

In the small and medium enterprise, SME, sector in my county, I have seen Khan's bookshop closed, as well as O'Neill's supermarket in Thomastown and John Joe Cullen of John Street, Kilkenny, and well-known retail outlets are now beginning to cut back and close down. We have to ask ourselves why this is happening and do something to make our significant shopping streets worthwhile going to, and that has to be addressed in the context of Government funding.

Some €3 for the living alone allowance was absolutely pathetic, particularly given the tax breaks we have given to the banks and the vulture funds. I cannot explain to people why that has happened, and I cannot understand why politically experienced Ministers around the table cannot see that it is an outrage. It is right and correct that people would raise their voices about it and say it here.

I turn now to those on social welfare and on pensions. Again, I have advocated in the past for a substantial increase in pensions to ensure that those people on them will live reasonably well during the course of a week. That has not happened. That €10 is well gone by the time it is going to be paid. Yes, I will vote for it in this budget to get them the €10 but I will tell the House that they are finding it extremely difficult to make ends meet. The Minister, Deputy Jack Chambers, is appointing a group to oversee the spending of all of this massive amount of money. For God's sake, Jack, do not appoint the usual suspects to that group. Start with someone else.

Michael O'Leary's name has been mentioned in different ways. I am offering the name to confront the *status quo* and to ask that in the appointment of this group they look beyond the usual suspects. Otherwise, it will just be the same old, same old. It will be the *status quo* being supported left, right and centre. The reforms necessary to make this country work at national and local level are not being put in place. I do not know why the Government is so afraid of reforming the C and AG Act, giving greater oversight to him to go through all the agencies if necessary and to take in local government. I will again bring a Bill before the Dáil focusing on that and I ask the Government to consider supporting it.

I turn to foster carers. In every budget I have mentioned foster carers. I have supported them in the work they do. We have abandoned them. We have put nothing but bureaucracy

and difficulties in front of every one of those families offering a safe place for some of the youngest and most vulnerable in society. I say that we are judged by how we treat the marginalised and less well-off in society. If this Government does not change direction, it will get to the point where they will not be represented and will be fighting hard to get the money they deserve.

Deputy Ann Graves: This budget was a great opportunity to give hope and practical support to people, their families and communities living with the dire consequences of problematic drug and alcohol use. However, the Government wasted the opportunity and showed yet again that it is not on the side of those who urgently need support. It allocated €15 million in support for publicans, yet the total budget for social inclusion, the national drugs strategy, alcohol support and community health and well-being is €36 million. This is a drop in the ocean compared with the challenges that face the drug task forces, community-based drug and alcohol projects and rehabilitation services. I do not want to see any business, particularly family businesses, suffering but allocating €15 million to publicans flies in the face of a public health response to drug and alcohol use.

We need a government that stands up to the drinks industry. We need a strategy that tackles the enormous damage done by alcohol. Alcohol misuse costs our public healthcare system €793 million annually. This does not include the human cost to families, children or in the workplace. We need a radical reset in Government priorities when it comes to tackling the causes and consequences of the drug and alcohol crisis. The Joint Committee on Drugs Use agreed the need for a comprehensive health-led approach to drug use. This applies to those using drugs, their families and communities. The Government needs to seriously increase funding for drug and alcohol projects to provide supports for families living with addiction and their communities, who are living through a third generation of trauma caused by addiction and violence.

The recent allocation of an extra €65,000 for the drug-related intimidation and violence engagement programme is simply not enough. DRIVE is doing great work but communities are struggling with violence and drug-related intimidation. In the past two weeks in Dublin we have seen increased violent attacks, including arson and firearms being used. Government must invest in preventative work to ensure that we are tackling the causes of community violence by ensuring that DRIVE receives adequate multi-annual budgets rather than piecemeal annual funding.

Women experience addiction differently from men. As a priority, women need access to drug rehabilitation programmes. For too long, rehabilitation programmes have been designed for men and by men. That has to change. I urge the Minister of State to visit projects like SAOL and Jane's Place to listen to women's needs, fund them appropriately and support the services in prisons for women.

Deputy Michael Collins: I said last night that this budget was a lost opportunity. We needed to get into the cut and thrust of where problems are, and they are with hauliers and agriculture. That bill lands at the table of ordinary mothers and fathers in every city and town in this country because when they go to do their shopping, it is going up and up. I spoke to many of those in the haulage business who have serious concerns. Many of them protested recently and today feel they were betrayed by the Government once again. We could have a problem on our hands

down the road but that is something they have to make a decision about. We will support them in every way we can to make sure we still try to get the message across. We said no carbon tax on delivery and productivity but a carbon tax on aviation. We were not just throwing out something that cost a lot of money and has no solutions. I hear a lot about the Opposition roaring and shouting about things but not saying where the money comes from. When the money goes out of the purse it has to come back into the purse some way. We did that, but it would have meant having a government that made a strong decision to support the haulier, farmer and fisherman and that was not there. It was a lost opportunity that will lead to serious repercussions.

I will move away from where I was last night when I spoke about quite a lot about different areas. Tonight, I am worried about the tourism sector. I do not see anything in the budget to compensate the tourism sector for short-term lets. The legislation is delayed but press releases have come out from the Department saying that short-term lets and people with Airbnbs will need planning permission. If that is the case, it will cost many of them hundreds of thousands of quid if they want to continue. Is the Government going to grant aid that, or is it going to see the business being wiped out? It put in legislation. It cannot put in legislation and tell people not to worry about it. That is not the point. If you put in legislation saying people have to be planning compliant within two years, that is ruination for the businesses that are there. I stand by those businesses linked to my constituency and to the constituencies I have visited in the past six months as I toured the country with my councillors along the east and west coasts.

I do not see any intention to save their businesses. It is just about planning compliance and then walking away, never mind about regulation. They always said they had no problem with registration. That has to be done. However, the planning issue was the one thing they wanted to avoid because some of these businesses have been running successfully for the past ten, 20, 30 or 40 years. Now all of sudden they are being made into criminals and have to close down the business because someone in Dublin is homeless, but they are not going to go down to Courtmacsherry to the house. We have to use our heads to see if we can salvage something at the 11th hour before ruination. A tourism tax was talked about. It is not in there and I hope it never is. For some reason, the Government is out to attack the tourism industry, which is one of the few things we could make a success of. We are a beautiful country for people to visit from all over the world. The Government should stop taxing people and turning people off. People look at prices and say this place is far too dear to go near.

I will move away from that because my time is tight. I turn to the health budget. We had the stem cells group in the audiovisual room today. Is there a budget for a stem cells unit? We have no stem cells unit in the south west, which includes Cork University Hospital. It was closed down 20 years ago to be repaired and is still closed. That is a shocking indictment of the way the health system works in this country. There are 2,400 blood cancers in Ireland. Some 8% of all cancers lead to death annually. There are at least 900 new cases each year. They are all travelling to Dublin, which is overcrowded and is unfair on that side of the country. They have enough of their own issues. The rest are travelling to Galway from the Cork side. Cork, Limerick, Clare and all of that side in Munster need to be dealt with and the budget needs be found. I thank Mags McCarthy, Anne-Marie O'Mahony, Dermot O'Leary and others who are putting up this massive fight to try to address this mindset with the doctors and consultants in CUH. They need this unit in CUH immediately. Is there a budget set aside for this in health?

I turn to respite for people in CoAction. This is at crisis point for so many people. Is there funding set aside for respite? Why is respite not there? I have looked at *The Southern Star*, which did a piece this week on Joan Carroll, whose son, Shane is aged 41; they have told me I can use their name. Esther O'Mahony's son, Brian, is 27. They are caring 24-7 for their sons and others are caring for their daughters. The bottom line is they cannot get respite and are facing serious burn-out. If they end up in hospital, who will look after their children? There is always that worry about children with intellectual disabilities. Joan Carroll has to feed and dress her son, who is tube-fed.

That is day and night and her doing it on her own. Her daughter comes in and tries to help with some things but she has her own children as well. The whole point is respite will always give people a chance to recharge their batteries. They are not looking for a month. They are only looking for a week every two months or something like that to give them that chance. We need to see that built into the budget.

The problem for people with intellectual disabilities is they need transport to get to their centres and they do not get that because they have no voice. That is the problem. We have no respect for people with intellectual disabilities. They totally depend on their parents and some of them are elderly and cannot do it. I know Megan O'Sullivan from Allihies cannot get a transport service to Bantry. Imagine that. She is at home sitting on her sofa with her dog. She does not deserve that life. She is a lovely young woman. She deserves to be encouraged to be out there among the people and brought on no end for her family. Megan's parents wrote a piece in the *Irish Examiner* recently about the crisis situation they find themselves in. It could cost them €3,000 a month and they cannot afford that. One of them cannot afford to give up their job so that means Megan is left at home.

Why is there not an special needs assistant, SNA, service? I was in my constituency office on Saturday and the people of Castletownshend told me the SNA service there that takes their children with intellectual disabilities to Clonakilty is being discontinued because CoAction is pulling the SNA-type service it had, which was somebody to travel with them on the bus. It is something as small as that. Is that the society we believe we should live in? Why was Before We Die, BWD, set up? It is because people are scared to within an inch of their life because their children have been forgotten and have no voice. We have forgotten them inside this House.

On transport, is Local Link going to be given a budget this time? Tenders were put out about 12 months ago and those tenders have not been filled since. There are areas like Clonakilty, Grange and Timoleague where that was promised but not delivered. We are looking for a loop in Castletownshend - the Mizen loop. There is no service for Drinagh, Caheragh or Drimoleague, which should be a stand-alone service. We have to look at a service that is working very successfully down in Baltimore serving Sherkin Island, Cape Clear and Baltimore. That needs to be a stand-alone service because it is full and people are being left on the side of the road. That has to be looked at through Local Link. There is also Macroom, Kealkill and Bantry.

We looked at trying to see where money could be saved. NGOs are a massive problem in this country the Government is ignoring. Why? I do not know. We will find out as time goes on. We are talking about €11 billion to 34,000 NGOs. The figure of €11 billion is astonishing. The Department of foreign affairs has probably the highest budget of all for NGOs. That needs

to be looked into and curbed. At the same time, a 52-year-old man was seriously injured in Rhodes, Greece, recently who has spent the past four weeks in a hospital there. The Department of foreign affairs do not seem to be able to bring Keith Twomey from Ballineen home. He is there with five fractures and a brain injury, and no one can put him on a plane and bring him back to Ireland. His fractures are not even healing over there. That is an astonishing situation. I ask the Minister of State to personally intervene with the Minister for foreign affairs or anyone because his father rang me a while ago. He rang me four or five times today as did his mother, upset out of their mind about their son. We asked the Tánaiste's office, the Department of foreign affairs and the Department of Health. Imagine that there are fractures in his body and he is being left in the hospital. It is scandalous, to be quite honest, that he is out in Rhodes and we cannot intervene. If it was a foreign national, we would intervene immediately. That is the problem we have here.

Deputy Colm Burke: Budget 2027 makes a significant investment in our health service, with €29.1 billion provided for health. That is an increase of around €1.8 billion on 2026. The focus must now be on ensuring this investment translates into improvements in access and better outcomes for patients. One measure I particularly welcome is a phased introduction of a national shingles vaccination programme for people aged over-65, starting with those who are immunocompromised. I have raised this issue repeatedly because shingles can cause severe and long-lasting health problems, particularly among older people. Making this vaccination more accessible is a practical preventative health measure that can protect older and at-risk people from illness while also reducing pressure on our health service.

There are other important measures too. Budget 2027 provides 1.8 million additional home support hours, helping more older people remain independent in their own homes. Cancer monitoring and follow-up care will increasingly be provided closer to patients' homes while additional investment will strengthen mental health, dental and GP services. I also welcome improved access to oral health and orthodontic services for children, including reducing waiting lists for school dental programmes and improving access to more complex dental treatment.

For Cork, investment is also continuing in the planned elective hospital, which is part of the wider expansion of health infrastructure. In particular, there is the need for the development of the new elective hospital, the development of the new paediatric unit and two additional theatres in the new elective hub. Two theatres have opened and an additional two are to be built in 2027. It is important that work is done.

We have a lot of work done but the important thing is having the infrastructure in order to develop that health service and that staff can provide the best quality healthcare. I very much welcome this budget and the investment both in services and infrastructure.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I very much welcome this budget in its overall context. It represents an expansionary budget of €125 billion in public expenditure and a 6% uplift on last year, which is very welcome. This is necessary in the context we find ourselves in with the international challenges, the energy crisis and the significant inflationary pressures facing the Irish people. Not only are we meeting some of the needs of today but we are also futureproofing our economy by putting funding into the two long-term funds, which I understand will have close to €26 billion in them by the end of this year. That is very welcome.

I am tight for time so I will focus on a couple of issues. The first relates to the income tax changes that were brought about in the budget. These are obviously very welcome and any budget that puts money back into the pockets of workers is welcome. I would have preferred the package to be calibrated in a way that there was a better balance in terms of the adjustment of the tax credits and the upper entry points so that workers earning €30,000, €35,000 and €40,000 would have received better relief. That is something we have to be acutely aware of in future budgets.

On the social protection side, the budget allocated over €2 billion and gives some relief to those in the country who need it the most. That is very welcome. One measure I particularly pushed was the living alone allowance and I had ongoing discussions with the Minister, Deputy Dara Calleary, on that provision. I welcome there has been some movement on it. However, the movement has been quite small in terms of the allocation. It has been described as mean-spirited and an insult to people. I understand people's anger at that. I point out that this allowance has not been adjusted in five years and we now have it in the budgetary context, which is very important. This has to be viewed as a first step. We certainly have to increase that amount into the future because those living alone on long-term social welfare payments are those who are most at risk of poverty. The living alone allowance should have been adjusted to reflect that.

I will touch on one measure I proposed prior to the budget on the housing front, which was that relief be provided for first-time buyers in the form of stamp duty relief. That particular measure did not make it over the line and it is something I am very disappointed with. Some of the arguments made against it were grossly exaggerated and unfounded. I am happy to take that debate on with anyone in the future. It was a modest measure. It would have had a negligible impact on the property market but it would have made a huge difference to first-time buyers. It is something I will continue to raise into the future. Having said that, there were measures in the budget for first-time buyers in the form of an adjustment to the help to buy scheme and the 8,500 starter homes, which are very welcome.

Deputy John Clendennen: I welcome this budget. It is a budget for families, workers, pensioners, carers, businesses, communities and farmers. We need to ensure we support the present and protect the future. We need to encourage people to get up and get out, make a positive contribution to the economy and society and have the opportunity to not just get by but get ahead. This is a budget that very much supports income tax. We see the measures around everyday costs like fuel and childcare. We also see it with schools. An issue that has been ongoing in my own constituency is in relation to further accommodation of units. We can see the capitation rates increasing to €68 at primary school level and €40 at secondary school level, and support for special education teachers and SNAs and school transport. These are measures that prove the Government is listening.

There are also pragmatic approaches around the likes of energy. I see in my own constituency that the majority of people rely on home heating oil. We are now taking pragmatic steps through the likes of battery storage, the boiler scrappage scheme and encouraging more solar panels, while also helping with the likes of carbon tax reductions and encouraging people to engage in retrofitting and make their homes more comfortable.

9 o'clock

It is also a budget for rural Ireland. I have not heard one person in the Chamber talk about the supports for post offices and pubs. These are social hubs in our communities that we have debated here many times. We now see that support being recognised. We are also seeing the start of a conversation about how we can ensure that it will be maximised and further developed in the future at the same time as maintaining support for farmers.

I acknowledge the public spending efficiency task force that was announced yesterday. That is a very welcome step. We have talked about spending a good deal over the past 24 hours. We need to start talking about efficiencies, waste and expediting the delivery of infrastructure. Where savings and efficiencies are found, they should be ring-fenced at a certain point and given back in the form of tax relief for the public.

Overall, this is a welcome budget. It is the first of four that will see work pay. It will continue to support people to get up, get out and get ahead.

Deputy Maeve O'Connell: I welcome the budget. It is a very good budget that will reduce the cost of childcare and enable workers to take home more of their hard-earned pay. It will also ease the cost-of-living and cost-of-energy pressures on households across the country. It is very disappointing to listen to the Opposition endlessly discuss the cost of living and then to hear their alternative proposals. The Opposition's alternative budgets involved tax increases as opposed to reductions.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: For vulture funds.

Deputy Maeve O'Connell: Sinn Féin and the Social Democrats proposed 23 additional new taxes.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: For utility companies.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please. No interruptions.

Deputy Maeve O'Connell: These would inevitably result in higher instead of lower costs. The Government has recognised the pressures people are under and has taken action. This budget will ease matters for working families and small businesses. It is a significant step in the right direction. One example is the fact that a person on the average wage will be bringing home an additional €750 as a result of the budget. That does make a difference to people.

The budget also has long-term focus. In that context, I highlight the areas of higher education and defence. We are increasing the SUSI summer earnings threshold for students in order that they can choose to work without doing so having an impact on their education. The Minister of State, Deputy Harkin, was here earlier. She has been managing the extra investment in the apprenticeship sector. We are moving closer to our target of 12,500 apprentice registrations annually by 2030. This is work that is being done on developing our national skills profile, a key focus for the Government. It is good that funding has been set aside through the National Training Fund for the workplace changes that artificial intelligence is going to bring about. Budget 2027 also provides greater support for our national security and resilience,

with a 10.5% funding increase which will result in an additional 400 members of the Defence Forces and extra capital funding for our defence priorities.

I commend the budget. I thank each and every Minister for all of the hard work they have done over recent weeks and months to prepare it.

An Ceann Comhairle: It is now Deputy McGuinness's turn.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: The level of delusion from the Government benches - this budget is a betrayal of workers, families and communities by Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and their Independents.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: Ah, stop.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: There is less than a fiver a week for most people. That will be gone before they even get it. The fuel allowance has been cut. A fill of oil costs €1,600 at the moment and the Government is providing €43 to take off that. Come off it. Students are paying hundreds more in fees now than when the Government promised to cut student fees during the general election campaign. Renters are being shafted at a time when the Government refuses to tax vulture funds on their rental income. There are 300,000 households and counting in electricity arrears, while utility companies' profits soar. I say to Deputy Maeve O'Connell that those profits are the ones we want to tax. However, a windfall tax has still not been imposed on them. These are the Government's choices. These are the choices that the Deputies opposite voted on yesterday in order to protect privilege. There are sweetheart deals for developers, bankers and vulture funds while ordinary households once again pick up the tab.

The Government is cutting community development funding at a time when communities need it most. Sinn Féin proposed €10 million extra for the community services programme. The Government gave €5 million, which is not enough to keep up with wage demands or to keep people in jobs. We proposed over €10 million of an uplift for SICAP. The Government has allocated absolutely nothing. Then it has the gall to talk about seeking efficiencies from the workers and organisations that deliver those programmes on the ground. What an insult. These are the people who are always doing more with less. They supported people and held communities together through the savage years of austerity and since. Now, the Government wants to lecture them about efficiencies. It has to fund them. It should respect and invest in them, not lecture them.

Is masla í an cháinaisnéis seo do phobal na Gaeilge agus na Gaeltachta. Tá méadú níos lú ná milliún amháin ar mhaoiniú reatha, gearradh €5 milliún ar mhaoiniú caipitil agus faic sa cháinaisnéis i dtaobh tithe agus infreastruchtúir sa Gaeltacht. Níl oiread is euro sa bhreis d'infheistíocht luaite le dul i ngleic leis an ngéarchéim thithíochta a chuireann todhchaí na Gaeltachta i mbaol. Agus ceiliúradh á dhéanamh againn i mbliana ar 100 bliain ó aithníodh na Gaeltachtaí, cá bhfuil an fhís, uaillmhian agus dóchas do theaghlaigh agus pobal na Gaeltachta? Cá bhfuil an plean don chéad ghlúin eile?

For rural Ireland, this budget is an enormous missed opportunity. There is nothing meaningful in respect of rural housing and no additional capital investment in housing at all. There are utterly inadequate measures on fuel and home heating oil for households and SMEs.

Young people are leaving towns, villages and the countryside in their droves. There is nothing for rural post offices or community infrastructure. There is confusion over the support for rural pubs. There is no serious package to tackle isolation and the growing epidemic of loneliness. While the additional LEADER funding is welcome, it is very late in the day. Concerns and uncertainty remain about its future.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: It is nice that the Deputy is ending on a positive note by welcoming the increased funding.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: The plan that will succeed Our Rural Future will soon be launched, but there is no dedicated funding to underpin and implement it. Rural communities need ambition, investment and a properly resourced plan for the future. This budget falls far short in that regard.

Deputy Michael Cahill: Budget 2027 contains a wide range of cost-of-living measures, including increases in the fuel allowance, the living alone allowance and social welfare payments, with the old-age pension going to €309.30 per week. There is an increase in children's allowance and improvements to the carer's allowance scheme. In housing, the help to buy scheme is going from €30,000 to €35,000. There is additional funding for affordable and social housing. The Government is introducing the first-ever cost-of-disability payment of €500, which I and many others had campaigned for. We thank the Minister, Deputy Calleary, for that.

As a member of the joint committee on health, I am particularly pleased to see the phased introduction of the shingles vaccine programme. This is very important. I am also pleased that there is €31 million for the fertiliser scheme for farmers, and that an increase of €500 per animal is also being introduced for the bovine TB reactors scheme, an issue I have raised previously. There are many other measures there for the agriculture sector, such as VAT, TAMS, ACRES and so on.

Workers received good news with income tax bands being increased by €2,500, along with many other measures. The €15 million for rural pubs is hugely significant. Those establishments are under enormous pressure. In my county, the local community purchased the Inny Tavern in Dromod. The first anniversary of the community acquiring the pub was marked recently. We have seen many other properties throughout the country being acquired.

In the budget, there is provision for 2,339 additional SNAs and 1,353 additional teachers to support everyday learners. The €33 million in respect of school transport is very welcome. The student support package of €34 million is also very welcome. Regarding fees, there is €1,800 for families who have more than one student going to college.

There are plenty of worthwhile measures to support businesses, including 1,000 extra gardaí, 2,000-----

An Ceann Comhairle: We will stay on time. Deputy Ward is next.

Deputy Barry Ward: I welcome the budget. There is an awful lot of really good stuff in it. We are in an incredibly lucky position compared with our European neighbours in that we are able to deliver an expansionary budget. I particularly acknowledge the provision for the shingles vaccine, the programme relating to which will start with immunocompromised patients. There is a lot of progress to be made there, and I have called for that.

I also acknowledge the promise to look at a reduction in excise for hydrotreated vegetable oil, HVO, which is a much cleaner fuel that can be used in diesel cars.

It is really important that we examine this.

I regret that the help to buy scheme is still capped at €500,000. There is not a house in my constituency that would cost less than that, so, essentially, it is not available for people in Dún Laoghaire. That is regrettable. I also want to acknowledge improvements such as grants for solar panels and heat pumps and local enterprise office energy efficiency grants. These are all good.

I have listened to the debate today. I recognise that there is a role for the Opposition to criticise the Government and hold it to account and for Opposition Members to tell us where they think we have not done enough. However, the kind of language I have heard used is, frankly, really unfortunate. The previous speaker spoke about betraying people with the budget. There was also some of the rhetoric used by other Members of the Opposition. Who on earth does Deputy Conor D. McGuinness think he is using words like "betrayal"? What exactly would he have done differently? Is the amount of money that is available to help people as much as we would like? No. However, it is a responsible amount.

We are grappling with a security crisis whereby one Member of the House was assaulted through the window of his car in the past few weeks. Does Deputy Conor D. McGuinness think words like "betrayal" help the situation? Does he think he is continuing to embed in the minds of member of the public the notion that there are people in this House who set against them, particularly when they are represented by people in this House? We all do our level best to represent the interests of our constituents. Deputy McGuinness does not have to agree, but he does have to show a modicum of respect for the people-----

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: I have the same mandate.

Deputy Barry Ward: -----whom we represent-----

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: I have the same mandate.

Deputy Barry Ward: -----and the people who are represented in this Chamber, with the very best offices of every TD.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy McGuinness-----

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Deputy Ward is addressing me directly. I have the same mandate to come in here-----

Deputy Barry Ward: I would never single out a Deputy in the way that Deputy McGuinness has singled out the Government.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: You will be known by your actions.

Deputy Barry Ward: The language used in the course of this debate by the Deputy and his colleagues is deplorable and reprehensible. The Deputy is perfectly entitled to disagree and to criticise, but words like “betrayal” are beneath even him.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: I have the same right as Deputy Ward. If it is a betrayal, it is a betrayal.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: There should be responsible use of language.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy McGuinness is free to leave. This debate will finish on time. I call Deputy McAuliffe.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Anyone listening to the debate in this House for the past 24 hours or, indeed, to the representative bodies in the media could be forgiven for thinking that there is nothing for anybody in the budget. What about people on the minimum wage? Between the increase in the minimum wage and the tax changes, they will be better off to the tune of €1,300. Somebody with a disability who is living alone will be better off by over €1,200. A couple with three children on the working family payment will be better off by nearly €1,600. A pensioner who is getting the pension and the living alone allowance will be better off by over €600. If they are eligible for the fuel allowance, they will be better off by another €1,200, which will bring them up to €1,800. That is not to talk about the up to €2,200 for some families for childcare or €1,500 for student fees.

Deputy McGuinness should knock on those people's doors.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: The Deputy needs new batteries for his calculator.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: He should tell them that they are the elite and that they are privileged. They are the people we have delivered for in the budget. We are very proud of what we have done for them. They needed our support and they received it. It is also not to mention more gardaí, more SNAs, more special needs teachers, more money for schools to help them operate - because schools are expensive to run - the 33,000 counselling hours, the money for the shingles vaccine or the many other initiatives contained in the budget.

The Opposition should call for us to do more. This is the role of the Opposition. It should also acknowledge when a budget of €125 billion, more money than the State has ever spent, delivers for some people, including those who are in need. This is not a budget for people who are privileged or for the elite. It is a budget for people who needed support and who got it.

I will say one thing more. The cost-of-disability payment is something that should have been in last year's budget. I am so pleased to see it in this year's budget. I look forward to the process relating to it being co-designed with disabled people in order that the permanent cost-

of-disability payment that is going to be paid for the first time over the next year will be paid again in 2028. This is a payment that I am so proud to have worked on with the Minister, Deputy Calleary. I am also so proud to see it delivered in the budget. I look forward to it being improved in others.

Deputy James Geoghegan: There is no one in this House who does not acknowledge the cost-of-living crisis. What is different is that the Government is trying to address the cost of living. What the Government will do, and there will be no spinning its way out of it by the Opposition, is put the money into people's pockets, including the minimum wage worker Deputy McAuliffe mentioned a moment ago who will receive an extra €1,300. The average worker in this country will receive an extra €750. Families reliant on childcare will receive an extra €2,000. The truth is that Sinn Féin and others in opposition do not want people to hear these things. They do not want people to hear these facts because, let us be honest, they do not want to support people who work hard to get ahead. It is a political choice that they will not tell people but it is the reality.

The budget is about supporting working people and working families who get up every morning and bring their kids to crèche or school. It is about saving for the future. We are not frittering away our savings for the future. The Tánaiste, Deputy Harris, has created a single savings and investment scheme of up to €50,000 over four years, tax-free, with a maximum deposit of up to €12,000 each year. From small amounts to medium amounts to large amounts, people can put a bit of money away for the future. That is what this budget is about. It is about working people and about supporting people in getting ahead.

The budget is also about supporting the enterprise economy that will be ruined by the 21 taxes that Sinn Féin and other Members of the Opposition want to introduce and that they never mention. They never talk about enterprise. There is never any discussion about the revenues that are being generated by the very working people they do not support. The truth is that the working people of Ireland, the average income earners of Ireland, are listening. They will recognise that. They will see it and they will notice it in their pay packets. I am not denying the challenges the country will continue to face. People will recognise those who are on their side. They will also see those who want to import to this jurisdiction the kind of tribal divisions that we have seen on another part of this island. We will not be doing that. We support all workers, including minimum wage workers, average income workers and median income workers. We are going to support work and support people who work hard to get ahead.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: All workers are equal, but some are a bit more equal.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 9.16 p.m. go dtí 10.23 a.m., Déardaoin, an 8 Deireadh Fómhair 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 9.16 p.m. until 10.23 a.m. on Thursday, 8 October 2026.