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DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 10 Samhain 2026

Tuesday, 10 November 2026

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mark Wall) i gceannas ar 1 p.m.

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

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

Deputies Michael Murphy and Mattie McGrath - To discuss the need to strengthen Uisce Éireann's accountability to Dáil Éireann.

Deputy Michael Cahill - To urgently intervene and treat the Ballyheigue water contamination issue as a state of emergency.

Deputy Cathy Bennett - To discuss efforts to secure a public sector pay deal.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne - To discuss measures to tackle the rate of youth unemployment.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly - To discuss the sports capital grant programme in respect of soccer clubs in County Kildare.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly - To discuss gaps in support for widows and bereaved partners.

Deputy Shane Moynihan - To discuss the need to ensure full provision of NEPS in schools across Lucan, Clondalkin, Palmerstown, Rathcoole, Newcastle and Saggart.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - To discuss the way in which local specialist music retailers can become approved suppliers to schools.

Deputies Mark Wall and Brian Stanley - To discuss the ongoing overcrowding on train lines serving Kildare South and the mid-west.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh - To discuss the loss of essential clerical support staff from Belmullet Community Hospital and Swinford District Hospital.

Deputy William Aird - To discuss staffing matters within the HSE, particularly the issue of graduate nurses' contracts.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - To discuss the need for footpaths from Waterfall village to Bishopstown.

The matters raised by Deputies Michael Murphy and Mattie McGrath, Rose Conway-Walsh, William Aird, Malcolm Byrne, Mark Wall and Brian Stanley have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Water Services

Deputy Michael Murphy: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, for taking this Topical Issue matter. On Tuesday last myself and my Oireachtas colleagues from south Tipperary met with the CEO of Irish Water and his leadership team such is the crisis in the water supply across the constituency of Tipperary south. The CEO described Tipperary as its most challenged area. That in itself tells a story. We have tens of thousands on a boil water notice. Some of those are on a do not consume notice for a period of time. There are multiple outages and very poor communication. Cordangan, which supplies Tipperary town's population of 5,000, has been on a boil water notice since February of this year. The Ardfinnan supply, which supplies the bulk of Cahir and surrounding areas and comes into the west of Clonmel, is on a boil water notice since June this year. For a period of time those 11,000 customers are on a do not consume notice. There are multiple outages across Clonmel and huge changes across Clonmel, with large parts of Carrick-on-Suir without water as well.

This is a significant public company in receipt of significant funding from taxpayers and offering an essential service. Yet, it remains unaccountable to Dáil Éireann. It is extraordinary to think that I, as a Member of Parliament, cannot table a parliamentary question. This needs to change. Everyone in this House of democracy agrees with that. My question to the Minister of State is: how can we make this happen?

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for accepting this Topical Issue matter today. South Tipperary's water crisis has exposed a serious failure of accountability at the heart of our water governance system. Families and businesses were left in the dark while agencies passed the responsibility from one to another. I am speaking about the Ardfinnan scheme. We know that the HSE was informed about aluminium exceedance on 9 September this year but a do not consume order was not issued until 9 October, which was a month later. During that period, more than 60 of the 72 samples exceeded guideline levels with some exceedance up to 12 times EU limits. It is shocking. It was two and a half times the WHO limits. The public deserves answers as to why it was more than a month before the do not consume notice was issued. Who knew? When did they know? Why was action not taken sooner? Who made the decision to wait for a month before issuing a warning? The HSE said it is a matter for the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA. The EPA says it does not provide public health advice and directs questions back to the HSE. The Minister for Health says it is an operational matter for Uisce Éireann. The role of the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, has been virtually invisible throughout the crisis. The obvious questions are: who is accountable, who is going to be accountable and who is going to take charge of this?

From the public's perspective, that was shocking. We had a meeting in Clonmel last night covering the whole of south Tipperary. I salute the committee there, which is working very hard under Richie Gleeson and Joe Hawkins. Indeed, we all attended to listen to people. In Cordangan in Tipperary, the well went down in February. If my well or anyone else's went down, it would be fixed by now. Uisce Éireann has not fixed it and we will not have water for Christmas. It is like waiting for Santy Claus. We met the CEO. He left after 50 minutes. We want another meeting with him. There is no responsibility or accountability; the Minister of State's former colleague, Phil Hogan, set this up in such a way. Please, we must make somebody accountable. We must have answers for the public, county councils, including local councillors, and Oireachtas Members. It is not happening at the moment. That is not right.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy John Cummins): I thank the Deputies for raising these important matters. The Minister, Deputy James Browne, sends his apologies for not being in a position to answer this Topical Issue in person.

Uisce Éireann is the national authority for water services and a statutorily independent body with responsibility for all aspects of water services, as prescribed by the Water Services Acts. It was formed and registered under the Companies Acts and is a commercial State company. Neither the Minister, Deputy Browne, nor I have any operational role. That is a matter for Uisce Éireann. These arrangements are not particular to Uisce Éireann. They apply to the generality of State bodies that have statutorily assigned functions that are not, as a result, functions of a Minister of the Government.

However, given the level of Exchequer funding provided to Uisce Éireann, it is subject to additional layers of governance and accountability by the Oireachtas, including audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General and accountability to the Committee of Public Accounts. There are also requirements for bodies funded by the State to have appropriate systems in place for the provision of information regarding their operations to Oireachtas Members, as detailed in Circular 25/2016, the protocol for the provision of information to Members of the Oireachtas by State bodies under the aegis of a Department. Uisce Éireann has a dedicated team to deal with representations and queries from public representatives. However, it is true that this engagement needs to improve significantly. It is something that I have addressed in my meetings with it over the last number of months. While progress is being made, significantly more work remains to be achieved. Uisce Éireann has also acknowledged that its engagement with public representative needs to improve and has informed me that it is in the process of taking additional steps to improve both the timing and quality of responses to inquiries made by elected representatives.

Turning to south Tipperary in particular, Deputy Michael Murphy has raised the ongoing issues with me in person over the last number of weeks. I have made inquiries on behalf of him and Deputy Mattie McGrath and have been informed that Uisce Éireann issued seven press releases since 9 October and communicated extensively and urgently with elected representatives on the matters that are affecting their communities.

The "do not consume" notice for customers on the Ardfinnan regional water supply scheme was recently lifted following consultation with HSE and the completion of critical works at Goatenbridge water treatment plant. However, the boil water notice remains in place and the

public in south Tipperary should adhere to the guidance until a further update is provided by Uisce Éireann. Uisce Éireann has said that its focus now is on lifting the boil water notice as quickly and safely as possible. The completion of the works at the water treatment plant is an important step. Further testing and monitoring is necessary to provide the evidence required, in consultation with the HSE, to determine when the boil water notice can be lifted safely.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I could not make it up. I thank the Minister of State for being here but the Minister, Deputy Browne, should be here. I have not seen the like of it. How many press releases did the Minister of State say that Uisce Éireann had issued? Press releases will not give us clean water, lift a boil water notice or fix the burst pipes. I could not make this up. I have met the Pope. I have met the President of America. That was much easier than meeting the invisible CEO of Uisce Éireann. Uisce Éireann is not accountable to anyone. It is like Comical Ali during the Iraq War. When the bombs were falling down on him, he was issuing press releases. This is total baloney.

There is a democratic deficit and it must be addressed. I have drafted a water services Bill, called the accountability Bill 2026, to establish clear accountability for Uisce Éireann to the Minister - that will be the Minister of State if the Minister is not available - and the principle is simple: no public body should be beyond democratic scrutiny. That goes without saying. No public body should avoid accountability by using operational measures. We have to have clear measures like this. No public utility should be able to preside over a fiasco like Uisce Éireann is in south Tipperary.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mark Wall): I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The old adage was, "Where Tipperary leads, Ireland follows". If Ireland follows what we are doing with our water, it will be a complete and utter catastrophe.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mark Wall): I call Deputy Murphy.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: We need Uisce Éireann to be reined in and be accountable to this House and, ultimately, the Minister.

Deputy Michael Murphy: I, too, attended that public meeting. It was attended by hundreds in the Talbot Hotel last night. Constituents of mine are angry and frustrated. There is huge anxiety within the community, particularly among vulnerable users, many of whom my office engages with on a weekly basis. I am reminded of the Tánaiste's contribution on 2 July last when he said:

> ... it is my very clear view that Uisce Éireann should be [more] accountable to Dáil Éireann through parliamentary questions [and select committee]. I do not understand why it is not.

Does the Minister of State agree with what the Tánaiste said in this Chamber on 2 July? It is extraordinary to think that I am a policymaker and a legislator, and we have a public utility in receipt of billions of euro that is not accountable to this house of democracy.

Deputy John Cummins: I understand the Deputies' frustration on behalf of their communities, which are being impacted as a result of the ongoing issues. There is no question that there is an information deficit and the response from Uisce Éireann is not where it needs to be in terms of the information that is provided to all Members of this Chamber. I agree with the Tánaiste in that regard. As I said in my opening contribution, though, I have raised this and there is an acknowledgement within Uisce Éireann that it is not where it needs to be.

We want to get to a situation where the information that is relayed to Members of the Oireachtas is accurate and done in a timely fashion and that Uisce Éireann is responsive to the needs and requests of Members of this House and the Seanad. When there is an issue, there is a call centre within Uisce Éireann that the public can reach out to-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It is a waste of time.

Deputy John Cummins: The Deputy might let me make the point. Yes, there is a phone number that people can call, but because I have been a public representative for over 16 or 17 years, I know that the phone call is oftentimes to the public representative. The Deputies have to be responsive to their communities as well and the only way they can do that is by having the correct and timely information.

It is also true to say that Uisce Éireann is responsible for appearing before the Committee of Public Accounts and subject to audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General. I sat on the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage. The officials have appeared before the committee as well as appearing before the Joint Committee on Infrastructure and National Development Plan Delivery.

The priority has to now be in terms of lifting the boil water notice. Testing and monitoring are ongoing in the area and that will be continued to be prioritised by Uisce Éireann. I can continue to engage with both Deputies offline.

Health Services Staff

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I want to outline for the Minister of State today the impact that the dead hand of the Minister for Health is having on healthcare delivery in County Mayo, starting with clerical support staff. They are essential to safe, accessible community healthcare. Their roles must get agency conversion approval in order to maintain clinical capacity in rural healthcare services. Agency conversions must get approval before the existing clerical officer contract finishes in Swinford. I am talking about the hospitals of Swinford and Belmullet.

I am talking about the clerical positions, of which there is one in each hospital. Those posts represent a tiny amount of money but provide a lot of support. In Swinford, for example, one person supports five physiotherapists and two speech and language therapists. In Belmullet, one clerical post supports several different therapists and medical staff. They are agency staff and because of the dead hand of the Minister, they are not being allowed to convert those posts into full-time positions. Patients are now facing longer waits and rescheduled appointments as staff are no longer available to manage referrals, records and scheduling. The physiotherapists, public health nurses and other clinicians cannot simultaneously do their jobs, manage patient-

facing workloads and also absorb clerical duties. Every hour spent on administration is an hour not spent on treating patients.

The communities in Belmullet and Swinford already face geographical and transport barriers when accessing healthcare. Removing local support disproportionately impacts rural patients in these cases. The promise of care closer to home is completely undermined when the staff who keep the local services functioning are withdrawn. One post may look minor on a national staffing spreadsheet but it is crucial to the day-to-day running of a rural healthcare facility. The clerical officers in Swinford and Belmullet have built up months of practical knowledge of local patients, referral pathways and physiotherapy services. The loss of experienced staff means a loss of that institutional knowledge, of continuity and of relationships that cannot be replaced immediately. It makes no sense to lose staff who are already performing essential duties while their posts await agency conversion approval. It is a complete waste of money as well.

Through my correspondence with the HSE, I have received confirmation that these posts are in an agency conversion approval system but no firm decision date has been provided. Agency conversion is subject to national pay and staffing controls, budgetary restrictions and available funding. This is the dead hand of the Minister.

This matter is urgent because I have been made aware that the current clerical support in Swinford is due to finish tomorrow but the agency conversion cannot take place unless the role is active. I am calling on the Minister of State to relay to the Minister for Health the need for immediate approval and funding of agency conversion for the posts in Belmullet and Swinford, without further delay. I would also like to remind the Minister that there are healthcare assistant posts in Belmullet hospital that have been waiting four years to transfer from agency to full-time staff. The positions are there and are permanent but the Minister insists on keeping them as agency staff. She must restore the appropriate clerical cover on site during the approval process rather than transferring the clerical duties to clinical staff.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): I thank Deputy Conway-Walsh for raising the issue of clerical support at Belmullet Community Hospital and Swinford District Hospital. I can hear the Deputy's passion and I do understand that she is in an area where there are concerns. I am taking this issue on behalf of the Minister for Health and I recognise the importance of both hospitals to their communities. I am aware of the important role that they play in their local communities for families and for everyone involved. The concerns that the Deputy raises today have implications for patients and clinical staff.

Belmullet is a 13-bed facility that can cater for step-down, respite and palliative care, providing an important service. Swinford District Hospital is a 40-bed model 1 rehabilitation and community inpatient facility. As part of the HSE's ongoing measures to reduce reliance on off-framework agency staffing, one whole-time equivalent, WTE, agency administrative post in Swinford District Hospital was reduced to 0.5 WTE. The HSE has advised that administrative duties associated with the reduced hours are currently being managed locally through existing staffing arrangements. In Belmullet Community Hospital, the agency administrative post remains in place at one WTE and the HSE has advised that there are no issues currently arising in respect of administrative staffing.

The management of staffing and the allocation of resources within these facilities are operational matters for the HSE. That does not diminish the importance of the concerns raised for patients and families who need confidence that local services have the support necessary to deliver safe and effective care.

Clerical and administrative staff make an important contribution to patient care. Their work supports records management, communications and the scheduling of the day-to-day operation of services. Appropriate administrative support helps clinical staff to focus on the work they are trained to do. It should therefore be considered as part of the overall staffing needs of a service, rather than in isolation. The Deputy has raised concerns about changes to clerical support and the implications for clinical staff. I understand the region is dealing with financial challenges at the moment which may be impacting on recruitment decisions. There are some challenges and I am sure the Deputy is aware of that. My expectation is that the HSE considers the full-service implications of any staffing changes and ensures that appropriate staffing supports are in place. The focus must be on maintaining patient care and making effective use of staff across both hospitals.

On the wider recruitment position, there is no blanket recruitment freeze. Recruitment, including the replacement of existing staff, can continue within approved pay allocations, subject to the necessary approvals. This does not mean that every vacancy is automatically filled. The HSE must prioritise recruitment according to patient need, service requirements and resources available. Additional recruitment approval requirements apply to HSE West and North-West as part of the measures to address regional overspending. I recognise that these requirements form part of the context in which local staffing decisions are being made. They provide a process for assessing recruitment proposals on the basis of service need, patient safety risk and affordability. In applying these controls, the HSE must take account of the support needed to maintain essential services, including the contribution of administrative staff to patient care. The objective is to align expenditure with approved funding while protecting essential services and making the best use of available resources. The HSE remains responsible for the delivery of services and for assessing the management of patient safety risks. Financial oversight and the effective delivery of care must be considered together.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: The problem is that the Minister is wasting money hand over fist by not having the services available in the community for a small cost. That is why you have the back-up in Mayo University Hospital. You cannot send people home without having the therapies and supports in the local community. It costs multiple times more to do that. This carry-on is happening in hospitals because the Minister obviously did not allow enough for existing levels of service. She just did not do that. I do not know if she fully understands the impact of that in terms of overcrowding, ambulances queuing up outside Mayo University Hospital and people staying in beds longer than they should because services are not available in the community. I listened to the Fine Gael Ard-Fheis at the weekend, and I heard talk about the dole. I want the Minister of State to ask the Minister why she is forcing young nurses onto the dole who were given jobs in Mayo University Hospital and in Sligo and Galway hospitals. They are now being told the jobs are not going to start after all. Why are we pushing nurses and clinical staff onto the dole and then not doing within the community what we need to do by putting supports in there? I do not know if it is that the Government does not understand the systems or if it has wrecked the systems to the point where things are collapsing. I am

telling the Minister of State that healthcare delivery in Mayo is collapsing and the workers are collapsing with exhaustion. The Minister is standing back to say that the Government does not have enough money for the west and the north west. She had better make the money available. There is money there to waste. She insists on the continuation of waste while she is presiding over what she is presiding over here.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank the Deputy. I can always say, working with the Minister, that patient care and delivery is always very important for all of us.

I recognise the concern is about staffing decisions, which means, in practice for patients, the staff delivery of care at Belmullet and Swinford. The Deputy is talking about clerical supports that help clinical staff to focus on patient care and contribute to the effective running of services. My expectation is that the HSE considers wider benefits than assessing staffing needs at both hospitals so that available resources are used effectively to support patients and staff.

I understand that the concerns the Deputy has brought up today are very important. I know the commitment from the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, and from all of us in the Department of Health. I will raise these concerns. The Deputy can be assured that I will have the HSE respond directly to the Deputy on the issues raised in both Belmullet and Swinford. I assure the Deputy that there is access to safe, effective care. The staffing decision supports and the objectives are important.

Rather than reading out the reply again, it is important to say the Deputy can be assured that I will have the HSE come back to her. I will go back to the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, and highlight the concerns the Deputy raised today.

As someone whose daughter is a nurse, I appreciate the work done by our nurses, clerical staff and everybody in the HSE. As the Deputy said, timely access to services is important. The HSE is saying it is working on them. I will come back to the Deputy.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mattie McGrath): I thank the Ceann Comhairle and her team and whatever other committee decided to change the Topical Issue Debate to this time of the day. It is much more functional for everybody, including the staff.

Hospital Staff

Deputy William Aird: I am raising the concerns of 36 newly qualified nurses who have completed their university education, undertaken clinical placements and obtained professional registration. They are still waiting for contracts and commencement dates for positions at the midlands regional hospitals in Portlaoise, Mullingar and Tullamore. These graduates completed their HSE recruitment process in June. They are qualified, registered and ready to work but they are unclear about when they can begin their careers. How has this situation been allowed to arise? In February 2024, the HSE announced that nursing and midwifery graduates would be offered permanent employment following completion of their courses and their placements. That commitment was reinforced through engagement with the unions in 2025. These graduates had every reason to expect a clear route to employment. Some have signed rental agreements and made financial commitments in anticipation of starting work.

I appreciate that the HSE operates within an allocated budget. However, financial controls must be aligned with workforce planning and the safe delivery of healthcare. It is unacceptable that recruitment campaigns proceed without clear commencement dates. There is also the question of value for money. If the midlands hospitals have nursing vacancies, they are relying on agency nurses while qualified graduates are waiting for permanent employment. Can the HSE explain why permanent appointments cannot proceed and whether agency expenditure represents the best use of public funds? I also want clarity on accountability. Under the HSE regional structure, responsibility for staffing and budgets has been devolved to health regions. If hospitals are identifying staffing needs but cannot make appointments due to financial restrictions, who has the authority to resolve this problem?

The Minister's statement on 15 October indicated that there is no general recruitment embargo but there are strengthened controls in four health regions. What controls affect graduate nurses' appointments to the three midlands hospitals? It is welcome that 974 graduate nurses and midwifes nationally have confirmed start days. I welcome that approximately 834 are expected to commence before the end of the year. That is progress, but it does not address the circumstances of these 36 graduates. I am asking the Minister of State to address these matters directly. First, can she immediately clarify to me when these 36 graduates will be offered contracts and commencement dates? Second, will she ask the HSE to provide a breakdown of approved and funded vacancies at Portlaoise, Tullamore and Mullingar?

Third, what safeguards will be introduced to ensure future graduate recruitment campaigns are properly aligned with funding posts and working requirements?

We want nurses to build their careers in Ireland and make a contribution to our health service. We cannot invest in training healthcare professionals and then force them to find employment abroad. These graduates deserve certainty about when they can begin their careers. I have asked the Minister of State questions and would appreciate the answers.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank Deputy Aird for the opportunity to address the House on staffing matters within the HSE, particularly the issue of contracts for graduate nurses and midwives. I am taking this Topical Issue on behalf of the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill. The Deputy can be assured I will take his concerns back to her.

The HSE knows how many nurses and midwives are due to graduate each year, and must plan its recruitment accordingly. Retaining these graduate nurses and midwives is essential to the future of the health service and continues to be a priority for the Minister. However, recruitment must also be strategic, matching graduates to the services and locations where the need is greatest while being aware of the impact on the overall pay bill. The latest data provided by the HSE indicates that nationally, there are 1,375 graduate nurses and midwives, of whom 1,145 have been offered positions to date, with more than 1,000 accepting. This equates to a national offer rate of 83%.

The Deputy’s health region, the Dublin and midlands region, has advised there are 105 graduate nurses and midwives, of whom 97 have been offered positions and 88 have accepted. This means that more than 92% of graduates in the region have received an employment offer. In addition, the Department issued approval last week for the recruitment of all remaining graduate nurses and midwives included in the submission received from the Dublin and

midlands region. This approval was granted in response to the applications received the previous week.

There is no recruitment embargo in the HSE, and recruitment has not been stopped. Strengthened recruitment controls are in place in four regions, including Dublin and the midlands, to ensure that appointments are affordable, properly prioritised, and directed to areas of greatest patient need and service need. I was concerned to hear recent reports that offers made to newly qualified nurses were subsequently withdrawn or delayed. The Deputy raised this issue. This is not acceptable and is not how we should be treating our graduates. The HSE must make every effort to provide employment opportunities for nursing and midwifery graduates but it is important that offers are made in the right locations with the necessary approvals in place.

A key part of this strategic approach must be to prioritise direct recruitment into services where vacancies are being filled through sustained agency usage. Nationally, agency expenditure was €536 million in the eight months to the end of August, 11.7% above budget limits. Recruiting graduates directly into roles currently being filled through agency staffing would help retain newly qualified professionals in the public health service, build a more stable permanent workforce, support safe care and service capacity, and deliver better value for the overall pay bill.

This is against a backdrop of sustained investment in the health workforce. HSE staffing has increased by almost 30,000 whole-time equivalents since December 2020, with nursing and midwifery accounting for a substantial share of that growth, up 9,924 over the same period. The priority must now be to build on that investment by retaining graduate nurses and midwives, strengthening the permanent workforce, and reducing reliance on agency staffing, while ensuring recruitment remains aligned with service need and the overall pay bill.

The Department is engaging closely with the HSE to monitor the recruitment of graduate nurses and midwives. While individual appointments, contracts and commencement dates are operational matters for the HSE, the Department expects these decisions to be processed promptly and graduates to be given clear and timely information regarding an employment offer.

Deputy William Aird: I thank the Minister of State for her response, but I must bring my question back to the immediate circumstances of the 36 new nursing graduates. These are qualified, registered nurses who have completed their training and successfully progressed through the HSE recruitment process. Their question is simple: when will they start work? I refute what the Minister of State has said. I am too long on the road to accept it. These 36 nurses are out there and still do not have contracts of employment. I need specific answers from the Minister of State about Portlaoise, Tullamore and Mullingar. Can she confirm that the HSE will urgently review the 36 cases, identify the approved and funded vacancies and provide realistic commencement dates? I also want transparency around staffing costs. Are these hospitals paying for agency nurses while qualified graduates are waiting to take up permanent positions? If so, is that financially justifiable?

There is a wider lesson here. The HSE knows how many nursing students are completing their courses each year. Workforce needs are predictable. I am not asking for appointments to

unfunded posts. I am suggesting that graduate recruitment must be properly co-ordinated with hospital staffing requirements and available funding.

I also raise the position of a children's occupational therapist in County Laois, which has been vacant for three years and has been frozen yet again. This position was recruited and accepted, but the offer has now been withdrawn by the HSE. In a week where two families from County Laois have already approached me about occupational therapy services for their children, I find this situation to be totally unacceptable. I am asking the Minister of State to investigate this vacancy as a matter of urgency and to revert to me on behalf of the children of County Laois.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I again thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. It is important for us to get out the information. Retaining newly qualified nurses and midwives is essential to the future of the health services and remains a clear priority. The latest figures show that 83% of graduates nationally have received employment offers and more than 1,000 have accepted them. Work is continuing to offer posts to the remaining graduates and to confirm start dates. I will read this out to the Deputy again. There is no-----

Deputy William Aird: There is no point in reading it back.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: -----recruitment embargo.

Deputy William Aird: What about the 36?

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: Recruitment has not stopped.

Deputy William Aird: It has.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: The Department issued approval last week to recruit all graduate nurses and midwives that the Dublin and midlands regions have requested. That is the information I am giving here.

Deputy William Aird: What does the Minister of State mean by "requested"? There are still 36 nurses there with no offer.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mattie McGrath): The Minister of State without interruption.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: Last week there were decisions-----

Deputy William Aird: You know-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mattie McGrath): Please, a Theachta.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: What I will do-----

Deputy William Aird: Those 36 nurses are still unemployed.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mattie McGrath): Please.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: Last week, decisions were made in that regard. I understand. I know. My daughter is a nurse so I understand.

Deputy William Aird: I confirmed that this morning, to be fair.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mattie McGrath): Speak through the Chair, please.

Deputy William Aird: I confirmed it this morning.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: The Deputy is right.

Deputy William Aird: Yes, I am right.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: He needs that information. As I said, the HSE must make every effort to provide employment opportunities for graduates. As I said, last week, all graduate nurses and midwives that the Dublin and midlands regions have requested have been sorted. With regard to the 36 nurses the Deputy has asked about specifically, I will ensure he gets an answer from the HSE and the Department of Health. The Deputy also spoke about an occupational therapist. I will certainly bring back that issue to the Minister and the HSE.

I thank the Deputy. All of us must appreciate the great work that our nurses and staff do. It is important for us. The Deputy can be sure, and I can say this on my behalf and on the behalf of the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, that all of us in the Department of Health are committed to getting this sorted.

Deputy William Aird: Is the Minister of State saying to me-----

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I will come back to the Deputy.

Deputy William Aird: -----that she will come back to me about the 36 nurses?

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: Yes.

Deputy William Aird: I thank the Minister of State.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I will.

Youth Unemployment

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, for taking this issue. He will be aware that the economy is doing well and, in general terms, we talk about the fact that we have full employment. However, I have a serious concern that the rate of youth unemployment is beginning to creep up again.

Youth unemployment is defined as unemployment among those aged between 15 and 24. It is now recorded at 11.5%. That is lower than the EU average but I still believe the reason it is at that rate must be a cause for concern. We need to examine the factors behind that and to examine in detail whether there are specific sectors of society and the economy where this is acute. The evidence, although it is not detailed, is that we have a number of urban pockets of disadvantage. It is particularly acute in some of the regions, especially along the Border, in the north west and in the midlands. There is a problem with recent graduates, especially in certain fields. Some of that relates to the experience trap but it is also evidence that we are not seeing the same level of graduate recruitment in certain areas as we did. I have a particular concern about this because it means young people do not have the experience of work that they should have but also that they may become increasingly alienated from the broader society. The rate in Ireland is 11.5% but the EU rate is 15.5%. In countries like Romania, the rate is 30% while in France and Italy the rate is now above 20%. In France there is obviously a particular concern about alienation among that young cohort. Something that particularly frightened me was that in the most recent polling in France voters aged 18 to 24 are turning to the populists as 45% of them said they would back Mélenchon in the next presidential election and 30% said they would back Le Pen. When groups of young people are not given the opportunity so many of us have had of a first job, of training, of an apprenticeship or of going into work as a graduate, then people become alienated.

What can we do to address this? The reasons people become unemployed are complex. To the Tánaiste's point, I agree work should always pay and people who are going to work should always be rewarded but it is not a simple matter that people are necessarily refusing employment. There has been a lot of very good work done on this by the National Youth Council of Ireland and youth organisations, including Gorey Youth Needs Group from my area. In resolving this issue, which we need to both tackle and get data on, it is critical to have the voices of young people. There are concerns for young people about transport costs and housing costs near employment. It is a challenge in rural areas. If the cost of going to a job is too significant, it may not make sense to take it up. There remains a concern about the number of hours given to some young people when it comes to employment. I am quite supportive of Mandate's campaign that everybody who is working should be guaranteed a reasonable number of hours in order to make that employment sustainable.

There is the danger of young people being stigmatised if they have been unemployed for a period and we have to address that. We need to look at what measures we can put in place to be able to provide the supports. I look forward to hearing the Minister of State's analysis and also to offering some solutions.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Alan Dillon): I thank Deputy Byrne for raising this important issue. lreland’s labour market continues to perform strongly, with record employment of over 2.8 million people last year. This reflects the resilience of a strong economy and the success of government policies in

supporting job creation, fostering innovation and providing opportunities across sectors for young people to begin exciting careers.

However, there has been a slowdown in momentum over the past year, consistent with an uncertain and volatile international macroeconomic environment, tighter monetary policy and a labour market that is close to capacity. It is often younger workers who feel the effects of economic uncertainty most acutely. The unemployment rate among those aged 15 to 24 has increased over the past year to approximately 12%, which is more than twice the economy-wide average. However, this increase remains modest and Ireland continues to perform well compared with our European peers. Having said that, it is really important we continue to focus on measures that help young people make the transition from education into sustainable employment.

The Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment works closely with other Departments on this issue, in particular with the Department of Social Protection through the implementation of Pathways to Work, the Government's strategy for employment services and labour market activation.

The Deputy referred to employment incentives. The Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment and its agencies will continue promoting employer awareness to encourage uptake of supports such as the work placement experience programme and the expanded JobsPlus subsidy scheme, whereby employers can receive financial support when recruiting eligible jobseekers, helping to reduce hiring costs while also creating opportunities for those with limited work experience.

With respect to PRSI, budget 2027 included an increase in the employer PRSI threshold from €552 to €600 per week, helping employers manage labour costs and support recruitment, particularly in sectors that employ significant numbers of younger workers. The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science leads on training and skills development which are equally important in addressing the challenges and through apprenticeships, Skillnet Ireland, SOLAS programmes, Springboard+ and Skills to Advance, the Government continues to invest in pathways that will continue to provide people with the skills required by a modern economy.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I welcome some of the moves on employers' PRSI. We should definitely give more incentives in that area to employers who decide to take on young people. Byrne's bookshops that operate in my home town and home county give good hours to young people but there is a huge cost on the PRSI side and we need to address it.

We need to look more generally. I am conscious that the Minister of State talked about work placements. If we look at the lowest rates of youth unemployment across Europe, they are in Germany and Czechia, where they are about 6.5% to 7.5%. As he knows, there is a far greater emphasis there on academic and vocational tracks in education. Young people get the opportunity to work in a company. Businesses, along with the trade unions, are involved in designing the training that goes into some of these job placements. Particularly given the transformational nature of AI and other new technologies in what is happening, it is critical that we have a programme in place whereby young people can get the necessary experience because frequently when they apply for a job they fall into what is called the experience trap and they do not get the opportunities to be able to progress.

We should look perhaps at summer programmes that will allow young people to be able to improve skills. We also need to look at further measures in SUSI, where young people are working. In fairness to the Minister, Deputy James Lawless, he has made a number of improvements there but it should not be a disincentive that if a young person wants to do additional work to gain money and experience that they should not be disadvantaged in terms of the SUSI grant. My overall point is that we should be concerned that we are starting to see the rate of youth unemployment creep up and I believe it should be a priority for the Minister of State's Department.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I again thank Deputy Byrne for raising this important matter. As Minister of State with responsibility for employment, I acknowledge the concerns he has raised here this afternoon. Ireland continues to have a strong labour market, record employment and significant opportunities for young people. Our focus now is very much to give every young person the skills, experience and also the opportunity to secure a good quality job, build a career and build for a future in Ireland.

At the same, the Deputy mentioned AI. I do not think we can pretend that it is not changing the labour market; it is, but the challenge for the Government is not to resist the technological change but to ensure that young people are prepared and can benefit from it. That is why we are investing in skills, apprenticeships, lifelong learning and digital capability to ensure that young people are equipped to secure jobs into the future. When we talk to many young people, they do not want temporary schemes; they want real jobs and careers.

Part of that is ensuring that we have the pathways from education into employment and ensuring that employers have the confidence to hire young people. That is why we are supporting both businesses and workers in that regard. The best guarantee that any Government can give is that the economy continues to be supported through real and proper policy but also that creates opportunities.

Public Transport

Deputy Brian Stanley: I am glad the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, is here for this discussion. The roads are congested. The N7 is bumper to bumper. Journey times have doubled from Portlaoise to Dublin. We are supposed to be reducing our carbon emissions but we need to give people options. At the moment the option is using trains or buses but the problem is that the trains are packed. Trains from Ballybrophy, Portlaoise and Portarlington going to Dublin are full. It is a success story in a way, in that there are crowds of people on the platforms in Portlaoise, Ballybrophy and Portarlington when there used to be half a dozen going back a few short years ago. The number of passengers has increased dramatically. However, the number of carriages has reduced. One train that used to have five carriages now has three carriages. We have fewer carriages. People are standing in corridors and sitting on the floor. That is okay for a short trip. I heard a Minister say recently that we can expect that across Europe. That is okay on commuter trains within a city or wherever for ten minutes or half an hour or on the London tube but when a passenger is there for hours like that, it is not good enough and it is unsafe. People with disabilities are struggling. For people who have a guide dog with them or for people in wheelchairs, it is really difficult. We need to be giving people a little bit of safety and comfort.

I want the Minister of State to focus on this. I know he takes public transport seriously. I welcome that he has focused in on it since he has taken over as Minister for State but he needs to give this a razor-like sharpness. Is money approved for new carriages? How many new carriages will there be? When will see those new carriages on the tracks?

The CEO of Iarnród Éireann, Mary Constine, said that everything the body has is rolling - everything that is fit to roll. Are there carriages that need to be reconditioned that can be used in the short term? What can be done? Do not tell me that it is an operational matter. Everything is an operational matter but the Government writes the cheque. The Government needs to ensure that all resources that we have are being utilised.

Deputy Mark Wall: I, too, am glad to see the Minister of State in front of us today. I have been raising this for the past number of months. I have engaged with the Minister of State previously on this. Over the past number of weeks, more and more commuters are coming to me daily. More and more commuters are experiencing hardship and overcrowding on our commuter lines. It is growing daily. Some of the stories that I have put on the record of this Dáil are horrific. Today, I want to put more stories on the record of real life experiences. One commuter said:

> I am 20 weeks pregnant and struggling to get a seat, often left standing in the carriages. I have had two episodes now where I have had to get off the train because I felt dizzy and I felt faint due to the claustrophobic and warm nature of the trains.

That is just one example. The next example stated:

> I travelled to Dublin Heuston five days a week. The majority of the time I stand on my way to and from where I begin in Newbridge. Yesterday, I did experience an episode where I felt like collapsing. I was absolutely drained before the working day even began. This is followed by the same experience on the train that I take home.

This is happening on a daily basis on the lines that go through my county of Kildare.

I have questions for the Minister of State. When will see proper health and safety introduced on these lines? As my colleague asked, when are going to see new carriages? From all the parliamentary questions that I put down, I am informed that a number of carriages will be freed up in the middle of next year. What we need to see are those carriages coming onto the Waterford line and the lines going through County Kildare because it is an issue with so many commuters at the moment. When can we see an early train on the Waterford line so that people can get into work on time? I put on the record here before, and I am going to do it again, that a doctor working in St. James's Hospital who gets the train from hometown from Athy each morning cannot get into work for 8 a.m.

That is unacceptable in this day and age and needs to change.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Seán Canney): I thank the Deputies for raising the issue of overcrowding on mainline rail, Luas and some bus services, in addition to the ongoing overcrowding on train lines serving Kildare South, including the Waterford, Limerick, Galway, Athlone, Portlaoise and Kilkenny lines. Deputy Stanley will not agree with my response. I have responsibility for transport but my officials are not involved in

day-to-day operations. That does not mean that we are not taking responsibility. The statutory responsibility for securing public transport services rests with the National Transport Authority, NTA. It works with the public transport operators which deliver the services. That said, I want to reassure the Deputies that the Government is strongly committed to providing all citizens with reliable and realistic sustainable mobility options, and public transport plays a key role in the delivery of this goal.

To support this objective, in budget 2026 the Department of Transport secured €940 million for public service obligation, PSO, and TFI Local Link services, an increase from €658 million in 2025. As announced in this year's budget, we are investing over €1 billion in public transport services that people rely on every day, with €1.042 billion allocated to PSO services across our bus, light rail and heavy rail networks. This represents an 11% increase in the PSO. The funding is about more than maintaining existing services and will also support the continued expansion and enhancement of our public transport network, with almost 140 new and enhanced services in the planning pipeline for 2027 across our flagship programmes such as Connecting Ireland, BusConnects and new town services. Separately, this investment includes almost €60 million in capital funding to maintain and renew our rail assets, including essential rolling stock and equipment to keep our rail network safe, reliable and fit for the future.

I understand the Deputies want to discuss overcrowding on public transport services. I would like to inform the Deputies that the NTA and Irish Rail have established a working group to jointly plan and implement changes and enhancements to the rail timetable. As part of the planning process, the NTA has also run public consultations to gauge the public response to changes to services and inform the demand for, and priority of, future potential enhancements. Iarnród Éireann saw record passenger numbers in 2025 of over 55 million passenger journeys, a figure that is growing further in 2026. To address this, it has confirmed to the Department it currently operates all available trains on a daily basis, outside of the required maintenance cycles to ensure reliability and to deal with any repairs which may be taking place. It is maximising use of their rolling stock to meet demand and will continue to monitor passenger loadings.

Irish Rail confirmed it recognises that this is creating pressure on capacity on some services at the busiest times at present. While its trains are busy, they are designed to safely accommodate full loading at our busiest times, although it appreciates this can be uncomfortable. In addition, it is pleased to advise that new trains will begin entering the system in 2027, which will provide extra capacity on the network.

To date, 285 new DART carriages have been ordered and Irish Rail has confirmed that the first order of 95 carriages will directly benefit the Drogheda line, with 65 battery electric carriages and the existing DART+ line. However, this will also allow Intercity and commuter trains currently operating on the Drogheda line to be used on other routes around the network, including commuter routes. Their deployment will be subject to review with, and the approval of, the NTA, subject to demand and infrastructure capacity at the time. This process will be repeated with the introduction of a further 90 battery electric carriages, freeing up existing trains, while the remaining 100 electric carriages will ultimately replace the original DART fleet, which has been in operation since 1984.

Deputy Brian Stanley: It is welcome that new carriages have been ordered but it is just one statistic from working groups in Iarnród Éireann and the NTA. Ultimately, the Minister writes the cheque and the more convoluted the process is the further it gets away from everybody, including those of us in here. The Minister of State needs to ensure that there has been delivery on the money that has been provided. I welcome that there is extra funding but we are trying to get people off the roads and onto rail, and make it easier for them to do so. The Minister of State has to make sure this happens and the process is followed through on. Sometimes the doors of the Luas trams will not close because so many people are trying to squeeze onto them. It is not a safe situation.

2 o'clock

I ask the Minister of State again to look at the situation with higher fares. He may say that fares have to be increased, but 15% in the month of January when the bills start coming in on top of everything else is excessive. I ask for the Minister of State's Department to go back and look at that again.

Deputy Mark Wall: I thank the Minister of State for his reply. I want to draw his attention to what he said to us. He said that the trains were designed to safely accommodate full loading at the busiest times. I have given the Minister of State examples of people standing on top of one another. If one of those trains stops urgently, what is going to happen to those people? These are the questions I am being asked. That is why I am asking the Minister of State to address the health and safety issues that are on these trains, which are so overcrowded.

Labour has introduced a Bill on remote working to try to allow more people to work remotely. That is a solution that the Government needs to look at. I will repeat that we need to see extra carriages being put onto those trains on the Waterford line to allow early trains and to remove the burden on the current number of carriages. There are plenty of houses being built in south Kildare, but we do not have the facilities for them. We need to see those carriages installed as quickly as possible.

I appeal to the Minister of State to look at the health and safety issues. I appeal to him to try to get those carriages on that line from Waterford, Carlow and Athy to Dublin as quickly as possible.

Deputy Seán Canney: What we are talking about here is pressure on our rail lines. It just shows how important the rail network is and how it has been growing over the years. Twenty years ago, we were closing rail lines. Now, we are opening them up. We need to invest in the carriages to make sure that people have a good experience and continue using public transport. That is what we are doing. From next year, we will have additional carriages coming on stream. Additional carriages will be going onto the commuter lines and the intercity lines because we are bringing in more new carriages. This is a good news story.

I say to people that I understand the pressure they are under when they are in these carriages, which are packed. I see more students using the rail network, which is why there are peak times for them as well. If we get students using rail and they get used to it and have a good experience, they will probably never have to buy a car. That is the end goal. We have to keep working at it.

I thank the Deputies for their contributions today and for their support in making sure Irish Rail continues to do its work safely.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

An Ceann Comhairle: We will now move to Leaders' Questions under Standing Order 38. I call Deputy Mary Lou McDonald.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: On Thursday, the French President, the German Chancellor and the leaders of other EU states that are also members of NATO are coming to Dublin. Europe's direction of travel is clear: greater militarisation, deeper defence integration and even closer alignment with NATO. It is little wonder, therefore, that leaders and the Minister's Government will be joined by the secretary general of NATO. His presence further underlines the increasingly militarised political environment taking shape across Europe. The European Commission has made that direction very explicit in its rearming Europe plan, which aims to mobilise up to €800 billion for defence investment, including €150 billion in EU-backed loans. These are vast sums being directed towards building up Europe's military capacity and, of course, the arms industry.

That is the context in which this Government is seeking to ditch the triple lock, rush legislation through the Dáil and undermine Irish neutrality with absolutely no reference to the people. The Government's position flies in the face of commitments made to the Irish people during the Nice and Lisbon referendum campaigns. Explicit guarantees had to be secured that EU defence co-operation would not compromise Ireland's military neutrality. The triple lock is at the very heart of that guarantee, so the Government cannot now dismiss it as a technicality. It is, in fact, the mechanism designed to protect our neutrality or, as Micheál Martin said in this House in 2013, it is at the core of our neutrality.

Let us be clear: the triple lock does not prevent Irish peacekeeping. What it does is anchor Irish overseas deployments in international legitimacy and democratic scrutiny.

Under it, our soldiers, their families and the Irish people know that they are acting in accordance with international law, under a UN mandate, and honourably fulfilling their duties as soldiers of an independent Irish State. Tá muintir na hÉireann bródúil as ár neodrachas. Tuigeann siad an tábhacht agus luach a bhaineann leis. Pé rud a cheapann an Rialtas, ba chóir go mbeadh an seans ag na daoine a gcuid tuairimí a chur in iúl. Mar sin de, ní mór reifreann a reáchtáil ar an neodracht.

Whatever the Government may think, Irish people want Ireland to remain neutral. They understand the value of that policy even if the Government does not. Neutrality has allowed us to make an independent contribution to peace and to speak with our own voice rather than following the military priorities of others. The Government now wants to force the Dáil to ditch this key safeguard. It is doing so with its eyes wide open to Europe's direction of travel, with increased militarisation, closer alignment to NATO, hundreds of billions of euro being committed to arms and a clear disregard for the views and wishes of the Irish people. I believe this to be a profound betrayal of commitments made to the Irish people and a direct assault on Ireland's neutrality. The Government has no mandate and no right to abandon Irish neutrality

or to ditch the triple lock without explicit reference to the people. What is it afraid of? It should put the question to the people and make its case. Bring the issue to a referendum.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Jack Chambers): This is more misleading nonsense from Sinn Féin with a flavour of Euroscepticism, which is what we have heard from the party for many years. The Deputy's presentation is completely disingenuous. This legislative change is all about reform and keeping alive the Irish tradition of peacekeeping. The Deputy is willing to abandon that proud tradition of peacekeeping. As a Government, we are not. That is the fundamental difference between us.

Without the reform we are proposing, Ireland will no longer have the capacity in many instances to participate in peacekeeping around the world. Without the reform we are proposing, our military will no longer have any meaningful international role. Does the Deputy understand that? Does she have any heed of or care for what that would do to recruitment and retention in the military? She needs to be honest with military personnel and their families at this point.

With the illegal and immoral invasion of Ukraine, the element of the triple lock that requires Russian approval for the deployment of Irish peacekeepers became unfit for purpose. The Government will not allow Russia, China, Britain, the US or anyone else to have a veto over our independent foreign and security policy. To whom does Sinn Féin want to give that veto?

Deputies: The Irish people.

Deputy Jack Chambers: Deputy McDonald is casually throwing around accusations about Ireland's neutrality. Of course, she has form in that regard. For years, she has been making the claim that our neutrality is being attacked. In fact, Sinn Féin declared it dead in 1972, 2003, 2008 and on many other occasions. Neutrality is about Ireland's ability to act independently and not to have legal obligations to participate in any conflict. That will not change. If we really value our independence when it comes to foreign policy and defence, our decisions on whether to participate in peacekeeping initiatives should not be subject to the veto of any other country.

My party was clear in our manifesto before the last general election on the need for reform in this area, and that is reflected in the programme for Government. The Defence (Amendment) Bill will provide for the removal of any foreign veto in relation to the dispatch of Defence Forces members for service outside the State as part of an international peacekeeping force. Any modification to the triple lock continues to require the Government of the day and a majority in this House to approve the dispatch of Defence Forces personnel to take part in peacekeeping and any similar missions. The proposed changes are a reassertion of our neutrality and of our right to make our own independent decisions and to act as an independent country. This reinforces Ireland's ability to pursue an independent foreign policy by removing the power of the UN Security Council's permanent members to veto our national sovereign

decisions and will allow the Defence Forces to respond to crisis situations affecting our citizens with more agility and effectiveness.

Stop being disingenuous. The Deputy's mask has slipped again in trying to attack the European political community meeting. What is it that Sinn Féin has against the European Union? It is a union that has shown incredible solidarity against the illegal invasion of Ukraine and in many other areas of policy that matter to people across this country.

Deputy Máire Devine: Focus on the question.

Deputy Jack Chambers: The reform being made here is simply to reinforce the sovereign decisions of the Dáil and also of the decisions of the Government in the context of the veto within the UN Security Council, which is a change that does have a mandate, was reflected in the general election, and is something that the Government wants to progress.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Let me be explicit for the Minister. We will challenge the €800 billion of proposed spending in defence, armaments and warfare. Every day of the week we will challenge the European Union and the Government on that. This is the only honourable thing to do. The Government chooses a different course but does not even have the integrity to be honest about what it is at. Just so the Minister knows, peacekeeping missions by definition require a UN mandate. In the absence of a UN mandate, it is no longer a peacekeeping mission. It is actually as simple as that. The Minister knows well the direction of travel of the European Union towards NATO, towards armaments and towards warfare. We wish to keep Ireland out of that. We wish to retain our noble tradition of neutrality, the very thing that has allowed us to make our contributions to the world.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister, Deputy Chambers, to respond.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Minister asks about the veto. The Irish people have the veto on this and the Minister has no right to ditch our neutrality-----

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Sinn Féin Members are the only ones-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy McDonald's time is up.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----without going and asking for the democratic permission of the Irish people to do so.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy McDonald's time is up. I call the Minister.

Deputy Jack Chambers: We are not proposing any sort of military alliance. The Deputy is completely misleading the Dáil in what she is suggesting. We have no intention of joining

NATO. There is no plan to join NATO and there is no mandate to join NATO. That is not what we are doing.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: There is no mandate to get rid of the triple lock.

Deputy Jack Chambers: Deputy McDonald is completely misrepresenting the position of the Irish Government, day in and day out.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: No, I am not.

Deputy Jack Chambers: This is a reform to remove the veto of Sinn Féin's friends in Russia and others. What does it have against that? Why does it want to acquiesce to major powers and give them the right to decide or veto where we deploy our troops?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Is the Minister actually that ignorant or naive?

Deputy Jack Chambers: This is a reinforcement of the democratic position of this Parliament, it reinforces the democratic position of the Irish Government, and we have no plan to join any military alliance. We co-operate with other EU member states, primarily in the interests of peacekeeping-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Then put the case to the people.

Deputy Jack Chambers: That is our central focus. That is where we have a strong record and we want to continue that record for the years to come.

The Deputy should speak to military families. Speak to them when-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: They live in my constituency.

Deputy Jack Chambers: Are you telling them that they will be deployed nowhere into the future because of your policy on this position?

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: They want fair pay.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: People are not joining because you are not paying them properly.

An Ceann Comhairle: I remind Members to speak through the Chair and allow all contributions without interruption. Deputy O'Callaghan, please.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: There were almost 70 patients on trolleys and in chairs at Cork University Hospital, CUH, yesterday morning, most of them elderly. Trolley to trolley, they were backed up against one another in bright noisy corridors, some of them beside drafty windows, making rest and recovery impossible. On the "Today with David McCullagh" show

this morning, the professor of emergency medicine, Conor Deasy, described conditions as tantamount to torture. The staff in CUH are under immense pressure. They are trying their very best to treat their patients in overcrowded and unsafe conditions.

None of this should come as surprise to the Government because it has been on notice of a developing crisis in CUH all year. Staffing shortages were first raised by the hospital back in April. In August, in desperation, the CEO of the hospital Jennifer Kearney wrote to HSE in very stark terms. She said that conditions at the hospital were unsustainable and it was not safe to enter the winter period with the current level of staffing shortages. Instead of being listened to, her concerns were dismissed and at a meeting with HSE officials she was threatened with performance management. Jennifer Kearney did her best to warn the Government of what was coming but instead of listening to her, the Minister for Health went on the attack. She lambasted CUH and said appeals for additional staff were unrealistic.

Now look where we are. Surgeries for cancer patients have been cancelled at short notice. Women admitted for breast cancer surgery, some already in hospital gowns, were sent home. Imagine enduring the anxiety, fear and emotional strain that comes before a major surgery, only to be told at the last minute that it would not go ahead. No patient should ever be put through this type of ordeal. Nine clinical directors at the hospital have written to the Taoiseach to outline their serious concerns. They said that of the 172 priority posts that are urgently required, just seven have been approved.

The winter is just beginning and the pressure on the hospital is going to increase. What will it take before the Government acts and will the Minister agree to an independent assessment of staffing needs at CUH as a matter of urgency?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I acknowledge the tremendous work being done across our health system by staff in all of our acute hospitals, particularly as we get into the winter period, which brings additional challenges and demand. Since 2020, there has been a record level of investment and staffing increases right across the system - more staff, more beds and more services available universally. We have embedded reforms with the public-only consultant contract and many other benefits are being brought to patients and staff, with a focus on community healthcare in particular. The Minister for Health has led in driving reform, with requests coming in for additional spending.

The pressures facing CUH are facing all hospitals across the HSE as we head into the winter period. This pressure arises from increased demand. Between 2019 and 2025, emergency department attendance has increased by 28% while inpatient day case and outpatient activity has also increased. Emergency department attendances in CUH increased by 11% from September last year to September of this year. Successive Governments in recent years have supported CUH. Look at the staff increases and the low overall level of investment. Between 2019 and 2025, funding increased by 98% from €303 million to €600 million. This has driven notable growth in staffing levels. Some 107 additional beds have been added since 2020, an increase of 19%. Staffing increased by 41% from 3,500 to over 4,870. In this year alone, CUH has recruited and grown its staff complement by 324 from 4,870 to 5,194, which is an increase of over 6% compared to a 3% growth more generally across Department of Health-funded HSE services.

The Government's investment in CUH is clear, but there has to be evaluation of where the staffing decisions were made within management in terms of where they were prioritised and allocated and what those allocations have achieved in the context of significant increases in expenditure and-----

Deputy Liam Quaide: It is 1,000 staff short.

Deputy Jack Chambers: -----significant increases in investment in recent years. The context here cannot just be about more spending, more staffing and additionality everywhere.

Deputy Liam Quaide: It is 1,000 staff short.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Quaide did not ask the question.

Deputy Jack Chambers: We need to balance that genuine request that comes, at times, from management with a focus on reform and the need to strategically deploy staffing in the best way, as the Minister for Health has reflected in recent years.

In terms of the Deputy's wider question, based on an assessment received from the HSE on quality and patient safety, the overall position regarding patient safety in CUH is reassuring, notwithstanding pressures associated with increased demand. The Minister for Health is continuously monitoring this issue. It is reflected in the broader staff increases we have made in recent years and the huge investment in CUH as a critical hospital in the southern region.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Has the Minister nothing to say to the almost 70 people who were on trolleys and chairs yesterday, most of them elderly? He did not even acknowledge them in his response, or what they were going through. Has he nothing to say to the patients with cancer, some of whom were in their gowns ready for surgery and who had to be sent home? He did not even acknowledge them in his answer. Has he nothing to say to them? All he can do is come in here and blame the hospital management, the very management that has been crying out for help to deal with the staffing shortage.

The request is for an independent assessment of staffing need. What has the Government got against such an independent assessment? Why will it not support that? Why will it not action that? An independent assessment is a very reasonable request. There are 1,000 vacant posts in the hospital. There are 172 urgently required to be filled and all the Government is allowing are seven of those to be filled.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I absolutely acknowledge the specific circumstances of patients. There is a responsibility in the hospital and in the HSE region to meet the respective demands with the staffing increases that we have funded and budgeted for in recent years.

On the Deputy's question about HIQA conducting an announced inspection in CUH to monitor against the national standards for safer and better healthcare on 5 and 6 November, of course there has to be evaluation of patient safety in all hospitals and funded healthcare regions. That is a standard that absolutely must be met. There is also the need within the HSE regions to prioritise posts within their budgets.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Jack Chambers: We obviously have a new control environment in the Department of Health-----

Deputy Liam Quaide: Where should the money go?

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputies, please.

Deputy Jack Chambers: -----and the Minister for Health is authorising specific posts where they are strategically placed in the context of the region. The facts are clear, however. Funding is up in CUH. In addition to many other hospitals,-----

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The Minister should answer the question.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister. Time is up.

Deputy Jack Chambers: -----it is up relevant to the investment in recent years, and that will continue to be the case in the next few years.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Bacik.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: We are at the eleventh hour again as Government and union representatives return to the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC. I want to express my solidarity with public sector workers facing the prospect of another strike on Thursday, potentially. All they want is fair pay and respect. We all know that the talks are ongoing. We hope for a speedy resolution. I will say this, however. It was not respectful for the Government to wait so long to engage meaningfully with unions when the last pay deal ran out months ago.

This morning, we heard stories from one group of public sector workers on the front line, with a shocking report from Cork University Hospital on David McCullagh's radio show. We heard a harrowing account of conditions at CUH for healthcare workers and patients alike, with 70 patients on trolleys in corridors and waiting areas in emergency departments. One woman described her elderly mother asking for help to go to the bathroom for two hours. All resuscitation beds are full and there is no capacity for fresh admissions. One medic said patients were experiencing a form of torture, while staff are working in intolerable conditions compounded by a severe staffing crisis.

As we know, the hospital CEO, Jennifer Kearney, said the hospital was short more than 1,000 staff coming into the winter period. That is a shocking figure. Doctors are now warning that people will die because the hospital cannot deliver timely, quality care due to the Government's recruitment freeze. Indeed, we learned that CUH may now face quarterly fines of €300,000 for non-compliance with labour laws on breaks and hours. Yet, the Minister for Health has the temerity to insist that CUH is operating on par with other hospitals. In today's *The Irish Times*, Beaumont emergency consultant Dr. Peadar Gilligan points out that the ordinary state of affairs in Irish hospitals is unsafe. Unsafe conditions have become the norm,

so CUH being on par with other hospitals is of no reassurance, not to nurses preparing to strike again when they know their best efforts are no guarantee of safe care. It is not reassuring for patients either now being told they may not receive treatment until the new year. It is not reassuring for sick people in chairs in emergency departments, deteriorating while they wait to be seen.

This is not just the case for patients and staff in Cork. Trolley numbers across the country are up 12% on last year. This September was the worst on record for overcrowding nationally, with more than 12,000 patients treated in inappropriate locations. The Minister boasted earlier about levels of investment in Cork and in the national health service but as Deputy Sherlock, Labour's health spokesperson, said, there is a huge gap here between the reality of healthcare budgets and the sort of wishful thinking in which the Government is engaging. She points out the gap between funding allocation for health services and the budget. She points out that the HSE is on course to record the second largest health deficit ever of over €1 billion. The Minister is telling us the HSE broke even last year when it actually recorded a deficit of close to €250 million.

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

Deputy Ivana Bacik: People are asking where the reality is. Will the Minister admit that the Government underfunded the health service this year? Will the Government lift what is a recruitment freeze in all but name to guarantee patient safety?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister to respond, please.

Deputy Jack Chambers: It really is just such a lazy narrative from the Deputy.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: It is really not.

Deputy Jack Chambers: More spending; that is Labour. It just wants more spending.

Deputy Liam Quaide: Spend the money; it is understaffed.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: It is understaffed.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am sorry; through the Chair and without interruption.

Deputy Ged Nash: The Government is lowballing here.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Jack Chambers: By any metric, the Irish health system is well funded compared internationally. We have a €27.4 billion budget in 2026. It has increased in the last few years by €10 billion. That is underpinned by workforce growth in terms of the number of whole-time equivalents by over 30,000. The workforce was at 133,000 as of September 2026, a 30% increase since 2019. The health system has been a central priority for this Government in terms

of public investment and the expansion of public services and that has been reflected over the last series of budgets. However, it is important that we balance the big increase and expansion in the service with the need for a control environment that is sustainable. That is what the Minister for Health is doing with the Department of Health in respect of the different regions. If we look at the facts around CUH, we see that funding has grown from €303 million in 2019 to €600 million, with a notable increase in staffing levels and 107 additional beds.

Deputy Liam Quaide: It is 341 beds short.

Deputy Jack Chambers: Of course, there are going to be requests. In debates around health spending, the Opposition always looks for more. Ultimately, it comes down to the wider investment, what way it is organised and how it is delivering across our system. What is the balance between investment in acute care and investment in community healthcare when there is always demand within our hospital system? That underpins the wider policy when it comes to Sláintecare. The same is true of the budget in 2027, where we have continued to prioritise investment in our health system.

Just saying that it is not enough is not a policy position in itself, which is what we hear repeatedly from Deputy Bacik. The facts speak for themselves around investment and staff expansion and that will continue, particularly as we have seen increased demographic demand in recent years.

I will speak briefly to the Deputy's question and point around the public service pay talks. I am not going to comment any further except to say that negotiations are confidential. It was positive to see a conclusion and resolution at the independent group, chaired by Kevin Foley. We want to see intensive engagement continue through the day so that we have a successful outcome for all parties. That underpins a Government that wants to prioritise public service expansion, support workers on the front line and ensure that the health system continues to be well funded in the years to come, but it is about how we organise that in the context of the budgetary growth in recent years.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: With respect, the response there was laughable. The figures speak for themselves. The health service is in deficit, the HSE is in deficit and the Supplementary Estimates give lie to the figures the Minister has quoted. We know that the health budget is not a reality. It is a work of fiction. Patients and healthcare workers deserve a budget based on reality and on an acknowledgement that there is chronic short-staffing across the system.

Quite apart from the psychodrama that we are seeing playing out between the Taoiseach, the Minister and hospital management, the most disturbing feature of the CUH controversy is the patient safety issue. That is the real core of this. The warning bells have been ringing loudly for some time now, yet the Government's response has been to focus on how concerns were communicated instead of looking at how to fix the problem by addressing the chronic shortfall in staffing. We have seen a bombastic, arrogant reaction, just as we saw from the Minister for justice, Deputy O'Callaghan, in his response to concerns about the legal aid scheme and in the Government's response when the public sector unions signalled how badly the cost of living was hitting their members.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. I call the Minister.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: What we need is a budget for the health service that is rooted in reality-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Your time is up, Deputy.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: -----and enables hospitals to recruit enough staff to treat patients and ensure patient safety.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister to respond.

Deputy Jack Chambers: The reality of the health budget is that it has increased by over €10 billion in a short number of years. That is an exponential increase. The reality of the health budget is that we have nearly 30,000 more staff working in the health system in the last number of years. We have to ensure that the health budget is sustainable and affordable into the long term. What is the Deputy suggesting? Is it just endless exponential increases that ultimately are not sustainable?

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Look at the actual need honestly.

Deputy Jack Chambers: We have prioritised funding our health system and by any metric, the expansion has been unprecedented in the last five to six years, particularly coming out of Covid when we had to increase capacity in our acute hospitals. That has happened with the significant staff increases universally.

The Government takes patient safety very seriously. That is why the HSE's quality and patient safety team carried out an assessment at CUH, and there is obviously work being done by HIQA to ensure that safety standards are upheld.

We need to ensure as well that the overall funding envelope in health has a control environment that works and is sustainable, and prioritises community healthcare in the context of Sláintecare.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The gathering of European leaders and, significantly, the head of NATO in Dublin this weekend highlights the misguided priorities of this Government and European leaders. It seems that European leaders and this Government think there are endless billions for weapons, militarism and war. However, the treatment of working people looking for a pay increase that matches inflation is much less of a priority. The same can be said of the patients in CUH whom a consultant has described as being tortured in that hospital because of the lack of staff and resources. Is it not a stark contrast? I do not know how much money is being spent but the Minister might tell us. I would say millions are being spent to roll out the red carpet for all of these EU leaders and the head of NATO, and to wine and dine them in the National Gallery.

Regardless of what happens with the pay increases, workers have had to go out on strike to get a pay increase from a Government that is trying hold back on them. It refuses to give them

a pay increase that will keep pace with inflation unless they go out on strike and threaten another strike. That is really my question to the Minister. How come there are endless billions for weapons of war, but we get contemptuous treatment of working people who are just fighting for a decent pay increase, or indeed of people looking for our hospitals to be properly staffed and resourced? This Government signed up to these priorities of rearming Europe. Let us remember that the European Union is the biggest trading partner of the Israeli regime, which is committing genocide against the Palestinian people. It is arming that regime to the teeth, but this Government wants to involve us in the plans for more militarisation. Many of those countries are selling weapons to Israel to massacre Palestinians. There is even dual-use technology going from this country to the Israeli military while it is committing genocide. This Government wants to do more of that, but it is holding out on ordinary working people who are just looking for a pay increase that will ensure they are not losing income and working for less because of the cost-of-living crisis caused by the warmongering of the United States, Israel and many of the powers that want more money spent on weapons. The Government is going to do away with the triple lock and deal another blow to our neutrality in order to serve that agenda. Do its priorities not need to be re-evaluated?

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

Deputy Jack Chambers: The Deputy raised a number of points. As I have said, I want to respect the confidentiality of the process under way at the Workplace Relations Commission. We want to have a credible and fair deal for workers, particularly prioritising the low paid. I am limited in what I can say, except to say that negotiations are ongoing. We had positive engagement yesterday through Kevin Foley, who chaired that process. We want to see a pay deal for workers. A lot of what the Deputy has said is a complete misrepresentation of the position. He knows clearly that we are absolutely independent in our foreign policy and our reforms of the triple lock. Like Deputy McDonald, Deputy Boyd Barrett wants to continue to hand a veto to Russia-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: No, he does not.

Deputy Jack Chambers: -----China, Britain, the US and many others. Why he would not support a reform that involves this House deciding on the independent deployment-----

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Because the Government cannot be trusted.

Deputy Jack Chambers: -----of troops to continue and sustain our proud record of peacekeeping is extraordinary.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: They do not trust themselves.

Deputy Jack Chambers: It is extraordinary.

Deputy Paul Murphy: It is not peacekeeping if it is not in the UN, is it?

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Murphy, please.

Deputy Jack Chambers: He throws about the issue of NATO here and there.

Deputy Paul Murphy: He can call it peacekeeping, but it does not make it peacekeeping.

An Ceann Comhairle: Members, please.

Deputy Jack Chambers: We have no intention of joining NATO. We have no intention of joining any military alliance. The Deputy knows as well as I do that the Constitution prohibits such an act. European Political Community meetings are important in the context of Ireland's role within the European Union. I know that like Sinn Féin, Deputy Boyd Barrett is Eurosceptic and would take a much different approach to Ireland's role in the European Union.

That is not something the broader Irish public would support either-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Go and check with the people in a referendum.

Deputy Jack Chambers: -----in terms of the Deputy's position with the European Union. Ireland's defence spending is set out. We have moderately increased our defence spending in recent years, again supported by the work of the Commission on the Defence Forces in supporting expansion of equipment and a lot of respective improvement to pay and conditions for people who work across the Defence Forces. A lot of what the Deputy has said is just rhetoric and a complete misrepresentation of the Irish Government, which is well respected, by the way, in the European Union, led by the Minister, Deputy McEntee, the Taoiseach and others, in terms of what we have said about Gaza-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: That is not complimentary.

Deputy Jack Chambers: -----and the shocking atrocities there and elsewhere. We have been consistent. We have been recognised in the European Union and the UN for how we have spoken up on behalf of the people of Gaza and elsewhere. That will continue within the European Political Community and all other European Union engagements.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Anybody who cares about our neutrality, opposes war and militarisation, and is concerned about the ongoing complicity of the European Union with the genocide being perpetrated by Israel against the Palestinians should be on the streets at 5 o'clock at The Spire, where we will be marching to the National Gallery, where, among others, the head of NATO will be. Which bit of what I have said is not true? Is it not true that the head of NATO is going to be there? It is not true that the European Union is the biggest trading partner of Israel that is committing a genocide? Is it not true that the policy of ReArm Europe is to double arms expenditure in Europe from €400 billion, which has already increased by multiples over recent years, up to €800 billion? That is not true, apparently, is it not?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: That is NATO. It is not the EU.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Is it not an attack on neutrality that we will be sent on military missions - our sons and daughters, potentially - which are not authorised by the United Nations?

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. You time is up. The Minister will respond.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: By whom are they authorised - NATO or the European Union?

Deputy Jack Chambers: It is complete and utter nonsense-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It is all true.

Deputy Jack Chambers: -----to talk about sending our sons and daughters away because of some decision by some other military alliance. It is a complete mistruth.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Read the legislation.

Deputy Jack Chambers: It is a complete and utter mistruth. Stop scaremongering.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Why are you scrapping the guardrails then?

Deputy Jack Chambers: You can continue to engage in your street politics and your division, but you know it is not true. You know there is no mandate for it. You know there is no intention to do it. Stop misrepresenting the actual position of the Government to the people of Ireland.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Then take your case to the people.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: What is the Minister talking to Mark Rutte about?

Deputy Jack Chambers: There is a growing budget for defence spending by many European member states. Does the Deputy know why? It is because of Russia and because of the risk of what Russia is doing in Ukraine and the risk across the eastern area. Deputy Boyd Barrett did not mention Russia. He rarely mentions Russia in all his contributions.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I do.

Deputy Jack Chambers: The Deputy rarely mentions Russia, except he is willing to keep Russia's veto-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Nobody is proposing an alliance with Russia. The Minister is proposing an alliance with NATO.

Deputy Jack Chambers: -----when it comes Ireland's foreign policy and Ireland's position in the context of deciding our own affairs.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: If you are that sure, bring the case to the Irish people in a referendum.

Deputy Jack Chambers: It is complete inconsistency and hypocrisy and a complete misrepresentation of the truth. Deputy Boyd Barrett knows our consistent position in all international affairs.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Put it to the people.

Deputy Jack Chambers: The focus of our reform is on upholding our strong role in peacekeeping.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Put the question to the people.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Why are you scared of democracy?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Even Sinn Féin met NATO when they went to Kosovo.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Bring your case to the people.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Your Sinn Féin colleagues met NATO in Kosovo.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

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

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

Tuesday's business shall be:

- Motion re Sixteenth Report of the Standing Committee of Selection (without debate and any division claimed to be taken immediately)

- Social Welfare Bill 2026 (Second Stage) (to adjourn at the end of the first speaking round; not to exceed 3 hours and 24 minutes)

Tuesday's private members' business shall be the Motion re Toll Charges and the Cost of Living, selected by Sinn Féin.

Wednesday's business shall be:

- Social Welfare Bill 2026 (Second Stage, resumed) (to conclude at the end of the second speaking round, not to exceed 1 hour and 52 minutes; any division claimed shall be taken immediately)

- Short-Term Letting and Tourism Bill 2026 (Committee and remaining Stages) (to conclude within 4 hours)

- Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Protection of Young Persons (Employment in Food and Beverage Services Sector) Regulations 2026 (back from Committee) (any division claimed to be taken immediately)

Wednesday's private members' business shall be the Motion re Reversing Planned Increases to Public Transport Fares, selected by Social Democrats.

Thursday's business shall be:

- Statements on Drug-Related Intimidation (not to exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes)

Thursday evening business shall be the Second Stage of the Non-Fatal Offences against the Person (Amendment) (Spiking) Bill 2023 [Seanad], sponsored by Deputy Barry Ward.

Proposed Arrangements for this week’s business:

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

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders:

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

(b) private members’ business shall be taken following Government Business with consequential effect on the commencement times for the items following in the ordinary routine of business;

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

3. the proceedings on the Second Stage of the Social Welfare Bill 2026 shall be interrupted and stand adjourned at the end of the first speaking round, which shall not exceed 3 hours and 24 minutes, and the following arrangements shall apply:

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

(b) where first-round speeches conclude before the 3 hours and 24 minutes have elapsed and no other member is offering, the debate shall stand adjourned; and

(c) members may share time.

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

Mins	4	20	12	4	20
Total: 3 hours 24 mins					

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

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders:

(a) any motions to be taken without debate shall be taken on the conclusion of the Short-Term Letting and Tourism Letting Bill 2026; and

(b) the weekly division time shall be taken on the conclusion of proceedings on any motions without debate;

2. the resumed proceedings on the Second Stage of the Social Welfare Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion at the end of the second speaking round, which shall not exceed 1 hour and 42 minutes, and the following arrangements shall apply:

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

(b) on the conclusion of the second speaking round, or where speeches conclude before the 1 hour and 42 minutes have elapsed and no other member is offering, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a speech in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes, whereupon proceedings shall be brought to a conclusion;

(c) members may share time; and

(d) any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately;

	Gov	SF	SD	Gov	SF
Mins	10	10	10	6	2
	Lab	Gov	SF	IPTG	Gov
Mins	10	6	2	10	6
	SF	ITG	Gov	SF	OM
Mins	2	10	6	2	10
Total: 1 hour 42 mins					

3. the proceedings on Committee and Remaining Stages of the Short-Term Letting and Tourism Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 4 hours by one question, which shall be put from the Chair, and which shall, in relation to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment; and

4. the proceedings on the Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Protection of Young Persons (Employment in Food and Beverage Services Sector) Regulations 2026 shall be taken without debate and any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately.

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

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, Thursday evening business pursuant to Standing Order 169 may be taken earlier than 8.24 p.m. with consequential effect on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil; and

2. the Statements on Drug-Related Intimidation shall not exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply:

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

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

(c) members may share time.

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

An Ceann Comhairle: Are the arrangements agreed to?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Not agreed. The Government is on notice of a proposed strike action by public servants on Thursday. That is not reflected in the Dáil schedule. Of course, public sector workers might be forced for the second time onto the picket lines because of the Minister's dithering, delaying and failure to deliver a fair pay settlement thus far. To be clear, and to put the Government on notice, if there are picket lines and if public servants are on strike, we will not be crossing those picket lines and there will not, in fact, be any Dáil business done.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: All across the world, communities are pushing back against power-hungry data centres. It was a major component in the mid-west elections. Norway is introducing a moratorium on data centres yet in Ireland, we are still being seen as a soft touch. Thousands of people were out protesting data centres in Dublin over the weekend. They are calling for a moratorium. We need an urgent debate in the Dáil. We need a moratorium on data centres.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I am not sure if it is pure ignorance or a lack of understanding. A senior clinician within Cork University Hospital, CUH, has said that people will die if they are not staffed appropriately. I am requesting that the Government, the Minister for Health and the Taoiseach facilitate statements and questions in the Dáil on the deeply disturbing revelations

concerning CUH. The audio recording completely contradicts the record of this House last week given by the Taoiseach.

We must have these statements and questions.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Boyd Barrett.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: The people of the southern region deserve much better.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Kenny, your time is up.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is totally inappropriate that while strike action by public sector workers on Thursday is still scheduled, we have a schedule for the Dáil to sit. Until this Government gives workers a decent pay increase, which they have demanded, and workers accept that, there should be no question that it should be scheduling Dáil business on the day they are being forced to take strike action because of their shoddy treatment by this Government.

Deputy Michael Collins: Absolutely.

In relation to short-term lets, it was agreed - and we were long enough looking for it - that there would be full committee pre-legislative scrutiny. We now hear the Bill is going to be railroaded through the Dáil tomorrow. It is totally and utterly unacceptable for the people of rural Ireland who are fighting hard for the little bit of business they have while the Government railroads this through to put them out of business in relation to the planning aspect of short-term lets.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Michael Collins: I ask for proper pre-legislative scrutiny.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Michael Collins: This is hugely important. It was promised to us and needs to be delivered.

Deputy Mary Butler: I note all of the comments from the Opposition Whips but in respect to this week's business, and without prejudice the ongoing negotiations, I propose that the Order of Business agrees the three-day schedule outlined to the committee last Thursday. If necessary, I will return to the House tomorrow with a further business proposal in relation to Thursday's sitting and I will continue to engage with the Opposition Whips and the Business Committee, as required, in regard to the sitting on Thursday and whether it will happen. The Order of Business stands.

An Ceann Comhairle: Are the proposed arrangements of this week's business agreed to? They are not agreed.

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

The Dáil divided: Tá, 80; Níl, 68; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Boland, Grace.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Brennan, Brian.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Shay.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brophy, Colm.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Browne, James.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Burke, Colm.	Collins, Michael.	
Burke, Peter.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Butler, Mary.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Crowe, Seán.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Cullinane, David.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Cummins, Jen.	
Cahill, Michael.	Daly, Pa.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Devine, Máire.	
Calleary, Dara.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Canney, Seán.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Ennis, Daniel.	
Chambers, Jack.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Clendennen, John.	Gannon, Gary.	
Collins, Niall.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Connolly, John.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Cooney, Joe.	Graves, Ann.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Cummins, John.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Currie, Emer.	Healy-Rae, Danny.	
Daly, Martin.	Healy, Seamus.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Hearne, Rory.	
Dillon, Alan.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Dolan, Albert.	Kenny, Martin.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Fleming, Sean.	Lawless, Paul.	
Foley, Norma.	Lawlor, George.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Geoghegan, James.	McDonald, Mary Lou.	
Grealish, Noel.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Harkin, Marian.	McGrath, Mattie.	
Heneghan, Barry.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Keogh, Keira.	Murphy, Paul.	
Kyne, Seán.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Lahart, John.	Nash, Ged.	
Lowry, Michael.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Maxwell, David.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	

McAuliffe, Paul.	Nolan, Carol.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
McEntee, Helen.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
McGrath, Séamus.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McGreehan, Erin.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McGuinness, John.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Murphy, Michael.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Naughton, Hildegarde.	Quaide, Liam.	
Neville, Joe.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
O'Brien, Darragh.	Rice, Pádraig.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Sheehan, Conor.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Connor, James.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Dea, Willie.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Meara, Ryan.	Ward, Charles.	
O'Shea, John Paul.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Sullivan, Christopher.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		

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

Question declared carried.

An Ceann Comhairle: I understand that in the Gallery we have Ms Shauna Browne, a champion professional boxer from County Tipperary. We have a few in here from Tipperary. She is most welcome. She is a guest of Deputy Mattie McGrath. We wish her all the best.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Given your last words, a Cheann Comhairle, I feel moved to say the following for the Dáil record: Up Tipp, the premier county. My mother would be proud and happy.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I appreciate that.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Deputy McGrath is welcome any time.

An Ceann Comhairle: The clock is running.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The LucidTalk polling over the weekend again reflects opinion north of the Border and the fact that not alone is the conversation around Irish reunification live but momentum is building towards that and therefore preparation for constitutional change in a referendum is absolutely necessary. I welcome the Taoiseach's initiative and the initiative by the Fine Gael Party at its Ard-Fheis over the weekend. Will the Government's actions now include the production of a Green Paper and some form of assembly, whether it is a constitutional forum or a citizens' forum? I am less worried about what it is called but I am very concerned that we would now see tangible actions taking place to engage people on this crucial question.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank Deputy McDonald. Her party and other parties of Government have all reflected positive proposals in this area. What the Taoiseach has said is that there are three priority areas: first, how we can continue to develop and deliver on the shared island initiative, independent of any discussion of constitutional frameworks; second, how we can seek to begin discussions on reform of strand one of the Good Friday Agreement; and third, how we can develop and establish a new initiative to develop the evidence base for a debate on future constitutional frameworks on which we want to get broader engagement. All of those respective initiatives reflect the broader public opinion which is evolving across the island.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: The Government is ignoring the cost-of-living crisis that is crippling families. It is ignoring the climate crisis that is crippling communities. It is ignoring its own just transition commission by deciding to increase the cost of using public transport from January 2027. It beggars belief that this Government is choosing to negatively impact our pockets, thus sending people back to their cars. More cars mean more congestion. The Social Democrats are using its Private Members' business time this week to call on the Government to reduce and reverse the public transport fare increases. Will the Minister use his position as Minister for public expenditure to do a U-turn on this political decision and reverse the public transport fare hikes?

3 o'clock

Deputy Jack Chambers: There has to be sustainability in terms of our public transport system. The level of subvention from central government to the National Transport Authority to support the public transport network is continuing to increase and will again in 2027. We want to significantly expand services. That is striking the right balance between continued

expansion of the subvention from the Government but also having sustainability across our fare system. We have had a series of years of reductions and retention at a particular rate. In most European economies, there are some increases of transport fares. That is to ensure that we protect services but also expand them. In the communities I represent, they are as focused on a big expansion of transport services as well. We have to ensure that is balanced, both with the fares and the subvention from the State.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Speaking of boxing, we saw the Tánaiste pushing down this weekend with comments about jobseekers and more punching down, unfortunately, by the State of carers this week. I am grateful to the Every Child Matters campaign and Labour Party's Councillor Ali Field for bringing to my attention this email that was sent by Intreo to recipients of carer's allowance this week. It said:

> Dear customer, as a carer's allowance recipient, we recognise that your caring responsibilities are your priority. However, if you would like to learn more about a flexible, short-term employment opportunity that may fit around your circumstances the following role may be of interest.

It is seeking to recruit for a specific role, and it is causing enormous distress and concern to carers. It sounds as if parents caring around the clock are assumed to have spare hours to fill. As Ali said, it is an absolute disgrace. They really have no idea what being a carer entails. Carers are exhausted from filling gaps in State services.

An Ceann Comhairle: A question, Deputy.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: When will the Government stop treating carers as a workforce to be mobilised and start treating them as people who deserve to be supported? They are facing the sharp cut off the cruel means test and-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up, Deputy.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: -----this really adds insult to injury.

Deputy Jack Chambers: If we look at the record of the previous two budgets in terms of the income disregard, we have made significant progress for carers in line with what we set out in the programme for Government, and rightly so. We know the huge contribution that carers make in communities across the country. I am not aware of the specific example the Deputy has given. The Department of Social Protection has always worked in a very sensitive way with different recipients of different supports. We acknowledge the huge contributions carers make to their families and their loved ones. That will continue to be a priority for us through the next series of budgets.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: A patient was admitted to Connolly Hospital last Wednesday with a significant brain bleed. The consultant recommended an MRI to figure out what was wrong but the MRI machine has been broken for a week. The man with very complex and other medical conditions as well has not been able to get an MRI in Connolly Hospital in

Blanchardstown. They were not able to outsource his care to get the MRI needed. How can a hospital with a stroke unit and other medical needs have a broken MRI machine for nearly a week? It is not the first time I have raised Connolly Hospital. I raised the CT scanner, which was broken. Now, we have an MRI machine. This is causing huge stress for the relative who contacted me, and who I have just spoken to, but also to staff who do not know what to do with the backup of patients. Lives are being endangered by this. It is the Minister's local hospital. He really ought to be ashamed of himself that this is continuing to happen in a major Dublin hospital in his own back yard.

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): I thank the Deputy for raising that. I will find out what is happening with the MRI machine and get back to the Deputy directly.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: The Government is going to stop the short-term lets Bill going to committee for an open discussion on it. That is what it thinks of the people in the hospitality sector providing short-term lets. The housing Minister has not released the up-to-date guidelines on planning permissions. Our local authorities are waiting for them, the people who are building their own houses are waiting for them and the people who want to put a roof over their children's heads are waiting for them but the Government has not done that either. However, it has said it is not even going to discuss the short-term lets Bill, that it is going to guillotine it and that it is going to be put to a vote. The Government has no alternatives to even giving planning permission to people who want to build their own houses. They are not depending on the State. The Government cannot even come up with the guidelines for that in a timely fashion.

Deputy Jack Chambers: The Chief Whip has informed me there will be four hours of debate tomorrow around the short-term lettings legislation.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: It is not going to committee.

Deputy Jack Chambers: There will be four hours of debate for Committee and Remaining Stages here. The Deputy will have plenty of time to reflect his position and the Minister will respond to any queries he has.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: Two weeks ago, the Minister and I attended the commencement of the works on DART+ West, which is extremely welcome news. The medium to long-term solution is DART+ West and South West, in particular for commuters in Kildare. However, in the short term a lot of commuters in Maynooth, Leixlip, Hazelhatch and Celbridge are complaining of overcrowding on trains, in particular in the mornings and evenings. I ask that additional carriages are afforded onto the train lines, including the Maynooth line, which goes on to Sligo, and the Hazelhatch and Celbridge lines to ensure overcrowding does not continue. DART+ will help in the medium to long term but we need immediate solutions.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Deputy. It it is great that both of our constituencies will see the real benefit of this transformative public transport project. It will make a huge

difference in terms of frequency, capacity and the modernisation of the line, which has been promised for 20 years. The Government is getting it started and will get it done. I will reflect that issue, which I know is a pressing issue in the Deputy's constituency as well as mine. There are particular points in the day where there are capacity issues and constraints where there is a strong uptake in public transport. I will reflect that to the Minister, Deputy O'Brien.

Deputy Grace Boland: I very much welcome the enhanced grants for solar panels and battery storage. There has been strong interest from households in my area of Dublin Fingal. However, many older homes require electrical upgrades before they can be installed safely. Issues include undersized electrical meter tails and outdated wiring, the cost of which can be significant. As a result, people who qualify for the grants cannot afford to upgrade the electricity requirements in order to install solar batteries and solar panels. Will the Government consider a targeted grant to support a essential electrical works where they are required for solar or battery installation? I have written to the Minister on this but I would appreciate the support of the Minister, Deputy Chambers.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank Deputy Boland. I appreciate it may be an issue for many homes which were built a number of decades ago and where there is a specific requirement for electrical upgrades. In all grants we have, whether with respect to SEAI for solar or other matters, there is a need to prioritise and target particular areas. We need to be careful. If we were to go down a new avenue, as the Deputy suggested - there is a good rationale behind why she would suggest such a change - ultimately we have to consider whether that has an impact on core grant support in existing schemes through the SEAI. We have had significant expansion by the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, to try to have improved absorption of that particular grant support. We need to be careful that measures are targeted at the particular area we want to address, that is, the direct uptake of solar. If we get into other areas of intervention, that could have an impact on our support for grants.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: I have been contacted by families across Waterford, from Tallow to the Comeraghs, about the lack of transport for those attending adult day services. Many people who availed of school transport when attending St. John's Special School in Dungarvan have been left without any transport as they transition to adult day services. Some parents are paying privately hand over fist for inappropriate transport to get their children to adult day services and others are considering giving up their employment. I raised this matter with the Department of Health and HSE. They have advised me, in response to a parliamentary question, that no new funding has been provided to the HSE for the running costs of providing transport, including drivers for individuals to and from day services. Will the Minister for public expenditure work to address that shortfall?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank Deputy McGuinness. I regret that people have not seen their service continue as he has described. I will reflect that to the HSE in respect of the particular transport service. I do not have the details before me. The HSE is well funded, as I said in an earlier contribution. It is important that specific health regions plan services where they know there is a demand in any given year. I will reflect that and ask the HSE to respond to the Deputy comprehensively.

Deputy Brian Brennan: I again want to speak about dereliction.

I welcome the Government's many initiatives on this subject, especially in relation to the collection of derelict property tax by Revenue. However, this can only happen if properties are registered. Take Arklow for example. It is a town where billions of euro of investment in industry is due over the coming years but the residents and businesses are totally frustrated by the lack of action on dereliction on its main streets.

On 8 July, there were only two properties listed in Arklow and only four properties listed in the whole of County Wicklow. I am calling on the Government to ensure action is taken by the county councils on dereliction, as this is a scourge and cancer on the social fabric of so many towns and villages throughout Ireland.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank Deputy Brennan. I share the goal of ending dereliction in terms of the wider policy objective of Government, and a new derelict property tax will make a real impact on this. It is legislated for in the Finance (No. 2) Bill 2026. The aim is absolutely focused on regeneration, not on revenue, and success will be measured by properties restored and homes created, not tax collected. It replaces the local authority derelict sites levy, which we know was not working properly across the country, at the same 7% rate with Revenue now administering the charge for the first time. It will make a real impact on delivering across our shared objective of reducing a lot of the dereliction we see in too many towns and villages across the country.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I want to raise the case of Dealz stores nationwide. As the Minister may be aware, its UK parent company, Poundland, has gone into administration. This is causing a lot of concern for the 70 Dealz stores in Ireland. There are about 3,000 employees who are impacted. The Dealz stores in Ireland, by all accounts, seem to be viable. My local Dealz store in Gorey has 17 people employed. I spoke at the weekend with Grace and Pippi, who are there. The Minister will understand the lack of certainty in the run-up to Christmas. Can the Minister assure us that the Government will engage fully and will try to provide any support to anyone who may be interested in buying the Irish stores?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank Deputy Byrne. I understand that Poundland has filed notice of its intention to appoint an administrator to the company in the UK but I can confirm the Minister for enterprise has not received a notification of collective redundancies from Poundland or Dealz in Ireland. As per the legislation, if an employer does become insolvent, the State ensures there are strong protections in place for affected workers. I appreciate coming up to Christmas is a particularly uncertain time for all involved. I do not want to speculate on media reports given the evolving position but I wish to set out the factual position relating to the Minister for enterprise at this point.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Too many households in Mayo and across the State are living on a week-to-week basis, crippled by the relentless cost-of-living crisis. As we head into Christmas and into winter, families are stretched to breaking point, juggling soaring grocery bills with energy and fuel costs, childcare, tolls, insurance, and I could go on and on. Budget 2027 supports barely scratch the surface. Sinn Féin proposed a €500 everyday essentials card to help households put food on the table and ease the pressure of the frightening grocery costs.

That was costed at €500 million in our alternative budget. I am asking the Minister whether the Government will reconsider this proposal and support 1 million struggling households before the winter hardship deepens even further. People cannot afford to live.

Deputy Jack Chambers: We absolutely recognise the serious cost-of-living pressures facing many families. That is why we have had targeted supports through the social protection system with a €2 billion allocation there. Specific changes have been made to the taxation of energy around home heating oil and around the continued reduction of excise across fuel, and also other supports related to fuel allowance. We have made specific interventions and targeted many working families.

On what Sinn Féin has come up with, is that where it is when it comes to policy development - a card for everybody - as if that is going to resolve the issues relating to the cost of living? To say that would be administered within the next number of weeks is not being honest with people. We have continued the Christmas bonus and a significant social protection package that is targeted at low-income families, and the changes we have made to taxation are progressive as well.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: You think people have enough.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: A damning new report on greyhound racing in Ireland shows that this industry is based around the premature death of thousands of dogs.

The report does not come from an animal welfare NGO or an Opposition party; it comes from the Parliamentary Budget Office. Greyhounds should live for ten to 15 years but the report shows that 10,000 have died in Ireland before their sixth birthday and 20,000 are exported out of the jurisdiction, where we have no control over their welfare standards. For how long will the Government continue to allow this carnage? Is the Minister satisfied with €20 million of taxpayers' money being spent to prop up an industry that is based upon the premature death of thousands of dogs?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I acknowledge the report to which the Deputy referred. For the Minister, Deputy Heydon, animal welfare remains an absolute priority for the sector. It absolutely is a focus for him and for the Department of agriculture. The wider fund that is there is associated with the need to support the economic and geographic importance of greyhound racing in certain communities in Ireland. There has been a real focus in the Department on animal welfare and it is a specific focus of the Minister in the context of the greyhound fund. He will be able to set out further details and information in that regard.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: My question is for the Minister for Health. There are concerns regarding the planned hospital development at Raheen in Limerick. In March this year, the Minister announced that the HSE had secured a 44-acre site in Raheen to progress option B of the HIQA recommendations and expand University Hospital Limerick, UHL, to a two-site hospital campus. However, the recently published terms of reference for the mid-west health planning board make no reference whatsoever to a new acute hospital or additional inpatient beds. Instead, they refer to the future development of the site, including the relocation of outpatient services in the first instance. Patients groups such as Friends of Ennis Hospital,

chaired by Ms Angela Coll, are understandably questioning whether the original ambition for the site will be realised. I am sure the Minister will agree that people in Clare and the wider mid-west region have endured years of overcrowding at UHL and cannot put up with it any longer. The language is really important. Are we going to get a new acute hospital or is this some in-between solution? Will she clarify what the Government intends to be done with the site?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: The Government set out the greatest ambition in embracing options A, B and C and purchasing a very significant site, which is slightly larger than the Dooradoyle site, for the development of extremely important new healthcare facilities for the region. What is particularly important for the good people of County Clare, whom the Deputy represents so well in this House, is that it is not only about a hospital in Limerick but also about all the services right across Clare, including the community hospital in Ennistymon and the excellent hospital in Ennis.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: Is the plan still to build a new acute hospital?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: The development board has been tasked with delivering all of those things rather than having a singular focus on Limerick. We have an ambitious plan for the region, which very specifically includes the development of an additional hospital. However, I do not want it to be limited to that. Having the dialogue exclusively about Limerick is unhelpful to the excellent people of Clare and Tipperary, who also need to have all of their services lifted.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: Seven weeks have elapsed since I last raised in here the CCTV system for Limerick city and county. During that seven-week period, hardly a day has passed when I have not been involved in imploring, pleading with and begging Ministers to bring the matter to a resolution and put a sustainable system in place. It is extremely disappointing that nothing has happened so far. I cannot overemphasise the catastrophic consequences for crime detection and prevention in Limerick if the system ceases to exist. Given that public safety is the first responsibility of any government, will this matter be resolved and, if so, when? The deadline is upon us. The people who operate the cameras have been given their notice and the system is about to come to an end.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I appreciate that the Deputy raised this with me a number of weeks ago. My office has been engaging directly with both the Departments of housing and justice and their Ministers to bring a positive resolution to this matter. I understand the importance of this system, as the Deputy properly and comprehensively described, for crime prevention and detection. We need to bring about a positive resolution that gives certainty to its future and ensures it is protected. We are working on that and we hope to bring it to a conclusion shortly.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: In last weeks midterms AI data centres proved to be a potent political and electoral force. Similarly, people took to the streets this last weekend, including myself, to ask for moratorium. I hosted a briefing last week on a separate but connected issue relating to a specific data centre in Ireland. This was based on a report from Ekô on the

Almunasseq app, the data for which is hosted here in Irish data centres. This is the system of permissions that is used to restrict the movements of Palestinian people, to decide when they can go to the doctor, when they can visit their families, and when they can go to work. An independent review found that it has incredibly invasive permissions that are tantamount to full surveillance where they track users around the clock even when the GPS is off and where they can silently copy their files. This is not possible without the companies which provide it, in this case Microsoft and the data centres that host the data, which are here in Ireland. We have duties under GDPR-----

An Ceann Comhairle: A question, Deputy.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: -----and under our signatory to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. Is the Department of enterprise or the Data Protection Commission going to act on this? Will the Minister's Government act to investigate the enabling of the crime of apartheid on Irish soil as a matter of urgency and hold these tech companies to account?

Deputy Jack Chambers: As the Deputy will know, the Data Protection Commission is totally independent of Government-----

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: The Department of enterprise is not.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy.

Deputy Jack Chambers: -----and it is a matter for it to investigate any matter that the Deputy wishes to report to it.

Tender To Payment (Public Spending Transparency) Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy Albert Dolan: I move:

> That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to provide for the transparency of public expenditure; to require that public spending be capable of being traced from tender, through contract award, contract, purchase order and invoice, to final payment; to establish a Public Spending Ledger linking those stages; to require the standardised, structured and machine-readable reporting of public expenditure by public bodies, including in respect of public procurement, grant disbursements and transfers between public bodies; to provide for a unique supplier identifier and for a basis to be recorded for every payment, including recurring and non-order payments; to provide for the linking of payments to the authority under which they arise; to provide for aggregated reporting of public funding received by non-public bodies; to provide for disclosure obligations in respect of special purpose vehicles; to provide for the interoperability of the Ledger with the public procurement data infrastructure of the European Union; to provide for oversight, audit, assurance and sanctions; to make consequential amendments to the Freedom of Information Act 2014 and

the Comptroller and Auditor General (Amendment) Act 1993; and to provide for related matters.

The first duty of Government is to serve its people. That carries a responsibility to manage public money with care, with competence and with accountability. We cannot meet that responsibility if we cannot reliably account for how that money is spent. This is what this Bill seeks to make possible. Over the past two years, I have spent considerable time examining public procurement and how the State records and reports its expenditure. What surprised me most was how many basic questions we still cannot reliably answer. How much does the State spend on procurement each year? How much does it spend with individual suppliers? When a contract is awarded how much is ultimately paid under that contract, and was what we paid for actually delivered? These are questions that any organisation should be able to answer. We have procurement systems, we have financial management systems and we have contract award notices and purchase order reports. We have the pieces but we cannot reliably put them together.

This Bill would establish a public spending ledger, creating a golden thread from the original tender, contract award, purchase orders and invoices, right through to the final payment. It would require public bodies to report regularly, linking payments to the contracts, grants or other authorities under which they were made, and recording changes to contracts. If a public body was to receive or to award a contract for €10 million, we should be able to see who received it, what was agreed, whether the contract changed, and how much was ultimately paid.

The Bill does not require public bodies to replace their existing financial systems. It requires them to report information in a consistent way so that it can be connected and understood. This would help us identify where payments exceed agreed contract values, compare what public bodies pay for similar goods and services, and ask whether what we paid for was actually delivered.

I want to acknowledge the people of Galway East who gave me the privilege of representing them in this House. I know how hard they work for their money and I believe it is my responsibility in this House to make sure their money is spent well. This Bill builds on decades of work by people who have sought to make the State more open and accountable, from freedom of information and open data to the work of public servants, campaigners and ordinary citizens. Over the past two years, I have learned that even relatively small changes can take considerable time, effort and persistence. I have seen public bodies respond constructively and make real improvements. I have also learned that change is possible. The progress we make today builds on the work of those who came before us. We have a responsibility, not just to maintain the institutions we inherit but to improve them for the generations that follow.

Seán Lemass and T.K. Whitaker understood that Ireland could not build a modern economy by continuing to do things as they had always been done. They helped to change how the State thought, planned and acted. Our generation should bring that same ambition to modernising the State itself, how it manages public money, how it learns from its experiences and, above all, how it serves its people.

This Bill will not on its own solve the challenges facing public spending. Better information does not automatically produce better decisions but without good information, we condemn ourselves to repeat mistakes we should have learned from. The State needs to buy better,

manage its contracts better and, above all, deliver better for the people it exists to serve. I commend the Bill to the House.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

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

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Local Government (Room Charges) Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy Ged Nash: I move:

> That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to enable local authorities to make charges in respect of the occupation of rooms in hotels and guesthouses, and of certain other premises used for holiday or guest accommodation, and to provide for related matters.

This is a straightforward Bill. Its intention is to provide local authorities with a clear legislative framework within which they can be enabled to introduce an accommodation levy. While tourism growth benefits local economies, the associated infrastructure costs, maintenance of public spaces, waste management, transport, cultural and recreational facilities fall on local authorities without a dedicated revenue stream linked to the volume of visitors. The Bill addresses this gap by providing a legal basis for a locally determined accommodation charge, commonly referred to as a tourist tax or bed tax, a standard feature of the fiscal architecture in most European countries. France, Germany, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, Belgium and Austria all operate accommodation levies of one kind or another, typically at municipal or regional level and typically ranging from €1 to €5 per person per night, depending on the category of accommodation. In the UK, Manchester introduced a city visitor charge in 2023.

In Ireland, the matter has been the subject of recurring policy discussion. The Tourism Action Plan 2023-2025 identified an accommodation levy as a potential revenue instrument for local authorities. Proposals were considered by the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport and Media. The Bill does not require any local authority to adopt the scheme, nor does it specify the rate of the charge. Instead, the scheme enables each local authority to decide whether to set a rate in the first place, or different rates for different categories of accommodation, appropriate to its own circumstances.

The charge as envisaged in the Bill is imposed on the room provider rather than directly on the occupant. It is recoverable by the local authority as a simple contract debt. The amount of the charge, the area to which it applies and the return on payment dates are all matters for

determination by the local authority under its adopted scheme. The Bill also provides for the Revenue Commissioners to share relevant VAT registration and returns information with local authorities to assist them in identifying room providers operating within their areas and in verifying the accuracy of charges paid. The charge as designed would be applied to hotels, guesthouses and self-catering accommodation let on a short-term basis. It does not apply to caravan parks or camping sites.

I note that similar legislative proposals have been published, for example, by Deputy McAuliffe, who is in the Chamber this afternoon. However, there appears to be no common Government position on the principle of an accommodation levy. We in Labour see the legislation proposed today through the lens of our commitment to broadening the revenue base. We also see the principle of a room charge as a potential, fair and sustainable revenue-raising measure that would allow cash-starved local authorities to generate more of their own income to improve services and the environment for local residents. We have one of the most centralised forms of decision-making in Europe, and a local authority system that is better described as local administration than as local government. We should trust good local elected representatives who are prepared to be held accountable on the generation and spending of locally sourced revenue.

As the derelict sites levy transitions to a tax collected by Revenue, something for which I have been advocating for years, this income stream will be lost by local authorities, as envisaged by the finance Bill. A way needs to be found to ring-fence the tax collected and to ensure its full value is returned to the local authority area within which the subject properties lie.

The Bill before us today would also allow a local authority to define an area within its administrative area in terms of where it chooses to deploy such a levy or charge.

In other words, a local authority can identify some areas within its own administrative area to target or deploy the charges envisaged in this legislation. For the avoidance of doubt, this legislation does not force any local authority to introduce room charges. Such a move would be, as envisaged under this Bill, at the local authority's democratic discretion entirely.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. Is the Bill being opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Mary Butler): It is not opposed.

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Sixteenth Report of the Standing Committee of Selection and Appointment of Committee Cathaoirligh: Motion

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

That Dáil Éireann, pursuant to Standing Order 33, and with effect from 11th November, 2026—

(*a*) approves the Sixteenth Report of the Standing Committee of Selection in accordance with Standing Order 33, copies of which were laid before Dáil Éireann on 6th November, 2026, and appoints members to a Committee accordingly; and

(*b*) appoints Deputy Ruth Coppinger to be Cathaoirleach of the Committee on Preventing and Responding to Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence.

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Cabinet Committees

1. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on water quality will meet next. [78908/26]

2. **Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on water quality will meet next. [75628/26]

3. **Deputy Tony McCormack** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on water quality will meet next. [64303/26]

4. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on water quality will meet next. [75860/26]

5. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on water quality will meet next. [70052/26]

6. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on water quality will meet next. [75862/26]

7. **Deputy Paul Lawless** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on water quality will meet next. [77535/26]

8. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on water quality will meet next. [77484/26]

9. **Deputy Liam Quaide** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on water quality will next meet. [75669/26]

10. **Deputy Michael Collins** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on water quality will meet next. [79369/26]

11. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on water quality will next meet. [79384/26]

12. **Deputy Conor D. McGuinness** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on water quality will meet next. [79355/26]

13. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on water quality will meet next. [79318/26]

14. **Deputy Roderic O'Gorman** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on water quality will next meet. [79395/26]

15. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on water quality will meet next. [79223/26]

16. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on water quality will meet next. [79428/26]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take questions Nos. 1 to 16, inclusive, together.

The Cabinet committee on water quality oversees implementation of programme for Government commitments in relation to Ireland's water, including those related to pressures from agriculture, forestry, land use and wastewater treatment. Water is vital to the well-being of our society, economy and environment and the programme for Government commits to improving the health of our rivers, lakes and estuaries and of our coastal and groundwaters.

The Environmental Protection Agency, EPA's, indicator report on water quality in 2025 noted some improvements at a local level, with 54% of rivers and lakes recorded as having good or better biological equality. Some 98% of bathing waters met or exceeded minimum standards. We continue to have concerns regarding nutrient loads in certain parts of the country. While EPA analysis shows that significant challenges remain, it is important to recognise the progress that has been made. An example of positive improvement is the Ballyteigue-Bannow catchment in County Wexford, seeing the biological quality of a number of its rivers improve.

Budget 2027 allocates almost €2.3 billion to Uisce Éireann in 2027. This includes €1.5 billion in capital funding to build essential capacity and increase the resilience and sustainability of our water supply for new water and wastewater connections, enabling the delivery of new homes, and to deliver upgrades to wastewater treatment infrastructure, improving water quality, protecting the environment and enhancing compliance with regulatory standards. This investment will progress over 400 projects across the country next year,

including the eastern and midlands region water supply project, the greater Dublin drainage scheme and the wastewater treatment plant upgrades in Limerick and Waterford.

The water action plan, published last year, sets out over 150 actions to protect, improve and restore water quality. These include the implementation and tracking of the water action plans, the development of a stronger sixth nitrates action programme, the farming for water European innovation partnership, EIP, project and the national barrier mitigation programme, which will support fish migration and water quality.

The sixth nitrates action programme was published by the Minister, Deputy Browne, in December and will run until 2028. This plan gives effect to the nitrates directive, which governs the management of nitrate loss from agriculture to water bodies. On foot of the measures included in this plan, the European Commission granted Ireland a three-year extension on its nitrates derogation in December 2025. The Minister, Deputy Heydon, is working with his officials to address key conditions within the derogation decision, including the undertaking of the environmental assessments to demonstrate enhanced compliance with the nitrates derogation, the habitats directive and the water framework directive.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

It will be important to safeguard the economic contribution of farmers in areas most affected by the derogation, as well as implementing workable solutions for water quality. The Farming for Water European Innovation Partnership with a budget of €60 million commenced in 2024 providing financial support for specific targeted water quality actions above regulatory requirements. To date over 5,500 farmers have applied for support.

Targeted agriculture modernisation scheme, TAMS, grant aid is supporting capital investments in low emission slurry spreading equipment and manure storage. Since 2015 a total of over €195 million has been paid to family farms supporting significant investments in manure storage and low emission slurry spreading technology.

The Cabinet committee provides a focus to drive the improvement of water quality. It met most recently in July and the next meeting will be scheduled shortly.

An Ceann Comhairle: There are 15 Members drawn to speak. I am proposing 45 seconds each. I will keep Members in check. That is to allow a decent answer.

I call Deputy Heneghan.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Last December, I raised the issue of flood defence being included in the Critical Infrastructure Act. I am seeking an update on that. My constituency and my constituents have waited far too long.

With regard to water quality, I raised the issue of using nature-based solutions with the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine last week. I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Moran's work with the 3D-printed bollards for flood defence, but flood defence and water quality should be going hand in hand. I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan, who brought me to Dún Laoghaire's oyster farms, which show that oysters can clean water at 190 litres per day.

We should be using 3D-printed flood defences that protect the oysters that clean our water. We should be breaking the waves but not breaking the ecosystem. I ask the Taoiseach for an update on that.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: The Nore, Suir and Barrow, known as the Three Sisters, traverse the heart of Carlow and Kilkenny. Last year, the EPA found that two of the most nitrogen-polluted waterways in the whole country were right where the Barrow and the Nore met. Last week, the EPA reported that more than half of our wastewater plants were failing the standards set to stop pollution. Meanwhile, in Bennettsbridge on the banks of the River Nore, the wastewater plant upgrade was approved years ago but it will not be finished until 2030. It is not good enough and it is not acceptable that in Mullinavat and Inistioge the plants are at full capacity. Graiguenamanagh, sitting on the River Barrow, is in dire need of an upgrade too. These villages need to be looked after. They need the money locked in and they need a date. We know that Uisce Éireann is drawing up its first national wastewater plan out to 2055. When the committee meets next, will it make sure that the plan prioritises the small towns, villages and rivers that the EPA says are under pressure, with funding and clear timelines provided?

Deputy Tony McCormack: I want to acknowledge the significant investment that this Government is making in water infrastructure, and rightly so, but we have an opportunity now to strengthen accountability and communication from the public bodies responsible for delivering these essential services. To take the example of Birr in my own constituency, residents and businesses have endured repeated water outages, causing considerable problems. I have raised this at our infrastructure committee. What concerns me is the quality of information that we are receiving from Uisce Éireann. It is not just individual TDs who are receiving generic replies that fail to address the questions asked. Even formal requests for further information from Oireachtas committees can be met with vague responses that provide little additional detail. Could we look at introducing a formal system requiring public bodies to respond directly to each question raised by an Oireachtas committee within clear timelines and to provide further clarification where answers are inadequate?

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: We are approaching winter with the possibility of more rain, cattle inside and around the yard, and silage pits opened. Farmers are very much alive to the risks to water quality. They will be out around their yards making sure that every action is taken to ensure a safe water quality. They have even been building extra slurry capacity. They are playing their part and they expect that others, including the likes of Uisce Éireann, would also step up to the plate and play their part. It is very frustrating to see wastewater from the Ballingeary treatment plant being discharged into the River Lee by Uisce Éireann.

The nitrates derogation is hugely important for farmers. Last week, the Minister expressed concern that some farms may not be able to retain the derogation even though Ireland as a whole may. The subcatchment results are due out next year. Can we make sure that Uisce Éireann pulls its weight and delivers capacity?

Deputy Brendan Smith: As the Taoiseach knows, the small towns and villages growth programme provides for investment in water and wastewater infrastructure in the smaller towns and villages that are not included in Uisce Éireann's main capital plan. Such investment would

enable housing developments in those small towns and villages, where we already have good social infrastructure, including schools, community centres, sporting facilities, shops and health facilities. There is a constant problem now with traffic in our larger towns, so the dispersal of the population in the future would be very beneficial. We would be adding relatively small numbers to towns and villages that already have infrastructure in place, bar water and sewerage systems of a certain standard.

Deputy Paul Lawless: There are major issues with Uisce Éireann right across the country. In Mayo, for example, in the Johnstown Lavellyroe group water scheme, which was taken over recently by Uisce Éireann, there have been major problems. Over the past five months, there have been 22 days of outages. This is happening at a time when Uisce Éireann has paid €18 million in performance-related bonuses to its staff and its CEO has received a pay increase of €118,000, bringing his salary to almost €400,000. How is this justifiable?

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Recent alarming reports from the United States confirm that hackers have targeted water infrastructure across 12 states, highlighting the growing threat to critical national infrastructure. I raised this with the Taoiseach in December 2023 and again in February 2024 when a local group water scheme in Mayo was hacked.

As Chair of the defence and national security committee, I am acutely aware of the dangers posed by cyberattacks and hybrid warfare and the need to invest in our preparedness. Water security is a national security issue. A successful attack could compromise drinking water quality, disrupt essential services and endanger public life. We cannot afford complacency or to underestimate the likelihood and potentially devastating consequences of such an attack. I want to know what proactive measures the Taoiseach is taking.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: One of my favourite things about representing the constituency of Dublin Bay South is Dublin Bay. The Taoiseach might know that, this past summer, bathing along Dublin Bay was restricted. Imagine my shock to learn that the Ailesbury pump station pumps raw sewage onto Sandymount Strand once every month and Uisce Éireann says it will take between five and ten years to rehabilitate the situation. There is a severe issue with residential, agricultural and industrial effluent going into our waterways. What are the Taoiseach and the Government going to do to enforce the standards people need to rely on proper, clean water, including in Dublin Bay?

Deputy Michael Collins: Last week, the EPA announced a figure of 11 towns and villages discharging raw sewage into clear waters. That is an absolute farce and a lie because there are 11 of them in west Cork alone, never mind 11 nationally. I cannot understand how the EPA can pull out these figures. Stop conning the people. There are the people of Goleen, Shannonvale, Ballydehob and Rosscarbery. There is the Ouvane river. There is raw sewage pouring into the rivers and people are blaming the farmers. There is something wrong here somewhere. Uisce Éireann has to get it right. The EPA certainly cannot get it right. Uisce Éireann cannot deliver a proper treatment plant. It is continuously hiding behind everything and getting well paid for doing that. It is time for delivery to these areas that in some cases are waiting 25 years.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: As the Taoiseach is well aware, Ballyheigue has been without water for almost seven weeks. One way or another, to resolve this matter, pipe laying will have to start and water will have to be taken from Ardfert, which comes from Killarney, towards Ballyheigue. I am asking that the Glenderry system be opened again to supplement. It worked well for almost 60 years. Time is going by and people are entitled to water and should have it. I ask the Government to liaise with Uisce Éireann to put a bit of a spur to the thing and to start laying pipes immediately.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Communities across County Waterford are being failed by repeated water supply problems, with no sign of lasting solutions. In Tallow and Dungarvan, separate faults have led to week-long outages and "boil water" notices, and these towns continue to experience low pressure. In Glencairn, water tankers have become an almost permanent fixture. Deelish, Mount Melleray, Kilmacthomas, Touraneena, Portlaw and Bunmahon are villages and towns experiencing sporadic water outages and pressure problems. People are being left without a reliable basic service while temporary fixes replace investment in infrastructure. The system is being patched every time until the system is basically comprised of patches. Will the Taoiseach ensure that Uisce Éireann produces a properly funded long-term plan to resolve these problems and improve advance notifications of outages?

Deputy Pa Daly: For the best part of six weeks, there have been 3,500 households in Kilmoyley, Causeway and Ballyheigue under a "do not consume" notice. Elected representatives have been receiving daily updates but get no answers in those updates. The updates say that the work is progressing. They say that investigations have commenced. They say that assessments are ongoing. However, the basic questions have not been answered. How was it caused? How long will it proceed? Will the perfectly good Glenderry sandstone water pump station, which was closed during the summer, be reopened to at least give temporary water to people in the Ballyheigue area? It is an easy fix to part of the problem there. Will the Taoiseach ensure that it is done as a matter of urgency?

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I raise the ongoing environmental disaster in Lough Neagh. The lough has been severely impacted by green algae in recent years to the extent that it risks becoming an ecological dead zone. My colleagues in the Green Party Northern Ireland have been highlighting this mounting crisis for a long time, but action in Stormont has been extremely slow. Given that we share one environment on this island, is this a matter that the shared island function in the Taoiseach's Department can raise with the Northern Ireland Executive, in particular with Andrew Muir, the minister for agriculture and environment?

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Last year, 55% of wastewater treatment plants in Ireland discharged polluted water into our rivers and seas. Some 50% of those failures were simply due to operational issues, such as not maintaining equipment and not having sufficient training in place. It is clear that Uisce Éireann is not doing its job properly. Will the Taoiseach explain to me again how it is the case that the CEO of Uisce Éireann got nearly €120,000 extra in their salary this year and nearly €18 million was given to staff last year in performance-related bonuses? There is someone in senior management at Uisce Éireann who cannot even ensure that equipment is being maintained and they are allowing our waters to be polluted by their failures. How are they being paid to do that?

The Taoiseach: We started with Deputy Heneghan in terms of flood defences, nature-based solutions and the utilisation of oyster farms. First of all, in terms of flood defence, we have extensive investment under way in terms of flood defences, but they take time. There has to be significant public consultation. There can be a lot of objections to flood defences, as we know and as we have experienced all over the country, but the plans are detailed and it is important to get them right. The problem is the timeline that is involved. I will talk to the Minister. The Minister has identified some public transport projects and he has listed them as part of the Critical Infrastructure Act. However, if you list everything, then it is no longer a priority. That is a challenge with the legislation. We have quite a number of critical flood defences that we want in place, but the Office of Public Works, OPW, is working on those with the county councils and with the public. Some of them are intricate, complex and so on.

The EPA has approved nature-based solutions for wastewater treatment, particularly for new housing developments in small towns and villages. The uptake on that has not been strong, but it is now available.

The Deputy said that the Minister of State, Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan, had taken him to the oyster farm. He is very enthusiastic about that. There is potential there, without question, and we will be expanding those types of approach into the future.

In terms of the Nore, the Suir and the Barrow, and in response to Deputy Cleere, first of all, I will engage with Uisce Éireann. The Deputy is saying that half the plants are failing. I suppose the backdrop to many of the questions is that Uisce Éireann was established more than a decade ago. I was in opposition at the time, just to clarify. We reached an agreement around 2016, but it seems to me that we lost a bit of local knowledge in the local authorities, which could have been valuable. Equally, to be fair to Uisce Éireann, it inherited a substantial deficit in terms of historic deficiency in the existing water supply, pipelines and so on, and that has to be caught up on.

This Government has allocated very substantial moneys to Uisce Éireann and we have said that there has to be better communication with Deputies in respect of how it communicates to the public at large in terms of outages, water being switched off and so on. That is something that we are constantly on to Uisce Éireann about. It has established a unit within its organisation.

The budget for 2027 is €2.3 billion and that includes €1.5 billion in capital funding. That is for essential capacity, increased resilience, sustainability of the supply, new water and wastewater treatment connections, and the delivery of upgrades to wastewater treatment plants improving water quality. There is a lot of money allocated, but I accept the point that Deputy Cleere and others have made in terms of outcomes and outputs and I will talk to Uisce Éireann in respect of that Nore-Barrow intersection that the Deputy described as being particularly difficult.

I am not in a position to give the Deputy dates now. Sometimes, I am careful of when organisations are asked to give dates because the dates can be too long into the future. We need to keep the pressure on to get interim solutions as well as the more longer term solutions.

Deputy McCormack spoke about accountability, communication, Birr and so on. A unit was established in Uisce Éireann following representations from Members of the House and,

indeed, local councillors. We have to look at this again regarding what the Deputy said and to develop some system. What I do not want, to be frank, is a system that overloads the administration with hundreds of questions. That can snarl up. However, there is clearly a gap from what I am hearing from everyone in the House on a repeated basis.

As to Deputy Moynihan's point, winter is approaching. Some days it is winterish, other days it is not. However, I take his point. Farming communities are very aware of the issues, particularly in the context of the nitrates directive. Some catchment areas are more vulnerable and challenging than others. I have repeatedly told Uisce Éireann representatives when they attend Cabinet subcommittee meetings that Uisce Éireann needs to get its house in order first. It must stop failures in its own wastewater treatment plants. Uisce Éireann above everybody else should not be polluting water through negligence, lack of attention or various incidents that have occurred in the past. It is conscious of that, to be fair, and it is working on it.

As for Deputy Smith's points regarding small towns and villages and wastewater treatment, we are putting pressure on. Apart from the nature-based solutions, we need plug-in solutions as well, particularly for small builders, so that we can get housing into towns and villages across the country. That would make a difference to housing and to villages and towns that have all the services and networks to grow naturally and properly. That is something we are working on.

I do not know whether it is the water quality or salaries that Deputy Lawless is interested in.

Deputy Paul Lawless: They are linked.

The Taoiseach: However, he said the group water scheme had been taken over recently. That suggests to me it is not Uisce Éireann's problem if there are outages emanating from that group water scheme. It might suggest that there were historic problems building up there - I do not know the specifics - but I do not think we can blame Uisce Éireann if it was only taken over recently. I do not think that would be fair.

Deputy Conway-Walsh referred to a group water scheme that had been hacked in County Mayo and cybersecurity. We are very alive to this. That National Cyber Security Centre guides both public utilities and private companies. It provides guidance and advice. If anyone suffers an incident, he or she should immediately refer it to the Garda and the National Cyber Security Centre. We are building resilience in cybersecurity. It is very challenging and the Deputy is correct in saying that all utilities are vulnerable, particularly in an AI-enabled world. AI-enabled cyberattacks can be far more dangerous. We have to be very resilient in response to that. We have built up a very strong National Cyber Security Centre in a relatively short period of time and I have a lot of confidence in the leadership of that centre.

In terms of raw sewage into Sandymount Strand, if we were to go back ten or 20 years, there was an extraordinary amount of raw sewage going into water all over the country. There have been substantial improvements, it has to be said, but until we stop it all everywhere, we will not be satisfied. That is the bottom line. I will discuss the Sandymount area and what is happening there with Uisce Éireann when we meet next. I will make the point that Deputy Hayes raised the issue.

I make the same point to Deputy Collins. There was a lot more discharge of raw sewage into harbours and rivers ten, 15 and 20 years ago than there is today. That means we have to keep on working and providing treatment facilities in as many towns and villages as we possibly can. The Deputy and I both know that there can be many rows about location of treatment plants in villages and towns, which can often delay the provision of such plants for years. I am a great believer in trying to seize the moment when an investment is available, and sometimes towns and villages miss that moment by objecting to a particular plant in a particular location, believing it will smell or whatever. The challenge is the area then does not get the plant or investment. That is a real issue.

Deputies Healy-Rae and Daly raised Ballyheigue. Uisce Éireann has told them that work is progressing and investigations are ongoing.

Those are the facts. If that is what Uisce Éireann is telling the Deputies, that is what is happening. I will check with Uisce Éireann what the story is with Glenderry. It is probably not as simple as the Deputies say because if it were that simple, why would Uisce Éireann not do it? There must be problems and challenges to it, but I will pursue it with Uisce Éireann. The note I had last week or the week before was that it was a serious enough matter that would not lend itself to an easy solution. I will get an up-to-date position from Uisce Éireann and relay it to both Deputies later.

Deputy McGuinness mentioned the water supply problems in towns and villages. He listed a number of areas across Waterford. I will discuss that with Uisce Éireann. There is a common refrain here. We have a capital programme of approximately €1.5 billion. The challenge is to balance that between the big, new projects and the smaller projects where upgrades are required or where extensions are required.

What we are witnessing is a clash. We are trying to catch up historically but are also matching an unprecedented increase in population growth over the past 20 years and the growth of towns and villages across rural Ireland. People often talk about rural decline but what is symptomatic of the representations today is the growth of the population in rural towns, increased capacities and so on.

Deputy O'Gorman may not be aware that we have already allocated substantial moneys from the shared island fund to the Northern Ireland Executive for the clean-up of Lough Neagh. That is matched by funding from Andrew Muir's department. That is my understanding. Off hand, I think we are talking about €20 million, if not more, from the shared island fund, recognising the wider catchment areas. These are our problems as well as theirs. It is also to help out, because it is a catastrophic situation that has proved difficult for the Executive to deal with. We have already allocated. The issue now is to get the work started and to use the funding that we have made available. I can get the Deputy the details of the scheme.

Deputy Whitmore spoke about Uisce Éireann not doing its job, failures in certain plants and pollution as a result of outflow from the plants. I have highlighted the issue with Uisce Éireann. It believes that some of the issue has to do with the transition from a local authority system to a nationally organised system. Nonetheless, as far as I am concerned, this should be the number one priority of Uisce Éireann because it must set the standards for others to follow.

Cabinet Committees

17. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on climate action, environment and energy will next. [78909/26]

18. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on climate action, environment and energy will next meet. [79025/26]

19. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on climate action, environment and energy will next meet. [79097/26]

20. **Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on climate action, environment and energy will meet next. [64307/26]

21. **Deputy Louis O'Hara** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on climate action, environment and energy will meet next. [67765/26]

22. **Deputy Shane Moynihan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on climate action, environment and energy will next meet. [64306/26]

23. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on climate action, environment and energy will next meet. [75863/26]

24. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on climate action, environment and energy will next meet. [77362/26]

25. **Deputy Liam Quaide** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on climate action, environment and energy will next meet. [75672/26]

26. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on climate action, environment and energy will meet next. [79262/26]

27. **Deputy Michael Collins** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on climate action, environment and energy will next meet. [79370/26]

28. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on climate action, environment and energy will next meet. [79385/26]

29. **Deputy Roderic O'Gorman** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on climate action, environment and energy will next meet. [79396/26]

30. **Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on climate action, environment and energy will next meet. [79419/26]

31. **Deputy Tony McCormack** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on climate action, environment and energy will next meet. [79418/26]

32. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on climate action, environment and energy will next meet. [79415/26]

33. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on climate action, environment and energy will next meet. [79224/26]

34. **Deputy Ciarán Ahern** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on climate action, environment and energy will next meet. [79436/26]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 17 to 34, inclusive, together.

The Cabinet committee on climate action, the environment and energy oversees the implementation of programme for Government commitments relating to the environment, climate action, energy and emergency planning. The programme for Government restates our determination that Ireland, together with our European Union partners, will play its full part in tackling climate change, protecting this and future generations.

Change is under way across our economy and society to steer Ireland towards a low-carbon future. Reducing emissions is now at the heart of all our policies and sectoral plans. We are seeing real progress. However, projections from the EPA make clear that we have much more work to do.

There are encouraging signs. Ireland's emissions have been falling for the last three years and we now have lower overall emissions than at any point in the past 35 years despite our population growing by 50% over that period. The climate action plan, an updated version of which will be published in the coming weeks, is guiding our efforts and sets out sectoral policies and targets that we are working towards.

The Cabinet committee considers the wide range of issues that require action in Ireland's transition to a low-carbon, climate-resilient and sustainable future, a future in which we take full advantage of the renewable energy potential that we possess while ensuring that policies also contribute to energy affordability, energy security and competitiveness. The programme for Government committed to taking decisive action to provide warmer, more comfortable homes as part of our drive to support energy affordability, security and sustainability.

The Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, launched a national residential retrofit plan for 2026, which will make home energy upgrades more affordable and accessible to many more homeowners. It provides for new and enhanced individual upgrades to support homeowners with their upgrade journeys, including new window and door grants. Increased grants and wider eligibility make it easier for homeowners to complete deep retrofits on a phased basis that suits their budgets.

4 o'clock

It also provides for increased grants for homeowners on qualifying welfare payments. There are also new supports for first-time buyers of existing houses, increased grant supports for

approved housing bodies and local authorities, and support in the community for older people. By promoting retrofitting, renewable heating and solar energy in this way, we will make homes warmer and cheaper to heat.

Last year, more than 58,000 homeowners benefited from energy upgrades under SEAI schemes. We will build on that this year, widening the net to upgrade even more homes in 2026 and making home energy upgrades more affordable and accessible to all. The number of applications to the SEAI so far in 2026 has doubled. Over 78,000 applications were processed between January and the end of July, which is up almost 120% on this time last year.

Improving Ireland's resilience in the face of more severe and more frequent climate impacts is one of the issues regularly considered by the Cabinet committee. Learning from the experiences of recent severe weather events, the Government has strengthened preparation and resilience ahead of possible storms and floods this winter. Significant work has been carried out to improve flood risk monitoring, enhance national co-ordination and increase operational resilience across local authorities, utilities and key response agencies. All Government Departments and agencies have reviewed their severe weather readiness and response plans. They have taken tangible actions to ensure preparation for the coming season. Local authorities have been carrying out ongoing preventative maintenance of drains, culverts and gullies. The OPW and local authorities have made arrangements for the purchase, storage at five locations around the country and deployment of mobile pumps and temporary flood barriers. These will augment the equipment already held by city and county councils. This will ensure that the right equipment can be quickly moved to where it is required. Uisce Éireann has positioned 30 large generators at key sites and has 70 additional mobile generators supplementing an existing fleet of 150 generators. A further 80 generators are planned for purchase. Some 20 dedicated wastewater pumps are available to manage disruption caused by flooding. Local authorities have identified 572 locations that can operate as community support centres, with more than 100 already equipped with generator changeover capability and approximately 200 expected by the end of the year.

Being positioned to react well and recover quickly from increasingly severe and unprecedented weather events will depend on how well we can anticipate and adapt to the impacts ahead. Ireland has an elaborate suite of resources to guide our work in this area. These include a national climate risk assessment, a national adaptation framework and a suite of sectoral adaptation plans. The Cabinet committee has been interrogating our collective efforts in this area and what more may be required to ensure we are adequately prepared for the significant changes to the climate that are under way. The Cabinet committee last met on 22 October. The next meeting of the Cabinet committee will be scheduled shortly.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: My private wires Bill has been selected for debate on 17 December. This is one solution to three of the biggest national challenges we face. In housing, we need faster electricity connections to unlock badly needed homes. Imagine a single connection to our national grid after a developer has already put in 64 connections that are ready for people. On the cost of living, I am delighted to see that plug-in solar has been done but families and businesses should be able to share renewable-generated energy locally more easily. In healthcare, hospitals should have easier access to on-site or nearby renewable generation. Will the Taoiseach commit to working with me to progress this Bill to deliver real savings for Irish people, households, businesses and public services? It is in the programme

for Government. It is the reason the Ceann Comhairle ruled me out of being a member of the Opposition. Ireland needs this. We need to do it as soon as possible.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Cork County Council failed to pass its annual budget last night. It has two weeks to pass a budget or the council will be dissolved and a Government administrator will have to be appointed. That is not good for the council's climate objectives. It is also not good for the county of the current Taoiseach. This happened because the council is looking for an 8% increase in commercial rates. As the Taoiseach will know, small businesses are being hammered with the increased cost of doing business. Peter O'Donoghue, an Aontú councillor, has successfully tabled a motion seeking that central government address the shortfall in the council budget to prevent pressure being put on small businesses. Small businesses are at breaking point. Will the Taoiseach step up to the mark and help them?

The Taoiseach: It is an ingenious move to table a motion.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: The Taoiseach mentioned the success of and demand for home retrofitting via the SEAI. In Kildare and nationally, there are entire housing estates where houses were built to the same standard and are losing energy and heat in the exact same areas. I ask that the Taoiseach liaise with the SEAI to look at a pilot scheme for retrofitting in housing estates to reduce the cost. This would essentially be like a group scheme. Local authorities should also be able to do group schemes for social housing. This would be a pilot identifying individual housing estates and trying to get more houses completed in this way.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: Last week, I attended a public meeting in Gort regarding the proposal to construct a large biogas plant in the area. We know that renewable energy has an important role to play but this is simply the wrong development in the wrong location. Placing a heavy industrial anaerobic digestion facility right on the edge of Gort town, adjacent to homes, schools and sensitive ecological sites, is completely unacceptable to the local community. The community has had to put a significant amount of time and resources into responding to this proposal over several years and it is now back in the planning process again. When will the Government step up and ensure proper oversight of these developments? When will we see reform of our planning frameworks to guarantee that local communities are meaningfully consulted and respected rather than forced to fight unsuitable proposals on their doorstep?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: An EU directive prohibiting public financial incentives for new stand-alone oil and gas boilers is creating a huge number of issues for people who previously would have been able to avail of council grants. There is now no SEAI grant. I dealt with this as a Topical Issue last week. There is no possibility of a payment through an emergency needs payment.

The Taoiseach: Is the Deputy saying there should be an SEAI grant for oil boilers?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: What I am saying is that, in a perfect world-----

The Taoiseach: I just want to get clarity.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: In a perfect world, if people could get support from the warmer homes scheme without it taking 15 months, they could make sure they had heating in a very short period of time. However, we are talking about people whose boilers have gone and cannot be fixed and who cannot get a refurbished boiler. Supposedly, you can get these out there but I would ask anyone to try to find one. If they could, they would be able to avail of the council grants that people previously would have used. There is a huge number of people whose boilers have gone. There is no fixing them and they cannot find a refurbished one. In some cases, we are talking about people in their 70s and 80s who are on really small payments. The European directive has created an anomaly here. We need to find a solution. We all want to move to renewables and sustainable heat pumps but it is not always possible for people in severe cold.

Deputy Liam Quaide: There is welcome investment in Cork's commuter rail network with new stations, electrification and more frequent services planned, yet Youghal, one of east Cork's most important towns, remains excluded from these plans. Youghal residents and the residents of surrounding villages endure ever-worsening commuting misery every day. Restoring the Midleton-Youghal railway would reduce car dependency and emissions, ease congestion on the N25 and support sustainable development across east Cork. The Cork metropolitan area transport strategy is due for review, with completion targeted for mid-2027. Youghal falls outside the existing metropolitan boundary, however. Despite this, the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, recently identified this review as an opportunity to reconsider restoring the Youghal railway. Will the Taoiseach ask the Minister for Transport to engage with the National Transport Authority to ensure that restoring the Midleton-Youghal railway is fully examined as part of that review? This is a vital infrastructural link for east Cork.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I will ask the Taoiseach about a scandal exposed on the news website, The Currency, today. It relates to what has happened with the windfall levy on energy companies. This was introduced at a European level. The European Commission said it should be used to help vulnerable households. Instead, in Ireland, it is being used to help Denis O'Brien, J.P. McManus, Dunnes Stores, Lidl, Aldi, SuperValu and the many other companies that have received tens of millions of euros in handouts from this EU-wide levy. All of the almost €22 million in levy proceeds handed out in this State has gone to businesses. Not a single penny has gone to struggling households. This is in the country with the most expensive household electricity prices in Europe, where 500,000 households are now in arrears on their energy bills. How can the Taoiseach stand over giving €200,000 to J.P. McManus to install solar panels at Adare Manor and €40,000 to Denis O'Brien to retrofit a castle?

Why should we be paying for this?

Deputy Michael Collins: A lot has been made of climate targets, and yes, we must meet our climate targets, but one of the things we must do is look at solar. While the grant that was given out in the budget recently was a top-class grant, and everybody has to acknowledge that, there is a problem. People in local authority houses are not allowed to apply, even though they qualify, and it is the same for people in private housing associations. This could be a game-changer for the whole country. Those people have the qualifying payments, but they cannot apply because the local authorities will not allow them to put solar on the roof. We need to change that policy. The extra power that will come from that will be fed back to the grid and

go back to the councils, which can then, in turn, stop the 7.5% increase that was put on rates for the people of County Cork yesterday, although it was rejected by the Independent Ireland councillors. The point I am trying to make is that there is an opportunity. The local authorities and people in private housing should be included in this top-class grant.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Every day since Bord na Móna was closed down, the cost of electricity has gone up. It has gone up for old people and the elderly. It has gone up for businesspeople. It has gone up for everyone. Even the people who spent a lot of money buying electric cars are complaining now. If they do not have their own charger, they pay more to replenish their car than they would if they were filling it with petrol to do the same number of miles. At the same time, the electricity companies are making a fortune. I have a question for the Taoiseach. Where is the energy regulator? Does the Taoiseach know him? Did the Taoiseach ever meet him? What is he doing? Is he asleep? Is he in bed? Did he ever get out of it? I am passing doors where people cannot turn on the electricity now at night, and that is a fact. So many people are in arrears, and they are in an awful way. I am asking the Taoiseach to do something about the regulator and ensure that the energy companies are not benefiting continuously on the backs of poor people.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I am asking once again where the 2026 climate action plan is. This week, the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, is travelling to COP31, where he is due to lead negotiations on behalf of the EU, something he is happy to issue a press release on, but the emperor is travelling without any clothes. Our national climate plans have yet to be updated this year, which puts us at significant risk of falling even further behind our climate targets. Will the Taoiseach confirm on which date the 2026 plan will be published? Will he also confirm if a separate 2027 plan will be published, as per the legislation?

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: It is November, and right across Carlow and Kilkenny, older people are turning up the heating. In many cases, they are still sitting in the cold because too much of that heat is going straight out through the roof and the walls. I acknowledge that the warmer homes scheme is one of the best things this Government has done, with fully funded upgrades for people on the fuel allowance and with €280 million put into it last year, 11 times what it was in 2020. That needs to be acknowledged on the floor of this House. However, the wait to get work done is brutal. The SEAI says it can take up to two years from the day someone applies to the day the work is finished. That is two winters. A pensioner in Borris or Skeoughvosteen, where I am from, cannot wait two winters. This cannot continue. When the committee next meets, will it set a clear target to get that wait to under a year to begin with, starting with older people, in particular those in rural Ireland in the coldest homes?

Deputy Tony McCormack: I welcome the Government's commitment to introducing private wires legislation, allowing businesses to connect directly to renewable electricity generators. This presents an enormous economic opportunity for Ireland, particularly for counties like my own constituency of Offaly. Offaly has a proud history of producing energy for the country, and today we are seeing substantial investment in wind and solar generation, but producing electricity is only part of the opportunity. We should be using that energy to attract manufacturing, new industries and major employers to the regions that are producing it. Private wires could help businesses to access renewable electricity directly, opening up

opportunities for industrial development and addressing some of the challenges with grid connections. As we progress this legislation, can we ensure that IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland are actively involved in identifying these opportunities? We should be turning our energy resources into investment, employment and long-term economic growth.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Homeowners affected by pyrite should not face further obstacles in relation to SEAI grants because of the arbitrary application dates for the pyrite remediation scheme when they originally applied. I acknowledge that the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment recently intervened in one case that I had in Mayo, but families should not have to fight individual battles to secure what they are entitled to. For the small number of homes that have fallen through the cracks, eligibility should be presumed and not contested. Will the Taoiseach ensure a fair and consistent nationwide approach so that no affected homeowners are left behind? I also want to ask what we are doing to secure redress for pyrite homes in the North that were built using defective concrete blocks sourced in the Twenty-six Counties. They were sourced in the Twenty-six Counties, so that is where the regulation fell down.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I would ask the Taoiseach to read today's article in *The Currency* by Niall Sargent. It is a really good analysis. It clearly demonstrates where many of the Government's solar grants are going, and the companies they are going to. Some 15% of solar grants for businesses, worth about €5.5 million, have gone to very wealthy, large corporate entities. The J.P. McManus-owned Adare Manor received €200,000 in grants. The Denis O'Brien-owned Ballynahinch Castle received just over €40,000. Dunnes Stores received more than €530,000. Lidl Ireland received €195,000. The grants for energy efficiency and for solar need to be targeted at people and businesses that need it. I do not think anyone could claim that the likes of J.P. McManus and Denis O'Brien need grants from the Government to facilitate and upgrade their hotels. Will the Taoiseach make sure the money is going to the right people?

Deputy James O'Connor: I want to raise the matter of the main Midleton flood relief scheme. We know that the planning permission is due to be submitted alongside the senior counsel review that is ongoing by the local authority. I am once again reiterating the need for this to be completed. The people of Midleton and the wider east Cork area were badly affected by Storm Babet's flooding. They need to see the Government giving its full commitment to providing support and funding to deliver this scheme. It is all about delivery. Being from Cork, the Taoiseach knows well the damage this caused to Midleton and the wider east Cork area. I would very much appreciate it if he could comment on the support, the funding and the planning process to make sure that all is well and on time, following delays that have caused huge frustration for people in the east Cork area.

The Taoiseach: In response to Deputy O'Hara, and as a general comment overall, this Cabinet committee is on climate action, the environment and energy. It is interesting that, although not all, quite a number of the earlier presentations did not really focus on climate or renewables, if I am honest, but rather the opposite. I would generally say that we have a huge challenge in this country. If we think we are going to solve the energy problem by saying we cannot have this, that or the other, real problems are coming down the tracks. The reason we are in a crisis of fuel cost is because of an over-reliance on fossil fuels. This has happened

twice in six years, with the outbreak of war, Russia invading Ukraine, Europe ending its dependency on Russian oil, the attack on Iran, the closure of the Strait of Hormuz and the Houthis impacting on the Red Sea routes. When are we going to collectively, as a Parliament, accept the reality that we have to move to renewables and alternative forms of energy generation? Far too often now, I think, because it is challenging electorally and politically, it is far too easy to avoid trying to communicate with people and explain to people why we need this particular plant or facility, as opposed to going along and not really pursuing renewables at the end of the day. I think that is a challenge for the country, and I would make that general point overall.

In terms of the biogas facility, I do not know the specific location or the issues there. Deputy O'Hara is saying it is the wrong development in the wrong place, but there was a planning process there, and it has to go through the planning process. The Government cannot get involved in every single planning application in respect of a biogas facility, a wind farm or solar panels. The country cannot be run that way. We have local authorities. We have a planning system. There have to be proper guidelines and planning statements governing all of this.

At the end of the day, it is something that has to be dealt with through the planning process. There should be public consultation. The earlier and better the consultation on these matters, the more effective it will be at getting issues properly resolved.

I did not quite understand Deputy Ó Murchú's question. I think he was suggesting that we would have grants for oil and gas burners.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: The grants existed before the council-----

The Taoiseach: I know, but-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Remarks should be addressed through the Chair.

The Taoiseach: -----the aim of the European directive is to end dependency on fossil fuels.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I know that, but we are dealing with people who do not have time to wait-----

The Taoiseach: I take the Deputy's point, but hydrotreated vegetable oil, HVO, is an option and we have to pursue that. Again, the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, grants are for sustainable generation. It would be perverse in some respects if we were to use sustainability grants for fossil fuels.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I am only saying there is no grant open to those affected. That is all I am saying.

The Taoiseach: I know. I am simply saying that we need to be honest about it too.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I have no problem with that.

The Taoiseach: The issue involves an EU directive, so it is not easy to turn it all around, but we are looking at HVO as a potential alternative and the Minister has a boiler scrappage scheme. However, I do take the point that there are-----

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It is for those people.

The Taoiseach: -----certain people in rural areas, elderly people and so on who will not be going down that road. We understand that.

Deputy Quaide raised the commuter rail network and Youghal. The challenge we have is having sufficient capital over the next decade to match the ambition that is already in the all-island rail review, including being able to complete the projects that have already been prioritised. The Cork commuter rail project is one. We do not have any issue with including Youghal in a future review, but some people think that if we include it in a review, it means it is going to get built sometime soon. We need a reality check in terms of what is possible financially from a capital point of view, because the capital outlays are going to be huge, particularly given construction inflation. We will see how MetroLink goes, and we will see how the Cork commuter rail project, which we have prioritised, goes. If we can get those projects completed efficiently, effectively and in a timely manner, it will open up other possibilities.

I am conscious that we have had the all-island strategic rail review, which the then Minister, Eamon Ryan, concluded. That review contains a whole lot of projects and a hierarchy, and it states some of the projects will not even be looked at until 2050. We have to be realistic.

Deputy Liam Quaide: That is a Government decision, though.

The Taoiseach: No, it is not a Government decision. This was a review by experts who said what we should prioritise and so on. I am simply saying that the enormousness of what is in the document has huge implications for capital allocation. There are many projects, like Youghal, that are not even in the hierarchy set out in the all-island rail review, which was undertaken North and South. There are other projects concerning rail in the west. People think we can do it all at once. We cannot. If something is not going to happen soon, we have to be realistic about it. We have to try to do what we can. However, I do get the point.

I am probably old enough to say I was on the Cork–Youghal rail line. People from our suburb and parish would go every summer to Youghal on day trips and have egg-and-tomato sandwiches and a pot of tea. It was a very lovely trip. That is where the working class of Cork went on their holidays. They used the train way back, and it is a tragedy that it got upended. I would have an interest in the project but I just want to introduce a degree of realism about how fast we can get things done. We need to be honest with people when we talk to them in that regard.

On Deputy Murphy's point, I have not read *The Currency* today and I do not know whether he is twisting it a bit.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I am not-----

The Taoiseach: This is an issue relating to climate. As far as I am concerned, we want as many people in as many walks of life as possible to make the transition to being energy efficient. I have not read the article and I do not know the context of what the Deputy is referring to. We have never said, and I have never heard anyone in the House say, that we should provide solar grants only below certain thresholds and means-test accordingly. Is our priority energy transformation or is it all just about income and means testing?

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: If you are a multibillionaire, you can afford your own solar-----

The Taoiseach: No, I am not talking about-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Remarks should be addressed through the Chair.

The Taoiseach: That is the cheap shot.

Deputy Paul Murphy: That is what the reform is about.

The Taoiseach: No. That is great for slogans and soundbites, but it does not butter any parsnips. It does not really, and that is the cop-out. It is a cheap old shot. I have not read the article but I will. However, we need to be careful. It is the same with electric vehicles, EVs. Should we not provide grants for EVs either because it is probably middle- and upper-middle-class people who buy them?

Deputy Eoin Hayes: For God's sake, J.P. McManus is not middle class.

The Taoiseach: I am not talking about him; I am talking about EVs. Does the Deputy want an honest debate? I said a similar situation arose with EVs, the argument being that if we targeted only those on low incomes, would we have had the same take-up of EVs? What is the priority? I would have thought the priority of a climate agenda was to take fossil fuels out of the equation and enable as many people as possible to do that. The more people who go solar, including big farmers who put panels on their rooftops or whatever, the better it is for the overall air quality. It is very good. It is better for emissions reduction. The Deputies need to make up their minds on whether they are about emissions reduction. Are they getting mixed up between their economic and sociological ideology and their climate ideologies?

Deputy Eoin Hayes: No grants for billionaires.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Just transition is a policy of this Government.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy should address her remarks through the Chair.

The Taoiseach: Just transition relates to areas that had fossil fuel power stations that we got rid of.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Just transition is about enabling others-----

The Taoiseach: We had to bring alternative economic-----

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: -----who cannot afford to transition. That is what it is.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are almost ten minutes over time. If Deputies encourage this kind of debate, we are not going to get to the end of it.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Taoiseach missed out on his supporter here.

The Taoiseach: I apologise-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: If the Taoiseach would not mind concluding-----

The Taoiseach: -----but I believe a good constructive debate and challenging people-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: It is not for today.

The Taoiseach: I get tired of the soundbites.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Taoiseach should talk to the Chief Whip about the debate.

The Taoiseach: I will.

(Interruptions)

The Taoiseach: I get tired of soundbites.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Can we just move on because the Taoiseach is out of time?

The Taoiseach: Where am I? On Deputy Collins's point, I believe local authorities can apply for solar panels on their houses.

Deputy Michael Collins: The grant rolled out recently is not-----

The Taoiseach: Yes, but if there are tenants, the local authority should be applying. The local authority should run the scheme for solar.

Did I pass over Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil?

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: Yes.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Also Deputy Barry Heneghan and me.

(Interruptions)

The Taoiseach: Deputy Danny Healy-Rae's statement that prices have gone up since Bord na Móna closed was amazing.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Every day.

The Taoiseach: The energy regulator is a woman. The Deputy said "he" the whole way through. That is just for the record. I did meet the regulators. The Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, is the regulator. We have established an energy task force to examine the setting of prices for energy. Connection to gas is a key issue and problem.

On Deputy O'Gorman's points, the climate action plan was approved by the Cabinet today, but it has to go through an environmental assessment now. That will dictate the timeline, according to the Minister. The more important point is that the Minister is changing the way we are doing it. It was ridiculous that we had civil servants doing nothing else but writing action plans with huge detail in them. When they finished one, they started the next one. It was ridiculous. We had to change that. The Minister is changing it, stating the principles, getting the fundamentals right, being more pragmatic and getting things done. That is what he is doing.

Deputy Paul Murphy: But the Government is not getting things done.

The Taoiseach: Did Deputy Cleere refer to turning up the heating? No, that is my own note. It is very hot in here and I think the heating is too high.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Yes.

The Taoiseach: We should cut it down to save energy and cool us all down a bit.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Pressure.

The Taoiseach: Reference was made to time being brutal. The Minister is suggesting, and I think he has already started, that the grants be paid directly to the contractors to bypass the administrative process. He is going to initiate that, if it has not been initiated already, to try to speed up grant applications and get people out to have the work done.

Deputy McCormack referred to private wires.

Deputy Heneghan was there at the beginning. How did I miss him?

Deputy Barry Heneghan: And Deputy Tóibín.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Yes.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Put me ar dtús.

The Taoiseach: I started off on the wrong page. I am sorry.

On private wires, the Deputy's Bill is in. The Minister is very shortly coming to the Cabinet with legislation on private wires as well. Presumably, it is a matter of dovetailing. We will get it done. The Deputy has been pushing this for a long time, to be fair, and we do see it as part of the solution.

On Deputy Peadar Tóibín's point, it is a matter for Cork County Council. It has to sort out its estimates. I must say I was struck by the Deputy's statement that his councillor colleague was successful in tabling a motion. There was a day when we could all table motions, but a motion is not going to solve this. The council will have to solve it.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: But the Government has cut back on central government funding for councils.

The Taoiseach: On Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil's points, there are schemes such as those mentioned that are happening already. I believe that if housing estates come together and make an approach, the SEAI will do a deal. That has happened in Cork, including in Douglas and other places. It is a very good initiative and one that should occur.

On Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh's point about pyrite, she wants a consistent approach across local authorities.

The Northern Ireland Executive will have to look after the situation in the North. We have made an unprecedented intervention both in pyrite and in defective houses and apartments in the Republic. It will cost billions by the time we are finished it and we do not have endless funding.

In response to Deputy Whitmore, I will have to read that article, but again is it climate or the redistribution of wealth we are on about? With regard to taxation-----

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: It is about solar panels and allowing people to-----

The Taoiseach: **-----**we should go after people generally. We have the most progressive taxation system in Europe-----

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: J.P. McManus knows about that because he does not pay tax here.

The Taoiseach: -----in terms of the highest earners paying taxes. Is it climate? Climate has to be priority. We have to get rid of fossil fuels, reduce them significantly and get solar in. I take issue with what Deputies Murphy and Whitmore said because right from the Ukraine war onwards, we have spent huge money on households through energy grants, the universal

payments we made through the early part of the 2020s, fuel allowance increases and the whole range of payments we made. This idea that we have not looked after vulnerable households is a falsehood and should not be asserted. We have through substantial tax revenues and-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: People in energy poverty probably-----

The Taoiseach: Deputy O'Connor raised the issue of the Midleton flood relief scheme. I understand that it is a very complex one and we have to get it right. There has been a fair degree of public consultation. There is a lot of anxiety in Midleton and its hinterland, in particular, in the context of any upcoming storm. We saw that in the last couple of weeks. Interim measures are being taken, and the Minister of State, Deputy Boxer Moran, has been down on a number of occasions. The sooner we can get that developed the better, and we will be supporting that financially. It simply has to happen. I have rearranged things within the Cabinet subcommittees as well in terms of emergencies and adaptation. I have asked every Department to work more proactively in terms of adaptation and that our Department would lead the co-ordination of that into the future, because as a country, we can do far better on adaptation. It does not have the same urgency across the system as it should have, and that is why, in answer to the previous questions, we outlined a number of initiatives we have taken in terms of greater generator capacity. We have also taken grip of coastal erosion, which is another big issue facing the country, and we need to do that properly and effectively.

Social Welfare Bill 2026: Second Stage

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

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

The total Department of Social Protection budget for 2027 is €30.9 billion, which is an increase of 7% on budget 2026, including over €1.15 billion in new and updated measures. Its level of funding will support approximately 1.6 million recipients of weekly social protection payments as well as recipients of other schemes, such as school meals and child benefit.

The budget measures will enhance the adequacy of the overall social protection system, while also providing targeted support for pensioners, people with disabilities, carers, families at risk of child poverty and households at risk of energy poverty. Overall, the additional investment will continue to reinforce the strong social safety net that is provided by our welfare system.

Budget 2027 will provide for a weekly €10 increase in the core weekly rates of payment, in line with inflation and with proportionate increases for those on a reduced payment rate and qualified adults. The State contributory pension will exceed €300 per week for the first time, increasing to €309.30 per week. In addition, the living alone allowance has been increased for the first time in five years and will now be paid at €25 per week. This will benefit almost 260,000 pensioners and disabled people living alone, bringing the total value of their payment to €1,300 per person per year.

The package includes further increases to the child support payment, benefiting some 330,000 children, with a weekly increase of €6 for children of all ages. The payment is now €64 for children under the age of 12 and €84 for children aged 12 and over. Since 2020, the child support payment has increased by over 77% for children under 12 and by 110% for children over 12, making a real difference to the lives of 330,000 children.

Further measures to tackle child poverty include a €30 increase in weekly income thresholds for the working family payment for all family sizes, worth up to €18 per week, which will assist low-income families, many of whom are lone-parent households. In addition, working lone parents will be assisted by an increase in the earnings disregard for those on receipt of the one-parent family payment or jobseeker's transitional payment. This will increase by €10 from €165 to €175 per week.

For employers, the Bill provides for an increase in the threshold at which the lower 9.15% rate of employer PRSI applies, from €552 to €600 per week. This will ensure that employers with employees working full-time on the national minimum wage will continue to pay the lower rate when the minimum wage increases to €14.94 per hour on 1 January 2027.

For employees with children, the Bill contains provisions to increase the rate of payment for maternity, paternity, adoptive and parents benefit by €10 per week to €309 per week. These payments are an important part of a broader suite of policies that seek to support the welfare of families and children.

The Social Welfare Bill also includes a range of amendments designed to support rural communities, including an increase in the income disregard for agri-environmental schemes in respect of farm assist and the State non-contributory pension from €5,000 to €7,500 per year. These schemes have an environmental focus and support the Government's climate change agenda. Increasing the disregard that applies to income from these schemes will assist farmers who participate in them while also providing an incentive for participation.

An increase in the disregard for income from seaweed harvesting, from €1,270 per year to €2,500 per year, is the first increase in the value of disregard since it was first introduced in 1994. The weekly payment to people living on a specified island will increase by €5. From January, the weekly rate payable will be €25. This payment is made to people living on certain offshore islands to help offset the additional costs associated with island residence, including transport, access to services and the higher cost of goods and essential services.

While Dáil Standing Orders provide that pre-legislative scrutiny is not required for a social welfare Bill that gives effect to budget measures, my officials have hosted a briefing for Opposition spokespersons to assist with any questions on the provisions in the Bill. I hope that was of assistance, and my office remains open for any further questions between now and the initiation of the Bill.

I bring to the attention of Deputies that I intend to introduce an amendment to the Bill on Committee Stage to establish the fish assist scheme on a statutory footing on the same basis as farm assist. I announced this measure on budget day. It has not been included in the published Bill because of technical considerations that arose during the drafting process. Drafting on this measure is continuing through the engagement of my officials with the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel.

In tandem with this work, my officials are also working with the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel to draft the budget 2027 provision to extend the payment period of a deceased person's State pension. The payment will be extended from six weeks to ten weeks, with an additional four weeks paid at 50% of the rate previously payable. I intend to introduce an amendment to the Bill on Committee Stage to provide for this measure too.

There are a range of measures announced by the Government on budget day which do not require primary legislation in this social welfare Bill. These will be provided through regulations, and I wish to touch on some of those measures now.

Budget 2027 delivers on a programme for Government commitment to introduce an annual cost-of-disability payment. The package includes the first ever permanent cost-of-disability payment. It will start with a lump sum payment of €500 in 2027 for people receiving a long-term disability payment. Respecting the feedback from a very detailed consultative process, we are also commencing a co-design process with disabled people and their representatives on how the payment should be structured and delivered in subsequent years. This work has commenced and will intensify in the new year.

The budget provides further improvements in measures designed to support disabled people to access employment. Building on last year's improvements to the wage subsidy scheme, this year's budget includes a reduction in the hours worked threshold required to access the wage subsidy scheme, from 15 hours per week to eight hours per week. There will be an increase of €15,000 in the grant paid to fund employment by employers of an employment assistance officer. Eligibility for the scheme is also being extended to those moving to partial capacity benefit from illness benefit.

Further measures aimed at encouraging disabled people to take up employment include improvements to the work and access scheme, with an increase to the allocation of hours under ongoing communication support or lrish Sign Language support from 24 to 48 hours per year, and an increase in the number of induction support hours from 12 to 18 hours. These build on a €10 increase in the earnings disregard for disability allowance and blind pension recipients from €165 to €175 per week.

This year's budget continues to progress the ambitious goal set out in the programme for Government to abolish the means test for carers over the life of this Government. To this end, further increases in the carer's allowance weekly income disregard have been secured, with an increase of €150 to €1,150 for a single person and an increase of €300 to €2,300 for a couple. Additionally, budget 2027 provides for increases in the earnings limit for the corresponding social insurance-based carer's benefit payment from €1,000 to €1,150 to maintain the current alignment between the schemes. This means that within the Government's first two budgets, we have already increased the carer's allowance disregard for singles and couples by 84%. As a result, a couple on over €126,000 will now be able to get a full payment without being in any way affected by the means test. In fact, they will be able to earn over €155,000 and still receive a partial payment.

The budget also provides supports to help households with the cost of energy bills. The fuel allowance will increase by €5 to €43 per week from January 2027 for some 460,000 fuel allowance recipients. In addition, there will be an improvement in the fuel allowance means test for single pensioners. From January 2027, the income limit for a single person aged 66 or

over was half that of a couple; this will increase to 60%. As a consequence of this measure, the allowable means of a single person aged 66 or over will increase from €534 to €640.80, thereby allowing more older people to qualify for the fuel allowance.

Programmes such as the community employment scheme, Tús and the rural social scheme are hugely important to individuals and communities. Not only do these schemes give people a direction forward and a sense of purpose, they assist and sustain communities. Without these schemes, vital supports such as meals on wheels, Tidy Towns, enhancement schemes and many others would not exist. In budget 2027, I have been able to secure an increase to the additional payment or top-up offered to people on welfare who participate in a rural social scheme, community employment or Tús scheme to €35 for 19.5 hours per week. This measure will provide a greater incentive to participate in employment schemes and will benefit some 27,500 participants. In addition, we have secured a reduction of the requalification period on Tús from three years to two years. This will enable those who have been unsuccessful in gaining employment to re-engage with Tús after two years. In turn, this will support a participant's pathway back to employment while also helping to sustain the delivery of essential services.

The Department provides a range of income supports to jobseekers. These payments are conditional on the recipient being available for, capable of and genuinely seeking work. This reflects the concept of rights and responsibilities, whereby those who are unemployed have the right to an income support from the State and a right to be supported in their efforts to secure employment, while also having a responsibility to seek employment and to engage with the employment services offered by the State. The Bill provides for a €10 increase in the reduction in payment rates for jobseekers not engaging with the mandatory activation process from €90 per week to €100 per week in the personal rate of payment.

I highlight the Department is currently finalising the successor pathways to work strategy, which is due for publication in the coming weeks. Pathways to Work 2026-2030 will strengthen efforts to support those who are long-term unemployed and face barriers to enter the labour market. Ongoing engagement across Government has informed the commitments set out in the strategy and will help ensure a co-ordinated response to the diverse challenges faced by jobseekers. This joined-up approach is central to supporting labour market participation and enabling more people to secure and sustain employment.

Between July and October last year, an extensive public consultation process was undertaken. Approximately 430 submissions were received, with an almost 50:50 ratio on submissions from individuals and organisations. The time taken to provide for a comprehensive consultation and engagement process will ensure that the successor pathways to work strategy is evidence-based and responsive to the needs of jobseekers, employers and the wider economy. A reduced rate is the final step in the process to encourage a jobseeker to avail of the employment supports on offer. Once a jobseeker resumes engagement, the reduced rate is lifted immediately. Whether a reduced rate applies and the duration of its application is within the control of the claimant and based on their engagement with activation services.

This week, the number of people who have been on the live register for a year or more is at its lowest level in two years at approximately 52,300, of which approximately 46,400 will receive a payment. It is important to note the live register is not a stock; it is a flow. People are moving in and out of employment every week or progressing to training, education and employment placements. Some 58,800 people either entered or exited the long-term live

register over the past 12 months. I do not believe that being on the dole is a way of life and I do not believe that it is one of the biggest issues facing us. It is my Department's role to support people to break out of unemployment and to provide the supports needed for each individual person in their journey because each individual has a different journey which will require different supports.

Before I provide an outline of the Bill, I would also like to confirm that the Christmas bonus will be paid in the week commencing 1 December, on the same basis as last year, to some 1.4 million recipients of long-term social welfare payments.

I will now give an overview of the Social Welfare Bill section by section. Section 1 is the Short Title and construction, section 2 provides for definitions of the relevant Acts and section 3 provides for the increase in the threshold at which the rate of the employer social insurance contribution of 9.15% applies in respect of employee gross wages from €552 per week to €600 per week. This measure will cost approximately €67.1 million in a full year and impact some 127,000 employments. This will save employers some €682 annually on employer PRSI for each of their employees working full time on the minimum wage.

Sections 4, 5, 6 and 7 provide for a €10 weekly increase in the rates of maternity benefit, adoptive benefit, paternity benefit and parent's benefit respectively, from €299 to €309, in January 2027.

Section 8 gives effect to the increases in the graduated rates of jobseeker's benefit and jobseeker's benefit for the self-employed. Where average weekly earnings in the governing contribution year are €300 per week or more, the full personal rate is payable.

Where average weekly earnings are less than €300, the rate payable is determined by reference to a graduated earnings band. This section provides for *pro rata* increases in the graduated rates.

Section 9 provides for a €10 increase, from €90 per week to €100 per week, in the reduction in the personal rate of payment for jobseekers who do not engage with the mandatory activation process.

Section 10 provides for a €30 increase in the weekly income thresholds of the working family payment for all family sizes.

Section 11 and Schedule 1 provide for the increase of €10 in the rates of social insurance benefits for the primary recipient. Also included are the proportionate increases for qualified adults and qualified children, and improvements in the living alone increase and the increase for living on a specified island.

Section 12 provides for improvements to the means test for certain schemes. They include an increase in the amount of income from agri-environmental schemes that is disregarded in the means assessments for both farm assist and the non-contributory State pension. Section 12 also includes an increase in the amount of income from seaweed harvesting that is disregarded in the means assessment for jobseeker's allowance and farm assist. It also includes a €10 increase, from €165 to €175 per week, in the employment earnings disregard for the one-parent family payment. This comes into effect from July 2027.

Section 13 and Schedule 2 provide for the rate increases in means-tested social assistance payments.

I have the honour of being a Minister in the Department of Social Protection, with more than 7,000 colleagues across the country who every day assist people facing challenges and assist people in their daily and weekly living. I thank each and every one of them for their commitment to the people they serve and to the country. It is an honour to serve as a Minister in a Department that is responsive and available to people in times of challenge, and that also provides pathways of opportunity to those seeking them. Molaim an Bille don Teach.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I join the Minister in commending the people who work in his Department and the work they do. We all deal with people in our constituency offices who have to engage with the Department of Social Protection and it is good that there are people there working hard. However, their job is to implement Government policy and that is where my kind words will end.

We have all seen the budget and had a good look at it, and commentators and experts with far more to say on this issue than I have given their verdict. The Parliamentary Budget Office, PBO, has said that virtually everyone, particularly workers, will be worse off under the Minister's budget. Months ago, the ESRI warned that the Minister is very far from reaching his 3% child poverty target. There are other experts in this field. They have also advised the Minister on ways he might meet the target. They have suggested a second tier of child benefit, for example, and a host of other ways to structure cash transfers to reduce child poverty in a real and meaningful way for good. They also advised him on the long-term costs of allowing so many hundreds of thousands of children to continue to grow up in poverty, including the psychological damage, the public health impact and the financial costs this will incur in the long term. There is a wealth of evidence. The Minister knows what needs to be done. He knows the impact of not doing it, yet we see children forgotten by this budget and this Bill.

It is clear that the budget went against the advice given to the Government. The ESRI has said that budget 2027, and these are not my words, will not reduce the number of children in poverty. If we can stand in this House and all agree, as we do, that one child living in poverty is too many, and certainly that the number of children growing up in poverty in this State is too many, surely the Minister would heed the ESRI when it tells him that his budget and this Bill will not reduce the number of children in poverty. If that is his ambition, he should change tack. If what he is doing is not working, I encourage him to try something else.

We know this is not a mistake. This is not something that is broken. It is designed. This is how the budget and the Bill are designed. At the Cabinet table, the Minister would have negotiated what is in this Bill. He is the one who accepted from the Minister for Finance and the Minister for public expenditure increases in the core rates of welfare payments that will not keep pace with inflation. He is the one Minister who put his hand up to an effective cut in the fuel allowance, because there will be €12 less for people on the fuel allowance in 2027 than there was in 2026. I understand the Government has tried to do the same with university fees but the Minister will not convince me that getting €12 less in 2027 somehow means the fuel allowance has been increased because it has not. For people who depend on this money, writing in the Minister's speech that they will be getting more when they do not physically have more money will not help them to pay their bills or heat their homes. The choices that were made

were not made because of a lack of money, manpower or advice. They were made simply to allow the Government to line the pockets of vulture funds, large landlords and data centre owners. Minister after Minister appears not to want to own this choice, but you can see it.

I ask myself what the point was of setting up the child poverty unit, holding the consultation on expanding child benefit and hosting the child poverty summit. It seems pointless going through all these gestures if none of it is reflected in the pounds, shillings and pence that will be transferred to children in poverty. They are not in this legislation. Sinn Féin had proposed real measures to tackle child poverty, including a targeted second tier of child benefit, which would make a real and meaningful difference in the lives of children who need it. Some 17.4% of children are living below the poverty line. When housing is added in, a debate which we have had many times since housing cannot but be added in, that figure goes up to 22.7%, which tells me that we are going in the wrong direction and that the Government is bringing us in the wrong direction. We know what the ESRI has said but the Minister chose to ignore it. I cannot imagine that there is a person sitting at the Cabinet table who is happy and content with any level of child poverty yet we see writ large in the Minister's budget very little to help children in poverty and very little that will make a real, meaningful and lasting difference.

I try to imagine who the Minister is thinking about when he is framing the budget. On the budget as a whole, we know who the big winners were. They were vulture funds. Those lads win every time. The joke people have is, "Perhaps I will change my name to Mrs. Data Centre and then I might get some attention from the Government." Those are very real. People who are in crisis and in poverty are the ones who depend on social welfare. They are the ones who need somebody in their corner because they live on a fixed income. Often that is because they are caring for a loved one or cannot access full employment. There are many reasons.

I was surprised and happy to hear the Minister's words distancing himself from the remarks made by the Tánaiste about social welfare being a lifestyle choice. It is not unusual to hear the leader of the Fine Gael party or indeed members of the Government punch down. I thought it was particularly pathetic at the weekend to hear the Tánaiste target a group. There are many reasons for long-term unemployment and the Minister knows them too. They are complicated. They should not be reduced to a single pathetic soundbite just to get a cheer, a guffaw and a bit of whooping and hollering from the base. What do they call it? Is it red meat for the base? It is a vile phrase and it was a vile sentiment that was expressed at the Fine Gael conference. It had the effect of distracting from the other 26 minutes and 20 seconds, or whatever it was, of the address the leader of Fine Gael gave to his party. Punching down is disgusting. Working with people who are long-term unemployed is important but it is not lost on me and others that the job clubs are gone. Nobody funded them and they closed. They were a vital service that ensured that people who were long-term unemployed could find a way back to employment, but they are gone.

There is profound disappointment with disability because the Minister promised much in the run-in to this budget on a cost-of-disability payment. It might interest him to know that persons who are disabled do not stop being disabled when they start working yet they are not eligible for any of these payments.

5 o'clock

It could be argued that those who are working face a new set of unavoidable costs, yet we do not see those people accounted for in this Bill.

Equally, the Government heard from disability advocates at the summit it held that they want co-design. This was not co-designed. It amounts to €10 per week, but it was not co-designed. They want a co-designed payment that takes care of them. They need that payment now, rather than this idea of live horse and you will get grass and that if they hang on and wait, they will get it. I am sure the Government is not so cynical as to wait until just before an election to do this, although we have seen that before. I sincerely hope we do not see it again. People with disabilities deserve more respect from the Government. Disability organisations and individual people who are experienced in this have made themselves available to work with the Government on co-design. They have offered their services and insight. They are living every day with the reality of the spiralling cost of disability. The Government took the energy supports from them, and now we see that many of them are going to be excluded from the once-off payment.

Of course, all of this money will be gratefully received. I am not suggesting otherwise. However, they were clear about the need for a payment that recognises the ongoing daily and weekly cost associated with disability. A once-off payment is not going to cut it. In our alternative budget, we in Sinn Féin proposed a proper, tiered payment. We carried out extensive consultation with persons with disabilities and their organisations. A lot could have been done in this regard. If only people with disabilities were vulture funds or data centres, perhaps they might have featured a little more predominantly in the budget. They deserve better. They deserve more than platitudes and vague promises. They deserve to be listened to and supported because, ultimately, that is the job of social welfare and social protection. It is a threshold of decency, and that threshold must be upheld. I am afraid, with the budget and with this legislation, the Government has fallen far short of doing that.

I look forward to engaging with the Minister and his officials on the Bill. We will be tabling amendments. I look forward to that debate.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: First, I echo the comments of both the Minister and my colleague Deputy O'Reilly with regard to the staff in the Department of Social Protection. They offer a lot of support to our offices and to every other office up and down the country. To be honest, my experience of them is that they are always looking to help. They are looking to try to see how they can make the system work for people. Ultimately, however, as my colleague said, the design of the system is up to the Minister.

I will raise an issue about which I have been talking for a number of years. In the first instance, however, I wish to draw back a second and refer to the Tánaiste's comments at the weekend. I welcome the Minister's qualified clarification or whatever in this regard. It is not controversial to say that if someone is capable and in a position to work, he or she should go and work. However, we all know the number of people who are long-term unemployed in this State is vanishingly small. Even within that cohort, the vast majority of those people want to work. It was the actions of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments that led to the closure of job clubs and other similar supports.

I want to talk to about a category of people who are working and often forgotten about. In the Minister's speech, he mentioned the threshold for the earnings disregard for the one-parent

family payment or the jobseeker's transitional payment. One of the cruellest and, as far as I am aware, sharpest cliff edges in our system is for working, single-parent households. This is often forgotten. To be honest, one of the most appalling and cynical acts of the recession was former Tánaiste Joan Burton's attack on one-parent families. That was absolutely appalling. This issue has still not been resolved. The threshold for one-parent families has increased, and that is, of course, welcome. However, if a mother of one who is a single parent works in a shop, she will be removed from the one-parent family payment and moved to the jobseeker's transitional payment when the child turns eight. She will lose the working family payment. I will repeat that. If she is working some 22 or 23 hours on minimum wage, she could be down as much €140 or €150 per week. That is per week, not per month. This is one of the most dramatic cliff edges in our social welfare system and it affects a category of people who are working, precisely what the Minister and the Tánaiste say they want. It is appalling and needs to be addressed. I welcome increases in the child support payments and so on but, ultimately, we still have not rectified the profound wrong that was done to one-parent families during the course of the recession.

During the most recent general election campaign, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael jumped on the need to abolish the carer's means test almost at the last minute. I do not know whether the Government is going to achieve that at the current rate. It is in everyone's interest to do so. It is only right. First and foremost, those people who are caring are not doing it for money; they are doing it out of love and a sense of responsibility and to care for their loved ones. If we want to sustain and support those people and ensure that family support for people at home is an integral part of the system we have, then we need to reward, incentivise and support them. The carer's means test has to be abolished. We need to get there. At the current rate, the Government is not going to achieve that.

On the issue of disabilities, it seems that successive Governments, particularly since former Minister Heather Humphreys' ill-fated White Paper or Green Paper, whichever colour it was, have walked away from this issue. I appreciate it is complicated, but we have to get it right. The cost of disability varies for an awful lot of people.

I will make a final point about social welfare generally. I echo what Deputy O'Reilly said regarding the need to invest in child benefit. Sometimes, the parties on the opposite side of the House are constantly trying to look at qualified and means-tested payments and so on and claiming a certain cohort of people do not need assistance. If they believe people on higher incomes do not need that assistance, then ensure that they pay their fair taxes. If we do not have a social welfare system that assists everyone but, rather, is only for the poor, then we will have a poorer social welfare system. Everyone should be able to pay in and everyone should be able to draw out at their time of need. That is a principle that is too often forgotten about.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: I welcome the opportunity to speak on social welfare and the current realities facing so many people across the State. The Minister's track record of achievement since the formation of the Government is appalling. There has been a 15% rise in the number of older people living in poverty. That amounts to more than 120,000 people. This is not just a number; it is 120,000 people who contributed to Irish society and put their trust in the State to be there for them when they got to their older age. Is this the legacy the Minister wants as the Minister for Social Protection? It is often noted that the success of a

nation is measured by how we treat older people, the vulnerable and the sick. On all three fronts, the Government is failing.

The €10 increase to the old age pension has simply been wiped out by rising household bills, especially for home heating oil, which many of our pensioners are heavily reliant on. Living alone as a pensioner is not a choice; it is the reality of having lost a partner. Household bills do not simply half when a person loses a husband or wife; they remain the same. The increase of €3 to the living allowance is an insult. It ensures widowed and bereaved pensioners are most at risk of poverty.

For nearly 20 years before I was elected, I worked with Corlann, formerly the Brothers of Charity Services Ireland, in Ferrybank, providing care for adults living with disabilities. These are amazing people who live their lives at risk and are heavily reliant on having family in a position to support them throughout their lives. The CSO data for people with disabilities living in poverty is shocking. It is even bleaker than the figures for pensioners. Nearly 40% are living in poverty, and even with so many in poverty the Government still decided in budget 2026 to take €1,400 away from them. These are some of Ireland's most vulnerable, at-risk people and they are the ones the Government picked on, while giving tax breaks and sweetheart deals to the big multinationals.

The measures announced in the budget are simply not sufficient. There are so many challenges and struggles facing Ireland.

The Minister's colleague in government, Simon Harris, in his keynote address at the weekend, took aim at long-term unemployment, a group of approximately 11,000 people nationally. There are more people homeless in Ireland than in long-term unemployment, as well as more people classed as working poor. Under this Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael Government, these numbers have increased on all fronts. While the Government claims success in many areas, it leaves scores of groups behind. As the saying goes, a rising tide lifts all boats. However, that is no good if one is not in the boat and is struggling away while barely having a life jacket on. The reality is that people want to work and contribute. They do not want to live with that level of alienation. The State should work with people to create the material conditions required to prevent this alienation and ensure that every person has the opportunity to contribute positively in a manner big or small to Irish society. While the Government might like the look and talk of the stick over the carrot approach, it is wrong and reactionary.

The Minister is looking to put in place harsher penalties for the long-term unemployed but what is he doing to tackle those engaged in antisocial behaviour and intimidation who are terrorising communities the Government has clearly forgotten about? This is not a Dublin issue; it is across the State. At the weekend, there were shots fired in a housing estate in County Kilkenny, all connected to a feud in the estate. These people are engaging in criminal activity. Some have been convicted of intimidation but continue to live in social housing. Where is the accountability there? Why is the Department not ensuring that those who breach their social housing contracts are not held to account before communities are left in ruins?

Deputy Eoin Hayes: There is a lot of attention on what happens in this Chamber on budget day. It has been a little over a month since the Minister for Finance and the Minister for public expenditure stood here and delivered their speeches, telling Members of this House and the country what they would do with the public finances - how they would sustain the economy,

fund vital public services, and support workers and vulnerable groups like carers, disabled people, pensioners, and children living in poverty. There may not be as much attention in the Chamber this afternoon but it is no less important. Indeed, what the Minister is asking us to do with this Bill is to give effect to the announcements made on that day, and to the implications of those announcements, which have become apparent in the interim.

As I said in my response the day the budget was announced, while there are many things to be welcomed in this Bill, what the measures in it represent is a further degradation of the social contract in this country and a failure to envision a more just and equitable future for its citizens. While the measures in this Bill ostensibly contain increases to various schemes in the social protection system, few of them recover the support people received prior to recent cuts. Many of them fail to match inflation, and all represent a slippage in the floor through which we will not allow people to fall. For some, the economy is doing very well. However, for too many, austerity still persists. The Minister will say that individual payments have increased year on year but they do not keep up with inflation.

When we analyse the social protection system as a whole, and what it is doing to support people, how it interacts with our economy is too often exclusionary, particularly for women and disabled people. Too often, it is becoming less effective, not more. When we look at the child poverty figures, there are 260,000 children living below the poverty line when we take housing into account, according to the ESRI. Let us look at the disability employment gap. With only 32.6% of disabled people in employment, we are one of the worst performers against the European average of 51.3%. When we look at the lived experience of carers across the country, so many are struggling to keep their homes warm as they save the State billions of euro.

This country is a wealthy one but the great failure of this Government and previous Governments is not to leverage that wealth into a more robust system of social protection and redistribution to lift people out of poverty. Increasingly, this State is failing to support those most in need.

Beyond the most wealthy households in this country, it is true to say that everyone is struggling in some way with the cost-of-living crisis. It is consistently the most vulnerable groups who face the steepest costs, and who bear the punishment of a social protection system that is failing to keep up with inflation. Inequality is becoming increasingly entrenched in this country, and a social protection system without adequate supports is a key point of failure in the fight to tackle it.

Let me now look at some of the specific measures in this Bill. There is a provision to increase the disability allowance by €10 per week. For starters, that will not keep up with the cost of inflation, particularly with the cost of disability. While I welcome that disabled people, after decades of campaigning, will finally have access to a cost-of-disability payment, it is essential that we remember this comes after disabled people had their incomes cut by €1,400 last year. The €500 payment proposed barely covers the loss of income the Government imposed on disabled people in 2026. It simply represents a rehash of the one-off payment it removed from them last year.

We in the Social Democrats had a bolder plan to really improve the lot of disabled people by offering a substantial support with an introductory rate for the cost-of-disability payment at

€40 per week. That would have amounted to four times the level of support offered by the Government's measly one-off payment, and it would have come with an additional €15 per week for those on disability allowance, meaning a real increase in incomes beyond the level of inflation.

I also note that the cost-of-disability payment is not in this Bill, as the Minister said. Can the Minister then assure us that the payment will be established on a statutory basis, or at least on a permanent basis, so that disabled people need not fear another rug pull from this Government like they experienced last year? Comparing the provisions for disabled people included in our alternative budget with what the Minister is trying to do in this Bill would leave no one in any doubt as to who is willing to put their money where their mouth is and support disabled people in this country, who for too long have had their needs dismissed and their advocacy ignored.

For older people, the measures in this Bill have been bitterly disappointing. Since budget day, we have heard from so many people who were shocked, many of them truly offended, actually, by the €3 increase to the living-alone allowance. What is €3 a week going to do for someone facing skyrocketing energy prices as we head into another winter? A stunning 30% of older people living alone are in poverty, according to the CSO. There are too many stories from those who struggled to remain warm last winter, of turning off heaters, skipping meals, and doing whatever they could not to shiver in their beds. Some €3 a week is not going to cut it for those people, particularly when the fuel allowance next year will be cut by four weeks after the temporary extension this year, meaning a net cut for recipients year on year.

There is one very notable absence from this Bill which is the clause which abolishes the means-test for carers. I would really like to know when the Government plans to do that. It has now gone three full calendar years since the general election without meeting a commitment it campaigned on. This was a key measure in the programme for Government and not only has it not abolished it but it is not even making progress on it this year. The increase to the income limits and the means test for the carer's allowance in this Bill barely keep up with inflation, never mind working towards reducing it to zero. The Minister is running out of time to make progress on this key promise he made to the people who are saving his Government billions of euro through the work they carry out as carers, and it is not just on the carers' allowance. As I have raised with the Minister many times, the issue of income disregards and eligibility thresholds is problematic across a number of payments in social protection. Across the board, they have not kept up with inflation, or with the increases to the minimum wage. Meaning, people are being pushed out of eligibility, particularly for vital child support interventions like the one-parent family payment.

I also want to raise the specific issue of kinship care. Our alternative budget set aside a substantial amount of money to raise the guardians' payment by €70 per week as a first step to align the payment with the level of support granted to foster carers. The work that kinship carers do in taking on care responsibilities for family members in what are very difficult circumstances, often dealing with the challenge of raising grandchildren on their own, is heroic work.

The current scheme does not recognise that work or provide them with the support they deserve. Kinship carers deserve to be supported and celebrated rather than left behind by a

system which is unfair. I call on the Minister to include kinship carers in the budget negotiations next year so we can pass a 2028 version of this Bill that actually does that.

The Bill contains a clause to increase penalties related to jobseeker's payments. I am sure the Minister will agree with me, even if the Minister for Finance does not, that the social protection system is one of the shining lights of the Irish State. It supports us in our moments of most acute need. When it works, it acts to fight injustice and alleviate hardship. As workers, we contribute to it not only in the hope that support will be there if we ever need it but also so we may live in a more kind and just society. I was glad to see the Minister's comments on the 27,000 longer term unemployed in activation in Tús, CE and RSS. The comments in the past week from the Tánaiste and leader of Fine Gael on how this system of social protection is something to be devalued and those supported by it are fair game for denigration and scapegoating were deeply disappointing. I hope the Minister will condemn those comments because they were beneath contempt. Indeed, they were beneath the dignity of anyone who hopes to hold the office of Taoiseach. I would hope anyone who hopes to lead our country would be wise enough to respect all its citizens rather than make them a subject of disdain. I welcome the Minister's comments today that he does not share that disdain.

Deputy Jen Cummins: It is welcome that there will be increases in welfare payments, but with the cost of living I am concerned the €10 here and there will just be eaten up. I will give a few examples. I am contacted regularly, as I am sure most TDs are, by phone, by email or in clinics by people who are really struggling.

I will outline some increases in the cost of living. The increase in the price of groceries is 23.6% since 2020. If you want to go to the dentist, if you get certain payments and are on a medical card, you are entitled to some free services, but people on maternity leave, for example, may not be entitled to that. The check-up is between €60 and €80 and fillings are €100 to €150. Root canal is horrific and so is the cost: €500 to €800. If anyone wanting to go to the doctor does not have a medical card, it is about €60 to €80 for an appointment. At the moment, doctors are under massive pressure. Even getting an appointment with one involves at least two weeks' wait.

We will look at rent. In my constituency, Dublin South-Central, there are apartments and houses at €2,000, €2,500 and €3,000. These are phenomenal amounts of money. Mortgages are set to increase due to the increases in rates from the ECB.

All these things lead to huge increases in costs and it is putting people under pressure. I am education spokesperson. I think everybody knows that as I say it every time. I am delighted to be education spokesperson but the costs of education are phenomenal. Last year the Department was saying it would support 233,000 children through the back-to-school clothing and footwear allowance. That is a huge number of young people and families who need that support. They should not need it. Things should not be so dire for 233,000 children that they are dependent on a payment of €160 or €285 to help them with uniforms, bags, clothes or shoes. It is a perverse and odd way to look at the things that we are celebrating supporting these families. The reality is we should not be celebrating it; we should be ashamed of ourselves that that number of families need that support.

The average cost of primary school for a child is €1,794 per year. That is a primary school lifetime cost of about €14,000. For secondary school, the lifetime cost is about €17,500. That

is when you do not pay school fees. We say education in this country is free but actually it costs families €14,000 for primary school and €17,500 for secondary school. That is not free. We have hot school meals and will debate them soon. I am happy with that and with the supports we give families. There are certain programmes that need to be universal in our schools so no one is stigmatised. That is a shining beacon of how things work. That works really well and I do not want to denigrate that. I am very proud to have that in this country.

For a single person or family, the costs of running a car are huge, up to about €3,000 per year. On the other side of that, there is an increase in transport fares. Our Private Members' motion about that is tomorrow. With increased fares for buses, trains and Luas, will people go back into their cars? If they do that, it is very expensive. People are snookered with things like this.

Increases in these payments are welcome but they will be eaten up quickly. The effect of child poverty when we have 200,000 children living below the poverty line in this country is shocking. I cannot explain it. I try to explain it sometimes to people who have never met the families I have worked with for 30 years. When I explain the level of need and poverty, they look at me as if I am mental and it is not true in such a rich country. It is true. The level of need is phenomenal. Putting all that together and considering the cost of living in this country, it is no wonder small and medium-sized businesses in this city centre are saying they will have to close down because people cannot come in and spend their hard-earned money on the nice things in life. People's social lives are being affected by the expense of getting from day to day. People are surviving; they are not living. We need to address this. I am shockingly worried as we come into winter about the effects heating and electricity bills will have on people.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: A constituent of mine in Wicklow is a young mother, 32 years of age. She has two young children and she was diagnosed with cancer earlier this year. I spoke to her partner last week and they are appealing for help. They are struggling to keep on top of things at the moment. She has had surgery, chemotherapy and radiotherapy and is unable to work. She applied for illness benefit and her application was initially refused because she had 254 PRSI contributions, six short of the required 260. They were advised her previous employment abroad could be used to satisfy the shortfall and she has provided all the documentation for that but they have now been waiting 22 weeks for a decision. They were originally told the process would take ten weeks. The Department has repeatedly advised it is awaiting information from the revenue office in the UK, despite that documentation already being provided by the applicant. This family is relying solely on one salary, a secondary school teacher. They are not eligible for additional supports and are €16 per week over the threshold for the working family payment. They also miss out on all the related supports, such as fuel allowance and assistance for SEAI home energy upgrades. All the while, they face mounting costs from her cancer treatment, including travel, parking, scans and over-the-counter medication.

I think the Minister is aware of the case but I will get in touch and see if we can move this along. The reason I have gone into so much detail is I wanted to use this as an illustration of how inhumane the system can be - to be only €16 per week above the threshold and therefore not be eligible for anything, and to have to wait for 22 weeks for financial supports while

having to deal with cancer, surgery, chemotherapy and radiation and having two babies at home.

There is the worry of the finances and having to push and pull and ask everyone for help to try to get the application seen to. Twenty-two weeks is a long time to go without any support. Our social system needs to be flexible and a level of humanity needs to be built into it. The officers and staff do what they can but sometimes it is simply computer says "No". In circumstances like this, which are extraordinary, but also extraordinarily traumatic, families should get the support they need, when they need it and not be left struggling for it, talking to everyone they can and hoping the local TD or councillor can help. I ask the Minister to look into that.

I also recognise the Minister's contribution earlier and thank him for what he said about the long-term unemployed. It was an important clarification he made. The discourse over the weekend was awful. It is difficult to see the people in those circumstances who cannot see any way out being used as a punching bag. Each of us here has a considerable platform. Our voices and what we say carry considerable weight. The more senior people are in their positions, as we go through the Government and up to the position of Tánaiste or Taoiseach, the greater the weight they carry. Their influence is much greater. We look across the world to countries we would have looked to for inspiration and their societies are crumbling; I hope they are making their way back now. As the world crumbles, it is important we use our time here and our platforms for good, for cohesion, inclusion and kindness, and to present a vision for the country that is positive. We are not perfect. There are a lot of problems, but let us hear the solutions and not use a tiny cohort of people to deflect and essentially point the finger at saying they are the problem. They are not the problem, so I thank the Minister for his contribution.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate on the Social Welfare Bill 2026, which gives legislative effect to a number of important measures announced in budget 2027. Our social welfare system is an essential safety net supporting people at different stages of their lives, whether they are pensioners, families raising children, people out of work, those living with disabilities or parents taking time away from employment. The measures in the Bill represent a further investment in that safety net and I am pleased to support them.

I highlight one measure of particular importance to rural Ireland and the agricultural community in Cork North-West. The increase in the income disregard for the agri-environment schemes from €5,000 to €7,500 for the farm assist scheme and the non-contributory State pension means test is welcome. Farmers who participate in these schemes make an important contribution to biodiversity, climate action and environmental protection. They should not be unfairly disadvantaged when their social welfare entitlements are assessed.

I will address another important issue, namely supporting people back to employment, particularly those unemployed for a prolonged period. Everyone who can work should do so and should have the opportunity to develop their skills and contribute to their communities. Despite a period of continuous full employment, the latest Central Statistics Office, CSO, figures for October show that more than 52,000 people have been on the live register for a year or longer. That is a significant number and one we cannot ignore. We must ensure that people who have been unemployed for a year, two years or longer are not simply left on the live

register without meaningful engagement or assistance. That is why I particularly welcome the Government's intervention, publishing a new pathways to work strategy in the coming weeks, focusing on more intensive engagement with those furthest removed from the labour market.

The Department of Social Protection provides a range of supports, including back to work schemes, education and training opportunities, work placement programmes and apprenticeships. Through Intreo offices, employment advisers can also provide tailored one-to-one assistance by examining individuals' qualifications and experience and developing a personal progression plan to help them to return to employment. This is an important responsibility attaching to receiving the jobseeker's payment. The fundamental condition of these payments is that people must be available for and actively seeking employment. Where people engage with employment service and make a genuine effort to find work, they should receive every support available to them. However, when people refuse to engage with employment services, there must be consequences. That is why I support the provision in this Bill to increase the penalty to €100 for those who refuse to engage with employment services.

As Cathaoirleach of the Oireachtas Committee on Social Protection, I am conscious of the many issues raised by individuals, families and representative organisations. We must continue to examine the adequacy of social welfare payments and supports available to carers, people with disabilities and older people. Overall, this Bill provides worthwhile and timely-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: -----improvements to our social protection system.

Deputy John Connolly: I welcome the publication of the Bill, the Minister's contribution towards its development, which is obvious, and what it contains to assist people in our society who require assistance.

I echo the sentiments of our colleagues to the left regarding the Minister's comments earlier today about those on jobseeker's benefit, the fluidity of those who are on jobseeker's benefit and the small number who are long-term unemployed, less than 2% of the workforce. It is important that we continue to support those families and make sure no one in our society is left behind. The Minister's efforts go some way towards that.

I also welcome the introduction of the first permanent cost-of-disability payment. This is a milestone in Irish social policy. Future generations will reflect and look back on this measure in the same way as we look back on other landmark social protection initiatives that fundamentally improved people's lives. It acknowledges the reality, long understood by the Minister and our party, that people and families with members who have a disability often carry additional costs. Fairness requires that these costs be recognised by the State and they be assisted with them.

Similarly, the changes the Minister has made to the income threshold to avail of the carer's allowance is welcome. It is a €150 increase for a single income applicant and €300 increase for a family with two incomes. This is welcome. I understand we are working towards trying to eliminate any income threshold to access carer's allowance, but this will help people and

enable more people to avail of the carer's allowance. Given the important work carers do on behalf of the State, that is important.

I share the sentiment of my colleague who spoke previously about the changes to the income thresholds for those who avail of agri-environment scheme payments, that is, the increase in the income disregard. That will have the impact of allowing farmers to participate in such schemes as ACRES, which will improve their income and contribute to environmental objectives while still retaining access to social protection payments, the farm assist scheme and the non-contributory pension. The measure removes a disincentive that existed for some lower income farmers to engage in schemes such as ACRES, and I welcome that.

The Minister and I spoke previously. We had many conversations about this. I welcome that he has increased the income disregard for seaweed harvesting for those applying to the farm assist scheme and jobseeker's payment from €1,270 to €2,500 per year. That will be effective from next year. People might look at that measure and say it is not substantial, but it is important for everyone in the House to remember that it is the first change to the scheme since 1994. That is significant. It is a measure-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy John Connolly: -----we will look at and build on in the future.

Deputy Michael Murphy: Next year, the State will allocate €31 billion to social protection. It is the largest single area of voted expenditure. At the heart of that allocation is the principle that we should reward work and enterprise but, equally, protect those who need our support. That is the principle of the social market economy, a strong economy alongside a strong social conscience. We should never lose sight of that balance. It is a huge commitment and reflects the importance we place on supporting our citizens.

I particularly acknowledge carers in south Tipperary and changes in budget 2027 for carers. I consistently meet extraordinary people who devote themselves to caring for their loved ones, many of whom have sacrificed careers, incomes and opportunities to provide that care.

Their contribution is immeasurable. It is important we continue to recognise that contribution not simply in words but through meaningful financial support.

The same, of course, applies to those with disabilities. A person's dignity must never be measured by their capacity to work. I welcome the changes in budget 2027, particularly the cost-of-disability payment. We have a responsibility to ensure that disability does not mean a lifetime of financial insecurity or exclusion.

It is equally important, though, that we recognise that social protection carries responsibilities. The latest figures show that 52,000 people have been on the live register for a year or more. At a time of strong employment, we must ask whether we are doing enough to help those who can work to get back into employment. That means education, training, apprenticeships and genuine opportunities. I welcome the forthcoming pathways to work strategy and its emphasis on individual engagement, but where a person who is capable of working is offered meaningful assistance but repeatedly refuses to engage, there have to be reasonable consequences. We need to be absolutely clear, though: we are not talking about

carers, people who are unable to work because of a disability or those facing genuine barriers to employment. They deserve our understanding and support.

The Tánaiste, as the Minister knows, recently spoke about opening up opportunity to all while also ensuring that social welfare remains available when life takes an unexpected turn. I agree with that principle. A society that supports those who cannot work, creates opportunities for those who can and never forgets the dignity of every individual is the balance we need to strive to achieve.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I welcome the debate on the Social Welfare Bill 2026. The Bill gives effect to the social welfare measures in the budget. I acknowledge the work of the Minister, Deputy Calleary, and his officials in securing a record social protection package of over €30 billion, up €2 billion on 2026, which will help the most vulnerable in our society as we deal with continued cost-of-living pressures.

At the centre of the Bill is the €10 permanent increase in core weekly rates from January. The State contributory pension will exceed €300 a week for the first time. The living alone allowance will go up to €25 a week, its first increase in five years. Taken together with the core increase and the higher fuel allowance, that is worth €816 a year to a pensioner living alone. I particularly welcome the changes to the fuel allowance. As the Minister knows, I have pressed for this on several occasions in this House. The rate will rise to €43 a week, and from January the income limit for a single person over 66 will rise by more than €100 a week. That will help older people in Dún Laoghaire and right across the country with a small occupational pension who were just over the line. Most importantly, the fuel allowance opens up access to the many SEAI retrofitting schemes, which is very helpful.

In my speech last year on the Finance Bill, I said that over the next four budgets we should move further away from strict means testing for full-time family carers. This budget takes another step in that direction, with the carer's allowance income disregard rising to €1,150 for a single person and €2,300 for a couple from July 2027.

I also welcome the first ever cost-of-disability payment. It is much welcomed.

I have one request of the Minister, though. The telephone support allowance helps older people living alone to pay for a phone or a personal alarm but only if they receive both the living alone allowance and the fuel allowance. The Minister's own figures show that almost 297,000 people over 70 on the household benefits package do not receive it. Extending it to them would cost about €36 million a year. Maybe that could be considered in 2027. I know the Minister does not want to discuss next year's budget already, but it is just a thought.

Deputy Martin Kenny: It is good to be here to discuss the budget and the issues with regard to social protection. I thank the Minister for the clarity he brought to the Government's position with regard to the long-term unemployed. That is important. While many people were aghast at the Tánaiste's comments, at the same time they pointed to something we need to deal with in our society. We have hundreds of thousands of people in this country who work every day, who get up, who are in low-income or medium-income employment and who struggle to pay their bills, struggle to find somewhere to live and to pay the rent or the mortgage and struggle for childcare and all those issues. They are the big issues facing our society, yet the Tánaiste

chose to point to a small number of people over there and try to divide people and blame a sector of society, and that is very wrong. At the same time, however, we need to examine that.

The truth is that in my office and, I am sure, in every constituency office around the country, we have hundreds of people who come to us seeking a disability payment. Perhaps they have a mental health issue or perhaps they have other capacity issues. They find they cannot get that payment because they get back a letter saying, "We think you will be better within a year." That is basically what they are told. The only option they then have is to go onto jobseeker's, and when they go onto jobseeker's, obviously, they have a difficulty in trying to source employment because the capacity is not there. We had job clubs and other services in the past, which were of assistance to them. They were shut down, and private companies like JobPath were put in place to provide the services for them.

I will give the Minister an example. There was a woman in her late 50s in my constituency. I will give her the name Kate. Most of her life she lived with her two bachelor brothers and her elderly father, who had a severe disability. She got carer's allowance for a long period of her life looking after her father. Her father passed away when she was in her late 50s and she ended up on jobseeker's. She got a letter from JobPath sending her to get a job in a local fast food chain which was nearly 30 miles away. The woman did not drive or have a way to go there. She did go for the interview and, obviously, they saw she did not have the capacity for that job. That is the kind of thing the Tánaiste was pointing to and blaming on that woman, as if she were the problem. That issue needs to be dealt with. We need to recognise that the system does not work for people who fall into that space between having a severe disability and having a moderate issue such that they do not have the capacity to find employment. That needs to be dealt with.

As another example - and always in examples in our constituencies we can find these issues that come to the fore - I had a young man who, with his girlfriend, went to Saudi Arabia to work for a number of years to save the money to buy a house. They came back with a good lump of money saved up. He went back to work and was not very long back in work when he got cancer. He went to the State to look for assistance. As he had saved that money to buy a house, he could not get any assistance, and at the same time he could not get a mortgage because he had cancer. He could not get anything from anyone and he and his family had worked all their lives. Now, the issue was eventually resolved but it is an example of the unfairness of the system and how it needs the capacity to expand and to be nimble enough to recognise that not everyone fits into square boxes. That is one of the big issues I have with the entire system. One of the reasons that people are so concerned about what the Government is doing and so disappointed so often is that this neoliberal economic model we have in Ireland and in most of Europe is there to protect and bail out the banks and the corporations all the time, yet when the people who really try hard and really feel they contribute to society need assistance, they are turned away. That is why they turn to other dark places.

The Government has a real responsibility to look after everyone in society and those who are on the margins, who find it difficult, who will be in long-term unemployment or who have other issues that need to be looked after. For the thousands and thousands of people who work hard, try very hard and at some point in their life find they need the system to help them and want a safety net, that safety net is not there. I know - and I have had this conversation with

the Minister in the past - that he is open to trying to find solutions to that, but those solutions need to be found if we are to have a society that will function adequately.

Deputy Mark Wall: I welcome the opportunity to discuss the Social Welfare Bill 2026. As other speakers have done, I will start by thanking all those who work in the Department of Social Protection. As I have said before on a number of occasions, they really contribute to us in our roles as Oireachtas Members, and I think and hope that that assistance can continue because it is a sincere help to us all in our day-to-day work.

I want to raise a number of points with the Minister tonight. Many he will not be surprised I am raising again because we have spoken about them previously in this House and at committee.

The first issue I want to raise with him is the half-rate carer's allowance and older people. I have continued to raise this issue of older people caring for an adult child getting their carer's allowance cut in half when they go onto the State pension. I remind the Government yet again that we have 600,000 family carers in Ireland who save the State over €20 billion a year in unpaid care work. That is nearly the equivalent to a second HSE. They are the invisible backbone of our health service and provide 24-7 care, often without a break. Due to the lack of long-term planning and building capacity in residential and independent living options for people with disabilities, family carers are having to pick up the shortfall.

This means that family carers aged in their 60s, 70s, 80s and even 90s are having to provide full-time care to an adult child with a disability. These family carers, upon reaching the pension age, get their carer's allowance cut in half. I know there is a programme for Government commitment to change this but there was no progress made in the recent budget on that change. The adult children of these carers should be supported to live independently. Family carers, who often go a lifetime without a break for their caring role, deserve to see their adult child live their own life.

Despite the Government finally committing to same, family carers have still not seen the means test removed. In the Labour Party's alternative budget, we prioritised this and we would have finally removed the unfair means testing of family carers. We would also increase the carer's support grant and increase the cap on the number of hours a carer can work, which is an issue I want to discuss further with the Minister. The 18.5 hours that carers are allowed work at the moment comes up time and again. It is a barrier to care and one the Government needs to look at.

I also want to talk to the Minister about older persons losing the fuel allowance and the SEAI grant. This is something I have raised with him before. First, however, I will speak about the living alone allowance. It was deeply disappointing that this was increased by only €3 per week. It has been a number of years since this payment was increased and €3 is nowhere near enough to support the households that need it most. Older people who are living alone already face higher rates of poverty, with at least 30% of them living in poverty. The €3 increase will not buy an older person a cup of coffee, let alone help them with the cost of living.

The €10 increase in the State pension is well below the €15 increase the Labour Party had proposed in our alternative budget. The latter is needed to help households, such as the older

people and carers I mentioned, with the current cost of living. As we all know, these are the people who have spent their lives building this Republic.

More and more, I have seen the impact of the housing emergency on older people, often in the form of the loss of social welfare payments after an adult child has moved back home. As rent prices continue to increase and young adults get priced out of the housing market, they are having to return to the family home. This results in older parents losing payments like the fuel allowance, a vital support, especially given the current cost-of-living crisis. It also means that these older people will miss out on the €9,000 SEAI grant for solar panels, a very welcome grant that was announced recently in the budget. This is a huge issue for them. I have raised this with the Minister previously and I continue to call on him to intervene in this matter. The housing emergency is not going away any time soon, so we must adapt our social protection system to protect those who need help the most.

I submitted a number of parliamentary questions to the Department in relation to the number of people losing out on this grant as a result of a son or daughter moving home. Unfortunately, the reply I got, which I have it in front of me, states that it is only calculated on a yearly basis. This is one of the biggest issues being raised in my office, namely, people having their fuel allowance cut because their son or daughter has moved home. I will give the Minister one example of a letter I got last night in a clinic in Kildare town. It states:

> Furthermore, based on the information you have provided, it has been decided by a deciding officer that you are no longer entitled to the fuel allowance as there is a qualified person resident in your household.

That qualified person was the recipient's 24-year-old daughter, who spends four days in college and three days working part time. She is the only other person living with in the home, apart from a 16-year-old child. That is why the particular person, who is on disability allowance, has had their fuel allowance cut. We have discussed before the need for all those on disabilities to have a fuel allowance given their medical condition, but this person's fuel allowance was cut because their 24-year-old daughter came back to live with them, even though the daughter is only working part time, three days per week.

These are the issues, and I can give the Minister example after example coming to my office. The problem is that these people are losing out. Whether we like it or not, they are losing out on the SEAI grants and, most importantly, they are losing the fuel allowance, which they need to heat their homes. It is very welcome that the fuel allowance went up to €43 per week, and it makes a difference for people. The Department was not able to give me the figures on this issue. We should look at it again. There are too many cases coming through my offices where people are losing out. I have given just one example from last night but, as I said, I can give the Minister more from the past couple of weeks.

I also raise the withdrawal of payments for households that have been recently bereaved. Of course, the loss of a loved one is not only felt emotionally but it places an untold financial loss on the grieving family. The fact is that the same bills have to be paid but with half the income. This can be particularly difficult for older people on the State pension, whereby the payment only continues to be paid six weeks after the loss of a loved one. The Minister mentioned a change in that regard, but this is an extremely short period of time for a grieving wife or husband to adjust to.

A number of my colleagues recently heard from and met, at the social protection committee, members of the Widowed and Bereaved Partners Ireland group, who spoke about the loss of some vital payments. One speaker told me they were unable to return to work for 18 months and the fuel allowance, again, was a great support to them, but when they returned to work, doing a few hours a week, they ended up €7.50 over the threshold for the fuel allowance. This is another example. That particular person was a nurse, and we all know how many nurses we need in this country. She has to cut her hours again to try to requalify for the fuel allowance. This example was raised at the social protection committee meeting by the Widowed and Bereaved Partners Ireland group. That is a massive loss for any person, considering the cost-of-living crisis in this country. We need to re-evaluate our social protection system to have a more compassionate policy response.

I am also aware of the little-known heat supplement, which I raised with the Minister in the House roughly five months ago. In reply, he told me that we had 231,000 people on disability income support payments and 170,000 people on caring support payments. Yet, only 692 people were in receipt of the heating supplement. This is a way of ensuring that those who need it most actually get a heating supplement. Again, I refer to those who are on a disability payment and I will come to that again shortly. These people, who are coming to my offices and the offices of other Members of this House, need help but are not getting it. There is already a grant available but it needs to be advertised and promoted and access to it needs to be made easier for those who need it most. A lot of people have difficulty accessing the heat supplement, as reflected in the fact that only 692 people are getting it. As I said, that figure is from a number of months ago.

In our alternative budget, the Labour Party put forward a package of measures to support vulnerable households. We would have increased the fuel allowance income threshold by €50 per week so more households would have qualified for the payment, while also increasing the payment by €7.50 per week and extending the payment season by another four weeks.

The Minister will not be surprised to hear me talk about the domiciliary care allowance, DCA, as this is not the first time I have raised issues relating to the allowance in the House. It is extremely disappointing for many families of children with additional needs that it is one of the few payments not to be increased in budget 2027. I ask the Minister to explain why this payment was not increased. It is €380 per month, or less than €100 per week. It was one of the few disability payments left out of the cost-of-disability payment.

I also raise the issue of eligibility. Information made available to me by the Department of Social Protection shows that from 2022 to 2025, nearly 16% of children on the DCA who applied for disability allowance were unsuccessful in their claims. This has left 1,300 children and families without this vital payment. I must stress that the DCA is a payment made in cases of severe disability. That is laid out clearly in the criteria, as the Minister will know. To leave nearly 1,300 children without this payment upon turning 16 is extremely cruel and cold. In the cases of many of the families I have been working with, their child has a lifelong disability. Unfortunately, these disabilities do not disappear when the child turns 16. That is why I continue to call on the Minister to extend the qualifying age for DCA from 16 to 18 to prevent that cliff edge. This is a vital payment for these households. The parents coming to my office in Kildare South need this payment. The DCA is used to deal with huge waiting lists and many

families use it to pay for essential therapies such as occupational therapy, speech and language therapy and physiotherapy.

The Minister will be aware that I have provided his office, as he asked me to do in a previous conversation, with details of the responses to families who are in this position as regards the DCA. The number of responses is now nearing 2,000. I hope that we continue to work on this very important matter and that we revisit the extension of the qualifying age from 16 to 18.

To be fair to the Minister, who has spoken about this at the Joint Committee on Social Protection, I welcome that some progress has been made recently with regard to a cost-of-disability payment.

6 o'clock

However, €10 is a very low starting point. In the Labour Party's alternative budget, we proposed starting the payment at three times that, at €30 per week. There also seems to be an oversight in regard to who qualifies for the payment. I understand that only those in receipt of the blind pension, disability allowance, invalidity pension and partial capacity benefit will be eligible for the €500 payment.

Thousands of older people have moved from some disability payments to the State pension. These are disabilities that do not just disappear because someone transfers to a new payment overnight. Since 2023, 24,911 older adults have transferred from the disability allowance and invalidity pension to the State pension. That includes 8,296 transferring from the disability allowance and 16,615 transferring from the invalidity pension. That is almost 25,000 older adults who have been left out of the new cost-of-disability payment because they have transferred to the State pension, in addition to those on the DCA, as I have already flagged. This is a massive oversight for these households. These are people who are living with disabilities and are already facing additional costs due to their disabilities, which, as we all know, can cost up to €15,000 a year. I ask the Minister to answer that and come back to us on it.

I want to address the comments made by the Tánaiste, Simon Harris, regarding people who are long-term unemployed. I welcome the fact that the Minister has tonight clarified his opinion on these comments. He is correct; jobseeker's allowance is not a lifestyle choice and is far from the most important issue in the country at this time. The Tánaiste simply needs to look at the statistics. We are a country at almost full employment, and a low unemployment rate of 1.3% was recorded in quarter 2 of 2026, according to the CSO. That means that fewer than 17,500 people have been on a jobseeker's payment for five years or more. This is reduced further to 14,000 when people aged 60 to 66 are excluded, who are already struggling to find employment due to age discrimination and the need for pensions, etc., which we have spoken about previously. Additionally, the Tánaiste ignores the fact that for many single-parent households, they are struggling to find work because of the chronic lack of childcare places available in many parts of the country.

The Tánaiste went on to call out a former leader of the Labour Party, but he neglected to mention that those comments were from 15 years ago, when the unemployment rate was 15%, a fact I am sure he did not consider when he was calling out the former leader of the Labour Party. The Tánaiste could have spoken of what is actually going on in this country. He could have spoken about reducing the cost of childcare, the cost of living, the homelessness

emergency or anything more constructive that the Minister and I are dealing with in the social protection committee, but he did not.

There are a lot of positive increases in this Bill, albeit not to the extent the Labour Party would have introduced. The issues I have raised with the Minister are real and are felt by so many people coming into my clinics in Kildare South. These are the issues that families, those living with disability and older people are raising with me in my clinics. I know they are also raised continuously with many Members of this House. There is a cost-of-living crisis in this country. Many households are struggling and they need their Government to help out. Unfortunately for many of those families, they will still be left seeking help following this budget. However, I look forward to working with the Minister and his officials as we make our way through this Bill. I ask him to consider those important issues I have raised with him once again tonight.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: The Bill contains a number of positive measures and I welcome all of them. In particular, I welcome the increased investment in social protection, the €10 increase in weekly welfare payments and the targeted supports for families, pensioners, people with disabilities and, most importantly, carers. Today I will focus on carers and family carers. Across our communities, thousands of people provide care every day for elderly parents, children with disabilities, spouses and loved ones. Their dedication allows people to remain in their homes, surrounded by family and community, rather than entering long-term residential care.

I welcome the €10 increase in the carer's allowance and carer's benefit, together with the significant improvements to the income disregards announced in budget 2027. These measures recognise the enormous contribution carers make to society and our healthcare system. However, I believe we need to go further. Family carers provide service that saves the State millions of euro every year. Without them, many more people would require nursing home places, residential care and additional State supports. The programme for Government commits to phasing out the means test for the carer's allowance, and I welcome the progress made to date. I have long held the view we should continue moving towards a full abolition. Family carers should not be disadvantaged because they own a farm, a small business or an asset built up over generations. These assets do not help with day-to-day demands and the costs of caring, yet they still affect access to support.

Keeping people at home is not only what most families want; it also makes economic sense. Residential care is becoming increasingly expensive. In one case known to me, a nursing home placement would cost a family €75,000 a year. While the fair deal scheme provides support, significant costs can still arise for many families. If we provide greater support to family carers and remove barriers to accessing payments, more people will be able to continue caring for their loved ones at home for longer. That improves quality of life, strengthens families and community networks and helps reduce pressure on nursing homes and residential care facilities. In the long term, this would save the State money. Supporting carers is not simply good social policy; it is sound economic policy.

Family carers are one of the most important pillars of our health and social care system and they deserve greater recognition and support. For those reasons, while welcoming the Bill and the improvements it contains, I appeal to Government colleagues to continue building the

progress already made to deliver further meaningful supports for carers and family carers and fulfil our commitment to phasing out the means test for the carer's allowance.

Deputy Micheál Carrigy: Ireland has a good social welfare system. It provides support to the people who need it. A good society looks after those who are vulnerable, and one of the ways to do this in Ireland is through the financial supports available through our social welfare system. An example of this support is the introduction of the pay-related benefit, ensuring that people who lose their jobs have a stronger safety net linked to their previous earnings. Supporting people who have lost their jobs is important. Jobseeker's payment provides financial assistance during periods of disruption, ensuring people have the support when they need it the most. However, there are cases of long-term unemployment where individuals have been living on jobseeker's payment for two and more years. That is not what jobseeker's payment, also known as the dole, is intended for. This does not refer to the people who are unable to work due to caring responsibilities, disability or illness or who are receiving other welfare payments.

Fine Gael believes that everyone who can work should work. In Ireland, we have a strong economy. Despite a period of continuous full employment, the latest CSO figures show that 172,800 people were on the live register in October 2026. Within that, 52,000 have been on the live register for a year or longer. Last year, over €1.7 billion was spent on jobseeker's payments. That is a significant amount of taxpayers' money. As part of the jobseeker's payment system, the Department of Social Protection provides tailored one-to-one support for long-term jobseekers. Employment advisers in Intreo sit down with individuals, review their qualifications and skills and help them develop a personal progression plan focused on upskilling and securing employment. The key condition of receiving jobseeker's payments is that a person must be available for and actively seeking work. The clue is in the name: jobseeker.

The programme for Government, agreed with our Fianna Fáil and Independent colleagues, commits to publishing a new employment strategy focused on intensive engagement and supports to help those furthest from the labour market to enter the workforce. The new pathway to work plan is at an advanced stage. The Department of Social Protection has undertaken significant consultation on the plan and it will be published in the coming weeks. The plan will focus on a wide range of back-to-work schemes, education and training supports, work placement programmes and apprenticeships that are available to help people into employment. My colleagues and I believe that supports should be provided to those who need them, both financial and non-financial, whether for jobseeking, illness, disability or other circumstances. A good society looks after its people through supports such as these. However, I support the work of this Bill to ensure that those who need support receive it while also ensuring that those who can work receive the assistance and encouragement they need to obtain employment.

With regard to budget 2027 and the cost-of-disability lump sum payment, which I welcome, I support the calls for financial tax breaks to be put in place in budget 2028 for persons with disabilities in the workforce who have not benefited from the cost-of-disability payment.

They face the same costs of disability in their lives as any other person even though they are in the workforce. We need to look at that in budget 2028.

Deputy James Geoghegan: I welcome this Social Welfare Bill. A strong social welfare system is not a sign of weakness in our society. It is a sign of strength that reflects our belief that people who fall on hard times deserve support, older people deserve security and families raising children and caring for loved ones deserve recognition. That is what this Bill delivers. It increases weekly social welfare payments by €10. This includes pensions and payments to carers and people with disabilities. It increases supports for families and children and raises the income thresholds for the working family payment. That matters enormously to families across Ireland who get up every morning, go to work, raise their children and still struggle to make ends meet. I particularly welcome the recognition of carers. I have met many families who care for children with disabilities, whose contribution to our society is extraordinary. Their work is work and our social protection system must recognise that.

There has been considerable debate about the Tánaiste's comments on long-term unemployment. I understand why people have strong feelings about this issue but we should be capable of having a reasonable conversation about the underlying principle. Sinn Féin seems to think that calling someone a Tory or accusing them of Thatcherism is a substitute for making an argument. There is nothing contradictory about believing in a strong social welfare system and believing that people who can work should be supported and encouraged to do so. Those principles belong together. Work is about more than a payslip. It provides independence, dignity, confidence and opportunity. If somebody has been unemployed for a long period, our ambition should be to help them into employment rather than simply accepting that they will remain outside the workforce indefinitely. That requires training, effective employment services and recognising the genuine barriers many people face. It also requires an expectation that people will engage with the supports that are available. We must distinguish between people who cannot work, people who face substantial barriers to employment, and those who are capable of working but who refuse to engage. The objective should never be to punish unemployment but to overcome it wherever possible. Ultimately, a good social welfare system protects those who need protection, recognises different forms of contribution and creates opportunities for people to build better lives. That is the balance we should strive for. That is why I support this Bill.

Deputy John McGuinness: All of the narrative around the proposal that everyone should work and about representing those who get up early in the morning for work is quite offensive. Humanity is a messy business. It is not perfect. We should strive to do the best we can with it but there will be those who cannot work or who will need assistance. They should not be targeted by anybody. I have seen too much of that going on over the last ten years. People are saying they represent this or that. It is all about people who get up early in the morning to work casting aspersions on those who may not be able to get up, get out of bed or go to work or who do not know how to work. We should remember that. In here we talk about weakness in our society and supporting those who are weak and vulnerable. Yes, we should but we should not then, in the next sentence, say that we should get them all out to work as if we are going to jackboot them into a position where they would have to do something they are incapable of doing. We need far greater humanity and compassion in what we are saying about others. I do not like what is being said about others without real foundation or any real intent of creating a society that we can be proud of and that will support those who need to be supported.

I will raise this directly because I am going to make a submission on behalf of the two families involved. Families in Kilkenny recently experienced terrible flooding. There was a big hullabaloo about it. Television cameras turned up, as did the Taoiseach. The Minister was there. We were all there, as politicians, standing in the flooded home of two elderly people. A commitment was given that they would be supported out of the hardship they had found themselves in through no fault of their own. An elderly pensioner cannot go back into her home because she cannot get the full supports necessary to put her home in a liveable state in spite of her family giving her everything they could to support her financially. Another lady cannot go back into her home because she cannot face the endless investigations, examinations and form filling to get even the basics. Any system that has humanity and compassion as part of its thinking would reach out to those people, particularly those who were on the ground floor of their houses, to support them. It would ensure they get the level of support needed to allow them to live in their homes again. Is that asking too much? With regard to the emergency response payment and the actions of the Department of Social Welfare, they all worked very hard and we got great service from them in our offices but it must be said that the Minister has to look at this and has to ensure the appropriate level of funding is given to allow those people to go back into their homes. Is that not a basic right? Is that not the basic response of any government that has a social conscience at the centre of what it does? It is a test for the Government and those Ministers who stood in those houses to deliver what they said they would deliver for the families who are affected.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Budget 2027 was a cruel and callous exercise in demonstrating who in our society Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael believe to be worthy of support. If ever there was any doubt of this conscious and deliberate choice, the remarks of the Tánaiste over the weekend made it grossly clear. Out of ideas and unable to excuse the lack of support his budget provided to the ordinary Irish worker and family, the Tánaiste had to dig out the most clichéd of classic Fine Gael tactics and attack people on social welfare. His predecessor spent nearly as much on media for his attack campaign as was every recouped for the Exchequer. It was certainly only ever a fraction of the amount he touted. Those harsh facts are a reality for the Tánaiste's party. What this is really about is creating a distraction from the Tánaiste's miserable budget. It is about pointing the blame at anyone but himself. The proof is before us in this Social Welfare Bill. It enables paltry half-measures that will do little to even keep pace with inflation, let alone offset the undue financial burdens borne by our people in recent years. It is shameful that the Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael parties go along with this.

Perhaps more shocking is the utter lack of cost-of-living measures. Having previously withdrawn the energy credits, the Government's measure is simply to get over it. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have put out the message that you should get used to living in a colder house. That is not exactly what they are telling people as regards the fuel allowance. The parties have tried to sell a €12 decrease as a €5 increase.

The once-off lump sum of €500 is a sop to the idea of a cost-of-disability payment. As opposed to Sinn Féin's proposals, it is not a blueprint to address the cost of disability in our society. It does not provide a pathway to ensure the broadest possible coverage, coverage that would include our pensioners. There was much consultation preceding the development of this payment but it seems the Government simply did not listen to the disability advocates. This is not a social welfare Bill. It will do little to improve the welfare of the most vulnerable in our

society. It will not see payments keeping pace with inflation, let alone undo the damage done by the failures of recent years. For disabled people, this lump sum will do nothing but undo a fraction of the damage the Government has done by withdrawing supports. With one hand the Government gives €500 but the other hand covers its mouth so as not to speak of the €1,400 previously taken away in the budget. This budget once again leaves people worse off.

Ten euro for pensioners will be gone as quickly as it is received in the face of ongoing inflation. People deserve better than this and the suffering caused by this Government.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I am sure a lot of others have referred to it as well but it merits mentioning because this is a social welfare debate and the Tánaiste is the Tánaiste - the second in command in this Government. What he said at the weekend, or last week, in the run-up to the Fine Gael Ard-Fheis was outrageous. I do not know if there is anyone here from Fine Gael. Not surprisingly, they tend to come in and escape as soon as they make their comments. Fine Gael did what Fine Gael does best, which is to pick a minority group and have a go at it, especially during a cost-of-living crisis and when the bill for the national children's hospital is mounting up for which Deputy Harris is directly responsible.

It has already been referred to but this nonsense about people who get up early in the morning is ableist and classist and it has to stop. It is a disgrace. It is like the ads that have been sponsored about full attendance at school pushing children who for lots of different reasons are simply not able to go. I speak as somebody who had full attendance right through school but it is nonsense to be pushing this concept that everybody is able to fit into that. I will go into the figures in a second but I suppose attacking people on social welfare gave migrants a break. That was the only thing I was thinking of - the migrant workers and the refugees that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have been punching down on of late. I do not know why Deputy Clendennen is shaking his head. It is so blatantly obvious to everyone. The dogs on the street can see what they are doing. It used to be unmarried mothers and single parents. It is always some group that well-heeled people on very good wages in Fine Gael, of which the Tánaiste is one, have the neck to pick on.

The statistics are very revealing. First of all, the Tánaiste said the dole is a safety net and not a way of life and that it is not acceptable for any person to remain on the live register. By the way, the live register is made up of people who do work. He is not even accurate with his facts. It includes people who are laid off for periods of time, seasonal workers, etc. He gave wrong figures for the long-term unemployed. He said it was 52,000. He said he was lifting people up and that it did not include disabled and elderly people but, of course, it does because many people are disabled but cannot get disability benefit for lots of different reasons because of the criteria. They include people with mental health issues, people with temporary disabilities and older people, who are going to find it very difficult to get a job in this economy. The CSO figures for quarter two of 2026 for those who have been unemployed for over a year are 38,900 so, again, the Tánaiste was not even accurate. There are already penalties for those people. They have had penalties imposed, for example, if they missed two appointments. How does Ireland compare? What is this big problem all of a sudden with long-term unemployment? The figure was 1.1% of the Irish workforce and went up to 1.3% recently. The EU average is 1.9% so it is way below the EU average.

There are other problems with unemployment. Youth unemployment is a real problem that this Government needs to get to grips with. Many highly qualified young people cannot get jobs. The Tánaiste knew what he was doing. He may not have got all the facts right but he knew that what he was doing was finding a group that it is very popular to attack in some quarters. The ESRI has come out and said, on arguments like this, that 58% of people believe welfare payments make people lazy, so obviously there is an audience there for it. Meanwhile back at the ranch, the housing crisis and the cost-of-living crisis go on with efforts to resolve them thwarted by this Government. There has been no action. It was a great distraction for the past five days. Hopefully, this is the last time that we will be discussing it but this has been a distraction from the real issues.

I want to talk as well about disability because disabled people were those most cruelly treated by this Government in the budget. The deficits in the payments they had lost out on had been well identified and the Government came back with €10, which basically it gave to every single group. Before the election, we heard a huge amount about carers because we know carers generally are good for voting so the Government decided, and not just the Government but many parties, to make promises it had no intention of keeping. The means test for carers is really cruel and is also extremely anti-women because it is mainly women who end up giving up their jobs and careers to become carers for their own children, many of whom need full-time care. Usually the woman may not be the best paid so she gives up her job for this. Women then find themselves dependent upon their partner, if they have one, for everything in life. They have no guaranteed income of their own. This has been raised again and again and it was used in the pre-election preamble by so many parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael in particular, to promise the sun, moon and stars. The Independents, who are not here tonight and who made up the Government, were leaning into it big time as well. What did the Government do? It turned around and did nothing for carers at all apart from tinker around with the reckonable income. It is not the same as getting rid of the means test. It has already been pointed out how the cost of this is very affordable if we look at the tax base in this country.

I also want to mention the cost-of-disability payment, which is a €500 lump sum that will be paid in January. Inclusion Ireland has said that it falls well short of what is required. It comes to about €962 per week, which is not enough for people who have disabilities to live on. The cost of having a disability in this society, at a very conservative estimate, is about €12,000 a year and this does not come close to the cost of the taxis that a disabled person has to order, the extra heating that he or she needs, the extra water he or she often needs to use and then of course all of the equipment and over-the-counter things that he or she has to buy that are not supported. It is incredible. Anybody who has lived with anybody with a long-term illness or a disability can see that. I believe that people who are disabled should have their own non-means tested income. Again, it is very affordable. It should be costed and we should see if it can be done because the amount of tax revenue taken in from multinationals and the wealth that we have in this society could easily be increased to pay for it.

Deputy Seamus Healy: This is a very wealthy country - one of the wealthiest in the world. The 2027 budget is the fifth consecutive annual budget with a surplus. There are 11 Irish billionaires, who are wealthier than more than 3,500 Irish people combined. The background to this Social Welfare Bill is a cost-of-living crisis and everybody here is well aware of that. Every family in the country is well aware of that. Over the past five years, prices for goods

and services have increased by about 22%. The 2026 budget made the position far worse, as the Minister of State knows well. It abolished all cost-of-living supports and hit the poorest 10% of the population hardest. People with disabilities lost out by anything up to €1,400 in that budget but the big developers and fast food chains got huge tax reductions that came to about €680 million. PAYE workers again paid increased tax because of the freezing of income tax bands and credits.

Budget 2027 continued in the same vein.

The cost-of-living crisis is having the greatest impact on middle-income families, low-income families and social welfare recipients. Budget 2027, which is effectively being implemented by this Bill, failed those families and prioritised the golden circle of the rich and powerful in our society. Last year, it was the burger barons and big developers who got the golden handshake, and 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 some of the 11 billionaires I mentioned earlier who are wealthier than 3.5 million Irish people combined.

For such a wealthy country, the poverty rates here are absolutely shameful. More than 200,000 children are living in poverty in Ireland. It is worth saying that again: there are 200,000 children living in poverty in Ireland. We have 687,000 people living in poverty, with 40% of disabled people living in or below the poverty line and 256,000 people live in consistent poverty. The percentage of people at risk of poverty has increased from 11.7% to 12.6%. Low-paid workers and persons relying on social welfare support, single parents, pensioners and people with disabilities experience poverty the most. The Central Statistics Office, CSO, has said almost half of households - 44.8% - said they had some difficulty in making ends meet in 2025. Of course, this increased in 2026 due to the abolition of the cost of living supports and energy credits.

The fact that over 200,000 children live in poverty is particularly shameful. A payment of child benefit can have a significant effect on reducing child poverty, yet this Government and previous Governments have refused to increase the child benefit payment from €140 per month. It has been ten years since child benefit was last increased, in 2016. Of course, this hugely decreases the value of the payment due to inflation. This Bill should be amended to ensure child benefit is increased to at least €200 per month per child. The minimum wage and social protection payments are also below the poverty line. This Bill should ensure the adult rate of social welfare is increased to €350 per week. Pensions, disability allowance, invalidity pensions and carer's allowance must all increase to that figure to at least bring them just above the poverty line.

Family carers do a huge amount of work on behalf of the State. Since 2016, the number of family carers has increased by 53%, and the number providing care for over 43 hours per week has doubled. It is relatively accepted on all sides of this House that carers save the State something in the region of €20 billion per year. A recent survey by Family Carers Ireland showed 71% of carers find it difficult to make ends meet, 75% never receive respite, 32% have bad or very bad mental health and 49% experience extreme loneliness. Many carers become ill themselves and some even pass away before the individual they are caring for.

It has been said previously that in the run up to the last election, every party in this House promised the abolition of the means test for carer's allowance. That was a commitment given in that election but has since been broken. Family Carers Ireland also made a very modest request to have the carer's support grant, a grant paid once a year, increased by €150 - not even in line with inflation - but that was not granted. If we look back from 2021 to 2024, there was no increase in that grant. There was an increase in 2025, but that was of course ahead of a general election in November of that year. There has since been no increase in 2026 or 2027. This should be rectified in the Social Welfare Bill.

There are a huge number of unavoidable costs associated with caring, which is why the carer's allowance should be increased to €350 and why a proper cost of disability payment should be paid. For carers in particular who are involved in education or training, the 18.5 hours working outside the home should be removed for that training and education. Many elderly parents and carers over the age of 66 are being paid as half-rate carers, and this needs to be addressed. Family Carers Ireland has asked that the full rate carer's allowance be paid to pensioners who are caring.

In particular, the working family payment should be amended to ensure income from a carer's allowance is disregarded in the means test for that payment. This is a particularly cruel regulation, and I appeal to the Minister to look at, change and include the amendment in this Bill. I have encountered a very difficult situation with a constituent family whereby a son with very complex and difficult needs was being looked after at home on a 24-hour basis with the support of two family members right around the clock. That young lad passed away and the family tried to get back to some bit of normality. The father was able to get some temporary, part-time work but his working family payment was reduced when taking into account the carer's allowance his wife was receiving for another child with a disability. This needs to be addressed and changed.

The cost-of-living crisis is now worse than ever. Half a million people are in arrears for electricity and gas, and we have the highest electricity prices in Europe. We need a cost-of-living package to be included in this Bill, like the package brought forward in October 2024 in advance of the election of that year. I remind the Minister of what was in that package in an attempt to buy that election. There were two electricity credits of €125 each; a €300 fuel lump sum for those on fuel allowance; a €200 lump sum for those living alone; a €400 lump sum for carer's allowance, working family payments and disability allowance recipients; and there was double child benefit in November and December of that year. That is the type of package that is needed now and that should be put into this Bill. The cost of living crisis was bad in 2025, it is worse in 2026 and is only getting more difficult into 2027.

Deputy John Clendennen: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Social Welfare Bill 2026. It is a good opportunity to discuss just how far we have come from a social welfare and social protection perspective in recent years. This year alone, we see new measures equating to over €1.5 billion and a 7% increase year on year. I want to acknowledge the staff at the Department and the work they do in helping every TD in this House to deal with concerns, queries and, in particular, appeals. We have seen great progress. Social protection must ensure that assistance and supports are provided for people who might need them for a particular period or a particular reason, depending on the environment. It is also important that we ensure we give people the opportunity to seize opportunities for themselves, along with independence.

I do not have time to go through all of the measures, but I would highlight the phasing out of the means test. To see the income disregard increase in recent years from €450 to €1,150 shows that we are moving towards phasing out means testing for carer's allowance. We see the changes to the State pension, the living alone allowance and also child benefit. Those in the Opposition need to make up their minds. Do they want universal supports or do they want targeted supports? In addition to child benefit, we have measures on schoolbooks, school uniforms, school meals and so on. These are all very welcome.

I know there has been a lot of debate in recent days in relation to unemployment. We have to ensure that the State does the service that it should in supporting people who have found themselves out of employment for a period of time and giving them a hand up to get going again. That should be through employment strategies such as Pathways to Work, and ensuring that Intreo, training and skills are all provided for. That is something that has to be provided as a priority at a time of full employment, and a time when we welcome migration from all corners of the world. Despite what some Deputies might believe, this is a country that is welcoming, and it is running well in terms of the economy's strength and the jobs we have to offer.

We recognise that the domiciliary care allowance is a very important measure. However, where carers are in receipt of domiciliary care allowance, they do not get a cost of disability payment for those under 16. We need to ensure that the cost of disability payment is made available to everyone.

In the last few seconds of my time, I would ask the Minister to consider an initiative for adaptive toys for children with disabilities. Far too often, these are multiples of the price that we see on toy shop shelves, plus there is the cost of customs and postage. I ask the Minister to look at that as an initiative.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: I welcome the Bill and the improvements the Minister, Deputy Calleary, is bringing forward for pensioners, carers, people with disabilities and working families. First, I want to focus on means testing and the impact that has on people's independence. There are women who come to see me in County Louth and others across the country who have spent years raising children, caring for family members and working to support families, communities and the State. Yet, at retirement, some have insufficient contributions for the full contributory pension. When assessed for a non-contributory pension, household means can leave them with a reduced payment or no pension of their own. I know that changes were made previously, but many women are still locked out. They feel penalised twice, first for leaving paid employment to care, and then because their partner's income is assessed against them. A household income does not necessarily give a woman financial independence. The programme for Government commits to a comprehensive review of means testing. That review must address these women's circumstances and deliver practical changes.

On carers' allowance, I welcome the increased income disregards and the commitment to continue to progressively increase them with a view to phasing out the means test during the Government's lifetime. I look forward to the further changes. We also need a dedicated kinship care payment. Grandparents, aunts, uncles and other relatives can step in to raise children, often in a time of crisis. They provide a secure home and keep children connected to their

families, but can face considerable financial pressure themselves. We should be supporting these families with a reliable payment that recognises the responsibility they have taken on.

For people with disabilities, I welcome the very first cost of disability payment. It recognises additional and unavoidable costs. In the next budget, where the payment needs to increase, we must also examine support for people with disabilities who are working. Those costs do not disappear when someone takes up a job. For example, the lack of accessible transport can mean expensive journeys to work, and the potential loss of a medical card and subsequent worry of meeting ongoing medical costs can seriously affect whether taking up a job is financially manageable. We cannot encourage people into employment while leaving them to struggle to afford the supports that make work possible.

The increased earnings disregard and the reduced minimum hours under the wage subsidy scheme are positive steps. Eight hours can be an important start for someone managing a fluctuating condition. We must also support individuals to return to employment from long-term unemployment. There are schemes in place, but we must build on these, possibly by working more closely with ETBs or Skillnet networks to provide training, build confidence and offer practical support. That means recognising each person's individual circumstances and helping them to develop the skills they need to move into sustainable employment and thrive there.

Deputy Joe Neville: I wish to speak as a Government Member. I support the Bill and thank the Minister and his Department for all the effort and thought that was put into it. The budget, like any budget, was difficult because you are assessing the needs and varying wants of different areas. I feel that what we have done here will ensure that people seeking the help of the Department of Social Protection are looked after. We talk about people working, but we need to ensure that we increase the tax bands and that it pays to go to work. We also need to ensure that where there are those who cannot go to work, or where families are not in a position to be rewarded and looked after, the State supports them fully.

We are lucky. As a lot of people have noted, maybe in a different context, that we are a rich country. We are very lucky to be in the situation that we are in as a country. We are very lucky that the Government is in the situation that it is in. It means we can look after the most vulnerable, and I believe that is what this element of the budget fulfils. It fulfils the duty to those people who might be ill, who might not be in a position to go to work or who might need to care for those who are less fortunate. People might also be in a position where they are between jobs, as we know. I am sure many Members across from me and around me have found themselves in such situations at different stages, where they have looked to the arms of the State for support, and the support of the State has been there for them. Once again, that is what this budget seeks to do.

It also seeks to specifically increase the amounts that are available to people. At the same time, when we talk about €10 a week, I know that can be a challenge. I am not going to say that is salvation for everyone, because it simply is not. We know costs are increasing, much of it for reasons outside the hands of the State, and I know that is difficult for those people. However, at the same time, there is a realisation and understanding from the Government side that this money is required and that support is necessary. As I said, that can go from children's

allowance support from the State and right the way from the cradle to the elderly stages of life, so we ensure that people in need get those extra few euro. I think that is very important.

Colleagues across the floor have referenced the Tánaiste's comments in his speech over the weekend. We have to be very careful not to take them out of context. What we are talking about here is not the people who cannot work, or the people who are between jobs, but people who simply refuse to engage. That is the term we need – it is the refusal to engage. Anybody who wants to get jobseeker's allowance can get it, and we are going to support them as best as possible.

Deputy Keira Keogh: Social welfare is about providing practical support to people as they navigate the everyday and extraordinary pressures of life. It gives meaningful assistance to people at a time when many households and communities across Ireland are contending with significant costs. In particular, I want to talk today about the increase in maternity, paternity, adoptive and parents' benefit to €309 per week. While I welcome that, I believe this House should consider how we can further strengthen support for families in the years ahead. I commend the Tánaiste on taking paternity leave and on showing leadership in this area, where it is not yet the norm. We have a way to go culturally in encouraging more fathers to take the leave that is due to them.

However, we must also be real about the fact that even with the increase to €309 per week, many families simply cannot afford for the father to take paternity leave. Median weekly earnings in Ireland are currently €759. That €309 will not pay the bills that keep coming, even more so when a new baby comes into the house. I would like to see us at some point getting to paternity leave of 20 weeks and getting all of those benefits to 80% of people's salary. That would not only help children's development by allowing both parents to be at home but would also help us take giant leaps for gender equality.

I am a proud member of the cross-party group on pregnancy loss. We are making important progress on recognising the impact of miscarriage and pregnancy loss. We are close to a baby loss certificate, which this Department is working on, and the Department of the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment, Deputy Peter Burke, is working on a Bill on leave for pregnancy loss, which will allow five days' leave for the first time for loss before 23 weeks. I welcome that and I think employers welcome it too. However, I do not want us to forget about women who are pregnant and self-employed and who may lose a baby before 23 weeks. As the leave Bill that is working its way through the House will be for private employers, those women will be left behind. We should look at how they could be looked after within the social welfare system.

On the comments about long-term jobseekers, I agree with my colleagues here today that the Tánaiste was not pushing anybody down. This is not about people who are struggling to work for reasons of disability, health or transport. It is about ensuring that if people can work, we help them to get to work. As Chair of the Joint Committee on Children and Equality, I know that lifting children out of poverty will be easier if families have meaningful, productive jobs. This is about helping people to engage with all of the services that are there to do that.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Social welfare is about providing supports to individuals and families who require them for the period they are required. People are commenting on what

the Tánaiste said because the Tánaiste said what he said so that people would comment on it. That is the fact. We know we are talking about a very small number of people. I believe that everybody who is fit to work should work. I could say that if the parties in government had been serious about this over the years, and about putting in the supports for those who require them, we would not have seen them get rid of the job club and the local employment service. Nor would we have seen, at times, a reliance on job activation schemes operated by private firms that did not put in the supports that were required, particularly for those with more complex cases. We all agree that work should pay. It is about making sure that the State, and the Government, does its bit to ensure that we have employment of a particular level and that we provide the supports that are required.

Let us be serious about the cost-of-disability payment. Anybody who has engaged with any of the disability advocacy organisations will say they are downright – I do not know how to put it - angry or disappointed, but this is not what they wanted. It is an abject failure. Too many times, we have come in here and said that €1,400 cut from the last budget, and €500 that will be paid only to a certain cohort of people with disabilities, is not going to cut the mustard. That is less than €10 a week.

If we are serious about job activation, and I accept there have been certain helpful changes to the wage subsidy scheme, then we need to look at the entire set of supports, whether work and access or the wage subsidy scheme, and at what is needed to facilitate both employers and those with disabilities who want to be in employment. We need to put a proper framework in place so that we can deliver real, decent employment. Many of the employers who have used the wage subsidy scheme, particularly those who employ multiple people, have given out about the rates and say they do not cut the mustard. I have had this conversation with the Minister, Deputy Calleary. We need to look at the entire sphere because we all accept that an insufficient number of people with disabilities are employed in this State and that our percentage is far too low. Alongside that, it is about providing the work and access supports, reasonable accommodations, and making it easier for individuals to apply and for companies to operate the scheme because, in fairness, we are not cutting the mustard.

I draw attention to an issue I have raised a number of times at this stage. It is the fact that an exceptional needs payment is not available to those who previously could have got a grant from the council to, let us say, replace a boiler. I am not only talking about oil and gas but about people who cannot wait the 15 months for the warmer homes scheme and who do not have the money. I also raise the case of people on fuel allowance with, let us say, a child who cannot leave the home at this point in time. They are getting screwed over, in the sense that fuel allowance has been taken for a child who cannot leave the house.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The central test of any social welfare Bill is whether it raises living standards. By any measure, this Bill falls extremely short. While welfare rates are increased, the withdrawal of the temporary cost-of-living supports means that many households will be significantly worse off this year than they were last year. The ESRI has said that this budget will result in an average reduction of approximately 2% in household disposable income. Those reductions will fall primarily on households on lower incomes. Those with the lowest level of disposable income will see a cut of 4.1%, while those with the highest will see a reduction of 0.3%. The households affected are those with the least capacity to absorb the additional costs they are dealing with. They are carers, pensioners, people with disabilities and

lone parents. They are the people who are struggling with the rising cost of living in this country. The Government points to increases in welfare rates and, for sure, those increases are welcome. However, the relevant question is whether they will make up for the withdrawal of previous supports to families. For most families, the answer is very clearly "No".

One of the major issues we in Aontú have been raising for many years is that energy poverty is getting worse in this country. There are 330,000 families currently in electricity arrears. Some 180,000 households have been in arrears for more than 90 days, which is the highest level on record. That is a legacy of the Government and the actions it has taken. If electricity and gas arrears are included, there are 500,000 units in arrears in this country. That is a staggering figure for a country so wealthy. A total of 500,000 units equates to roughly 1.3 million people living in households that cannot afford to pay for energy. This will get worse over the coming months this winter.

My real frustration with the Government is that it is an engine of the increase in the price of fuel in this country. If a person pulls into a filling station today and puts €100 of petrol into the car, €45 of that will be tax. That is exceptional. Fuel is not a luxury good; it is a staple good. Yet, the Government is taxing it to levels people cannot reach. We are the most expensive country on the planet for electricity. We recently beat Barbados to that infamous title. One of the reasons is that the Government is charging so much in network charges. Every household in the country pays €500 every year in network charges. Just last month, the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, put up network charges by €40 or €41 a year for every household. The reason for that is the infrastructure is so decrepit we are losing much of the electricity we generate. There are so many bottlenecks in the system and that is why it is costing so much. We still have a system in this country whereby electricity is priced at the marginal price. For example, if it is produced by gas, the price goes sky-high for all of the units consumed.

7 o'clock

I want to talk about people with disabilities. The Government has significantly let down people with disabilities in terms of the cost-of-disability payment. The Department carried out a review into the cost of disability. It wrote a report, and yet the Government refuses to implement the findings of that report. It is estimated that it requires an extra €25,000 a year to deal with the costs associated with having a disability, and it is substantially higher for people with severe disabilities. If the Government knows the information around this and refuses to provide the money for it, it is doing an enormous injustice to the people in that cohort. Disability also does not disappear with age, and the truth of the matter is that a lot of people with disabilities have a disability allowance, but then they go on to a pension and it does not help them in that situation either.

Deputy Michael Collins: While there were increases in the budget and there is no point in me saying anything different, in keeping pace with the cost of living, these fell short for many people. My biggest concern in recent times is that more people who are getting disability payments and things like that are being investigated and having the payments taken off them. There were different people in my clinics over the weekend. One person's disability payment was withdrawn from them, and she did not feel well. The other person had applied for a carer's allowance, had a leg amputated and was told she would not qualify. God almighty, how do you

qualify in this country? Do you have to be missing your head to qualify for a carer's allowance? It is an astonishing situation to think that a person with that type of a disability was refused. There is something wrong somewhere. It is very easy to save money or say that the Government's budget is giving out more when we are taking away the little bit of comfort that people have. To be honest, I am not sure if the Minister of State is the relevant Minister as this relates to social welfare, but it looks like he is the only one here to answer questions. The bottom line is that I would like to think that the Government would look into why people in the disability sector and their carers are having their money withdrawn from them and be a bit more caring. The Government promised that it would remove means testing from the carer's allowance. It did not deliver that. It has not delivered it yet. This affects a lot of people out there.

I was at a meeting about CoAction in Bantry on Thursday night after leaving the Dáil. There are adults with intellectual disabilities who have no respite whatsoever. In fairness, I hope to God that the tide is turning because the HSE said that it was providing funding, but that should have been provided. It is putting serious pressure on management in CoAction because they cannot deliver it if they do not get the cash. That is the bottom line, and it comes back down to the foot of the Government.

At the same time, these people, who in some cases are caring in their 80s and 90s, are being called at four, five, six or seven o'clock in the night, never mind during the day, to care for their family. That is an indictment on a country that does not care for its people. It cannot give them a little bit of respite and does not want to give them the carers. It is as a simple as that. It is watching every penny. As I said to someone, if they have an extra cow in the field, it means that their wife who is looking after the child cannot get the carer's allowance. It is most likely the wife who is doing that.

In relation to the pension, while the increases were welcome, and there is no point in me saying they were not, I find that a lot of people are still telling me that they are unable to fill the oil tank because they do not have that money. It is €1,500 or €1,600. It was maybe €800 or €900 a couple of years ago, and they were able to do it then. They are now in a desperate situation, and when the Government had a chance to give them something, the only relief they got was €40-something, so that oil tank is going to remain empty. This is what matters to the people on the ground.

In relation to USC, Fine Gael promised the people that it would abolish it, but they are still paying it. That is a huge frustration for people. It is an extra tax. The previous speaker spoke about fuel. If you fill your tank with €100 of petrol or diesel, €45.50 goes to the Government. It is making a cash cow out of motorists which is totally and utterly wrong.

We need to look after the working people. That is where we need to focus a lot of investment in relation to social welfare in the future. They are people who need a lot of help because they are keeping the country going, but they are finding it the most difficult of all, and they are all the way back from the worker to the small businessperson.

I have mentioned it several times today that, thank, God Cork County Council rejected a plan that Independent Ireland spoke very strongly against to increase the rates by 7.5%. That would have taken out businesses all over the place. They would have been taken out in Castletownbere, Allihies, Ardgroom, Eyeries, Bantry, Schull, Bandon and Bantry. All of those

places cannot survive at this present time. We support and understand those businesses. Whether they are in Carrigaline, Youghal or Fermoy, we will support those businesses. Independent Ireland made sure that did not go through yesterday, but I was disappointed that the Independent councillors fell across each other to vote. Is it all for chains and chairmanships in councils instead of thinking of the people they represent? They must knock on their doors in Castletownbere and Carrigaline in time to come and is that they way they are leaving their people? It is an absolute disgrace. These people are struggling at this present time.

There is another area that I would like to spend a lot of time talking about and that is the self-employed. If he is in connection with his constituents, which I expect he is, the Minister of State knows as well as I do that people are coming and saying, "I am self-employed. I fell and broke my leg, and I cannot get anything." If a person is working for someone, they will automatically get relief, which they deserve to, but the self-employed who are delivering so much cannot get a brown cent. It is so difficult. I met somebody in a filling station the other day, a young man, and he told me that he had serious cancer. He said that he had been employed but had been self-employed longer. He applied for something to give him a chance to recover and got nothing.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: It is ironic that Fine Gael had its Ard-Fheis in Cork and they spent more time giving out about Independent Ireland to their councillors and Deputies. They also talked about ideas that I am on the record discussing in this Chamber three or four weeks previously. They are 16 years in government, and all they can do at their Ard-Fheis is give out about Independent Ireland, which is in existence for only two years.

It is ironic that the recent poll taken by the *Irish Farmers' Journal* showed that Fine Gael dropped from 31% down to 6% with the agricultural sector.

An Ceann Comhairle: Now, Deputy, we are discussing the Social Welfare Bill.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I am going to that, and this goes back to what the Tánaiste said when he was talking about social welfare. This is the man who was talking about social welfare and trying to copycat what we said. I will say it again, and if the Tánaiste is listening, he can copy it again. I have no problem with people in this county who are social welfare and need it. I have no problem with that. As a working person, I have no problem supporting people with disabilities who cannot work, who are unable to work, and who are trying to support their families. I have a huge problem with people who are abusing the social welfare system and who are laughing at the people in this country who are working. I have people who I know very well who have a disability. It allows them to go out and maybe work ten or 12 hours a week if they are able to do it, but they are doing it because they want to contribute. We have a small sector of society that never wanted to work a day in their lives, never will work a day in their lives and get rewarded all the time.

This is why I mentioned the Tánaiste, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil. They are 16 years in government. Independent Ireland comes out with this a couple of weeks ago, and it is on the record of the Dáil, and the Tánaiste now brings it up at an Ard-Fheis. Where was he for the last 16 years? Why has he not been tackling this for the last 16 years? The only thing that this Government has been doing is targeting the people who work in this country and making it

unaffordable to work - the squeezed middle. God knows, they should get a subsidy for working. They should get a break for working. Two people working in a household trying to fulfil for their family cannot make ends meet and a minority of people, who never worked a day in their lives and never want to, get rewarded.

As I have said, I am self-employed all my life, and thankfully I was given the health and hands to have a trade. I contribute as much as I can even within our own sector. I have brilliant people and their families working with me in our business. They get up every morning to get to work and ask what more they can do to help the vulnerable, elderly and people who cannot work.

They have no problem with that. They will work all day and all night to help them but we have not got one bit of help back from the Government. All it does is tax the fuel we use going to work and if we earn an extra few bob, it taxes us on it. If you are self-employed in this country and anything happens to you, you are a statistic. It is a case of "Fair play to you, thanks for helping". You might have employed as many people as you could and done brilliant work helping communities but when something happens to you, you get nothing.

Regarding those on social welfare, it is about being able to work. We have done a small bit of work on this. How many people out of the minority I am talking about have been involved in crime while they were on social welfare? If they are able to rob people, they are able to work. Why can they not join the dots regarding those people committing crimes? Everyone in this House supports people who cannot work and who need the subsidies but the ones who can work should get off their behinds, get out and help the people and do a bit of work. That is all I am asking for.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: At face value, the increases in core social welfare rates and family supports, maternity benefit, paternity benefit, adoptive benefit and parental benefit - the €309 along with €10 for pensioners - are all positive. At face value, they are going to help people face rising costs but let us face it, they are incremental. They are barely going to keep up with inflation and other costs when people are suffering across the country, especially when the supplemental energy supports have been removed. I previously called this budget an inflationary budget that has failed to address rising costs because of taxation measures that have done nothing to improve services. Ultimately, this social welfare element lacks ambition and fails to address the real hardship that some in our society face - our most vulnerable citizens.

Sadly, the Government continues to underestimate the additional costs faced by people living with disabilities so while the once-off payment may provide temporary assistance and is more than last year's amount, it clearly does not address the reality that many disabled people face massively higher daily living costs every week. Annually, that would be up to €25,000 in some cases as some of my colleagues have said. Whether it involves transport costs, energy usage, assistive technology, specialised equipment, medical expenses or personal supports, the additional cost of living with a disability is substantial. We have had multiple debates on this and the advocates for disabled people have worked hard to get the message across as have people living with disabilities that we need a long-term commitment to recognise these costs rather than relying on periodic lump sum measures.

I welcome the increase in the carer's allowance in terms of the income disregard but I think this budget forgot that carers are continuing to save the State billions of euro through their personal contributions to their family and friends, often at financial sacrifice. Many carers remain excluded from support because of the way the means testing arrangements are carried out and they struggle to balance these caring responsibilities with employment so, again, while one has to give some credit, it is incremental and is not enough.

I want to raise an issue that is not addressed in this Bill, namely, the position of women who face redundancy during pregnancy. Across the House, we welcome the increase in maternity-related benefits but I did not see anything in the legislation for a woman who loses her job through a genuine redundancy while preparing for the arrival of a child. There is a 16-week period where these women can get some sort of maternity benefit if the birth is pending but other than that, women face enormous financial uncertainty during one of the most vulnerable periods in their lives, so we need to look at additional measures. Germany has what would be described as the best practice situation. I have put down a few parliamentary questions in this regard and will be examining the responses in due course.

I refer to the Tánaiste's comments at the Fine Gael Ard-Fheis where I would say he punched down and went for the cheap sound bite criticising people in receipt of social welfare. We all know there are people who need incentives. We all know there is fraud in the welfare system but I got quite a few emails after my appearance on "A Week in Politics" where I pointed out that due to AI and not being given the opportunities to gain experience, young people are not being offered jobs. These people are graduates and people with master's qualifications but they cannot get a job for the simple reason that they have not built up the experience and after a couple of years, it gets harder and harder and it gets even more difficult to get ancillary jobs to keep things going while they get the job they train for. They felt quite insulted by what the Tánaiste put out there, so instead of punching down, we should try to create new supports for young people because while there are some measures out there, graduates and people who have just done their leaving certificate are not being given the opportunities to gain the experience. We need some sort of a hybrid model for all types of people working in those type of environments.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I refer to two previous speakers. I was self-employed for 18 years. I took the decision to go into self-employment. The tax code was clear and the PRSI and the welfare rates were clear in terms of contributions. It was my decision to take a risk. I never expected anything major back from that system and I think most people who go into self-employment do not have any expectation. They are very clear about the risks and what the systems and the supports the State can provide will do for them. I just wanted to say that because some people do not seem to get that

The Bill is about recognising the pressures that many people continue to face and the true test of any society is how it responds to those pressures and tries to give people some support. We are fortunate in Ireland to be in a position that many of our European counterparts are not in. In Europe, governments are facing difficult decisions and are trying to scale back public spending. In Ireland, we have over €30 billion to spend on social welfare for this coming year, including almost €1.15 billion on new measures.

One of the most significant measures in this Bill is the introduction of the first-ever cost-of-disability payment, which is expected to help over 240,000 recipients. I mentioned this last year and it is great to see it coming to fruition. People with disabilities have extra costs that I or others may never even have to think about. This payment acknowledges as a first step that those costs are real and the State has an important responsibility to help people address them. While it is a welcome first step, we can do a lot more in this area and I look forward to further progress.

We are also strengthening support for carers. The carer's allowance supports over 112,000 people. From January, the carer's allowance will go up by €10 per week and from July 2027, the weekly carer's allowance income disregard goes up to €1,150 for a single person and twice that for a couple. These changes will effectively allow more carers to qualify for and benefit from this really important support.

The Bill also gives supports for parents and families. The increase in child support payments will help and the increase in the working family payment income threshold widens it a bit and means that an estimated 63,000 people will now benefit. Older people will also benefit with changes in the State pension.

One issue I want to raise is VHI fees and charges. It is not necessarily directly relevant to this Bill but older folks in particular worry a lot about escalating VHI charges and we really need to look at that. In conclusion, these measures are only possible because the economy is doing so well. There is lots more to do but I support the Bill.

Deputy Brian Brennan: I welcome the Social Welfare Bill 2026. I listened with interest to previous speakers. I am a new TD but I am totally taken aback by the memory of some TDs when they spoke as though we have done nothing in the past 15 years.

Look at the statistics. I was in business when the unemployment rate was at 15% and people were kicking down the doors of my hotels to try to get employment. Now, we are 1.5%. If that is not a step in the right direction, then I am lost in debates. It is simply wrong to say that nothing has been done. Looking at other countries in Europe, the unemployment rate is at 10% in Spain. In the UK, it is at 5%, while it is at 6.5% and 32% in Canada and South Africa respectively. We must look at where we have come from. Some people in the Opposition have short memories based on the conversation and debate held in this Chamber today. We have to deal with the facts.

The fact we have reached an unemployment rate of 1.3% is hugely positive, but it is costing the State €1.7 billion. The Tánaiste was correct to bring a start to the debate in this regard. He is not discussing people with disabilities, carers or people who have just lost their jobs. Rather, he is discussing the long-term unemployed, namely, people who are unemployed for at least one year. He is questioning why they are in that situation and what supports we can give them. Able-bodied men and women are sitting at home. Is that healthy? That is the question the Tánaiste is asking. Why are they not working? Let us engage with these people, put courses and programmes in place and develop personal progression plans for them. That is what we are talking about. It cannot be healthy for someone, whether a parent or child, to be sitting at home when they are fully able to work. That is the question the Tánaiste was asking on Saturday night. We should have that debate. It is healthy to do so.

We also must look to the future. We must continue to engage on the issue of unemployment. There is a serious fear about what might happen down the road with artificial intelligence, AI. Some people are in two minds about it. Is the glass half full or half empty? Are we going to have massive job losses that will be replaced by AI?

With regard to the carer's allowance, the programme for Government clearly commits to abolish the means test for the carer's allowance. I hope we stand firm with that commitment.

Deputy Martin Daly: I welcome the social welfare budget for 2027. I welcome the increase of €2 billion, bringing the total budget to €30 billion. I note that, within nine years, we have moved from €19 billion to almost €30 billion in social welfare payments, despite a burgeoning economy and an almost full employment rate. Of course, we have to recognise that we would not be able to afford the supports contained in this budget without the industrial dynamo of the Irish economy, which has been nurtured by successive Irish Governments with forward-looking policies.

I wish to reflect on some of the commentary made. We have an unemployment rate of 1.3%. We need to be careful that the tone we use regarding that unemployment rate is one of encouragement, rather than one of beating down on people who may not have the resources or time. We want to arrive at a situation where people who can work should work, but we must also reflect on the last time this issue was raised in 2017. Claims were made of widespread welfare fraud when that turned out not to be the case. In fact, it was less than 0.2% of the social welfare budget. We have to reiterate that our social welfare system is, by and large, absolutely legitimate, supportive and progressive. It looks after our old people, our children and people who simply cannot work due to disability, as well as those people who are out of work short term.

I welcome the increases to the domiciliary care allowance and the wage subsidy scheme.

In the time remaining to me, I will comment on the carer's allowance income disregard. It has been increased substantially over the past two years. I would like to see, in the lifetime of the Government, the end of the means test for the carer's allowance. I also ask that further consideration be given to allowing more flexibility around the 18 hours individuals in receipt of the carer's allowance are allowed to work. We should make every effort to allow people to work those 18 hours in a flexible way without losing benefits.

Deputy Michael Cahill: I raise an issue that is having a real and, in some cases, devastating impact on people in receipt of disability allowance and the non-contributory State pension. Both of these are means-tested payments. The current treatment of inherited shares in Kerry Co-operative Creameries under the means assessment rules is fundamentally unfair. At present, the market value of a person's Kerry co-operative shares can be assessed as means, regardless of whether the person has received any money from them or has the ability to sell or access them or their value.

A constituent of mine lives with a disability and inherited Kerry co-operative shares. He is not in a position to fully understand or manage those shares, yet their assessed value has resulted in his weekly disability allowance payment being stopped. That is completely unacceptable. One is either disabled or not. These shares are not money in someone's bank

account. They are not necessarily accessible funds that can be used to pay household bills, put food on the table or meet the rising cost of living.

The situation is particularly concerning for pensioners. The €20,000 capital disregard under the State pension non-contributory means test can quickly be exceeded when the market value of these shares is assessed and added to even modest personal savings. People who have worked hard or inherited a small shareholding should not find themselves penalised or potentially deprived of essential social welfare support. Every pensioner looks forward to receiving their pension. To deprive them of that is sinful. At the very least, they should receive a partial payment.

There is also the question of taxation if those shares are sold. Tax liabilities may arise, meaning the individual will not receive the full market value that is being attributed to them in the means assessment. I ask the Minister of State to urgently review this approach. At an absolute minimum, the value assessed should take account of the tax payable on disposal. However, a fairer and more practical approach would be to assess the actual dividend income received from these shares, rather than their total theoretical market value. People with disabilities and older people should not be left without essential supports because of shares they may have inherited but cannot readily access. The Minister must address this anomaly and ensure the social welfare system treats these people fairly. The current system is an attack on our elderly and those with a disability. I ask the Minister of State to intervene to address this anomaly.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: First, I want to publicly put on the record my sympathies to the Minister of State, Deputy Collins, on the loss of his uncle, the late Gerry Collins. Like the Minister of State, he was a man who gave a great contribution to politics, both locally and nationally, for many years. He should be respected, and so should the Minister of State. He is an awful loss to you all.

Turning now to this important issue, the work that has been done and is continuing to be done by the Government on the carer's allowance and the means test is important. Over the past two budgets, more and more people have been able to come into the net, as I call it, and qualify for the carer's allowance. We have to get to that stage for every person who is caring for someone. The strict means testing that was in place meant that people who were providing care were still not entitled to get the allowance. That was wrong. These people are doing a great service to their communities and families by taking care of relatives and, indeed, people who are not related to them at all. That is important.

I wish to again raise the issue of couples who have been left out of this budget through the inheritance tax. I am talking about parents and couples who, for one reason or another, do not have a direct heir of their own.

They work hard and see what I call double or triple taxation of their money and assets, which they have worked hard for. I was hoping last year that there would be something in the budget for those people and again this year. There were a lot of constraints and a lot of things were being called upon, but surely to goodness we can do something for those people. We have to get to the stage where we can do that.

Regarding the fuel allowance, the cost of fuel is ever increasing. It is hard to believe that there are still people who should be getting fuel allowance but are not. There could be a widow whose husband might have had a private pension and because of the income going into the house, she might be debarred from getting the fuel allowance. That person is living on only a pension, is elderly and may be living alone and relying on all-electric heating or having to buy solid fuel or, worse again, home heating oil. Those people are struggling and I would have liked to have seen consideration given to people like that. When it comes to budget time, social welfare and the Department, the Minister and Minister of State are doing excellent work. However, at the same time, it is a balancing act trying to make sure they take care of everyone.

I will tackle the elephant in the room, the words of the Tánaiste about long-term reliance on the dole, jobseeker's payments or whatever you like to call it. That we want to try to encourage people not to look at it as a way of going through life is obvious. Any parent, grandparent, politician or anyone worth their salt would want to tell people they should work. People have reasons for not being able to work, whether it is intellectual or physical, but we have many schemes for upskilling and training. For young people of 18, 19, 20 or in their 20s to decide they will not work because they will be able to claim jobseeker's payment, that they will get some payment, is an awful way for them to set out on life's journey.

Life is not a practice run. People get one chance at it and, for people to achieve and do any good, it is great the State, via the Department of Social Protection, is there to help people. If people have a disability and are unable to work, we are still trying to help them to get to do something to fill their days, have them on different types of training programmes or something to keep them occupied. However, for a young, healthy, fit young man or woman to think they do not have to work because there is money there for them is rubbish.

I hear people making these suggestions. It was like the Tánaiste had grown horns and become the divil all of a sudden for suggesting we should talk about people on the jobseeker's payment long term. There is nothing in the world wrong with asking people why it is going on so long and saying we want to encourage them. It is not that we want to do that people out of something, but we would like to encourage them and show there is a better way of living.

We are at full employment. The one thing everyone, including the Ceann Comhairle, is hearing employers say every day is that their biggest problem is having enough people to do the work and that they could do much more if they could get people to work. At the same time, we have people who say they cannot get work. Then the Tánaiste said we should do something about it and people criticise him. I cannot understand that. I cannot square that circle at all, because we should be encouraging people to work and doing everything in the world to ensure the only people claiming a jobseeker's payment are those who genuinely need it, that is, those who, for a genuine reason, cannot get work. However, having people who are fit and healthy not working is not good for them, their families or the State. It is not good for anyone. We should be watching out for things like that and having a debate about it.

The work being done with training programmes and all the different organisations is welcome. We should be encouraging more of that. I am grateful in County Kerry, for instance, for the great work being done in the Munster Technological University, MTU, and the expansion that has gone on and will continue to go on there. That type of work is welcome.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I too commiserate with the Minister on the death of the former Minister, Gerard Collins. He was a regular visitor to our house at different times. I extend my sympathies to all the family.

I welcome the increases in the budget to welfare payments and benefit payments, including jobseeker's benefit and maternity benefit. I also welcome the payment for people with disabilities because it costs them more to live. It is an important payment.

I thank all the social welfare workers, those in the offices who help us all daily and those in different roles who help people with disabilities. The benefit payments, so it is clear, are payments people are entitled to based on their contributions. People who work for years and pay their taxes should be entitled to a payment when they need it. I have raised this before and ask again today why it is that those on a benefit payment do not qualify for the fuel allowance. Women on maternity benefit at home with a small baby are not entitled to fuel allowance. It should be paid with the benefit payment as those people have paid their fair share of taxes down through the years. I ask that this is be looked at and ensured.

For example, a pensioner living with a cancer patient on illness benefit does not qualify for fuel allowance, although the combined State pension and illness benefit payments are considerably below the fuel allowance means threshold. It is wrong that those getting benefit payments do not get the fuel allowance. The cost of fuel is exorbitant at present, whether it is heating oil, coal, electricity or foreign briquettes - we do not have our own briquettes any more. It is unfair that they do not get the fuel allowance.

There are 1.8 million additional home support hours for elderly people in the budget and we are told that home help hours increased in previous budgets. This is welcome. However, it is a fact that every day people are approved for home help, but it is not happening because the people do not come. They are waiting for months. They have been let out of hospitals on the strength of getting help at home and it is not happening. It has to be addressed.

I know one elderly lady who is 83 years of age. She was approved for home help in May 2025 and it still has not been put in place - imagine - 18 months later. She is living alone in dreadful pain. She cannot get out of bed on her own or dress herself and is prone to falls. I have made representations more than once on her behalf to the HSE and as recently as 22 October, I got the same reply saying it does not have sufficient capacity to meet her home support needs. This is unacceptable. It is sad to think an 83-year-old person who dearly wants to live out her life in her own home cannot get help. I will initiate a serious investigation into this, to see why it is has happened like this.

The community employment, CE, scheme is a great scheme for workers. It gets them out and improves their social activity. They are generally paid a small sum of money. They do great work in their communities. However, when workers get to pension age, they have to stop working and coming into the CE scheme, which gives many workers a lot of heartache. They have been told they can continue working, but they will not get one extra cent of pay. This is carrying the thing to the fair altogether.

It is totally unfair. No one should have to work for nothing. No pay is not fair. Enough money is being wasted and likes of Mother Teresa are long gone. This is a ridiculous situation.

Another sector that is hard done by is the self-employed. I have been one of them for many years and I know what it is like to be injured or out of action and to get nothing from anywhere. There are people with young families who are struggling to survive. They do employ people and have paid a lot of taxes so it is wrong that they cannot get disability or anything. They get nothing.

The working family payment is there to bridge the gap for those on a minimum wage or low income. It is very unfair that this payment can then put a family over the threshold for social housing. I have come across this on several occasions where families have been thrown off the list because they got the family income supplement and that can put them over the threshold for social housing. It is proof when they get it that they need it to live, survive and put food on the table. It should not be treated as raw income and force them off the social housing list. I have often had people who were on the housing list for nine or almost ten years. They were almost there but just because they qualified for the family income supplement they were thrown off the list and had to start again when the family income supplement stopped. That is totally unfair. I hope the officials are listening because I want this to be addressed. It is totally unfair when people have given that length of time, and often longer, on the housing list only to be written off it and have to start all over again.

I will go back to the self-employed and something that is very unfair. In 2012, a Minister or Tánaiste in a different government promised that she would address this. I will not mention her name as she is not here tonight to hear me. Over the years so many Ministers have promised to do something to help the self-employed. God damn it, they are employing people and have employed people. They put everything at risk to employ people and to work but when they come a cropper for an accident or something that puts them out of commission, they still do not qualify for an illness benefit payment or something of that kind. It might be 12 months before they qualify for any payment of any kind.

There are things we welcome in the budget but there was something that gave a lot of insult to me and a lot of people: €3 extra a week for people on the living alone allowance. That is neither here nor there, as I said at the time. It would not buy a cup of tea or a bar of chocolate. It would have been better not to mention it at all because it insulted so many people. An extra €3 is a very small amount for people who have been waiting for something a long time.

Debate adjourned.

Toll Charges and the Cost of Living: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Pa Daly: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

recognises that:

— there are 11 toll roads in operation across the State, ten of which are on the national roads network, with two of these being in full public ownership, and eight roads across the State are tolled under Public Private Partnerships (PPP), with the Minister for Transport holding responsibility for overall policy and funding in relation to the National Roads 2040 programme;

— households and workers across the State continue to face significant cost of living pressures, including the rising costs of rent, energy, food, insurance and transport;

— motorists are already facing substantial financial pressures arising from fuel prices, motor insurance, motor tax, vehicle maintenance and existing toll charges;

— for many workers and families, particularly those living in rural areas and communities with limited public transport, travelling by car is a necessity rather than a choice;

— toll charges represent an additional financial burden on workers who rely on the national road network to travel to and from employment, education and essential services;

— further increases in toll charges in January 2027, would add to the cumulative financial pressures facing motorists and households; and

— annual increases in carbon taxes, which have been implemented by the Government since 2020, and are set out to 2030, have raised the price of motor fuels, with the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance holding overall responsibility for tax policy;

notes that:

— private toll companies have recorded millions of euros in after tax profits in the past year, and these profits are growing to record levels;

— the existing gold-plated PPP contracts, that permit toll increases and generous traffic guarantee payments, are a legacy of bad economic policy choices and decisions made by successive Fianna Fáil led Governments, while workers who depend on tolled roads for their daily commute incur significant annual costs, simply to travel to and from work;

— motorists are being charged higher tolls year-on-year for roads that are growing increasingly congested;

— new data has shown that hiked tolls on the M50 motorway have done nothing to reduce congestion since the new toll regime began, meaning this is another punitive measure from a Government that punishes people because they have failed to provide any alternative;

— families should not face additional transport costs at a time when household budgets remain under considerable pressure;

— the Government has a responsibility to consider the cumulative impact of increases from toll hikes, and the impact on household living standards; and

— there is a precedent for this, and the Minister for Transport said, on the eve of the General Election, that toll hikes should not go ahead, and the cost of living has risen sharply since then; and

calls on the Government to:

— stop the proposed increase in toll charges scheduled for January 2027, ensuring that motorists are not subjected to additional financial pressures at a time of continuing cost of living difficulties;

— undertake a review of the cumulative financial burden of toll charges on regular commuters, workers and families, particularly those with no viable public transport alternative;

— examine measures to provide greater relief for frequent road users who depend on tolled routes for work and essential travel; and

— ensure that future decisions on toll charges take full account of affordability, household incomes and the wider cost of living pressures facing motorists.

Ordinary workers and families have had enough. They have had enough of being treated like cash machines, of being told there is no money to ease the burden on households while government after government signs off on price hikes, and enough of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael making life more expensive for ordinary people at every available opportunity. Across all of the issues that come in here, through housing, student accommodation, roads and energy, the Government's *modus operandi* seems to be to facilitate profits for investors. At a time when the cost of living remains so high, the Government has decided that motorists should pay even more - more at the petrol pump, for insurance, taxes, charges and now more at the tollbooth from 1 January. The reality is the people being targeted by these increases are not wealthy executives or investors. They are healthcare workers travelling to hospitals, parents bringing children to school, tradespeople trying to get to work and small businesses keeping local economies alive.

Endlessly, the Government talks about public transport options but in huge parts of rural Ireland these options simply do not exist. There have been new bus services put on in the recent years but these are decreasing year on year where now only four new services were introduced this year. What makes this decision even more outrageous is that motorists are already paying extraordinary amounts in toll charges. There is a double indemnity in the deal that was done with the Government because they get huge increases in traffic, profit and income and built into it is the guarantee that with the cost of inflation that will go up and up. Last year alone, the M50 generated €216 million in toll income. The M50 and the Dublin Port Tunnel together generated €251 million. That is about €688,000 every single day. Across the State, toll roads generated about €476 million in one year. Despite this, motorists are still stuck in traffic, congestion is rampant, journeys are getting longer and now the Government wants people to pay even more for a deteriorating service.

We are told that these increases are necessary but for what? They are not reducing congestion and the evidence shows that previous toll increases on the M50 in particular failed to deliver any meaningful reduction in traffic volumes because people still have to make the same journeys. The truth is that these tolls are increasingly nothing more than a revenue-raising exercise. They are attacks on getting to work, on bringing your child to school and on participating in society. The Government is not managing transport demand - it is monetising necessity. Private operators are continuing to record substantial profits. The operator of the Limerick tunnel reports an operating profit of almost €12 million. Toll hikes helped to push profits up by 10% and this year they increased again at a rate significantly above inflation. Let

us be honest about what is happening. The increases are not about protecting struggling motorists, helping families or tackling congestion but protecting revenue streams and protecting profits.

The Minister argued before the last general election that toll increases were too high and should not proceed. Now, when he is in the Cabinet he is standing over exactly the same policy that was criticised. He has the power to stop this. Increasing tolls is not a *fait accompli* – it is a political choice. The Government did it before following a motion introduced by Sinn Féin in 2022 when toll increases due in January of 2023 were deferred. That can happen again. The only thing missing now is the political will. Which side is the Minister on? Is he on the side of the workers and the people going to school or college or is he standing with the operators who are recording millions in profits while families are struggling with household bills? Government TDs also have a choice to continue down the road of endless increases and endless excuses or to stop the toll hikes. They can finally start addressing the fundamental injustice of forcing people to pay more and more for a system that they have no choice but to use. We say scrap the toll hikes and support this motion. Workers and families have paid enough.

I will mention some of what is in the Minister's counter-motion. "Lies, damn lies and statistics" is the old phrase. The Minister's amendment mentioned that the Government has implemented significant reforms under the action plan for insurance reform December 2020. He says boldly that average motor insurance premiums have fallen by 34% since 2016 but what he did not say is to look at the 2014 figure.

According to the Central Bank, the average cost of insurance was €431 then and is now €655 - an increase.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: The recent announcement of toll hikes across the State comes as yet another blow for drivers, hauliers and commuters but good news for private toll companies, which will continue to see their profits increase while drivers pay the price. Year after year, we have seen congestion grow on our motorway network and the cost of road transport increase, especially for those who operate haulage businesses. Following the latest announcement, the Irish Road Haulage Association warned that toll increases will increase operating costs for freight operators and these costs will inevitably be paid by consumers buying everyday essentials.

These increases will have a significant impact on every driver who uses the motorway network. Somebody driving from Galway to Dublin must pass through two tolls, or three if they are travelling to Dublin Airport. This all adds up. These toll hikes come at a time when drivers have seen significant increases in the cost of fuel, insurance and other basics associated with running a car. For many people, especially those living in rural areas, driving is not a luxury. The Minister knows that many people simply do not have a viable public transport alternative and they have to use their cars and the motorway network daily to access employment, education, healthcare and other essential public services. The cost of driving has become a major pressure on families and households across the State, yet over recent months the Government has failed to deliver the measures needed to support households with that cost. When it comes to toll hikes, it is increasing the pressure on families.

Four years ago, following pressure from Sinn Féin, the then Minister for Transport acted to halt toll increases due to take place in 2023. It can and should be done again now. People will

remember that on the eve of the general election in 2024, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, called for toll increases to be scrapped. In 2025, he said in the Dáil that toll increases were far too high but allowed them to go ahead anyway. He has offered nothing but spin and soundbites, promising one thing and doing the complete opposite. He has the same powers to stop toll hikes that his predecessor had in 2022. He must use these powers and ensure motorists do not face yet another increase in the cost of driving.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Tax, tax, tax - that is all this Government wants to do to people. Everywhere people turn, the Government is hitting them with higher taxes and higher costs just for the basics. It is no different when we are talking about travel, whether on public transport or keeping a car on the road. The Government's decision to hike up toll charges in January is its latest bright idea to take more money out of the pockets of ordinary people.

Let us be honest. Tolls are a bad policy. They are a bad way to deliver infrastructure. We have rip-off contracts stretching over 25 years that provide terrible value for money. They are a gravy train for the private companies, while taxpayers are left to pick up the tab for tens of millions of euro. These tolls were never a good idea.

Now, in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis, the Minister, who said before the election that they should not go ahead, is jacking them up, hitting thousands of ordinary families who rely on these routes every day. Diesel prices have been hammering these same drivers and insurance costs have gone through the roof. In the Finance Bill, the Minister wants to increase VRT, and then he comes along and jacks up toll charges as well. People have had enough. It is time to put workers and families first. We should have no toll increases, no new toll-funded projects and no renewal of toll contracts when the leases are up.

For many workers these roads are not a luxury or a choice. They are how people get about their everyday lives, yet every year the Government seems to find another way to reach into people's pockets and make life harder for them. The Minister knows damn well because he is the Minister who said toll increases should not happen, but that was before an election. Fianna Fáil forgot about that when they got their seats. The Minister has the power to stop this toll hike. It can be done in the morning. We forced the Government to do it in 2023; the current Government should do it now. It is a political choice and one that it should make. It should make the right choice and say clearly that people have had enough and that it understands the pressure people are under when putting diesel in the car or paying for insurance, tax or the VRT it is pushing up. Pushing up tolls on people is simply a step too far. The Minister should do the right thing, live up to the commitment he made and scrap these toll increases.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: The Government parties have made Drogheda a commuter town. To make matters worse for the thousands of daily commuters, the Government has made commuting more expensive. In the depths of a cost-of-living crisis, it has refused to go far enough in cutting excise on fuel and diesel, despite us in Sinn Féin proposing ways for this to be done. In January, commuters will face increased bus and train fares - happy new year, indeed. On top of that, the Government is putting up M1 toll costs locally for us by 10 cent per journey, which will mean the average daily commuter using the M1 will pay over €1,000 per year on that toll alone. For many, it could be close to €1,200.

My opinion on the M1 toll road is the same as it has always been: there should be no toll road in Drogheda. The gold-plated public-private partnership contracts that permit these toll increases are a legacy of bad economic decisions made by successive Fianna Fáil-led Administrations. The M1 Dundalk western bypass PPP contract was awarded to the Celtic Roads Group Dundalk Limited consortium in February 2004. It will run for a 30-year term. The scheme involved construction of an 11 km stretch of road forming part of the N1/M1 national primary route in the vicinity of the town of Dundalk, County Louth. Dundalk got the road but Drogheda got the toll.

I call on the Government not only to scrap any proposed toll increases but to review the PPP toll arrangement on the M1 and end that contract once and for all. Locals in Drogheda have had to live with severely congested roads as commuters divert into the town to avoid paying the toll. With every increase, that congestion gets worse. The slip road tolls are an additional tax on people living, working, shopping and visiting in Drogheda. We have congestion on roads, packed-out buses and trains and commuters are paying a fortune for the privilege of getting to work.

At a time when my constituents face rising cost-of-living pressures in rent, energy, food and fuel, they do not need the Government to inflict another cost hike on them just for getting into and out of Drogheda for work, education or essential health services. It is nothing but another slap in the face to the people I represent. It is in the Minister's power to stop this proceeding in January. He has an opportunity to show the people he sees them and, more importantly, hears them. Scrap the toll hikes.

Deputy Martin Kenny: The issue of public-private partnerships goes back many years in this country. It has been one of the most inefficient and ineffective ways of providing public transport services, particularly road services, yet Government continues to go back to it. The reality is that we have a well-connected group of people on a gravy train and the public is paying for it through Government contracts that were lousy contracts from the very start. Now the Government will allow more increases on those tolls. The people who use the toll routes have little or no other option.

I went to the airport last Saturday morning. I paid a toll going up the N4, another one going up the M50 and the same going back again, and it was like a traffic jam. That is the reality for the vast majority of people in the country, who have to use those roads through no fault of their own. Think of the haulage sector and those delivering goods to our shops and other premises. This is putting up the cost of delivery, which puts up the price of supplies the public has to buy.

All of this is an inflationary gravy train that continues to make it less affordable for people to live. That is the reality most people are encountering as they go about their daily lives. The cost of fuel, housing, rent and everything is going up and up. All these small things make a big difference. When they are added together, they put huge pressure on ordinary working families who are struggling to survive.

The Minister needs to ensure these toll increases do not go ahead, stand by what he said before the last election and recognise where people are. Ordinary workers and people doing their best to survive and manage in our economy need a break. The Minister needs to give them that break by ensuring these toll charges do not go ahead so we have a chance of seeing some relief for ordinary working people and those delivering goods the length and breadth of

the country, whether hauliers or the small white vans that deliver goods to our shops. All of them are paying through the nose.

At the end of the day, all of this comes back to the same thing: greasy deals done in the background with small groups of people who got a big payout and everybody else has to pay for it. It is time that stopped. It is time we recognised that that corrupt type of arrangement we had in this society needs to end. The first thing the Minister can do to end it is ensure these toll charges do not go ahead and then look at those contracts, take them apart and ensure we do not continue to see ordinary people paying for this corruption from the past.

8 o'clock

Deputy Ann Graves: Families, workers, students and pensioners all continue to be hit by the cost-of-living crisis. Their food, fuel and rent costs and all their bills have just spiralled out of control. Now the Government heaps further pain on the public by imposing transport fare increases from January. The Government is pickpocketing the public. It does not matter what you do. If you drive, you are hit with tolls and the soaring cost of fuel. If you use public transport, you are hit with fare increases. Sinn Féin is calling for an immediate stop to the fare hikes, free public transport for under-18s and a sustainable public transport system that is accessible and works for everyone. This is an opportunity for the Government to stand up for ordinary people by backing our motion.

The private companies in charge of toll bridges are making record profits. There is no argument for increasing the tolls again in January. Meanwhile, in Dublin Fingal East, the Minister's constituents, as well as mine, are experiencing chaos on the roads. The R132 connectivity project has brought Swords and the surrounding areas to a complete standstill. I stood last night with residents outside Fingal County Council offices to protest the ongoing problems with the project. There is growing anger and frustration over the delivery of this project, particularly the issues with the newly constructed S3 junction and the impact the changes have had on road users. Only an independent assessment of the R132 project will give the public the answers they deserve and need. People deserve a clear, impartial assessment of whether the junction is functioning as intended, whether it is safe and suitable for all road users and what remedial works are required.

A major publicly funded infrastructure project should be properly designed, properly delivered and fit for purpose. What we have is traffic chaos. Journeys of five minutes now take an hour. Emergency service response times are affected. Large vehicles, including buses and emergency vehicles, cannot navigate the turns. Public infrastructure should make journeys safer and more efficient, not create additional problems and uncertainty. There must be proper scrutiny and accountability.

The people of Dublin Fingal East are struggling to pay their bills without increased costs in fares and tolls, while the Minister for Transport, who is also a local Minister, does not, as I understand it, pay tolls for his ministerial car. Perhaps the Minister will confirm that for the House. Sinn Féin calls on the Government to develop affordable alternatives and improve transport investment, not impose additional charges and chaos on road users. The Minister can and must scrap the toll increases.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I represent the youngest constituency in the State, the constituency with the fastest-growing population. Unfortunately, our transport options are not growing in line with the population. The Minister will know that very well if he ever tries to get on a DART or a train, because they are already overcrowded by the time they reach my constituency.

My constituency has not been well served by successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments. This means that for work, for third level education and to go to hospital, we must leave the constituency. There is no primary care centre, no hospital in my area and no college or university. We remain underemployed. The people I represent have to leave in the morning. What do they do? They go for the train or the bus. What is the Government's answer to that? It is going to jack up the cost of public transport on 1 January by 15%, in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis. Public transport then becomes unaffordable or, indeed, people cannot get on one of the disappearing buses or find space on one of the overcrowded trains, so they get into their cars. No matter which way they drive, they are getting caught by the Government jacking up the cost of the tolls. If they turn to the right when they come out, they go up towards Drogheda and they are getting caught. They go across the M50 and they are getting caught. They go down the port tunnel and are getting caught. The Government is getting them in every way. I have written down that they are getting squeezed, but in fact they are getting screwed every which way by the Government. It is not funny. It really is not. It is very serious for people. They are facing very real choices in the cost-of-living crisis. Jesus Christ knows we would not expect much from the Government, but the very least a government could do, if it were listening in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis, is just not make things worse. People are already struggling to get to the end of the week. They got nothing in the budget, absolutely nothing. The vast majority of working people will either be *status quo ante* or worse off as a direct result. They are now facing the Government jacking up the cost of using the car and the cost of taking public transport from 1 January. Happy new year to them. What does the Minister want them to do? The Government has no policy that gives them the right to work from home. What does the Minister propose that they do? Where are they supposed to make the cuts? Perhaps the Minister will address that in his remarks.

Minister for Transport (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I move amendment No. 1:

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

"notes that:

— over the last 25 years, an extensive motorway network has been built across the State, development of which depended on the use of Public Private Partnerships (PPP);

— toll revenue provides a significant contribution to the maintenance and improvement of the national road network, and it is expected that approximately €282 million in revenue will contribute to the Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII) investment in the network in 2026;

— the absence of toll revenue would leave a shortfall in maintenance and improvement budgets that would need to be met by the Exchequer, and by extension, the taxpayer;

— the impact of inflation, driven by a number of factors, including supply chain disruptions resulting from the geopolitical situation, energy costs and labour shortages, has had a particular impact on the cost of civil works, such as pavement restoration and other measures to safeguard our national road network;

— the setting of tolls is not at the discretion of the Minister for Transport, but is an annual process undertaken by TII, that takes place in accordance with formulas which are set out in the bye-laws for each toll scheme, with long-term contracts in place for the PPP schemes;

— the Government has delivered one of the largest support packages in the European Union per head capita, amounting to over €1.7 billion in supports from March 2026 to June 2027, to assist households and businesses;

— excise reductions have been extended in full until end of February 2027, thereby maintaining until then a 30 cent per litre reduction in diesel, and 25 cent per litre reduction in petrol;

— the carbon tax increase on auto fuels due to take place on 14th October, 2026, has been deferred until 1st May, 2027;

— motor tax rates have remained unchanged since January 2021, and motor tax receipts per vehicle are in fact in long term decline;

— the Government has implemented significant reforms under the Action Plan for Insurance Reform - December 2020, including the establishment of the Office to Promote Competition in the Insurance Market (OPCIM), rebalancing the duty of care, enhanced data transparency from the National Claims Information Database (NCID), the reform of the Injuries Resolution Board (formerly PIAB), and the introduction of the Personal Injuries Guidelines, and these reforms have delivered measurable outcomes, including:

— average motor insurance premiums falling by approximately 34 per cent since 2016; and

— the share of personal injury costs in motor claims declining from 72 per cent in 2019, to 44 per cent in 2025;

— the development of a more competitive insurance landscape in Ireland, through the OPCIM, has seen insurance now available in areas that previously faced serious difficulties, and the entry of additional supply from new insurers;

— the Government is implementing further reforms to address the cost and supply of insurance under the Action Plan for Insurance Reform 2025-2029: A Stronger Market, A Fairer Future, focused on where the greatest impact on cost and availability can be achieved, including:

— the introduction of a Transparency Code for the insurance industry;

— accelerated publication of the NCID data and enhanced sectoral analysis;

— strengthening of the Injuries Resolution Board;

— reforms to address legal costs, including consideration of caps for certain injuries, a scale of legal fees, and bringing forward legislation to amend the Judicial Council Act 2019; and

— expansion of the OPCIM, and streamlined authorisation for new market entrants, to deepen supply and attract new entrants into the insurance market; and

affirms the Government's efforts to:

— recognise the critical importance of transport investment, with almost one-in-four euros allocated as part of the National Development Plan review to be invested in transport;

— increase investment in road networks and road safety to €9.7 billion during the 2026 to 2030 period, as part of the €24.3 billion to be allocated to transport under the Sectoral Investment Plan for Transport;

— continue the construction of new national road projects, such as the N5 Ballaghaderreen to Scramoge, M28 Cork to Ringaskiddy and the Adare Bypass, and support the delivery of Critical Infrastructure with the Galway City Ring Road being one of the initial projects designated in July this year;

— safeguard the protection and renewal of existing national roads, through pavement repair and renewal, safety improvements and climate adaptation;

— support affordable public transport options through an increased allocation for 2027 of over €1 billion, allowing the expansion of bus services across the State;

— address affordability through the support of free travel for all children up to the age of nine, and the Young Adult and Student Card for those aged 19-25;

— deliver an improved public transport network through the investment of billions of euro in new infrastructure, such as BusConnects, MetroLink, DART+, Cork Area Commuter Rail, Luas Finglas and the reopening of the Western Rail Corridor;

— support our road freight sector, through the Road Transporters Support Scheme and the Diesel Rebate Scheme;

— fully understand the pressures on households that have arisen due to rising petrol and diesel costs, as a result of the conflict in the Middle East, and that it has continuously acted to allay these pressures;

— remain committed to decarbonising our society, increasing investment in renewable energy sources;

— recycle carbon tax revenues, to protect those most vulnerable to fuel poverty through targeted welfare interventions; and

— prioritise and progress further insurance reform to enhance the affordability and availability of insurance, under the Programme for Government 2025 - Securing Ireland's Future, and building on the significant reforms to date.".

I thank the Deputies for giving me the opportunity to speak about the issue of transport, including toll charges. I am sure we can all agree on the importance of ensuring a safe and efficient network of national roads and motorways and that it is vital that the investment that has been made in that network in recent decades continue to be safeguarded. I also welcome the chance to discuss measures that are being undertaken to deliver radical improvements in public transport across the State. As such, I have tabled a counter-motion to the Sinn Féin motion on toll charges.

Deputies might know that there are 11 toll roads in the State, ten of which are on the national road network. Of the ten toll roads on the national road network, two are publicly operated, namely the M50 and Dublin Tunnel. Revenue from these tolls is collected directly for TII by operating companies under contract with TII. These revenues are invested by TII in the operation and maintenance of the national road network. The other eight roads are public–private partnership, PPP, roads, which were constructed and are now operated and maintained under long-term contracts with TII. Revenue generated by these roads is collected by the PPP companies and is used to repay loans arising from the construction of the roads and to fund ongoing operations and maintenance activities. In addition, some toll revenue generated on these roads passes to TII through revenue-sharing mechanisms.

On the framework for setting tolls, toll by-laws for each individual road set out the basis for calculating maximum tolls each year. These are calculated for each vehicle category. TII calculates the maximum tolls for the Dublin Tunnel and the M50 and decides what actual tolls should apply. The PPP companies calculate the maximum tolls for the eight concession schemes and propose the actual tolls that should apply. The mechanism for these calculations is set out very clearly in the individual toll by-laws and is based on the consumer price index. Actual tolls charged may not exceed the calculated maximum toll for each scheme. There is no formal consultative role for me as Minister when it comes to tolls. It is a matter for TII. It is important to note that TII does not have the right to unilaterally change the basis on which PPP tolls are reviewed.

The Irish national road network is now over 5,300 km, of which about 1,000 km is motorway. Since 2000, Dublin has been linked to Cork, Limerick, Galway and the Border with new motorways, augmented by high-quality dual carriageways. Substantial progress has been made in improving the quality of the road network in other parts of the State. It is an investment priority to ensure that the existing motorway and national road networks, which have been greatly enhanced over the past two decades, are maintained to a high level to ensure high-quality service, accessibility and connectivity for transport users.

Many major new road developments in the last 25 years were funded through PPPs, meaning the funding for the building and maintenance of the roads came from both the Government and the private sector. These private sector businesses then charge tolls for the use of the roads they have helped to build. This has allowed for the rapid expansion of our motorway network. A number of these contracts include mechanisms under which, when traffic volumes do not reach a specified threshold level, money is paid by the State to the toll operators. However, it works in reverse. If traffic volumes exceed certain thresholds specified in the contract for each scheme, the excess toll revenue is returned from the toll operator to the State. That is a two-way financial contract approach that has been used in other sectors to encourage private sector infrastructure development. It is important to point out that the only

scheme for which the State is currently making payments under this mechanism is Limerick Tunnel, for which approximately €5 million was paid in 2025.

It should also be noted that in recent years inflation has had a particular impact on the construction sector, with the NTA's inflation bulletin indicating that the cost of major civil engineering projects has increased by approximately 54% since 2020. This is particularly felt in relation to products such as bitumen, which are used in road pavement repair, meaning that the cost of protection and renewal of the existing network has increased substantially.

Significant investment has been made across Ireland in recent years to expand public transport services. Deputy O'Reilly will know that too. This includes the roll-out of BusConnects services, enhanced rural transport links through Local Link and increased rail and bus capacity. This investment will increase further over the period covered by the current national development plan. For example, MetroLink is starting. Enabling works will start next year. It is at approval gate 2 stage. There is €6 billion to be invested between now and the end of the decade, with major construction work starting in 2028.

This will be transformational for the Dublin region, with 20,000 passengers per hour in each direction. It is the largest public transport project we will be embarking on.

On Luas Finglas, which we will extend, we have brought that forward. It is approaching a critical milestone to get to approval gate 2. It is a project we expect to procure for next year, starting construction very shortly thereafter.

In regard to the network redesign of BusConnects, we have seen that already. The first two are under construction. We have Liffey Valley into the city and Finglas-Ballymun into the city as well, with further roll-out of BusConnects right across the State.

On the DART+ programme, work is already starting on that. We have started the enabling works on DART+ West. The northern rail line from Dublin to Drogheda, which Deputy O'Reilly spoke about, will see the first new battery electric DART+ fleet rolled out next year, in a boost for people in our area, increasing capacity there as well. The northern line will also see a new Dublin-Belfast Enterprise fleet rolled out at the end of the decade. Already this year, we have invested €140 million from the shared island fund, which has enabled us to bring DART+ Coastal North forward.

The Cork commuter rail programme has finished phase 1 and we are embarking on phase 2. Phase 1 provided new platforms at Kent Station, signalling and double-tracking works, all of which are completed and being advanced.

In relation to the all-island strategic rail review, we are progressing a series of passing loops and new platforms to add capacity and enhance resilience across the network. These works will be completed by the end of the decade in relation to bus and rail services across the State as well. As Deputies will know because I have said it publicly, next year will see one of the largest expansions of services right across the country, with 140 new services to be announced shortly across urban and rural rail, bus and Luas. We have also seen one of the first major recommendations of the rail review progressed, with the reinstatement of the western rail corridor from Claremorris to Athenry. This project will significantly enhance regional connectivity in the west.

Taken together, this is a very ambitious programme, one that is absolutely needed. One in every €4 in the national development plan, NDP, is being invested in transport, or €24.25 billion between now and the end of the decade.

Not to be too parochial, but Deputy Graves mentioned two things. One was in relation to tolls. I pay tolls when I drive my own car. If a Garda car drives on toll roads, it is, like other services, exempt from paying them and the Deputy knows that. I pay tolls myself. Let us be clear on that. Second, the scheme that has been referenced with regard to the R132 works is a local authority scheme that has been passed by the local authority. It is not part of the MetroLink enabling works. I saw a colleague of the Deputy's and mine making that pronouncement yesterday on social media - not the Deputy. However, we need to ensure that the major transport projects we are looking to deliver across road and rail are actually delivered and we are embarking on a significant phase. We are getting into construction on projects that have been spoken about for a long time. I campaigned on the basis that MetroLink would be delivered and I am going to deliver it. We are going to start it. On Luas Finglas - I see Deputy Ellis sitting beside the Deputy - I said we brought that forward, and further investment in our rail network right the way across the country, as I have outlined there. I refer to things like the delivery of the Galway ring road, which many opposed as well. Work will now be able to commence on that.

These are welcome things. We have a growing population, with 1.5 million people more than we had in 1990, 1 million more cars than we had in 1990, and over 1 million more homes in this country as well. Yes, there are unquestionably areas where there is congestion, but the answer to that is not just more roads like the M50. The answer to that is to improve public transport. That is why every €1 in every €4 being invested under the national development plan is going into transport, with more than ever going into public transport services. Yes, they do need to improve - no one is disputing that - but they are in places. They will improve further through the delivery of very significant projects such as MetroLink.

On Cork Luas, the preferred route is out. It is another scheme that we will commence as well, so the plan is there and is now in implementation. I mentioned DART+ West; I am also going to bring DART+ South West forward. I will be bringing both of those to Cabinet very shortly at approval gate 2. We have already started the compulsory purchase order, CPO, work on lands in that area, too. This is a major expansion of our DART network and that is where the answer is. Investment does need to still continue on our roads to make sure they are maintained to a safe standard, and that is what I intend to do.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: Motorways are not a luxury. They are essential public infrastructure. They get people to work, hospital appointments, everyday requirements and home to their families. Motorways keep the entire State moving. They are designed to make our daily lives easier. They should not be treated as a cash cow to drain more money from ordinary people and workers but, in January, that is exactly what the Minister will do, drain more money out of people's pockets.

Fuel is already too high, running a car is already too expensive, but the Minister does not mind because the Government is raking in increased tax revenue. Increasing toll fees is nothing short of another tax on ordinary people, a tax that penalises workers, families and commuters who have no realistic alternative but to drive.

Across Carlow and Kilkenny, since the Government came to power, it has dismantled and reduced people's access to public transport, forcing them back onto the roads. I am speaking about the Expressway route 4. It should be noted that the same Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael TDs who will be voting for these price hikes on ordinary people receive a general travel allowance as TDs to cover their travel. While Ministers are driven around in ministerial cars, never needing to put their hands in their pockets to get to work, the vast majority of people across Ireland do not have this luxury, yet the Minister has decided they ain't paying enough.

It is important that we address the fact that many of these tolls are locked into public-private partnership deals that have operated with little to no transparency or accountability. Why is there such resistance to carrying out a value-for-money assessment on these deals? Taxpayers deserve to know whether these deals are delivering good value for the State or are simply another sweetheart deal for the private sector thanks to Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael.

At a time when so many workers and families are struggling, the Government needs to do more than just listen. It needs to act.

Deputy David Cullinane: In the budget just gone, many of us on this side of the House stood up and called out the Government's so-called tax plan, where the majority of workers received €200 a year, or less than €5 a week. We said at the time, and we have been proved right, that this increase would be wiped out even before workers got it. Mortgages, rents, groceries, insurance, petrol, diesel and school transport are up. I received an email from a number of parents over the last number of days who are very concerned about the 100% increase they are now paying for school transport. Now it is tolls. There is no end to what this Government will do to increase the burden on people. The Government should be there to protect people during a cost-of-living crisis and in most instances I have referenced, it can do more. In fact, in some of these areas, it is the Government increasing the charges, whether it is school transport or tolls.

I am from the Waterford constituency, as the Minister knows. If he comes across the toll bridge in Waterford and is going to Limerick, I ask him to take that drive and pass through all of the towns and villages he has to pass through to get to Limerick. We talk about regional connectivity. It is absolutely disgraceful, yet that road is not being properly funded. In fact, that scheme has been stalled, even though preferred routes are out. It is the same for the N25 to Cork. You get stuck in Killeagh, Castlemartyr and other towns and villages. We have been screaming at the Government to fund these schemes for years. The funding does not come, yet the Government is able to increase toll charges on people during a cost-of-living crisis.

It is unacceptable. The Minister did not address those issues in his own contribution at all. He went all around the houses and talked about anything and everything but those toll increases. The reality is that he is justifying them.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Let us be clear: the reason these toll hikes will raise more revenue is the same reason they are so unfair. Motorists will have no choice but to shoulder the increases. Working people will be forced to pay these higher tolls because for many, there is simply no alternative to driving. How is a nurse finishing a night shift, a carer travelling between houses or a tradesperson carrying tools supposed to get about their day without using a car?

These toll hikes are taking money straight from the pockets of hard-pressed workers and funnelling it straight into Government coffers. It is disgraceful when the Taoiseach defends increases in public transport fares by claiming that the Government cannot fund everything forever. No doubt the same argument will be used when it comes to these, but when it comes to the wealthiest in society, the Government has no difficulty finding money indefinitely to fund sweetheart tax arrangements for vulture funds, the banks and big landlords.

When the Government goes looking for money, does it ever ask itself about those particular sweetheart tax deals? Why do we not change them? No, of course it does not. It is a question that we raise all the time with the Minister. Instead, what the Government chooses to do tonight is to put more pressure on hardworking ordinary people. It is more pressure on people who already cannot make ends meet. It is more pressure on those people who have no other choice but to commute to work. What is the Government saying to them? It is saying tough luck and that they will have to shoulder these increases in the tolls. The people will have to shoulder these increases because the Government is not going to do anything about it, but it is okay, we will find the money when it comes to the vulture funds, the banks and the big developers. That is not on.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: It beggars belief that we must bring a motion like this forward tonight. Does this Government have any thought or concern for the people across my own county of Wexford and across the country who find themselves battling with this cost-of-living crisis, mostly caused by successive bad decisions by the Government? This is at a time when the ordinary person and families are struggling as they try to get by from week to week, and some day to day. The cost of living has put the people of Ireland to the pin of their collars. The cost of food, heating oil, electricity and other facets of life has increased.

On top of all that, the cost of driving has more than doubled, with petrol and diesel prices well over the €2 mark. Did the Government ever consider the cause and effect this proposed toll increase will have? All goods are delivered by truck, van or rail to the internal market. If the Government increases the price of petrol and diesel and now toll prices, as sure as night follows day, the price of consumer and perishable goods will increase too, hitting ordinary people in the pocket and making it harder for SMEs and small farm producers to operate on already tight margins, while coping with the highest energy fuel rates in Europe.

At the same time, the Government is taking it in on the tolls. Approximately €600,000 a day is made from the M50. When you add the Dublin Port tunnel, this figure goes to a whopping €680,000 per day. This does not include collecting 23% VAT on public-private partnership, PPP, road schemes, averaging €45,753 per day. Before the last general election, the Minister said there should be no toll increases. How can the Minister justify increasing these tolls? It is literally highway robbery. The only thing missing is a sign stating "Stand and deliver". Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil always claim they are for business. These toll increases are anti-business, anti-family and will hit the working man and woman once again where it really hurts - in their pockets - while the Government and private contractors line their pockets.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Further toll increases from 1 January 2027 are another financial blow to motorists and households already struggling with the rising cost of living. At a time when families are dealing with increasing grocery bills, electricity and heating costs, insurance premiums, mortgage repayments, rent and childcare expenses, another increase in the cost of

travelling to work places another financial burden on families. Thousands of workers depend on these roads every day to get to their jobs, transport their children, attend medical appointments and carry out essential daily activities. The cumulative effect of these increases over time in fuel and transport costs and toll charges have a negative impact, not just on the motorists or the commuter, but also on a family's household budget. Haulage businesses and those involved in deliveries, construction and distribution will be affected as well as operating costs increase.

These costs will most likely be passed on to the consumer. The self-employed and small business owner will be particularly exposed as they have less ability to absorb such additional costs. Rural communities will be adversely affected as they have fewer alternatives with regard to public transport options. For many driving, it is often the only realistic way to get to work, access essential services or travel into the city, and will remain so until there is a vast improvement in public transport. We have been waiting for years for both the Luas Finglas and the MetroLink to be built. Until such services are provided, people will continue to rely on their cars for transport.

The M50, which borders my constituency of Dublin North-West, on any given day, especially during peak road usage hours in the mornings and the evenings, looks more like a car park than a motorway. People are now expected to pay more for the privilege of sitting in their car on a motorway that cannot cope with the current numbers using it, resulting in increased vehicular queuing and longer trip times.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Erin McGreehan): Before I call Deputy Farrelly, I will ask the Minister to formally move his amendment.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I moved it in my earlier contribution.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I thank Sinn Féin for the opportunity to discuss this motion this evening. It is a motion that simply asks this Government to wake up and stop saying one thing while facilitating another. Toll increases, as we know, are the latest hit to land on commuters, businesses and families. The cost of groceries in Ireland is the third most expensive in the EU. We have the highest household electricity prices in the EU. We have the highest non-household electricity prices in the EU. We have experienced the highest volatility in home heating oil prices in the EU. The cost of rent in Dublin is the highest and most expensive of capital cities in the EU. We have among the highest childcare fees in the EU. What a record.

Our Tánaiste and Minister for Finance is trying desperately hard to distract us and distract the Irish people from turmoil within his own party and friction within his own coalition. He is trying a sleight of hand magic trick which takes our minds off the dismal performance of this Government on the cost of living, housing, healthcare, education, disability supports and public transport. Quite frankly, it is impossible to see where this Government is succeeding. The Tánaiste is distracting us by kick-starting a debate which he knows has no policy future but turns the societal discourse away from him, away from industrial action in the public sector, work to rule in An Garda Síochána, upheaval in our courts and places scrutiny on those receiving long-term unemployment payments. He has form for this, of course. Not too long

ago, he managed to blame asylum seekers for the housing crisis in this country. He has decided yet again to beat down on those who are marginalised.

Ideology is a big word to play with in this House, but it matters. Just like the issue of our tolls and the issues facing our communities throughout the country, Government ideology believes that the private market will provide the solution and save the day. The private market owns the majority of the tolls in the country. When it comes to the toll increases coming in January, ordinary road users will be punished twice for every toll increase - once as they drive through the toll and second for the prices in the supermarket. TII has told us that the toll increases cannot go beyond inflation, but it is a bit of a chicken-and-egg situation because the Irish Road Haulage Association has stated increasing toll charges will just lead to an increase in food costs on our supermarket shelves. Essentially, the private companies and private international investor funds will reap the rewards of revenue collected from our tolls until the year 2052 in some cases, with a guarantee of being able to increase costs baked in annually. This Government yet again outsources responsibility. We pay for that privilege. The companies make the profits and we underwrite the risk. What matters is the cumulative effect on social policy and the Government's responsiveness to this.

Quite simply, people are really struggling. The Minister does not need me to tell him that. People who work hard and reinforce the foundation of the social contract within which we all participate are barely getting by week to week. They are starting to believe that this Government is simply not listening to them and does not see them. It is too distracted and it is complacent. One must question where this ends. What is so frustrating are the levels of services the Government expects people to put up with while in tandem allowing the prices for such services to increase. The M50 is full. There are no more engineering solutions available. The people are paying more to join a bigger, longer queue.

The Government has provided for a significant, and allegedly heavily politically influenced, roads budget for projects throughout this country. The reality we must all accept is that building more roads for more cars will not help us when it comes to journey times, climate ambition and the cost of living, yet this Government is stripping away the positives achieved by recent Governments when it comes to the cost of using public transport. Nothing is safe. You will get abuse from Simon Harris if you do not go to work. You will get punished financially by this Government if you do go to work. You will sit for hours if you want to drive. In some instances, you will do well to sit at all if you want to use public transport. No longer can this Government blame international events as the reason families must choose between heating and eating. The political choices have been made. The contractual obligations have been signed and the friends on the other side appeased. This Government is responsible.

Deputy Rory Hearne: The issue we are facing here is one of a legacy of 30-plus years of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. I did my own PhD on the issue specifically of public-private partnerships many years ago and it was a critical analysis of this form of privatisation of our infrastructure. The Irish public are now paying the price of the legacy of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael's policies of handing our public infrastructure over to private operators. It was neoliberal policies then and that has been continued. It was about privatising the delivery of public infrastructure because the State did not want to pay for it itself. It did not want to take the responsibility because those in power did not believe in the State delivering public infrastructure. While we see public transport across this country struggling, we still have the

same public-private partnerships being used in the operation and development of the metro and Luas. We want to see public infrastructure but it needs to be public, otherwise we are repeating the same problems and issues.

In my constituency, there are people looking for the Finglas Luas project to be developed as soon as possible. They want to see it happen. They want to see public transport but the Government is not doing everything it could be doing to progress routes like the Finglas Luas. There are also the issues with buses. There are major problems still with ghost buses or buses not turning up. As I have raised before with the Minister, there are issues with changes to routes that actually mean it is harder for people to use public transport.

Specifically on this motion, I thank Sinn Féin for bringing it forward because it is very important. Right now, we have a cost-of-living crisis and people are literally struggling to cover the basics. According to a recent Eurobarometer poll, a third of Irish households said they had to cut back on their heating in the past year. We are literally seeing people in this country struggling to pay for food and heating.

What is happening on our roads that we have paid for already in our taxes? The Irish public is being utterly fleeced by toll operators across this city and country. They are being fleeced by toll operators while they are struggling to cover the basic cost of living. Toll operators, and many of them multi-billion euro private equity and infrastructure corporations, are acting like modern highway robbery men by squeezing drivers who have no choice but to pay these tolls. The Irish public paid over half a billion euro in tolls last year to drive on the roads we have already paid for with our taxes. This is why the cost of living is so high, because Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael handed our roads over to these private toll operators to engage in what is extortion of the Irish public every day.

The M50 is owned by the State now but it is operated by a private company owned by a massive French corporation whose operating profits on the M50 alone increased to €2 million last year. The operator of the M7-M8 in Portlaoise took in €24 million in tolls last year. It also owns the Dundalk and Waterford tolls. Who is it? A multi-billion euro Dutch corporation. The Limerick toll operator saw its revenue increase by 10% last year. Who is it? It is owned by an English and French infrastructure corporation. This is why Ireland is so bloody expensive. The cost of living here is one of the highest in Europe because of the price and profit-gouging, and in the case of the M50 it is by our own State and Government. It owns the M50. Why will it not stop the toll increases? It cannot say that the cost of living is out of its hands when it can actually stop those tolls being increased. It can stop the toll hikes and intervene. Why does it not stand up for the Irish public? Why does it not actually stop those toll increases when it could do it? The State owns the M50 toll. It is illogical to me that the Irish State would actually be enforcing higher costs on the public when it could be stopping it.

People are really angry and frustrated about this because they do not understand why their own Government is facilitating them being charged even higher for the basics - for a toll on a road which the Irish taxpayer has paid for already. We have paid for it. Why is the Government facilitating that? Why is it pushing higher costs on the Irish public when it could control those costs? It is not true when Ministers get up and say that the cost of living is out of their hands and it is energy costs. The Government controls the tolls and the fares on public transport. It could control that. That is something it could do. What happened to the Fianna Fáil that used to stand up for ordinary people in this country? It is not doing so any more. Now it is standing

up for global corporations that are fleecing the Irish public and own the toll concessions on these roads that the Government handed over to them. What we are dealing with here is a legacy of 40 years of neoliberal policies by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, and the public are paying the price every day.

Deputy Mark Wall: I welcome the chance to speak on this motion. I thank Sinn Féin and Deputy Daly for addressing the issue and bringing forward the motion. I also welcome the fact that the Minister is here to listen to the debate.

For the area that I represent, which is Kildare South, commuting is a way of life forced on families due to the lack of availability and high cost of housing, aligned with the continued rolling back on the advantages of working from home for so many. As a result, commuting on the M7, N7 and M9 has become a nightmare for workers. Workers are leaving their homes at 6 a.m. only to be stuck in traffic for anywhere up to two to three hours. It is a car park. Recently I spoke to a constituent who commutes from Rathangan in Kildare South to Dublin for work each day. That person spends six hours a day stuck in a car and for many commuters this is their daily reality. Many of those I have spoken to now leave their town in Kildare South an hour earlier just to beat the traffic. They arrive at their work an hour or more earlier than is needed and many use the extra hour to sleep in their cars. Such is the reality of their lives, and such is what they do before they go about their daily job. That is the mental hardship that affects their families more and more, and it is an issue on which I continue to get representations almost daily.

Indeed, the Labour Party and I previously proposed a range of measures to address and help the ongoing traffic congestion issues but the Government simply rejected this. More worryingly, it rejected our possible solutions without offering any of its own or even agreeing to trial some of them or bring forward any of the suggestions.

The simple fact is that many commuters in Kildare South have no option other than to take to their cars because of the underinvestment in the public transport system. Towns like Athy, Newbridge, Kildare town, Rathangan, Kilcullen and Monasterevin have become commuter towns. However, the transport infrastructure to meet the capacity and frequency requirements of these growing communities is not there, while public transport does not align to their work schedules. For example, the first train from my home town of Athy to Dublin departs at 6.41 a.m. each morning. That is too late for the many whose work demands that they have to arrive before 8 o'clock, leaving them with no option but to start up their cars and join the car park. Athy, like so many towns, has become a commuting town for the reasons I outlined earlier. In rural Ireland, rural Kildare and all these urban settings, people have no choice but to use their cars. That is why the toll hike is so hard on commuters. They simply do not have any alternative.

They cannot make any adjustments to their commutes and in a cost-of-living crisis, it is unthinkable that Government would impose another increase on hard-pressed workers and families.

Many commuters are also rightly confused about why this is happening now, especially when tolls are taking in so much money. Since 2023, the tolls have already taken in nearly €1.6 billion. TII has earned nearly €700,000 a day, on average, from the M50 and the Dublin

Port tunnel. So many workers are today asking why they are being asked to pay more when the tolls are already taking in so much money.

Many of the plans the Government is looking at to assist commuting lack the urgency and commitment needed. We still do not have a date for DART+ South West, albeit the Minister confirmed tonight that he will bring forward a plan to Cabinet shortly. That is very welcome. I have been asking about the priority bus lane on the N7. In fairness, the Minister brought forward the bus lane on the M4 but, according to the latest reply I have received for the N7, design might start next year.

As I mentioned in the Topical Issues debate I had with the Department, the extra carriages that are needed for overcrowded trains are being promised, possibly, for the middle of next year. These overcrowded routes are the ones where we need to see most of those new carriages. However, there is no urgency being shown to address this commuting chaos. What is the Government going to do? It is going to increase the tolls and put more hardship on working families that they simply cannot take. It is time that commuters and workers got something back from this Government to help cushion the chaos. It is not an increase that is needed. It is time the Government reduced the fares on these routes and put some money back in the pockets of those who are keeping this country going day in, day out.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I appreciate that Minister of State is not in the Department of Transport. I will put my concerns on the record in the hope that the Minister for Transport, despite having left the Chamber, will recognise them. I thank Deputy Pa Daly of Sinn Féin for bringing forward this motion.

From 1 January, someone driving through the Fermoy toll road on the way to work and back five days a week will pay €24 a week in tolls alone. Over 48 working weeks, that is €1,152 before he or she puts a litre of diesel in his or her car. For that worker, the increase in 10 cent a crossing is another euro a week on top of the €23 he or she is already paying and it comes out of the same pay packet as groceries, fuel and insurance. Every increase can look small on its own. The worker has to pay them all.

I support the call in this motion to stop the January toll increases. The Government should intervene and keep charges at their current rates. We talk about how much people in rural Ireland rely on their cars. We should also talk about people who rely on public transport because they do not have a car or cannot drive. A bus that arrives after someone's shift starts is no use to them. If the last bus leaves before they finish, they are left looking for a lift. This can decide whether someone takes up a job in the first place.

I welcome BusConnects in Cork and I want to see a Luas line built but BusConnects is still unfinished and the Cork Luas line is taking far too long to move forward. I cannot keep telling my constituents to wait and see while Dublin marches ahead with new projects. I welcome investment in Dublin. It is the first time I have said that in this House. I expect the same urgency for Cork and communities across the country that have spent years waiting for better services.

I acknowledge the very good work on the Cork commuter rail programme. The people delivering it deserve huge credit. We need to see that same urgency on buses and light rail so that someone coming in by train can get from the station to work, college or a hospital

appointment without spending half the morning getting there. In the meantime, the Government has allowed public transport fares to increase as well. The Labour Party would reverse those increases and invest in services that people can rely on. In rural Cork, that means early buses, late buses and timetables to let someone make a connection without losing an hour of their day.

The same urgency has to apply to the roads we need. The Government must get on with delivering the M20 motorway. Cork and Limerick are two of the largest cities in this country. A safe, reliable road between them should be a national priority. Along the N20, people sit in traffic on their way to work and watch heavy goods vehicles pass through their communities. Every year of delay is another year they, residents and businesses are asked to live with it. We need to see the Mallow relief road progressed in its own right. The Government must get the M20 moving and get the Mallow relief road moving alongside it. People in Mallow should see progress on both projects. The Government should get the design and planning work done, commit the funding and be ready to move to construction as soon as the approvals are in place.

Once we build the M20, we want people to use it. We already have motorways and national roads that people can use without paying a toll. They connect communities and give drivers a route that takes them out of towns and villages. That is what the M20 should do too. We can see the issue in Fermoy and Rathcormac. The bypass was built to take through traffic out of those communities. Every toll increase gives drivers another reason to start using the old road again. If more traffic goes back through those towns and villages, the people living there will have to deal with it and the consequence of it as well. If we are building the M20 to take traffic off the N20, why would we charge people to use the new road and give them a reason to stay on the old one? We need to build the M20 between Cork and Limerick, and I am sure the Minister of State will agree with me on that, but we need to open it toll-free and keep it toll-free.

On roads that are already tolled, we must examine a monthly cap for regular commuters and consider removing tolls when private operating contracts expire. We must stop the January increases, give Cork a clear timetable for completing BusConnects and moving the Luas forward, give people in Cork and Limerick a commitment that the M20 will be delivered as a priority and will be toll-free, and give people in my hometown, Mallow, an assurance that the Mallow relief road will progress alongside the M20.

The people outside of Dublin have consistently spent too long waiting to be told what is coming. They deserve to see it delivered. I am looking through the different bullet points in the Minister's speech. Eight or nine of those 12 bullet points refer to projects that are ongoing within the capital. That is extraordinary. If I handed that to a constituent of mine, they would laugh at me and ask me what is happening in their community, constituency and city to help them with commuter chaos, with trying to get to work or a hospital appointment or trying to bring their child to school.

I saw recently that after a Cork County Council municipal district meeting, some businesses in Mallow have considered not reopening after the Christmas period because they are sick of having to put up with traffic that is coming through the main street. We must get on with it and progress the building of critical infrastructure like the Cork to Limerick motorway and the Mallow relief road. We must also ensure that when we build roads like this they are used and

=people do not have a reason to start using the old one again. We must also ensure that, once built, we keep the M20 toll-free.

Deputy Charles Ward: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this motion on the cost of living and toll charges. In particular, I support the call for the Government to stop the proposed increases in January.

Regarding the additional pressures that are being put on families in this country, we are in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis and households across this country are struggling to keep up with this never-ending rise in household bills. The rising costs of rent, energy, food and car insurance are putting massive strains on families. We are now in a unique position where everything is record high. We have record high energy arrears and record high energy costs.

Motorists are already experiencing significant financial pressure due to the cost of fuel, motor insurance, and motor tax.

In rural Ireland, the limited public transport that we have is a significant issue. For people living in rural Ireland and rural communities, travelling by car is not a luxury; it is simply a necessity because the services are not there. Many people have no alternative but to rely on their own vehicles to access employment, education, and essential services. The impact of the rising toll charges is particularly concerning for my constituents in Donegal who have to travel considerable distances by car to attend hospital appointments and access other essential services. That alone has caused hardship in Donegal because over the past year the cost-of-living crisis and the cost of fuel have meant that somebody travelling from Donegal has had to spend extra money they simply does not have to attend hospital appointments and pay toll charges. It is unacceptable that we are discriminated against but we are.

The proposed increases would be yet an additional financial burden on people who have little or no choice but to make these journeys because they have to access these hospital appointments in Dublin. They have no choice but to travel by car because they live in rural communities where there is no bus service that can take them from their community straight to Dublin. They have to jump in a car and drive at an additional cost.

Toll charges already present a considerable expense for rural road users who depend on national road networks to get to main cities and access essential services throughout. This is particularly difficult to justify when private toll operators have recorded millions of euro in profit, and yet the public does not benefit from this. The cost-of-living crisis, particularly the aspect of the ongoing fuel crisis, is having a real and immediate impact on families like mine, among other families in Donegal. Despite having two incomes, households are dependent on cars. They need to be able to access two cars because there is no proper infrastructure in place for travelling. Where there is a bus service in Donegal, we have town bus services that are barely hanging on. We are so far behind what is going on that we need as much infrastructure and help as there is.

Letterkenny, for example, is a town that is in the midst of a traffic crisis. I encourage the Minister, whenever he gets the opportunity, to come to Letterkenny on a Friday and just look at the carnage there because it is unacceptable. It has been unacceptable for years. That town is suffering, and we need as much help as possible. For us to continue, this Government needs to realise it is getting it wrong and leaving rural Ireland behind.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I support the proposal to freeze toll charges. Toll charges are adding to the already high cost-of-living for people. As we have gone through a period of high inflation over the past five years, it has gone up at a rate we have not seen for a few decades, and that has piled pressure onto people and workers, people who are trying to get to work, among all the other costs they have. The problem is that come January, the Government is going to heap more costs on these people by increasing public transport costs. Up to 13,000 people commute from Laois every day, many of them by train or bus, and their charges are going to go up. Tolls are going to go up but some people have to drive. A lot of people drive to Dublin and have to use the M50 to get to work and hospital appointments. That cost is going to go up again. They already pay €7.80 for a round-trip and that is €39 a week in tolls alone to get through the M50. That is a huge burden on people. Before the election, I remind the Minister that the Government halted increases on tolls.

I ask the Minister to look again at the increase in public transport fares in double digits of 15%. That is excessive by any standard, and it is going to put huge pressure on people who are commuting from Laois and other counties. It will discourage people from using public transport at a time when we are trying to get them to use it and reduce greenhouse gas emissions and congestion on the motorway. When going to Dublin, there was a one-hour rush hour in the morning and the same in the evening but it is now three or four hours at each end. That is what it is in the morning and evening. I ask the Minister to halt the 15% increase in bus fares, to revise that and not to go as far as 15%. I ask him to halt the planned toll increase.

On energy, we had one of the cheapest electricity systems before it was "liberalised". That was the word used. In other words, that was before it was privatised and opened up to the private market. We now have the most expensive electricity system in Europe, according to Eurostat, and data centres are only paying almost half of what households and small businesses pay. The Government needs to change that. We have a situation where there are 230,000 households in electricity arrears alone. The Government should reduce the VAT on electricity charges for the winter period. It should bring in legislation or put in place measures to force data centres to pay the same as householders and level out the bills so that householders and small businesses are not paying as much.

To move to health costs, 42,000 people, men, women and children in County Laois are covered by private health insurance. Another 38,000 have either a medical card or a GP visit card. Some 15,000 people have nothing at all. There is a huge cost for them if they need medical care or any kind of procedure. The average cost of a policy now is €1,950 per year. That is a huge burden. It is almost €40 a week for a pensioner and €80 a week for two pensioners and they often find when they go to use the private health insurance that it does not cover the procedure they are getting, so they have to pay anyway.

We agreed on Sláintecare almost ten years ago, in 2017. It was supposed to be implemented over a ten-year period but here we are nine years into it and we are not near the finish line in terms of getting a public system in place like other European countries which have had them since the Second World War. We need to move on that and modernise our health system to a universal health system.

Deputy Seamus Healy: Families and workers are being pummelled by a cost-of-living crisis. We have sky-high rents, high energy costs, which are the highest in Europe, and food costs

running at an increase of 5% per year. Car insurance is up, as is vehicle maintenance. Transport costs are to go up on 1 January by 15%, or in some cases, 30%, or 35%. Diesel costs a minimum of €2.07 a litre and petrol costs well over €2 per litre. We have half a million people in arrears on electricity and gas bills, and prices for goods and services over the past five years have increased by approximately 22%.

Increased toll fees are another imposition on hard-pressed families, and a tax on workers going to work. For people in rural areas with little or no public transport, travelling by car is a necessity; not a matter of choice. They should not be penalised further. As we know, the Minister for Transport told us before the last general election that toll increases should not proceed but that was then, before the general election, and this is now. He is now playing a different tune.

In constituencies like mine in south Tipperary, motorists are battered in every direction. Travel by car is a necessity, not a luxury. There is little or no public transport. If a person works in Abbott in Clonmel, Boston Scientific, Bulmers, Medite, Tipperary University Hospital, Tipperary County Council or in any of the general business areas, they must travel by car at a considerable cost. If a person attends third level in Clonmel in the Technical University of the Shannon, or goes shopping or for entertainment at Clonmel, they must drive a car.

On the other hand, if a person has to leave the county for work, the situation is much worse. Some 17,900 people leave the county for work each day, and they also must drive. Workers from Carrick-on-Suir and Tipperary town are hugely impacted by outward journeys to work. Carrick-on-Suir, located on the Waterford-Kilkenny border, sees a substantial share of its workforce leave both town and county daily for Waterford. Tipperary town is particularly badly affected. Out of roughly 1,800 residents at work, only 40% work within the town. Some 60%, or 1,080, must commute to other Tipperary towns but mainly along the N24 to Limerick.

9 o'clock

These workers are already under severe financial pressure and cannot afford any more increases in travel-to-work costs. What these workers need is a reduction in fuel prices, a cap on fuel prices and a cap on EV charging costs, which have increased substantially in the past month. The ESB has increased its EV charging costs, and so has Energia. What these workers need most of all is local employment. The Industrial Development Authority and the Government need to provide new employment opportunities, job creation and investment in these towns.

There is no need for these increases. Private toll companies have recorded millions of euro in after-tax profits, and those profits are growing all the time. The public-private partnership is a rip-off, and these tolls should be nationalised.

Deputy Michael Collins: I put out a statement on toll charges the other day. I said, "Enough is enough." It is becoming beyond a bloody joke, to be honest with the Minister of State. It is hurting every day of the week the same people, mainly the working people because if you are not working, you do not have to commute, but if you are working, you do have to commute. People are being hit very hard. I cannot understand for the life of me a Government that is so tone deaf and out of touch. It does not realise that those are the same motorists putting €100

of petrol or diesel into their cars and paying €45 in tax. They have to pay this continuous tax to keep their motors. They pay for insurance, tax on their cars, tyres and repairs. It is just one thing on top of the other. I would love to calculate what it costs a motorist doing a daily run. I assure the Minister of State it is a phenomenal amount of money. It is hurting people very hard at a time when they cannot afford to put fuel in the car or home heating oil in their tanks, and we know why. It is a huge cost.

At the same time, people are hit in the pocket when trying to buy groceries or pay their electricity bill. There are arrears on electricity bills. About 350,000 people cannot pay them at present and, again, that is hurting the working person. It is no wonder they cannot pay them because they are taxed to drain every bit of blood out of them. I cannot understand a Government that has no understanding of that and thinks that if it gives something in the budget, it has given enough, but then it takes it in so many different ways.

The problem with a lot of these communities is that they have no rail connection. I have often heard about Connecting Ireland. Those words are the biggest farce ever because Connecting Ireland does not connect Ireland, has not connected Ireland and has failed miserably in its so-called achievements. I have to travel 80 km in my constituency before I can see rail. Astonishingly, in the 1850s there was rail within 3 km of me. Now I have to travel about 80 km, 85 km or 90 km to get to rail. That is not acceptable in this day and age.

Solutions can be put forward. There are good operators out there, like West Cork Connect, that are willing to connect people with rail every morning, but for some reason the powers that be are doing everything in their power to make sure that does not happen. Again, I cannot understand that. It is another kick in the teeth to people who do not want to go through the toll bridges and are trying their best to find another way. They will not be allowed do that.

The condition of the roads is beyond belief in some cases, as is the lack of funding. Where is the money going? That is what we would like to know. This is a cash cow of the highest order. Billions of euro are after being collected at tolls. Where is the money going? It is not going back into areas where it should go. I was screaming recently about passing bays on the N71. I do not know if the Minister of State has ever been down along there. Come into Bandon and west of Bandon into Clonakilty, drivers can come in behind a tractor for maybe 45 minutes, on a journey that should take 20 minutes. That tells us there is no movement in understanding the people's pain out there. That is the cause of accidents afterwards. From Clonakilty to Skibbereen, it is the same story. People get stuck behind a tractor or a lorry. They have to do their business, but there is no way for the ordinary person trying to get from A to B, in a bit of a hurry, and trying to stick within the speed limit. They are caught doing 20 km/h or 25 km/h for maybe 20 or 25 minutes and then they hit the pedal as hard as they can. It just shows the lack of vision.

Passing bays are important. They have been promised. We might get them in 120 or 130 years. If we live like Methuselah, we might get the bypasses. Two have been promised in Bandon but not delivered. There is an announcement every year. We will see what will happen. We will have another announcement soon about Inishannon, a Clonakilty bypass or a Bantry bypass. I cannot understand for the life of me why nothing can be delivered. Nobody wants to hear about another report. They all want to hear when a bucket will hit the ground. That is all they want to know and that is all they want delivered. No more rubbish reports. That is

kicking the can down the road and a handy way to say, "Listen, we are doing something", but the people are not fools.

The people the Government is hurting hardest are the hauliers. They are in dire despair and they tell me that every day of the week. They just do not know where they will be. A gentleman I met in Dunmanway recently said to me, "Michael, I am afraid to turn the lorry on." That tells you how far it has gone. I just had to take him at face value. He was a cattle haulier and he told me, "It is frightening."

As I said, where is the money going to? I am on the transport committee and I listened to the Minister say recently that for greenways there was going to be €360 million. Is that where the money is going - €360 million for, in most cases, greenways, walkways and cycleways that railroad through people's farms? I see the *Southern Star* picked up on one of my stories - mind you, it never acknowledges me - in the Dáil. It was about Tim O'Leary's farm in Ballinascarthy. Imagine a farmer being told, "We will shove your old sheds and parlour aside and take the walkway through it." Another gentleman told me the other day that he explained to a lady, "You cannot take the walkway through where you have planned because that is going to be a graveyard." To hell with that. Sure they can all be cremated. God almighty, the ignorance that is out there. They can use the term CPO and they are using State funding of €360 million, which is being wasted, instead of taking away the ditch, widening the road and taking the roadways down there. This is not acceptable.

Talking about EV chargers, we need to look at the ones out the back here because they do not work most times.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I support the motion, which recognises the huge additional costs facing people trying to get to and from work.

There are a few things to talk about in relation to tolls. First, there is a certain logic to putting in a toll so people have to pay for the construction costs over a period. It also makes a certain logical sense that the people using the toll road most should be the ones who pay for it the most. I am in agreement with the concept, but once the toll roads are built and the money is going into the Government coffers, it is a different question. It is about whether the toll road is actually helping people or whether it is just a money-making exercise. Is it encouraging people to rat-run through different communities? I have mentioned this before in relation to my constituency of Dublin Mid-West, where the M50 is routinely congested so people will rat-run through Lucan village to go to Blanchardstown, Clonee, Dunshaughlin or Navan. They will face the same congestion going that way - they queue for hours - but, crucially, they avoid paying the toll. If the toll on the M50 were got rid of or even staggered along the way, we would find people would more likely use the main route.

As an aside, the M50 is no longer a Cork-to-Belfast route; it is an internal ring road and should be dealt with as such. In road terms, we need a motorway west of Leixlip or west of Maynooth that bypasses the urban area totally. That is coming from someone with a green background who thinks we need to massively invest in public transport and alternatives to people driving.

There is such a thing as toll avoidance or traffic diversion or leakage. It has been documented by State bodies like Transport Infrastructure Ireland, which has looked at this in

internal assessments. It has planned for multi-point tolling in the past. It has done studies on it which acknowledge that people are trying to avoid the tolls by exiting at one gantry and then going back in further down the road. We have had research from Europe that shows that on the Euroroutes drivers, especially HGV operators, will recalculate routes to avoid the tolled sections.

While hauliers will obviously make a financial saving from that, it comes at the cost of congestion in towns around Europe. That also happens in Ireland. This goes back to 2011 and the AA Ireland commuter behaviour survey. That was one of the biggest studies on behaviour. It involved 13,000 drivers and tried to map behavioural responses to road tolls. The study established that 60% to 70% of Irish motorists said they would change their travel routes and use secondary roads if tolls were increased or if new toll points were introduced on their regular commute. Basically, tolls have an adverse effect on local traffic management and increase congestion. County Cork was mentioned. Fermoy is a case in point. You would think the M8 would help avoid congestion but, as a result of the tolls, people are still clogging up Fermoy because they are trying to avoid the tolls. There is a happy medium to be found. We should fund the toll roads when they are being built and we should make a degree of contribution when those toll roads are being used by more people. However, there are cases where the tolls absolutely need to be abolished at this stage. I would include the M50 and some of the older toll roads on national routes in that category.

Some constituents have called for something that I have heard mentioned here during this debate, namely, a cap on tolls for commuters. I am a member of the Committee on Enterprise, Tourism and Employment, which has heard stories of how difficult it is for young people to get the experience needed to get a full-time job. Often they are trying to work in jobs that are not related to their master's or other degree. They are being discouraged by the fact that it is going to take them a hell of a lot of money to get from A to B and that they will have to travel a long distance. They are trying to make ends meet. They realise that affording a house is a good few years ahead of them. If we are trying to help hard-pressed people, even if the Minister of State does not support this motion, there should at least be a cap on tolls for people who commute. They are not commuting because they choose to. They are not commuting to speed past the little towns and villages around Ireland and gain an advantage over other people. They have no choice but to make that commute because they cannot get on the train or because the bus takes too long or does not get them where they want to go. Even when sitting in congestion for an hour or an hour and a half, the quickest way is to take their cars. That is a sad reality of Irish life. You cannot be expected to commute for two hours a day each way to keep a job. We need to think about the small people who are suffering right now. The tolls are just another unnecessary penalty on people who are trying to better themselves. We need to look at cutting these types of costs.

Deputy Carol Nolan: What makes the promised toll increases particularly frustrating is the way they are being imposed on people who are already contributing. Indeed, they are the most heavily taxed transport users in Europe. Motorists pay fuel tax, carbon tax, VAT, motor tax, vehicle registration tax and a range of other transport-related charges, which generate billions of euro annually for the State. Despite these enormous contributions, the answer always seems to be the same, that they should pay more and that we should tax out of existence those who are contributing That seems to be the approach. People are disillusioned. These are the people

who get up early in the morning. We are talking about the small businesses, the companies that generate employment in rural Ireland. They are the ones unfairly carrying this burden.

This burden is particularly felt in counties like my own county of Offaly and across the midlands. Earlier this year, figures released to me by Transport Infrastructure Ireland showed that a staggering €23.7 million was collected at the M7-M8 Portlaoise plaza in 2025 alone. That excludes VAT. That is just one toll plaza. In one year, €23.7 million was taken from motorists, commuters, farmers, small businesses, construction companies and hauliers travelling through the midlands. It is unfair and needs to be looked at. A hands-off approach or saying that it is a matter for TII is just not good enough. The Government must send a message. We need to support our businesses and companies, which create a lot of employment, and those who get up early every morning, commute and ask for nothing but to be treated fairly. That has to be the case. That figure of €23.7 million deserves to be reflected upon. It represents farmers, tradespeople, families and hauliers who are simply trying to get from A to B. Despite collecting almost €24 million in a single year from that location in Portlaoise alone, we are now told that toll charges should rise again. That is unacceptable.

As I said earlier, the Government's position has always been that this is a matter for TII. People are fed up with the buck being passed. A message must be sent to Transport Infrastructure Ireland that further toll increases are not acceptable. People are being taxed out of existence. The USC was meant to be a temporary measure. People are still paying it. It is unfair to continue to tax people to the extent we are.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: As legislators, there is an onus on all of us to be responsible to the people who are working hard. For people who are on the road every day and who are paying tolls and tariffs, those charges are now a serious expense. Motorists who drive ordinarily sized cars feel the pinch, but if you are driving a larger van or an articulated vehicle, the cost is enormous. These people are on the road all day every day. It puts an additional financial burden and hardship on the companies that run those individual vehicles. We have to look at this in an holistic and serious way. Along with Deputy Nolan, I had the privilege of attending the Irish Road Haulage Association's conference, where we heard at first hand the difficulties, trials and tribulations of these hard-working companies. We are an island nation. Who hauls everything that lands in a shop throughout this country? It is hauliers. They are the people. They have the additional cost of fuel but also tax, including road tax, insurance and tires. Everything is now so expensive. There are also the wages. It is all an expense and it all presents difficulties in trying to keep those wheels rolling.

The Government and all of us have an onus not just to say that it is a matter for TII and to leave it at it. We have to intervene. We have to be able to stand up for these people. That is our job. Our job is to stand here, to try to make our voices heard and to try to get a consensus that the proper thing to do is to really look at this. Of course, we live in the real world. We know that our motorways need maintenance and that there are costs involved. We see it ourselves every day with the maintenance that goes on late at night. We see it happening in the cutting at the edge of the road and all of the work that goes on every day. Having said that, you have to be fair to motorists, the people who have to travel the roads every day. They are not travelling the roads for the fun of it. They are going from A to B to work. That is something we spoke about here earlier and that we should speak about a lot more. We must try to reduce those costs and to stop the continuous spiral. If the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach had a graphic in

front of him showing the increasing costs, it would actually be frightening. I do not want to eat into anybody else's time.

Deputy Michael Cahill: We have a very real cost-of-living crisis. We are experiencing rising costs in transport, transport services, electricity, home heating oil, gas, groceries, eating out and going for a couple of drinks. Our people are struggling. This is an everyday occurrence now. In many cases, people are stretched to their limits. There is a very real and huge cost-of-living crisis.

In that context the increased toll charges are being noticed by the general public. People are not fools. Public-private partnerships and increased charges must be controlled. We need to look at price gouging. What is happening in our little country beggars belief. To build a modest room onto a house, such as an en suite bedroom, you need at least €30,000. Labour costs have increased significantly, and especially during the past three to four years. Buying anything today has got to the stage of almost guessing a price, and this is at the expense of every family and household. The general public is wising up to what is happening. People see it every day. Pricing is being abused, and "abused" is the correct word. The woman of the household is seeing it in particular because, in most households, it is she who does the shopping. We have to bring a halt to this serious increase in prices right across the board. It is as simple as that. I would like to see action from the Government and the Minister in this area.

I welcome the €500 disability cost-of-living payment in the recent budget. We also need to introduce a €500 tax credit for disabled workers. They were left out of this budget, as were those who cannot avail of the €500 disability cost-of-living payment. I would like to see progress on that. It is only fair and right that we look after the working disabled and those who are not able to access the €500.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Thousands of motorists in my constituency have consistently raised two issues with me, and they have been calling my office, especially given the debate tonight. The first is the M50, which others have mentioned. One of the best ideas floated around the House, and something we should definitely look at, is a weekly commuter toll cap, with discounts for people earning under a certain amount or, in particular, for critical workers such as doctors, nurses, SNAs and teachers. With this increase, they could be paying hundreds, if not thousands, of euro a year from their hard-earned money. It does not make sense. It is as if we are penalising people who have to work. I had to use the M50 for my previous job. People are paying every single day to sit in traffic. If the increase could be justified with a guaranteed plan for additional lanes or traffic easing, then maybe it could increase, but that has not been discussed at all.

Constituents of mine who are not as savvy about technology as others drive on the M50. They struggle with eFlow and with setting up their accounts, and some of them have lost their accounts, misplaced passwords or got new vehicles. They ask why, when they pay their penalty, they are not automatically set up again by eFlow. A child might be sick, or they might be busy at work, and they might forget to pay by 8 o'clock the next day. We are all very busy. We understand how it works. They should automatically be set up again.

With my last minute, I want to raise the East Link. It opened in 1984. The original private toll agreement ended in 2015, over a decade ago. Why are motorists in my constituency and

on the south side stopping at toll booths? We built this connecting bridge to ease traffic in the city but today motorists still have to slow down and still have to pay. It makes no sense. How much time is being lost? What is the impact on congestion in Dublin? What would it cost to replace the booths with barrier-free tolling? I worked on this when I was a councillor, with some of the councillors who are in the Gallery today. If we removed the M50 toll barriers to improve traffic flow, why can we not do the same on the East Link? How can a toll increase be justified when we need to sort out the M50 car park and the car park on the quays? I am not asking for roads to be maintained for free. I understand that the money has to come from somewhere, but we need to state clearly where the money is being spent and where it is flowing and let the Irish people know that the purpose of transport infrastructure should be to keep people moving, not to keep them queuing.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Niall Collins): I thank Deputies for their contributions, for the points they have raised and for bringing these important topics to the House. As set out in the remarks of the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and in the amendment, the Government is committed to ensuring the continued improvement and maintenance of our national road network. This requires the ongoing investment of Exchequer funding, supplemented by toll revenue. The Minister also referred to the extensive investment taking place in our public transport system to ensure that more citizens have affordable alternatives to the private car. This investment is advancing projects in urban areas, such as MetroLink and Cork commuter rail, as well as in rural areas, such as rural bus services and the western rail corridor.

I take the opportunity to highlight some of the continuing investment taking place on our national road network as well as the measures the Government is taking on the affordability of transport. Over the past 25 years, the Government has invested heavily in our national road network and an extensive motorway system is now in place. The motorway network has expanded almost tenfold since 2000. The programme for Government includes commitments to increased funding for new roads and for the protection and renewal of the existing road network. It is the Government's intention, as part of the €24.3 billion to be allocated to transport under the sectoral investment plan for transport, to increase investment in road networks and road safety to €9.7 billion in the period 2026 to 2030.

In 2026, approximately €800 million in Exchequer funding has been allocated for national roads. This has enabled the continued construction of the N5 Ballaghaderreen to Scramoge, M28 Cork to Ringaskiddy and Adare bypass projects. This funding has also allowed multiple major projects at an earlier stage of the project life cycle to progress. They include the Galway city ring road, which is the first road project in the State to be designated as critical infrastructure. Other projects, such as the Limerick to Foynes project, the N/M20 Cork to Limerick project, the Donegal TEN-T project and the Slane bypass, have also progressed this year.

Exchequer funding has also been used to invest in the protection and renewal of the existing national road network. This investment, which is supplemented by toll revenue, helps to ensure that our road infrastructure is kept to a high standard and that safety levels on the network can be improved. While final allocations for 2027 have not yet been announced, national road projects listed in the NDP and the sectoral investment plan for transport will continue to progress in 2027. It is anticipated that the Adare bypass and the N5 Ballaghaderreen to

Scramoge projects will be completed in 2027. Overall, the funding of €9.7 billion announced for road networks and road safety for the period 2026 to 2030 represents a significant increase on that provided in the first half of the decade and will allow more projects to proceed.

In budget 2026, €940 million was secured for the public service obligation, a significant 43% uplift on the 2025 allocation. This allocation has ensured that existing public transport services can operate reliably and sustainably throughout the year in the face of growing passenger demand and increased operational costs. It has also allowed for the continued delivery of targeted fare initiatives, including free travel for all children up to the age of nine and the young adult card for those aged 19 to 25, as part of the NTA's national fares strategy.

In budget 2027, over €1 billion has been allocated to public service obligation, PSO, services across the bus, light rail and heavy rail networks. This is a record investment in the PSO funding allocation and supports the continued expansion and enhancement of our public transport network, with approximately 140 new and enhanced services in the planning pipeline for 2027 across flagship programmes such as Connecting Ireland, BusConnects and new town services. The 2027 allocation also prioritises the advancement of ongoing programmes and commitments in line with operational readiness and resource availability.

In recognition of its essential role in Ireland's supply chains, the Government unveiled a package of supports for the road transport sector in the face of escalating fuel costs in April. Central to these supports is the €120 million road transporters support scheme, RTSS, which complements reductions in the excise rates, the NORA levy and the increased rebate rate allowed under the diesel rebate scheme. The RTSS opened for applications in May 2026 and provides financial support to licensed hauliers, the own-account sector and commercial coach operators to help meet the challenges posed by increased fuel costs arising from the war in the Middle East. More than 4,400 applications were received during the application window. Additionally, approximately 120 late application requests were received during a dedicated late application window between Monday, 20 July and Friday, 24 July 2026. An appeals portal was provided from noon on Wednesday, 21 October until noon on Friday, 6 November to allow applicants who had been refused support for one or more vehicles to request a review of that decision. Approximately €77 million has been paid out to date under the scheme, with further payments anticipated during the ongoing appeals procedure.

Last month, Ministers at the Department of Transport secured Cabinet approval to extend payments under the RTSS for a further two months, for September and October. Funding of €73 million has been allocated to continue to assist haulage and passenger operators with high diesel prices. Applicants do not need to reapply for these additional payments. They will be issued directly to applicants once the appeals process is complete. In addition to the RTSS, the diesel rebate scheme has been in place since 2013 and remains available to licensed haulage operators in respect of vehicles over 7.5 tonnes and diesel prices over €1.43, including VAT. An enhanced rebate of 12 cent per litre is being provided until the end of December.

The Government has delivered one of the largest support packages in the EU *per capita*, amounting to over €1.7 billion in supports from March 2026 to June 2027 to assist households and businesses. Excise reductions have been extended in full until February 2027, thereby maintaining until then a 30 cent per litre reduction in diesel and a 25 cent per litre reduction in petrol. The carbon tax increase on auto fuels due to take place on 14 October 2026 has been deferred until 1 May 2027.

I thank the Deputies for raising these matters and initiating this discussion. However, for the reasons that the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and I have outlined, the Government is opposing this motion. The Government wishes to see the national road network, into which so much public investment has been made in recent decades, safeguarded for future generations. Toll revenue is an essential component in achieving this. However, we are mindful of the many cost-of-living pressures that households and businesses face. Therefore, we have continued to increase investment in public transport across Ireland and to provide targeted financial measures to those most impacted.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: Coming up to Christmas, many families are struggling with the cost of living. Disposable income is not available in the way it used to be and increased bills continue to come through the doors. The Government, supported by its Independents, needs to drop the spin and look at the reality: Ireland is officially one of the most expensive countries in Europe for energy, housing, transport and electricity. Ireland has the third-highest cost in Europe for everyday groceries. That is not an accident. It is a direct outcome of political choices made by Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Independents in government. They are the architects of this cost-of-living crisis.

Every morning, long before the sun rises, the hard-working people of County Meath are already on the move. Our tradespeople, nurses, teachers, SNAs, public sector workers and factory workers, the very people who keep this country running, are hitting the roads to provide for their families. Whether they are driving down the M3 or the M4 or are looking at gridlock on the M50, commuters from Meath have been hit from every single angle. They face relentless toll increases and punishing fuel costs. If they try to do what this Government asks and choose public transport, they are met with ever-increasing fares.

How can this Government, in good conscience, tell people to give up their cars when it is simultaneously pricing them out of every single option to get to work? They get up early, they work all day and they do everything right. What do they get for it? Many people are struggling to survive. Elderly people are lying in bed under two coats, terrified to turn the heating on. Parents are walking through supermarket aisles putting basic food items back on the shelves because the total at the till climbs every week.

What is this Government's grand strategy? It is to claim it is monitoring the situation. Sinn Féin has put forward solutions time and again, yet the Government simply does not listen and does not care. It is simply pricing people away from public transport and making it unaffordable to travel to work. The cost-of-living crisis is affecting many people. The Government now has an opportunity to support Sinn Féin's motion and prevent the toll and public transport increases.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: These planned toll increases must not go ahead. People are already under enormous pressure from the surging cost of petrol and diesel. The Government's decision to add on yet another cost is a slap in the face for many of them. During a cost-of-living crisis, the Government seems determined to make things a bit more difficult for people. Previous toll hikes have been suspended and there is absolutely no reason why they cannot be suspended again.

From January 2027, users of the Limerick Tunnel will pay €2.40. In 2021, people paid €1.90, so the costs facing people have increased. The Government has opted time and again to impose further costs on them. Figures from TII show that taxpayers have paid €74.5 million to date to a private operator over a 14-year period for the Limerick Tunnel. In 2024, €5.7 million was paid in fees. That is €110,000 per week to a private operator. These moneys were paid because of lower-than-expected traffic volumes in Limerick Tunnel. Taxpayers, in addition to paying the toll, are being forced to compensate the private toll road company for the low number of vehicles using the tunnel.

The PPP contracts that permit this extremely generous traffic guarantee are a legacy of bad economic choices and decisions made by successive Fianna Fáil-led Administrations in the early 2000s. These road toll contracts represent poor planning, a total lack of foresight and dreadful value for money for taxpayers. The tunnel, while it is a wonderful piece of infrastructure, is far too close to the city centre and the toll is too high for many motorists to allow it to reach its maximum potential of removing traffic from the streets of Limerick city. It was a poor deal and now costs taxpayers millions of euro in penalties every year. The least the Government can do now is stop the increases for 2027.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: Once again, we see workers, families and ordinary commuters being forced to pay the price for the Government's failure to protect them. This time, it is through another hike in toll charges. For many people in County Clare, these tolls are not optional; they are unavoidable. People travelling to work, parents bringing children where they need to go and families travelling to hospital have little or no realistic alternative. What is the Government doing but piling more pressure on them?

People are already struggling with the cost-of-living crisis. Petrol and diesel prices are putting enormous pressure on household budgets; yet, instead of providing some relief, the Government is handing commuters another increase, another kick in the teeth. This is not about keeping pace with inflation. The operating profits from Limerick Tunnel increased by 10% in 2024 following previous toll increases, with almost €12 million in profits being generated. Who exactly are these increases benefiting? It certainly is not ordinary people. They will have to pay more to sit longer in congestion and they have no choice but to use these roads.

Penalising people with higher costs will not cut congestion; it will only give bigger profits to the operators of gold-plated PPP contracts. The reality is that years of failure to deliver an adequate public transport system in Clare have left people dependent on their cars, and they are now paying a tax upon a tax upon a tax. They are being penalised because the Government has failed to provide alternatives.

I find it particularly galling to hear Ministers talk about listening to communities while at the same time introducing policies that make life harder for those very communities, giving big profits to PPPs and big bonuses to CEOs while people are struggling.

What about the Minister during the election? He said the increases should be scrapped and were too high. What happened? Why is he now pushing for these hikes? Previous toll increases have been paused and there is no reason for the Minister not to do so again. Stand by election commitments, do not make ordinary workers and families pay another price for this Government's failure, review the tolling policy and the PPP policy and stop these toll hikes.

Deputy Pa Daly: TII has the idea, and the Government is going along with it, to give extra money to operators of the Fermoy scheme, income from which has gone up from €11.9 million in 2015 to €18.9 million in 2024; to the Dundalk scheme, which has increased from €23.5 million to over €40 million; to the Limerick scheme, which has increased from €12.5 to €23.9 million; and to the Waterford scheme, which has gone from €5.4 million to €11.4 million. Is it any wonder, when this and the previous Government have abolished town councils, denuded water services of staff, privatised bin collections, outsourced housing and put no State involvement or investment into energy? In the past few years, there has been more poor planning and governance. Commuters pay the extra amount but they see that battery-operated trains are not being used. We see a rail line to Foynes being built that will never take passengers, a shrivelling number of new bus services and increasing public transport fares across the State.

We reject the statistics the Government amendment contains about the cost of insurance having decreased since 2016 because if you look at 2014 figures, it has increased by almost 50%. I reject what it says about supporting affordable public transport options. In fact, public transport fares are being increased by 15%. I reject what it says about decarbonising society when we see no State involvement in and no significant advancement towards renewable energy, offshore wind or solar.

The Government has a choice. It should stop these toll hikes, order a review of tolling policy and examine relief schemes for regular commuters. Workers and families have paid enough and they have had enough. Motorists are not a cash cow. Scrap the toll hikes and support this motion.

Amendment put.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan): Beidh an vóta againn oíche amárach. In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time on Wednesday, 11 November 2026.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Industrial Relations

77. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment to report on the measurable improvements in collective bargaining coverage in Ireland in the year since the publication of the Government's action plan to promote collective bargaining. [79772/26]

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: It is now a year since the Government published the action plan to promote collective bargaining and workers have seen precious little action in that time.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Alan Dillon): I thank the Deputy for her question. Collective bargaining coverage in Ireland is estimated at 33% to 34% of employees, drawing on figures informed by survey-based

evidence and research sources, including the workplace industrial relations survey and the OECD ICTWSS database, together with analysis by Eurofound and other national and international sources.

Ireland's Action Plan to Promote Collective Bargaining 2026-2030 includes measures to close data gaps and provide reliable and up-to-date evidence on collective bargaining coverage. The Department is working with the Central Statistics Office, ICTU, IBEC and research bodies to develop appropriate metrics and improve the quality and regularity of available data. The action plan's content was reviewed by the EU in October. The plan is being actively implemented in line with the social partners. Regular progress reports on the suite of actions are regularly provided. The plan provides for a mid-term review in 2028.

Implementation of the plan is progressing across a range of measures. Key developments in 2026 include: seven dedicated meetings under the Labour Employer Economic Forum, LEEF, umbrella between Department officials, ICTU and IBEC to support and monitor the implementation of the action plan; quarterly engagements between my Department, the Workplace Relations Commission and the Labour Court to align priorities and progress relevant actions; a new award category celebrating excellence in collective bargaining practices launched in August; and progressing the research commitments with a view to developing and collating more robust and representative data on collective bargaining coverage during 2027 in advance of Ireland’s next reporting obligations to the European Commission in 2028.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I do not see where the action is being implemented. As the Minister of State said, there are a lot of meetings and other things but I cannot see the working out of that. Unions and workers are still concerned the plan was little more than a box-ticking exercise to comply with that EU directive on adequate minimum wages. A year on, those concerns seem to be well-founded. I am still trying to find out what measurable progress has been made. How many more workers are covered by collective bargaining arrangements as a direct result of this plan?

The Government’s action plan acknowledges the enormous benefits of collective bargaining: better pay, improved working conditions, addressing the power imbalance between workers and employers, increased productivity and better work-life balance. Yet, a year after it was published, we have seen little meaningful action to deliver those benefits for workers. Ireland remains among the worst performers in the EU when it comes to collective bargaining coverage. That is not something we should accept.

Deputy Alan Dillon: Ireland continues to have a robust industrial relations framework. There is active engagement with employers and workers’ representatives across multiple structures. Through this action plan, we are taking a practical approach. That involves, first, improving the evidence and data. We want to continue to strengthen social dialogue, support voluntary collective bargaining and deliver on commitments contained in the action plan.

The honest answer is it is too early to reliably measure any national change in collective bargaining. The action plan is in its early stages. However, we are continuing conversations and engagements through my Department with employer and employee representative organisations. Progress is being made.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Before the last election, the Minister of State's party signed the respect at work pledge promising to support the legislation promoting collective bargaining, protect workplace representatives and guarantee trade union access at work. I cannot believe the number of workplaces in our own county that do not allow union access. Does the Minister of State genuinely believe he has honoured that pledge? The workers and unions I talk to certainly do not.

Last year, I and Sinn Féin tabled a motion calling for a legal right to collective bargaining and a legal right for trade unions to access workplaces. The Government voted it down. We recognise improving collective bargaining coverage requires legislative action. Workers do not need another action plan sitting on a shelf; they need rights that are enforceable by law. The consequences of failing to strengthen collective bargaining are very real for workers and their families.

Deputy Alan Dillon: The Government's role is very much to support constructive engagement while respecting the autonomy of employers, workers and trade unions. As the Deputy knows, Ireland operates a voluntary industrial relations model. That has been developed over many decades. Other countries have different arrangements. The Government's focus now is on the implementation of the action plan that has been agreed between trade unions and the employers' representatives. It ensures that Ireland complies with the directives while respecting Irish law and practice. We are doing that by strengthening the enabling conditions. We are also strengthening the social dialogue and improving the evidence base. Policy should be focused on data. That progress is being properly monitored, and it will be informed as we move through the action plan.

Industrial Development

78. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment for a progress report on land owned by the IDA outside of Portlaoise; when funding will be allocated for it; and the plans to develop the site. [79467/26]

Deputy Brian Stanley: What progress has been made on getting jobs into the large site that the IDA has in Portlaoise and also to the Leprino factory?

Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Peter Burke): I thank Deputy Stanley for his questions. Balanced regional development and supporting investment and job creation in all regions is central to the work of the Department and our enterprise development agencies.

A key component of IDA Ireland's five-year strategy, Adapt Intelligently 2025-29, is the continued and ambitious focus on maximising regional investment opportunities. The availability of suitable property solutions is a significant factor in winning investments into regional locations, and the IDA, through its regional property programme, maintains a portfolio of high-quality and sustainable property solutions aligned with evolving client needs. This includes the 36 ha IDA business and technology park in Portlaoise which has roughly 33 ha available for marketing to suit both manufacturing and international services clients in a landscaped and serviced environment.

The IDA has undertaken several initiatives to enhance the attractiveness and readiness of the Portlaoise lands for prospective investors, including providing access to the land to the ESB for the development of infrastructure to increase local power capacity to support the local and wider community and to ensure the business park can accommodate the scale of development required by IDA clients.

Planning permission for a new road extension and associated infrastructure is being sought to help open up the lands, further increasing the development potential of the park, and construction is scheduled to commence in 2027. Separately, an upgrade to the park's public lighting and CCTV network is under way.

Under its current strategy, the IDA has committed to delivering an advanced planning permission, in partnership with Laois County Council, for an advance building design at this location, and this proposal is currently under review by the local authority.

These initiatives are part of a broader strategy to ensure that County Laois, and specifically the lands in Portlaoise, are well positioned to attract new investment. In that regard, the IDA continues to proactively market the lands to both IDA and Enterprise Ireland client companies, including through its network of overseas offices, and is committed to the continued promotion of the lands for the development of employment generating uses consistent with its brief.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I thank the Minister for his reply. What he did not tell me was the number of IDA visits - not virtual visits but actual visits where it brought clients to those sites in Laois in the first half of 2026. The last figure I had was two. Will the Minister address the Leprino factory as well?

The Minister referred to "balanced regional development". It is very lopsided as far as Laois is concerned. Laois has 156 IDA-backed jobs. Westmeath, the county the Minister comes from, had 4,700 the last time that I looked. That is very lopsided.

The land in question is strategically located in Laois. The Minister has been down there and seen it. The rail network almost goes right into the site adjacent to it. It is almost on the M7-M8 motorway junction, as well as the N80 and the N77. The Minister will agree that the county council has been very successful with its sites down there.

I welcome what the Minister said about the ESB installations going ahead. Will he tell me if it is currently happening and clarify when that road is supposed to start? Getting infrastructure on the site in order that people are not just coming to look at a greenfield site where cattle are grazing and, rather, there is a level of preparation, would help attract industry into it.

Deputy Peter Burke: I understand scheduled construction is due to commence in 2027 in connection with Laois. There are five very significant IDA clients, as well as a number of Enterprise Ireland clients, in operation in County Laois. One of the announcements I was down in Laois recently for was Midland Steel's announcement, and the Deputy is very familiar with it and the work it is doing. I am particularly linked in to some of the advance networks that are now being developed in the digital sphere, and it is doing huge work underscoring it.

We have had three site visits for County Laois to date in 2026. One of the big challenges in relation to the competition in attracting foreign direct investment is the geopolitical circumstance that we operate in. We have a number of clients that are sweating their existing assets and investing further on their current sites. It is very difficult at the moment to win new bricks and mortar developments. That is just the constraint that we are in, but we are working very hard as an agency to prioritise towns like Portlaoise, and indeed County Laois, which has a huge amount to offer such as its infrastructure, connectivity and most importantly its people, who are first class.

Deputy Brian Stanley: We have to keep this issue on the boil, to put it bluntly. Three visits in the first half of this year is still very few. While there are five industries, 156 jobs is the last figure we got on that.

I want to also point out that along with those assets that the Minister saw when he visited the county, such as the strategic location of the site and the fact that it is on the crossroads of the national motorway network and the N78 and N80, as well as the rail network, the fact is over 13,000 people leave the county every morning to go to work. We have an educated and skilled workforce that is leaving the county.

I spoke during a debate on public transport and transport generally earlier today. The N7 is chock-a-block in the mornings. The train is full. There are not enough carriages on the train to carry the number of people travelling out of the county.

That is a good thing in a way, but a lot of those people could be working in Laois. If we want to reduce carbon emissions and have balanced industrial development, which the Minister said he wanted and I take him at his word, we need to get more people working in the county. It is a prime location. I ask the Minister to employ a razor-like focus over the next six to 12 months and to make sure the IDA is doing its job. How much is the IDA's budget this year? I am interested in that figure.

Deputy Peter Burke: Under the IDA's new strategy, we have earmarked about 40 new investments for the midlands region of Laois, Offaly, Longford and Westmeath. It is critical that Laois gets its share over the five-year period of that because we have upped the profile in getting more investments into regional locations, and we have a minimum of 55% picked out in the strategy.

The IDA's budget increased this year. I do not have the figure off the top of my head, but we can come back to the Deputy with it. It has a very significant capital budget, and its current research, development and innovation portfolio is going very well, particularly in relation to digitalisation. A lot of new technologies are being deployed, and it is involved in important and very significant projects of common European interest. However, as I said, new bricks and mortar projects are one of the challenging areas. That is what we really have to work on to try to deliver significant new capital projects. That will be a challenge for our country in five or six years' time, if we do not start to see an increase in that regard. I will come back to the Deputy with the exact detail on the budget and the increase in it.

Legislative Process

79. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the reason for not waiting for the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Enterprise, Tourism and Employment to finish its pre-legislative scrutiny of the Short-Term Letting and Tourism Bill 2026 and to publish its PLS report, with its recommendations, before the final Bill was introduced. [79774/26]

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: This question relates to the Short-Term Letting and Tourism Bill 2026. There is a real anger towards the Minister among hosts for rushing ahead and publishing this Bill without waiting for the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Enterprise, Tourism and Employment to complete the pre-legislative scrutiny and submit the report and its recommendations. This shows an extraordinary disregard for the committee, its members and the organisations that engaged with it in good faith.

The Minister is ramming the Committee, Report and Final Stages through the Dáil in a single day tomorrow simply to meet his own self-imposed deadline of 1 December. What was the point of pre-legislative scrutiny if he had no intention of waiting for its conclusions?

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy Conway-Walsh for her very important question.

10 o'clock

The general scheme of the Short-Term Letting and Tourism Bill was approved by the Government in April 2025 and was referred to the Joint Committee on Enterprise, Tourism and Employment on 16 June 2025 to be considered under pre-legislative scrutiny following the transfer of the tourism function to the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment. The Bill provides the statutory basis for the introduction of regulatory controls, including a national register for the short-term letting sector. The tourism sector has broadly welcomed the introduction of this register.

Pre-legislative scrutiny commenced on 15 October 2025 and my Department has fully co-operated with the process set out in the Oireachtas handbook. My officials have also engaged extensively with stakeholders at national and EU level and established a dedicated webpage with information for short-term letting operators and platforms.

The current pre-legislative scrutiny framework was revised in 2022 to address concerns regarding delays arising from open-ended scrutiny processes. As part of those reforms, a standard timeframe of eight weeks was established for committees to undertake pre-legislative scrutiny and furnish a report to the Minister. The Oireachtas guidance also states that committees are empowered, but not obliged, to undertake pre-legislative scrutiny and that the process should not operate as an indefinite barrier to the publication of legislation. Having allowed more than sufficient time for scrutiny, and with no report forthcoming, it was necessary to progress the legislation.

Publication of the Bill ensures that the necessary legislation is in place to enable Fáilte Ireland to implement the short-term letting register in December. It will also provide legal certainty for the sector to enable Ireland to fulfil its obligations under the EU short-term rental regulation, which came into effect on 20 May 2026.

It should be noted that, in line with Oireachtas guidelines, the committee's report would ordinarily have been expected by mid-December 2025. The Department allowed a further period of almost 11 months beyond that date before progressing the legislation, during which no report was furnished.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I have never heard a more disingenuous answer. It is disrespectful to the Chair of the committee, its secretariat and members, because the Minister knows the pre-legislative scrutiny could not be completed without the planning guidelines. It would have been absolute nonsense to complete it without the guidelines. We waited and waited for those guidelines. It is the Minister who has made a shambles of this legislation and turned the entire pre-legislative scrutiny process into a farce.

The committee spent considerable time and resources engaging with organisations such as Fáilte Ireland, Threshold, the Department of housing, the County and City Management Association, Historic Houses of Ireland, the Irish Self-Catering Federation, *booking.com,* and even the Minister's Department. They all gave their time, expertise and evidence in good faith on the understanding their contributions, alongside the committee's recommendations, would inform the final Bill. The pre-legislative scrutiny could not be completed without the national planning guidelines. The Minister needs to put that on record.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy for her response. As Minister for tourism, I am responsible for the tourism aspect of the legislation. We engaged with the committee. I cannot be responsible for the planning aspect and planning statement, which the Minister, Deputy Browne, has responsibility for. However, I point out that we held a number of joint stakeholder meetings with a number of those affected, including representatives of the Irish Self-Catering Federation. We attended its annual conference and answered questions. We had a number of meetings at the Department with it on 29 April and 20 June 2025. I also engaged extensively with the sector.

As we are all aware, this debate has been going on for a long time. We know what the issues are in connection with it and it is important to get a balance to ensure we can have vibrant tourism accommodation in rural areas and that, in the 25 towns and cities where there is significant housing pressure, we ensure we bring more units back onto the long-term rental market. That is the objective of the legislation. We have a fair balance in doing that.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: This is a crisis entirely of the Minister's making and he is asking everyone else to pay the price for his failure to prepare and the failure of the Minister for housing. I agree with the Minister, but there should be joined up actions in the Government between the Minister for tourism and the Minister for housing. This legislation is far too important to get wrong and the Minister has created enormous confusion and uncertainty for short-term letting hosts. His communication has been abysmal.

People are genuinely panicking. Family businesses are worried about their livelihoods and they still do not know where they stand. Incredibly, it appears their legislation could allow for commercial investors operating for more than seven years to continue, while, at the same time, penalising small, family-run businesses in rural Ireland. That does not make sense. He is

potentially protecting the very commercial operators this legislation is supposed to address, while punishing ordinary families.

Then there is the 31 December deadline, which is right in the middle of the Christmas holidays. Offices will be closed. Services will be stretched and hosts will be scrambling to register properties before the deadline. This should not be happening.

Deputy Peter Burke: To be clear, this legislation does not go far enough for the Deputy's party. Sinn Féin wants to impose a stricter regime so the families the Deputy is talking about would be precluded from having short-term lets. The Sinn Féin housing spokesperson is on the record as saying this does not go far enough.

The legislation I brought forward ensures the family businesses to which the Deputy referred can pay €25, register from 1 December and have two years to become planning compliant and that for family businesses that have existed for seven years - not commercial operators, but family businesses that have been providing accommodation for more than seven years - there is a presumption that planning permission will be granted to them. It is clear and concise. It is an express administration process.

The Deputy needs to be clear about one thing. I listened to her speech and that of Deputy Ó Broin last week. There is no consistency there. He said we need a stronger regime and almost that short-term lets are a scourge. That is what he said, that we need more long-term accommodation across the country. If the Deputy is being decent about this, she should say a figure. What figure does she want our population to be? What does she want us to work on?

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: The Minister needs to differentiate them from the commercial.

Deputy Peter Burke: I did not hear anything put forward.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: There are two Ministers involved in this.

Deputy Peter Burke: The Deputy should at least be open and upfront and say we will go for 10,000 or 5,000, because when I went for 20,000, which exempts a lot of short-term lets in her constituency, Sinn Féin said I was wrong. Let us be clear on that.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach Deputy Conor Sheehan: The Minister is over time. We will move to the next question.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: That is an arbitrary figure plucked from the air.

Insurance Industry

80. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment in light of his proposal to cap minor injury payouts, the action that will be taken

to ensure the savings being made by insurance companies from reduced claims will be passed on to business owners to reduce the cost of doing business. [79456/26]

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: This question relates to the cost of doing business, which is becoming increasingly unsustainable for SMEs. Small businesses are being squeezed from every direction and insurance premiums remain one of the most significant pressures facing employers. I welcome the measures to reduce excessive personal injury awards, but reducing payouts cannot simply mean increasing profits for insurance companies. What concrete action will the Minister take to ensure the savings from capped injury awards are passed on directly to SMEs through reduced insurance premiums, rather than pocketed by insurance companies?

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy Conway-Walsh for her question in this important area on which I am working, alongside my Cabinet colleagues, to continue to bring down the cost of insurance in line with the programme for Government. Our focus is to deliver a comprehensive series of actions aimed at improving affordability, availability and transparency across the insurance sector.

One of the first steps to deliver on these commitments was the new action plan for insurance reform, which was published on 24 July 2025. The action plan for insurance reform includes a range of actions under six themes, including competitiveness, legal reform, fraud reduction, innovation and skills, and climate protection. Responsibility for the actions lies across a number of Government Departments and public sector bodies. The Injuries Resolution Board, an agency of my Department, is tasked with several actions under the plan, which are intended to strengthen its remit and maximise the number of claims resolved through its non-adversarial processes, thereby reducing unnecessary, expensive and time-consuming litigation.

In October 2025, under action 4 of the plan, I published an independent report, a review of compensation for minor soft-tissue injuries in Ireland and the UK. The report analysed compensation for minor neck and back soft-tissue injuries sustained in road traffic accidents, comparing Ireland with England and Wales. It found that over the three-year period reviewed, the average assessment made in Ireland was 3.9 times higher than the average in England and Wales, while the average Irish insurer settlement was 4.9 times higher for minor neck or back injuries. On foot of this, I have asked the Injuries Resolution Board to conduct a second, more extensive, piece of research to be delivered in the first quarter of 2027, which will strengthen the evidence base and support the Judicial Council in its review of the personal injuries guidelines.

In 2025, data from the Injuries Resolution Board showed that 67% of the claims received by the board were for minor injuries. Awards were only accepted in under 40% of assessed claims under the board's consent-based model. These findings demonstrate the importance of examining the more significant measures of reform set out in action 22 of the plan.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Insurance costs are crippling small businesses. Not only do we have a situation where there are enormous energy costs, but insurance costs are continuing to rise. I know that from my own insurance costs. They have risen 15% this year. Employers are paying enormous premiums just to keep their doors open, and many are struggling to remain viable. We need competition in the insurance market to challenge the dominance of major

providers and address the lack of meaningful choice available to businesses. It is all well and good introducing caps on injury awards but let us be clear about what that means. Insurance companies will be paying out less money. The question is whether businesses will see any of those savings.

Meanwhile, the cost of doing business continues to spiral. We have heard the plans to permit further toll increases. For a small business using these roads multiple times each day, those additional charges quickly multiply into significant annual costs. Every increase matters when running a small business, employing people and trying to keep the doors open. Businesses need reductions in their costs, not more promises while their bills continue to rise.

Deputy Peter Burke: We have seen 20,000 claims go through the Injuries Resolution Board last year, which saved about €88 million in avoided legal costs. That is a significant saving for the business community. Claims are 35% lower compared with 2019 and the median award is 24% lower. That demonstrates that we are making progress. We are on the 11th consecutive month in which the cost of motor insurance has continued to fall. Again, that continued reduction is a significant and important asset.

We are currently looking at the potential of bringing in a cap for minor injury claims that could go forward. Essentially, it would be similar to an adjudication made by the Residential Tenancies Board, RTB, or the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, which would be proportionate and set by the Oireachtas. Essentially, it would streamline a lot of cases and build more capacity into the system. Obviously, we would provide a right to recourse on a point of law that could be challenged through the courts. If we could have a cap in place for both the courts and the Injuries Resolution Board, it would provide significant savings to the sector. The need to get those savings passed onto consumers is critical.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: To whom will those savings go? I want to bring the Minister back to the fundamental question. He needs a clear and transparent plan to ensure the savings from the reduced personal injury awards reach the SMEs that desperately need them. Insurance companies are already generating substantial profits. There is absolutely no justification for a situation in which the Government reduces the amount insurers have to pay, only for businesses to continue to be ripped off while insurance providers enjoy greater corporate profits. What specifically is the Minister going to do to ensure those savings for insurance companies are passed on to small and medium businesses that need every help they can possibly get at this particular time? No Government policy should be done simply on the basis of providing more profit for insurance companies. We already have a lack of transparency on the raw data within the sector. We need measures in place to ensure that if this initiative goes ahead, the extra profits are passed on.

Deputy Peter Burke: That has been our key objective. As I pointed out, we have seen significant success with motor insurance. There have been 11 consecutive months in which the cost of motor insurance has reduced. Motor insurance costs have reduced by approximately 5% in the past year. The critical challenge has been public and employer liability.

When it comes to competition in the marketplace, we have got new insurers in. A key focus of the Government, through our new insurance action plan, is to demonstrate that when we

work in partnership with consumers and insurance companies in bringing in reforms – we must remember the previous Government brought in more than 90% of the reforms it was asked to do – we will be ensuring those reforms result in reduced consumer quotes on the other side of the coin. It must go in partnership. That is the bargain we have with insurance companies. We need to ensure we see reduced premiums, such as those we have seen with motor insurance. I know there is a challenge with other business insurance, but we are working hard through our new action plan to see reduced premiums.

Business Supports

81. **Deputy James Geoghegan** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment if he will provide an overview of the Startup Ireland programme; and to provide a breakdown of the funding associated with it. [79506/26]

Deputy Keira Keogh: I am taking this question on behalf of my colleague, Deputy Geoghegan. I congratulate the Minister and Minister of State on the recent launch of Startup Ireland. It is a fantastic initiative. I am thankful for the work the Department and Enterprise Ireland have put into it. Will the Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, provide an overview of the programme and a breakdown of associated funding?

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy for the question. In October, Startup Ireland was launched as the Government's new flagship initiative to strengthen Ireland's start-up ecosystem and make it easier for founders to start, scale and succeed from Ireland. Led by Enterprise Ireland, Startup Ireland will provide a co-ordinated national framework to support entrepreneurs, improve access to funding, mentoring and networks and strengthen pathways for start-up growth. It aims to create a more connected, founder-focused system by enhancing collaboration between Enterprise Ireland, local enterprise offices, LEOs, higher education institutions, accelerators, incubators, investors and other ecosystem partners.

As set out in Startup Ireland's roadmap to 2030, the initiative aims to support 10,000 entrepreneurs and facilitate the creation of 1,000 new start-ups by 2030. To support these ambitions, Startup Ireland will invest €150 million in direct early-stage funding during the period to 2030 through Enterprise Ireland's pre-seed start fund and innovative high potential start-up fund.

A national start-up hub will be co-located with Enterprise Ireland's new Dublin city centre headquarters. The hub will connect Ireland's start-up and innovation ecosystem, both nationally and internationally, by providing a convening point for founders, investors, multinational companies, researchers and other partners.

Startup Ireland will deliver a new national accelerator programme, with a €21 million allocation for the first three years of operation. The programme will have an enhanced regional focus and will deliver company, talent, sectoral and specialist accelerator programmes to support start-ups in high-growth sectors. The first specialist programme to be delivered is Startup Ireland's Al accelerator, which will provide participant companies with access to technical expertise, customers and investors to help them develop and scale internationally.

Deputy Keira Keogh: I thank the Minister of State. It is exciting to work towards 10,000 entrepreneurs and 1,000 new start-ups with a turnover of €1 million. It is all exciting. We will have this national hub in Dublin, but I seek to ensure that we get fair regional access for our entrepreneurs across Westport, Claremorris, Belmullet and Ballina. Being a constituency colleague, I am sure the Minister of State is also seeking to ensure this. How will we ensure they also get access to investors and mentors? Will there be regional or county targets? Obviously, we are supported by the likes of the LEOs and Údarás na Gaeltachta, but how will this be rolled out?

I welcome the focus on female-led founders and having that 35% target. Ireland ranks second in venture capital funding for women, but it is a low bar. Globally, female founders still struggle to access venture capital. Will the Minister of State elaborate on how that 35% aim will be achieved?

Deputy Alan Dillon: Coming from a business background, I know the Deputy is a champion within her town of Westport in this regard. Regional balance is a core principle of Startup Ireland. The strengthened new frontiers programme already operates through a nationwide network, and the new regional pre-accelerator programmes will expand greater access across the country. We all appreciate that entrepreneurs come from all parts of the country. They are spread far and wide. Talent exists in every county and that is why it is important that we have a programme that brings together funding, mentoring, accelerator programmes and international supports.

Startup Ireland also has a key focus of attracting and supporting more female entrepreneurs in their journey. We are all in agreement that if we want the strong indigenous enterprises of tomorrow, we have to invest in the start-ups in the here and now. That is why we are backing this roadmap with over €150 million of funding. Indeed, the ambition is to create 1,000 new start-ups by 2030.

Deputy Keira Keogh: It is good to hear that the funding has already been clearly stamped down.

I recently attended the AI summit, where the AI accelerator was launched. We heard a lot about the regulatory burden facing many of the start-ups in Europe. It was mentioned that it is often potentially easier to scale into countries like the US rather than trying to navigate the different European markets. I know the proposed EU Inc. will help our position with this. Will there be resources in Startup Ireland to help companies navigate these requirements so founders can spend more time developing their products and growing their businesses rather than in regulation? One company at the summit stated that about a quarter of its staff are involved in compliance. I suppose that is okay for a medium or large enterprise, but for a small enterprise trying to grow and scale in Europe, it would be very easy to pivot to the US or markets that may be less complicated in a regulatory way.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I want to recognise the Minister of State, Deputy Smyth, and the Minister, Deputy Burke, in the context of the success of the international AI summit. It really shone a spotlight on what Ireland already possesses in terms of its strength within AI, but also within technology, research and innovation. As the Deputy said, AI represents probably one of

the biggest economic opportunities of our generation, so there is a real focus on it. The first specialist accelerator programme under Startup Ireland will be the AI accelerator. The objective is to ensure that Irish indigenous founders and entrepreneurs are supported so they can have that connection with experts, investors and customers at local level, but also be able to scale internationally. We want that ambition to be delivered by Irish companies. That will be a key focus as we roll out the new national accelerator programme across the country.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Urban Development

82. **Deputy Martin Daly** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the specific measures he intends to introduce to address persistently high commercial vacancy rates in rural towns, particularly Boyle, County Roscommon, where the commercial vacancy rate has reached 30.1%, and Ballinasloe, County Galway; whether targeted financial supports, enterprise incentives or retail activation schemes will be introduced to encourage businesses to occupy vacant commercial premises in these towns; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [79458/26]

Deputy Martin Daly: What specific measures does the Minister intend to introduce to address persistently high commercial vacancy rates in rural towns around the country, particularly in my constituency at Boyle, County Roscommon, where there is a commercial vacancy rate of 30%, and also in Ballinasloe, County Galway, Ballaghaderreen, Castlerea and Ballygar, where there are considerable vacancies?

Deputy Alan Dillon: I emphasise that we all acknowledge the importance of having vibrant towns and villages, and that local shops and the retail sector are essential in achieving that aim. I am committed to tackling the issue of commercial vacancy across rural towns and villages. I have asked my officials in the Department to assess proposals on activating vacant commercial properties. The retail sector provides a huge amount of important employment, with over 220,000 people directly employed in retail. This contributes to the economy in every city, town and village in the country.

As the Deputy is aware, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht developed the town centre first policy, which was launched back in 2022. This was a major cross-government policy that aimed to tackle vacancy, combat dereliction and breathe new life into our town centres. Most recently, we have had the next revision of Our Rural Future out to 2031. That renewed policy framework sets out the Government's approach to reinvesting in and strengthening the economic, social and environmental well-being of rural areas.

The new policy has a strong focus on vacancy and also highlights the importance of town and village renewal schemes and the town centre first approach as the primary solution to vacancy. Commitment 1.2 of the policy looks at enhancing the vitality and resilience of rural towns by advancing the town centre first approach. In addition, within the local authorities, we have over 31 LEOs that will support and continue the economic strategies in the local

economic and community plans. We want to ensure they have more visibility within our local authorities to try to support businesses early in their journey and ensure that they have access to the required supports during that process.

Deputy Martin Daly: The State and the Government cannot be faulted in this area. In Ballinasloe, just transition funding of €5.7 million has been committed, with a further €3.8 million under town and city regeneration. There has also been an application under the SÍOL programme for deprived towns and an enterprise hub in which €225,000 was invested. Regarding childcare, there was State-led capital funding for a new preschool in Boyle, as well as a new community library for Boyle and community recognition funding for Boyle Town Centre and King House. The State has committed considerable funding in the education and social enterprise areas, but without enterprise, without business, which is the beating heart of our towns, towns will not survive. We really need that. We cannot have hollowed-out towns up and down the country, where we have people living on the periphery and nothing going on in the centre of the town.

Deputy Alan Dillon: The Deputy's points are well made. I agree that the level of vacancy referenced for the towns of Boyle and Ballinasloe is too high. No one benefits from empty shopfronts, not the local community or the neighbouring businesses that are trading, and certainly not the town itself. That is why, within the Department of enterprise, I have developed proposals for a retail activation programme. It is about turning vacancy into a vibrant programme and specifically looking at vacancy on our shopping streets. We are starting with the 21 town centre first towns and then expanding that to other towns that have substantial vacancy. The proposal concerns how to put a vacant building, an entrepreneurial business and Government supports together at one front door. We need to ensure that we can work together with town regeneration officers and local authorities, look at the mechanisms and supports that are available, and drive that forward in the months ahead.

Deputy Martin Daly: We have seen how a radical approach to housing under the vacancy and dereliction grants can work to bring housing in rural areas back into living spaces for people and make rural communities vibrant. We need that type of radical thinking for town centres across my constituency, but also throughout the country. We have to find a way to bring people and businesses back into the centre of town. Of course, we have the over the shop scheme to bring people to live in our town centres again. Without that revitalisation, we will end up with vacant properties and derelict town centres where people just hang out, with commercial enterprises that are not particularly desirable and with people leaving their towns to shop and do their business in bigger centres.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I agree with the points made by the Deputy. We have some excellent schemes in place. The above the shop living scheme is an important one, with €130,000 of supports for owners to bring more residential life into towns. We have town centre first, the town renewal scheme, but there is still a gap. I think we are good at improving buildings, but we are not always successful at getting businesses into those vacant premises. The proposal I want is very much around activation. How do we identify a vacant unit? How do we bring a business to the person who owns the unit? How do we help businesses access support and address the barriers? How do we look at broader ideas around targeted rates, incentives and

shopfront improvement supports? How do we provide co-ordinated local enterprise office assistance for businesses that are looking to take on a lease over 24 or 36 months, and how will they be supported on that journey? We are focused on that. I will keep the Deputy updated.

Social Enterprise Sector

83. **Deputy George Lawlor** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment given the role social enterprises play in sustaining employment and services in towns and villages where private sector investment may be limited, if he will introduce targeted grants or tax incentives for social enterprises operating in rural and disadvantaged areas. [79464/26]

Deputy George Lawlor: Given the role that social enterprises play in sustaining employment and services in towns and villages where private sector investment may be limited, will the Minister introduce targeted grants or tax incentives for social enterprises operating in rural and disadvantaged areas?

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Niamh Smyth): I thank Deputy Lawlor for this very important question. The policy responsibility for social enterprise lies with the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht. Trading for Impact: National Social Enterprise Policy 2024-2027 was launched by the Minister for Rural and Community Development in 2024. This policy is designed to cultivate and sustain a strong, impactful social enterprise sector in Ireland that enriches the social, environmental and economic well-being of our communities.

It was developed following extensive consultation with the sector and outlines a renewed commitment to help cultivate strong and impactful social enterprises through new and existing supports. Many of the actions contained in Trading for Impact seek to support social enterprises to increase their trading income and improve their resilience, thereby reducing the reliance on grant funding.

Balanced regional development is a Government priority. The Department and its agencies contribute to this agenda in several ways, including through regional enterprise plans, REPs, and the local enterprise offices. In the Department, the regional enterprise plans have proven effective in fostering regional collaboration, bringing together key stakeholders to identify challenges and opportunity and take action in areas such as cluster development, manufacturing and the knowledge economy. The REPs are bottom-up plans developed and led by regional stakeholders which focus on collaborative initiatives to strengthen the enterprise environment. Each of the nine REPs are tailored to reflect regional strengths and opportunities and aligned to national enterprise policy priorities, such as decarbonisation and digitalisation. First launched in 2018, the REPs evolved from the regional action plans for jobs which were in place from 2015 to 2017. The latest REPs ran from 2022 to the end of 2025, following an agreement to extend them by year one to support implementation and enable consideration of their future iterations.

Deputy George Lawlor: I thank the Minister of State for her response. While I appreciate that the Department of Social Protection plays a leading role in the area of social enterprise, I believe that the Department of enterprise should be equal in its contribution to the development

of social enterprise. Often, as we know, social enterprises can be the employer of last resort in rural communities. I am sure the Minister of State will accept that in many towns and villages, particularly where private sector investment is weak, they provide employment opportunities that otherwise do not exist. Every euro invested in social enterprise delivers a double return. Unlike conventional businesses, social enterprise reinvests its profits back into local services, providing training, employment and community development. Why is there no dedicated tax incentive recognising this added social value? It also has a key role to play in tackling rural decline. Targeted grants and tax incentives for social enterprises would be most welcome.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: Following an independent review of the REP initiative, the Department and its officials are working on a new approach to regional enterprise development, aligning more closely with the regional, spatial and economic strategies. This will strengthen the links between enterprise development, skills, infrastructure and wider regional planning. In addition to this, our local enterprise offices, LEOs, provide a wide range of business supports, which are available to social enterprises provided they operate on a commercial basis and meet the eligibility criteria of the scheme for which they wish to apply.

Social enterprises are generally eligible for the full range of the LEO capacity building and productivity supports, including all training, mentoring and advisory services. These include lean for business, green for business and the digital AI for business consultancy programmes, the grow digital and AI voucher and the energy efficiency grant. In addition, they can access a wide range of high-quality business and management development programmes tailored to meet specific development requirements. The Department, through both the LEO policy statement for 2024 to 2030 and Enterprise Ireland strategy, Delivering for Ireland, Leading Globally, recognises that social enterprises are a valuable part of our economy, and we support the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht's Trading for Impact: National Social Enterprise Policy 2024-2027.

Deputy George Lawlor: In my own county of Wexford, there are some excellent social enterprises that provide a deal of employment and add to the economy, both in the area of training and retraining. These include EPIC Social Enterprise, Kafe Konnect, run by Wexford Local Development, Wexford Enterprise Centre and Recycling 2000. These are good enterprises that provide employment and training and commit to the local economy. Given the relatively moderate cost of targeted grants or tax relief compared to large-scale industrial supports, does the Minister of State not agree that social enterprises represent excellent value for money in the context of investing in them to invest in jobs? They are not seeking special treatment. They are just asking for recognition for the unique role they play in sustaining jobs, keeping services alive and maintaining the social fabric of communities, which, of course, is all part of the role of the Department of Social Protection, but the Department of enterprise has a key role to play here.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I agree with the essence of what Deputy Lawlor is saying in terms of anything we can do to nurture and harness the social enterprises. We should be taking a serious and more laser-sharp focus on it. Officials from the Department attend the trading for impact stakeholder engagement group and contribute to progressing actions assigned to the Department. That may be where the crux of the Deputy's argument is. This is between the

Department of Gaeltacht and rural affairs and the Department of enterprise. In addition, Enterprise Ireland's LEO operations and client excellence unit has actively worked for a number of years to improve awareness, understanding and constituency in how local enterprises are supported across the network. This has included dedicated training and awareness sessions with LEO staff developed in collaboration with representatives from the social enterprise sector, social enterprise practitioners and enterprise consultants. I take the Deputy's point and I will discuss it with the Minister, Deputy Burke, and our colleagues in the Department of rural affairs.

Enterprise Policy

84. **Deputy Emer Currie** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the timeline for the development and publication of the Enterprise 2035 Strategy; the plans for further consultation with businesses; and the way in which key enterprise sectors falling under the remit of other Government Departments will be incorporated into the strategy. [79393/26]

Deputy Emer Currie: I welcome the Minister's initiative and leadership in bringing forward the proposed Enterprise 2035 strategy. It is both timely and important, given the significant challenges taking place in the global economy, the rapid development of AI and the challenges and opportunities facing Irish businesses. There was an initial consultation process earlier this year. What further engagement and consultation are planned with businesses and representative organisations as the strategy is developed?

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy Currie for her important question. Work has commenced on the development of the new national enterprise strategy, Enterprise 2035. The strategy will build on the White Paper on enterprise and maintain a focus on strengthening Ireland's position as an open economy underpinned by trade and innovation. Its development is being informed by an evidence-based approach, combined research, stakeholder engagement and public consultation.

A public consultation was launched on 31 July 2026 and concluded on 2 October 2026, providing businesses and other stakeholders with an opportunity to contribute to the strategy's development. More than 100 submissions were received as part of the public consultation process and they are currently being assessed by the Department. The findings of the consultation will be considered by the three groups overseeing the development of the strategy, an internal principal officer group, an interdepartmental group at assistant secretary level and an external advisory group comprising business leaders and academics. The interdepartmental group had its first meeting on 9 September 2026. I chaired the first meeting of the expert advisory group on 29 September 2026. These groups will help ensure that relevant policy areas across government are reflected in the strategy and that Enterprise 2035 is developed as a coherent, whole-of-government framework.

In addition, the Department is arranging a series of bilateral engagements with relevant Departments to examine the key policy areas. Following consideration of the consultation feedback and wider stakeholder inputs, drafting of the strategy will commence in quarter 1 of 2027 with publication planned for quarter 2 of 2027. Stakeholder engagement will continue throughout the drafting process, including through the Department's enterprise and retail

forums. I encourage all businesses and sectoral representatives to take advantage of the opportunity to get involved and share their views. The Department also intends to engage directly with regional businesses through a series of focused workshops on specific aspects of the strategy during quarter 1 of 2027.

Deputy Emer Currie: One of the key challenges in developing a genuinely national enterprise strategy is that responsibility for significant parts of the Irish economy is spread across a number of Departments. Financial services fall under the Department of Finance, transport falls under the Department of Transport, energy falls under the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment, food and drink fall under the Department of agriculture and construction falls under the Department of housing. These are all significant sectors in terms of private sector employment, investment and economic growth. While Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland support some businesses in these sectors, responsibility for their broader competitiveness and development largely rests within the relevant line Departments. The fundamental challenge is that we need to move beyond having individual Departments looking after individual sectors towards a whole-of-government approach to competitiveness of every significant sector of the Irish economy, to ensure that it is given consistent attention at the very core of the Government.

Deputy Peter Burke: Deputy Currie has raised an excellent point and is absolutely right that responsibility can straddle a number of Departments. There are a few key examples of how we are trying to break down silos in government.

First, in the case of health, the Minister for Health, Jennifer Carroll MacNeill, and I are bringing together a live science strategy, looking at how we can look through the prism of innovation, which comes under my Department, and access for all, under the Department of Health. It looks at how we can make the most innovative medicines accessible to the population at large. That is a key example of having symposiums with industry to explain the Government's perspective and our wider responsibilities to the community while also trying to get exciting new businesses to invest and develop in Ireland.

In the case of housing, Construct Innovate is working with Enterprise Ireland on the new development model in Mount Lucas, which is training people in modern methods of construction, MMC. This is a very exciting opportunity whereby well over two thirds of all construction in Ireland are now done through modern methods of construction. We have a huge opportunity to increase that by breaking down the silos and having Departments work together. The Deputy is absolutely right, and that is what I want to see more of.

Deputy Emer Currie: I am glad we are on the same page. Some Departments have their own sectoral strategies, but their focus is often primarily on regulation and other departmental priorities rather than the competitiveness and growth of the business operating within those sectors. Bringing tourism within the remit of the Minister's Department is welcome, but it is neither practical nor realistic to expect every enterprise sector to sit within his Department. We need effective structures to ensure all sectors receive appropriate, strategic attention.

Would the Minister consider establishing a permanent Cabinet committee, or an equivalent formal cross-government mechanism, specifically tasked with overseeing enterprise,

competitiveness and productivity in all sectors of the economy? How will he ensure Enterprise 2035 is properly aligned with the sectoral strategies of other Departments, with clear ownership and accountability for delivering on competitiveness and growth?

Deputy Peter Burke: Those are very valuable suggestions put forward by the Deputy. Implementing strategies is key because you have to have key performance indicators to monitor whether your strategy is delivering. Just like A New Era for Irish Tourism, our tourism strategy, we monitor this through our Cabinet subcommittee. We also monitor the action plan on competitiveness and productivity through the National Productivity and Competitive Council, where we have summits to ensure we meet the objectives set out in that strategy and that each objective is carried out. Our cost-of-business advisory forum is another key strategy with very clear targets. Some of these targets are very challenging because they go to structural deficits at the heart of government, with some taking time to resolve.

I am absolutely open to working with Deputy Currie on suggestions for any mechanism that could ensure we are holding all Departments' feet to the fire to improve our competitiveness. There are huge challenges in Ireland's competitive offering right now, chief among them energy. That is our biggest challenge as an economy right now, and I would be happy to work with Deputy Currie on anything we could do to unlock that potential.

Question No. 85 taken with Written Answers.

Visa Applications

87. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment to provide an update on his Department's progress in establishing a single application process for employment permits and visa applications. [79274/26]

Deputy Colm Burke: I am seeking an update on the Department's progress in establishing a single application process for employment permits and visa applications. I understand a committee was set up between two Departments. What progress has been made with that committee?

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank Deputy Burke for his question. Over the past number of years, my officials, in collaboration with officials in the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, have been working strenuously to deliver a more efficient and streamlined employment permit and visa system. A key element of this is the implementation of a single application procedure for both employment permits and immigration permissions, in line with the single permit directive. It is expected this will reduce the complexity of the current system, ensuring the process responds efficiently and quickly to the skills and labour market needs of the future.

A programme implementation team, co-chaired by my Department and the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, has been established. The initial focus of this group has been the streamlining of existing processes and co-ordinated external communication, scoping the feasibility of technological, legislative and data sharing solutions, and agreeing and laying

the groundwork for subsequent implementation. The expected delivery date for this complex project is 2027.

My colleague the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, and I recently met with officials from both Departments and we remain actively engaged with regard to driving momentum to ensure progress is maintained and milestones are achieved in the work on the single permit directive. A pilot project has been developed, which will test the new single application procedure for applicants under the critical skills employment permit scheme, Ireland's primary economic migration route for attracting highly skilled talent in sectors experiencing labour shortages. The initiative forms part of ongoing efforts to modernise public services, improve customer experience for applicants and employers and strengthen co-ordination between employment permit and immigration processes.

These developments mark a necessary and significant step towards a more integrated and efficient employment permit and visa system, which will strengthen Ireland’s reputation as an attractive place to work and do business.

Deputy Colm Burke: I thank the Minister of State. I raise this matter because employers are having difficulty when they offer a person a job and then that person has to apply for a work permit. Whether it is a critical skills employment permit or a general employment permit, they then have to apply for an entry visa. Over the years the process has taken too long, and I have seen cases where employers have withdrawn their offer of employment, which is quite frustrating.

When the Minister of State says we will have a process in place in 2027, are we talking about the start or end of that year? The other reason I am concerned relates to stamp 4 applications. At one point this year, and I know it is not the Minister of State's Department, over 100,000 applications were pending. Work was done to resolve that issue, but the Department did not appear to have foreseen that number of applications waiting for stamp 4 renewal.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank Deputy Burke for outlining his concerns. It will not be at the start or the end of the year; rather, it will be somewhere in between in 2027. We are actively working on this. As the Deputy said, one of the key reasons we are undertaking this work is that we recognise the delays, the complexity created and the challenges for both employers and applicants. Alongside the development of the single application procedure, officials in both Departments are examining how we can continue to expedite visa processing, particularly for holders of the critical skills employment permit and those working in high-demand sectors.

A major advantage of better integration and information sharing is that it should remove the duplication between the Departments. That in itself will create a more efficient process. There are real opportunities here, not just for a new system but for radical reform in how we process employment permits and visa requirements and improve the processing times and overall customer experience.

Deputy Colm Burke: The issue that remains is the huge amount of paperwork involved in any application. This is about making it easier for departmental officials too. I fully accept that there must be checks and balances. No Department can take shortcuts, and it is important

that this process does not take shortcuts. A robust system needs to be put in place such that there will be careful examination of people looking to come to work here, but also a safe and secure procedure in place.

I would give one example. This is nothing to do with the Minister of State's Department or any other Department but I know of one person who worked under another person's PPSN for over ten years - he did not have a PPS number himself - and was able to work through the system. Therefore I am very aware of the need for proper precautions and processes to be in place to make sure there is full security for everyone coming into the country.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy for his questions and comments. I think the Minister of State, Deputy Smyth, and the Minister will also agree. Every day we meet companies and businesses and the one issue they relate is challenges with labour and skill talent. We are competing internationally for that. When people look to invest and expand their operations here in Ireland, they need to have a system that is efficient and which responds to that. As of today, new applications are being processed for critical skills employment permits. Five days is the processing time for those and for general employment permits it is 25 days. The objective is to build and improve on that and that is what we will do. We will provide a simpler customer journey. We will reduce the duplication between the Department of enterprise and the Department of justice. We will also get better co-ordination between both Departments. There will be greater transparency for the applicants. We will reduce the administrative burden for employees. We want a system that works and I think this new platform will tick all those boxes.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Before I come to Deputies Connolly and Ó Cearúil, I will go to Deputy O'Connor on Question No. 86.

Enterprise Support Services

86. **Deputy Aisling Dempsey** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment for an overview of the Startup Ireland initiative. [79289/26]

Deputy James O'Connor: I want to ask about the status of Startup Ireland. The initiative is aimed at boosting about 20% of startups that want to scale revenue by over €1 million a year. It is very welcome because Ireland needs to do more to grow indigenous business and our SME sector and to make a new generation of entrepreneurs believe that Ireland can deliver for them through Government funding and agencies. Will the Minister of State outline to the House the benefit of the scheme, show how it will work and give some feedback to the question?

Deputy Alan Dillon: Startup Ireland is the Government's flagship initiative to strengthen Ireland's startup ecosystem and make Ireland one of Europe's best places to start and scale an ambitious company. Led by Enterprise Ireland, the initiative is intended to provide a more co-ordinated and founder-focused approach to supporting entrepreneurship in Ireland. The Startup Ireland Roadmap 2026-2030 sets out a vision for a more connected ecosystem that enables entrepreneurs to access the support, expertise, talent, networks and international opportunities needed to translate innovative ideas into globally competitive businesses.

Startup Ireland has been developed in response to analysis of Ireland's startup ecosystem which identified the need for greater co-ordination between stakeholders, stronger international connections and clearer pathways for founders seeking support and investment. The initiative therefore seeks to bring together Government, higher education institutions, investors, industry and startup support organisations around a common framework for startup development.

Importantly, Startup Ireland has been designed with a strong focus on the needs and experiences of founders. The views of entrepreneurs were central to the development of the initiative, reflecting feedback on the importance of clearer pathways to support stronger ecosystem co-ordination and easier access to funding, expertise, talent and international markets. A key objective is therefore to create a more connected, responsive and founder-focused ecosystem that is easier to navigate and better aligned with the needs of ambitious entrepreneurs at different stages of their development.

A central feature of the initiative is the creation of a national startup hub, which will serve as a focal point for Ireland's startup ecosystem and provide founders with a clearer entry point to available supports and opportunities. The hub will strengthen connections between entrepreneurs, investors, researchers, multinational companies and other ecosystem participants while supporting collaboration between national and regional stakeholders.

Deputy James O'Connor: With the changing global landscape, the certainty of US foreign direct investment in Ireland and making sure we have a diversified economy, we need to take into account the fact that fewer than a dozen companies are paying in excess of 60% of Irish corporation tax. While it is a positive that over 250,000 employees in Ireland go to work in US multinational companies every day, when we know that is a risk, we must take into account how we derisk from that and have Irish companies and Irish entrepreneurs who work day in, day out setting up their own enterprises and finding employees in their own local areas to scale and grow their businesses. I welcome that the budget commits €3 million to help establish Startup Ireland and that there is €21 million in funding available through the accelerator programme. Those are very positive Government-led initiatives. Will the Minister of State give an idea of how they will work, their objectives and what the key outcomes may be from those decisions?

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy and the joint committee on enterprise which he chairs for their work in championing indigenous Irish companies. The Government wants more indigenous Irish companies to start, scale and succeed internationally. That is why this initiative and roadmap has a very firm focus. It is to support over 10,000 entrepreneurs and create over 1,000 new startups by 2030. Every successful indigenous company brings an entrepreneur who is willing to bring forward an idea and create the environment for those ideas to become successful businesses. That is why we are putting in significant funding with this. There is €21 million for the national accelerator programme while €150 million will be allocated for pre-seed funding through Enterprise Ireland. This is all about designing the ecosystem that feeds in to new indigenous Irish companies so they will be more resilient into the future.

Deputy James O'Connor: We need to make sure we provide every support we can through every available Government agency and make sure there is accountability and not have different entities not talking to one another.

I thank the Ministers of State and the Minister present for the work they have done. I also congratulate the Minister of State, Deputy Smyth, on the success of the recent AI summit. It has been really well received by all the partners who participated. We are grateful to see Ireland being showcased internationally by multinational companies. It is important for young people and entrepreneurs who are passionate about the success and future of Irish business seeing the possibilities out there when they put their shoulders to the wheel. That is why these initiatives are timely. They should work. Then there is the series B funding. We have to ensure companies in Ireland do not always feel they need to migrate over to Silicon Valley to obtain scale and success. We need to encourage that not only in Ireland but also in the European Union. Ireland is a key player in helping that transition.

Deputy Alan Dillon: Again, I thank Deputy O'Connor for his comments. The Startup Ireland programme very much looks at where indigenous Irish companies will be in ten years and the need to start now to ensure we build more Irish companies, create more jobs, drive innovation and strengthen long-term competitiveness. The Deputy spoke about our reliance on FDI and multinational companies. We do need to rebalance that and focus on our own competitiveness at a local level. The startup hub will act as a real front door to Ireland's startup ecosystem. It will bring everyone together, from founders, investors, multinational companies, universities and even support organisations. The expectation will be that the startup hub will be operational in the first quarter of 2028. We have a plan, progress is being made and we look forward to further engagement on that.

Enterprise Support Services

88. **Deputy John Connolly** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment when a new western regional enterprise plan will be brought forward. [79402/26]

Deputy John Connolly: I want to ask about the new western regional enterprise plan. The previous plan ran from 2022 to 2025. At the end a very substantial progress report was undertaken. I expect the new plan will include much of what was contained in that report.

11 o'clock

Deputy Alan Dillon: Balanced regional development remains a Government priority. My Department and its agencies contribute to this agenda in several ways through the regional enterprise plans. The most recent regional enterprise plans include the western regional plan covering Galway, Mayo and Roscommon, which ran from 2022 to the end of 2025. These plans were developed and delivered by regional stakeholders and focused on collaborative actions to strengthen regional enterprise ecosystems. My Department commissioned an independent review of the REP initiatives alongside consideration of the final progress reports for the plan. The final progress reports for the regional enterprise plans will be published shortly and, together with the findings of the independent review, have informed Government consideration of the future approach to regional enterprise development.

The approach approved by the Government will align regional enterprise priorities more closely with the regional spatial and economic strategies, RSESs, of the regional assemblies. This will strengthen the links between enterprise development, skills, infrastructure and wider regional planning, supporting a more integrated approach to regional enterprise development. My Department's officials are engaging with the relevant Departments, agencies and authorities to develop a regional enterprise framework statement to give effect to this approach, whereby any future regional enterprise actions will operate as focused implementation programmes aligned with the RSESs. This approach will combine long-term strategic planning with shorter term action-oriented delivery. The framework is expected to be completed in early 2027.

In the meantime, substantial supports remain available to enterprises in the region. Through the local enterprise offices, Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland, companies across the west continue to benefit from a wide range of supports, including research and development funding, digitalisation and sustainability programmes, export supports, entrepreneurship initiatives, property solutions and regional investment measures.

Deputy John Connolly: I recognise in the Minister of State's response a continued commitment to the whole area of enterprise and innovation in the western region and the support the Government has given to that, working with different agencies, organisations and the private sector. One thing about the last plan, and about the final progress report that is available on it, is that some of the ongoing projects are only partially complete.

There is one particularly exciting one that I want to bring to the Minister of State's attention and I hope it would form part of the new plan - the development of the new health tech campus in Galway. Galway County Council and the life sciences working group of the current plan were advancing an Enterprise Ireland smart regions feasibility study for a life science and health tech centre of excellence, which would be known as the health check campus. This would be driven by the regional academic powerhouses, the University of Galway and Atlantic Technical University. An example of their potential is the BioInnovative programme, which has already generated over 30 start-ups and €300 million of follow-on funding. There is also the medical and engineering technology or MET Gateway, which is the Enterprise Ireland research centre at ATU. We need a co-ordinated method of bringing this to life.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy for raising this important project. The west is an active hub for many of the pharma, medtech and life science companies. In his own county, IDA Ireland supports a huge amount of employment. There are over 133 IDA-supported companies across the west and in Galway over 170 IDA clients that create jobs for more than 25,400 people. Our Department continues to support enterprise development through the regional enterprise development fund. Over €19 million has been secured for the west. The Deputy mentioned the scheme through the smart regions enterprise. We will look at the health tech campus. It would be an exciting project. The Deputy has spoken about it in the House previously and I know Enterprise Ireland is working on the feasibility and development programmes into the future.

Deputy John Connolly: I thank the Minister of State. He is right. It would be an exciting project. It has significant potential to attract investment from outside the region and, more

particularly, to instigate new business and new innovation. As I said, it is being led by the two academic powerhouses in the region. It will be the type of facility that will bring projects and companies from concept right through every stage until they are up and running and in production and, hopefully, become profitable businesses employing more people. The spin-off that creates should not be forgotten.

I will become even more overtly parochial but another action of the existing plan, which is only partially complete, includes the extension of gteic at Na Forbacha. That had a specific ambition. The extension would be specifically tailored to meet the requirements of the life sciences sector providing state-of-the-art facilities to foster research, development and collaboration. Planning permission had been granted and tender documents were at an advanced stage. I hope the new enterprise plan will further develop that.

Deputy Alan Dillon: It is evident that the Deputy is a great advocate of regional balanced development. He has mentioned two really important projects not only for Galway but the west. Success for me is not having huge concentration in Dublin or on the east coast. Success means we will have enterprise growth right across the country and strong investment in projects like the gteic he mentioned and the health hub campus. The west has seen significant strengths in medtech, technology and life sciences as well as food innovation, renewable energy and tourism. The next version of the regional enterprise plans transitioning into the RSES will be an important step forward. We want to get the framework right now. In doing so we will move forward to ensure that key areas along the west coast are also being supported.

Questions Nos. 89 and 90 taken with Written Answers.

Artificial Intelligence

91. **Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the specific artificial intelligence technologies and research areas that Ireland intends to prioritise under the Important Project of Common European Interest (IPCEI) in Artificial Intelligence (AI); and the way in which these priorities will be determined. [79389/26]

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: I will start by congratulating the Ministers of State, Deputies Smyth and Dillon, and the Minister, Deputy Burke, on the international AI summit. It was a marvellous event. I also congratulate their officials. It was clear a lot of work went into it so I thank them for all their work.

I wish to ask about the specific AI technology and research areas that Ireland intends to prioritise under the IPCEI in artificial intelligence and the way in which these priorities will be determined.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: IPCEI projects are large-scale, EU multi-country projects and are an important tool for delivering breakthrough innovation and infrastructure when the market alone does not deliver. They are set apart from other research programmes by the scale of collaboration and investment, most of which comes from industry. For Ireland, investment in IPCEIs in key strategic sectors offers huge market opportunities for the industries of tomorrow, creating new, well-paid and secure jobs and securing Ireland's position as an innovation leader.

At a European level, participation in IPCEI demonstrates Ireland's constructive engagement in efforts to enhance Europe's technological leadership and build our resilience. The current programme for Government aims to: "Boost participation in Important Projects of Common European Interest (IPCEI) to increase competitiveness and productivity for Irish companies and create more jobs." The action plan on competitiveness and jobs also includes a priority action to enable Irish-based firms participate in IPCEI.

To deliver on this ambition, I announced in budget 2026 the allocation of €120 million for IPCEI participation to position Ireland at the forefront of strategic European industrial initiatives, including advanced semiconductors and AI technologies. This enabled my Department to launch a national call for expressions of interest in three digital IPCEI, including an IPCEI in AI, in December 2025, with a closing date of February 2026. Applicants were provided with published guidance in the form of an IPCEI-AI value chain description document which defined the rationale for the IPCEI, the scope of the IPCEI and the key objectives to be delivered.

The scope of the IPCEI-AI was developed by member states, the Commission and other stakeholders during 2025 to ensure it effectively contributes to European strategic goals. Arising from this process, a number of key technology fields are targeted by IPCEI, which I will outline in a moment.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: The Minister of State covered a lot of the positives that are coming with this and I do not want to go over that. I was going to ask for specifics around the technologies but I think she will outline that in her response to my supplementary.

She mentioned that prioritisation was around semiconductors for Intel in my constituency, which is marvellous, but also AI more generally. Is the key component AI infrastructure compute capacity? We talk about data centres and the need for compute. As these companies grow, they need more space. Is it cybersecurity entrusted AI in healthcare and life sciences about which we heard from Deputy Connolly and the Minister of State, Deputy Dillon regarding expansion in the west? Is it industrial manufacturing applications or public sector AI solution? There are a lot of areas we could focus in on and, ideally, we would have specific priorities in terms of that AI application.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: The key technology fields we are targeting are data processing, sovereign foundations large language modules, LLMs, and large reasoning models, LRMs, sovereign industry sector-specific foundation models, AI deployment and operations, OpenAI, Platform AI, and AI services in sector-specific use cases. Ireland is progressing two projects under the IPCEI, subject to obtaining the necessary approvals from the Commission. The technology areas covered are network management for the future, clinical workflow and logistics infrastructure. Two projects are being progressed. One is the network management of the future. The project will contribute to the broader European digital ecosystem and AI innovation landscape. It will also support integration with cloud edge computing, and multivendor network environments. The network management of the future aligns with IPCEI and EU digital sovereignty by developing autonomous, secure and energy-efficient AI platforms for critical telecoms networks, reducing non-EU technology reliance and strengthening European industrial competitiveness. I thank the Deputy for his forbearance.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: I thank the Minister of State. That is extremely helpful, particularly the two key areas of network management of the future, which would include cloud, and clinical workflow and the logistics around that. I will email her to get more detail.

We look at network management of the future, and just dovetailing for a second into the whole piece around digital sovereignty, that is the main piece of conversation. Again, we speak about data centres. The narrative is that data centres are extremely negative. What we need to try and get out there is the need for data centres and compute. When we talk about healthcare and the expansion of digital healthcare, that needs somewhere to stay. That compute is required in Ireland if we do not want it to go to the US or further afield.

I appreciate the clarification around those two priorities of the network management of the future and the clinical workflow and logistics. I look forward to working with the Minister of State on that.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: AI and digital sovereignty is a very live debate globally. Ireland has to remain an honest broker in that conversation. The Deputy has been very public and honest, as many colleagues have, about how the infrastructure is needed to keep Ireland not just at the centre of the conversation, but ahead, and not just in Europe but globally. Ireland has done a terrific job of that so far. It can be a difficult conversation to have, but if we are truthful and honest with the people, there is a deep understanding of how it has benefited Ireland so far and how it has put us front and centre in the digital economy, and of course with AI as it develops too. At a very basic level, there is the dependency we have on it for employment in this country. It is a huge part of the economy and our skilled labour force very much depends on it. Ireland needs to continue in the vein of being the honest broker in that discussion.

Questions Nos. 92 to 94, inclusive, taken with Written Answers.

Maternity Leave

95. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the current status of the Pregnancy Loss (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2025; and the changes that are envisaged. [79272/26]

Deputy Colm Burke: What is the status of the Pregnancy Loss (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2025? Is it to be published shortly or what is the plan within the Department on the matter?

Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Peter Burke): I thank the Deputy for his very important question. This is a Private Members' Bill that proposes introduction of paid leave following pregnancy loss. On 9 July 2025, Government tabled a motion in Seanad Éireann that the Bill be deemed to be read a second time 12 months from that date to allow sufficient time for the Government to develop legislative proposals in line with its principles. The motion was passed.#

Following extensive policy development grounded in the Government commissioned 'PLACES report', which examined pregnancy loss under 24 weeks gestation in the workplace, in addition to broad stakeholder engagement, I brought the general scheme of the pregnancy loss leave Bill to Cabinet in July this year. The general scheme, which was approved

by Government, provides for a new statutory entitlement to pregnancy loss leave for employees who experience a pregnancy loss prior to 23 weeks' gestation. Under existing legislation, maternity leave is available for those who experience a loss from 23 weeks gestation and onwards. The scheme amends the Maternity Protection Act to provide for five days of leave per year for employees who experience a pregnancy loss prior to 23 weeks gestation. The leave will require medical certification. The leave will be employer paid and payment will be contingent on a service requirement.

The proposal addresses the extremely important and sensitive issue of pregnancy loss. Despite an estimated one in four pregnancies ending in a loss, it is often dealt with privately without the support or indeed knowledge of an employer. The general scheme intends to reflect the realities of modern working life: that those who have lost a pregnancy should be entitled to take time away from work to recover.

Since Government approval of the general scheme, officials in my Department have commenced engagement with the Office of Parliamentary Counsel to progress drafting of the Bill as a priority. We are continuing to engage with stakeholders during the priority drafting of the Bill.

Deputy Colm Burke: I thank the Minister. The Department is talking about drafting a Bill, which he has outlined. What kind of timeframe are we talking about? As the Minister said, it is a very difficult time for anyone. What tends to happen is people get medical certificates from their doctors that allow them to stay out of work for a period of time. Will this be set up as a formal legislative process? What is the timescale in which he expects to be able to bring forward a new Bill? Will we see it within the next three months or will it take a little longer?

I fully understand that there are pressures for priority in relation to Bills but this is an important area, and it is only right that it be put in a legislative format so there are clear legal entitlements for someone to take leave and be appropriately remunerated as well.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy for his very important question in this area. Tomorrow, the general scheme of pregnancy loss leave will undergo pre-legislative scrutiny at the Oireachtas Joint Committee for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment, and the committee will furnish a report on the Bill to me. We continue to work with the committee and indeed the Oireachtas, and particularly the women's caucus in the Oireachtas on drafting of the legislation. I hope to be in a position next year, hopefully after the first quarter, to come forward with the legislation. It is a complex area, and that is one of the key issues we have to be careful about because we are interacting with two different Departments, mine and the Department of children run by the Minister, Deputy Foley, and we are just trying to ensure there are no unintended consequences.

We have a good pathway. The committee has been excellent as has the women's caucus. Some have provided exceptional testimony. One thing I will never forget is the afternoon I was in Seanad Éireann, and I heard so many women Senators come forward with real-life personal testimony of what they went through in their respective lives. It was really touching. We all have a huge amount of work to do on to support women, particularly in the workplace, who go through so many of these challenging emotional life events in silence. That is one critical issue. I hope we get the conversation going, as well as getting the legislation through.

If we get the conversation going, we can better support women in the workplace, and indeed, their families as well.

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Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 11.19 p.m. go dtí 9 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 11 Samhain 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 11.19 p.m. until 9 a.m. on Wednesday, 11 November 2026.