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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 12 Samhain 2026

Thursday, 12 November 2026

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

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Social Welfare Schemes

1. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he will consider making specific supports available for persons on metered energy who run out of money and are left without energy, in the time it takes to apply for and receive supplementary welfare allowance; and if he is aware that this period of disconnection can disrupt the powering of essential mobility devices, allow food to spoil and generally bring about serious hardship. [80201/26]

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The question is very straightforward. The Minister will be familiar with this issue because I have raised it a couple of times. It concerns people who are on hardship meters. We hear a lot of talk about disconnections, people who are on the vulnerable register not getting disconnected and so on but there are some people who are getting disconnected every week because they simply run out of money for the meter. There is a gap between when they run out of money and when they can access support. My question concerns the specific measures that are in place to help these people get through the winter.

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Dara Calleary): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta ní hamháin as an gceist seo, ach as a suim san ábhar seo. I thank Deputy O'Reilly for consistently raising this issue. The community welfare service is committed to providing a quality service. It ensures that applications are processed and that decisions on entitlements are made as quickly as possible. There is support available to prepay energy users. This includes the services of the community welfare officers. Prepay energy users have the facility to track power usage and to watch their day-to-day spending, which should assist with early engagement, if required. However, energy providers are also responsible for ensuring that running out of credit does not automatically mean running out of power and that customers do not lose supply over weekends or on bank holidays.

Customers in vulnerable situations are entitled to additional protections under the rules of the CRU. Energy providers should be aware of this. These protections include safeguards relating to communication, payment difficulties and disconnection. Vulnerable customers include those who are critically dependent on electrically powered medical or mobility equipment.

Those customers who present to the community welfare service are advised and, where necessary, assisted to register as a vulnerable customer with their energy supplier.

With regard to income supports, my Department provides a range of schemes. To the end of September of this year, over 42,000 additional needs payments were awarded at an estimated cost of €44.3 million. To the end of October 2026, 2,309 additional needs payments were awarded to assist people with energy costs. We also have a range of permanent supports including fuel allowance and the household benefits package. These will increase as part of budget 2027.

As she has raised this issue before, the Deputy will know that I have asked the community welfare service to be extra vigilant with regard to people on prepay power meters. We will also take the opportunity this morning to discuss the responsibilities of companies in this space.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I am raising a question with the Minister for Social Protection and, with respect, I do not want the answer to be that I should talk to the Minister for energy. We have an issue with this. These people are not being captured in the information the Minister has. I fully appreciate the work the community welfare service does. I get that. However, in the time between getting cut off and being able to access support, people do run out of energy. I know it and the Minister will know it from his own constituency. Their electricity gets cut off, they cannot heat their houses and they have no light. About two weeks ago, I spoke to a woman who was going to go stay in her mam's for the night. When she got her money the next day, she would be able to put a few bob in the meter. She should have been on a bill. She should not be on a meter. She is paying the most expensive rate. Crosscare and St. Vincent de Paul have highlighted a number of concerns about micro-disconnections. That is the word I use. Some call them involuntary disconnections. People do not realise they can come off prepay tariffs and go onto a billed tariff. A bill is easier to manage. Prepay energy is not easier to manage if you are getting cut off once a week or even once a month.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I could not agree with the Deputy more. We need to work to advise people that it is easy to go back to a bill-pay system. I refer particularly to those vulnerable customers. The Department of Social Protection is obviously there to assist people in this position. Both the CRU and the utility companies, particularly the prepay power companies, also have responsibilities in this regard. I assure the Deputy that if people come to us in a situation where they are about to lose their power, particularly where they are vulnerable customers, their applications will be dealt with expeditiously. We have kept a focus on that since the Deputy engaged on the matter last year. If there are any difficulties in that space, I know the Deputy will bring them to my attention and we will get them dealt with.

I will also pick up on something Deputy Kerrane said yesterday. We will be reiterating the supports that are available with respect to energy, including energy credit supports, during the winter season. As I have said, up to the end of October, 2,309 additional needs payments were

made. When debating the Social Welfare Bill yesterday, I meant to say that we will reiterate our communications around energy supports. We will also look at tailoring a measure to address this prepay power space.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: We have spoken about this. I absolutely respect that the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, has some responsibility here; God help us. However, the issue for people is that it is only for a couple of hours. It is sometimes just for one night, when they are going to get cut off. The gap that exists there is still not being bridged. It is for some people but others, while they are vulnerable people because they are going to run out of power, are not eligible to be on the vulnerable persons' register and so do get cut off. Even if you are on that register, if you are on a prepay meter, you still get cut off. I am just wondering if word can go out in advance of winter to advise community welfare officers that people will need that money quickly. While we wait for the CRU and the other Minister to conduct whatever work they are going to be doing, an emergency measure is needed. A communication should go out to all of the community welfare officers to advise them that the first thing they should do is to get people off these prepay meters and onto a bill, if that is what the customer wants. Many of those officers will do this anyway. A bill is actually easier to manage and means that people will not face these micro-disconnections.

Deputy Dara Calleary: As I have said, both Deputy O'Reilly and Deputy Kerrane have raised this matter. We will reiterate communication to our team of community welfare officers regarding the immediate energy supports that are available. As I have said, 2,300 additional needs payments have been made this year already. We did so last year. We also did something last year that I will repeat in spring 2027. We had a day where community welfare officers from all over the country came here and met teams. I think everybody found that to be a useful engagement in respect of CWOs and the supports that are available. I will also reiterate my thanks to our CWO teams around the country, who work so hard with vulnerable clients and people who are in very difficult situations.

On passing responsibility to the companies in this space, they do have a responsibility. Government and politicians cannot absolve them of their responsibilities to their customers. They are subject to the code of practice on vulnerable customers and the code of practice on pay-as-you-go metering and budget controls. Companies have responsibilities in this space and we need to highlight those responsibilities so that customers are equipped to vindicate their rights.

Children in Care

2. **Deputy Eoin Hayes** asked the Minister for Social Protection the steps his Department is taking to honour the programme for Government commitments to enhance outcomes for kinship carers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [80125/26]

Deputy Eoin Hayes: My question is about the programme for Government commitment to improve outcomes for kinship carers. As the Minister might know, about 12,000 children are living in family arrangements with kinship carers. About 5,000 of these are cared for by grandparents. I expect that the Minister will talk about the national framework for alternative

care that is due to be published next month. It may be worth reminding him that, 34 years ago, the Government ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. We still have not honoured those rights.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy very much. He will be aware that matters relating to foster care are the responsibility of my colleague, the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality. However, we acknowledge the very important role of all carers, including foster carers and kinship carers. Along with my colleague, Deputy Erin McGreehan, I met with the Irish kinship care group last year. I am very interested in this space and I am fully committed.

The programme for Government contains a commitment with regard to kinship carers. As the Deputy said, the Department of Children, Disability and Equality is in the process of developing a national policy on the rights of children who are living in informal kinship care. Officials from my own Department have been participating in this group in the context of the various guardian's payments administered by my Department. Considerable work has gone in from our side. I understand the deadline to complete the work is next month. To date, our work has looked at the scoping exercise on informal kinship care in Ireland. The exercise includes a review of: the existing relevant legislation; the current reality for families in informal kinship care arrangements, including an analysis of their current access to supports; national and international literature and international perspectives; and examples of international best practice.

As part of this work, the Department of Children, Disability and Equality is ensuring that the voice of the child is present from the earliest possible stage. Consultations have been carried out with children and young people with experience of informal kinship care arrangements. That approach is aligned with Article 12 of the UNCRC and the requirement that children's views must be considered and taken into account in all matters affecting them. The Department has also completed a consultation, via survey, with parents of children with experience of informal kinship care and has conducted research to better understand those experiences. As the Deputy will appreciate, this is a sensitive and complex issue. The Department has engaged deeply with stakeholders. Based on that analysis, it is currently finalising draft policy recommendations.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: I appreciate the engagement and work of the Minister and his officials on this matter. The Minister is absolutely right that the view of the child needs to be central to this. When we look at the domestic experience, until now, full State supports have not been guaranteed to these children or to their families. I will give the Minister some figures. Tusla has estimated that the cost of special emergency arrangements to care for a child where there is no kinship care or foster care available is about €14,000 per week. Foster care costs over €400 a week while kinship care costs about €240 a week. The Minister can see the inequality. We know that outcomes are way better when people stay with their families. We need to make sure that people are able to access supports such as the guardian's payments, that these payments actually honour the rights of children and that the Minister's Department gives sufficient State support to these families and children.

Deputy Dara Calleary: We are looking at all of those issues. The Minister, Deputy Foley, is leading out in her Department in relation to this work. The Deputy will agree that extensive

work has been done, including ensuring that the voices of children and teenagers who have experienced kinship care are included.

I have a lot of meetings in this job, but the meeting I had last year with Deputy McGreehan and the kinship care group is genuinely one that stands out in terms of the dedication, commitment and absolute love of the kinship carers. That is not to say that it does not happen everywhere, but this was a particularly special bond and is something that people have taken on in very difficult circumstances. We need to ensure that they are getting the maximum support.

My officials have been engaging extensively with the Department of Children, Disability and Equality. We have contributed extensively to the work in terms of our schemes, and I certainly look forward to working with the Minister, Deputy Foley. There are a number of Deputies, alongside Deputy McGreehan, who are involved in this space. I see Deputy Nolan here, and I have taken parliamentary questions from her in this space as well. All of us have a duty to assist people who are involved in kinship care in terms of the work they do and the considerable commitment they give to that work.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: I strongly support the Minister's work on this and his commitment, and I cannot echo enough his sense of feeling in terms of how he has met the kinship carers. It is really important.

One of the things that has come up in this is that the carers must evidence abandonment a lot of the time to qualify for the guardian's payment. That is actually really difficult. If there is a parent who, for example, suffers from addiction, is in prison, is involved in criminality and all those kinds of thing, the child could then be placed with another family member such as a grandparent, aunt or uncle. If they have any contact at all with the parent, they could be disqualified from the guardian's payment. That is what Kinship Care Ireland has said. That is extremely stringent and does not honour the rights of the child to proper support and care from the State. I ask the Minister to look at this matter in particular. Only about 20% of children in kinship arrangements are there due to dead parents, so the contact barrier is a significant issue. In particular, I also ask the Minister to consider the pension arrangements for kinship carers because they do exceptional work on behalf of the State.

Deputy Dara Calleary: These are all issues that are being considered as part of the report and part of the work that the Minister, Deputy Foley, is conducting. There are issues and qualification criteria across all of our schemes, but when we get the report from the Department of children, we will analyse it. I will go through it and see where we can reduce any barriers that are there to make their jobs and commitments a lot easier. There are a range of complex qualifications around all of our schemes, and they are there for a reason, but we certainly do not want to get in the way. I am very cognisant of the sensitivity and complexity of this issue, but the Deputy will agree that considerable work has been done by our colleagues in the Department of children, led by the Minister, Deputy Foley. It is work that recognises that complexity and sensitivity and engages not just here, but also in international best practice in this area, so that when we have recommendations, they will be as contemporary and responsive as possible to the situation people who are in kinship care are in.

Social Welfare Schemes

3. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Social Protection the details of the supports currently in place for long-term unemployed persons; the measures under consideration to support them back to work; the penalties that exist for refusal to engage with job activation; and the further penalties that will be forthcoming. [80499/26]

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: My question concerns the supports in place for persons who are long-term unemployed. To be fair to them, they have had the spotlight shone on them thanks to the deputy Head of Government and the quite frankly very cruel remarks he made at his party's conference. Will the Minister outline what supports are in place and, more importantly, perhaps for the benefit of others in government as well, that penalties do exist for those who refuse to engage, courtesy of the 2011 Government and the then Minister, Joan Burton? We know that they exist already. Will the Minister talk about what supports are in place? The jobs clubs are gone and the local employment service has been shut, so it would be helpful if people understood what supports are there and may be forthcoming.

Deputy Dara Calleary: At the end of quarter 2 this year, Ireland's long-term unemployment rate was 1.3%, compared with EU and eurozone averages of 1.9% and 2.1%, respectively, in 2025.

This week, the number of people on the live register for a year or more is at its lowest level in two years at approximately 52,300, of whom approximately 46,400 will receive a payment. These figures do not include casuals but include those signing for jobseeker credits. As I have emphasised throughout this week, it is important to note that the live register is not a stock, but a flow, with people - I emphasise the word "people" - moving every week into and out of employment or progressing on to training, education and employment placements. Some 58,800 people have either entered or exited the long-term live register over the last 12 months.

These aggregate figures are very low, but I am very conscious that for each person who is unemployed, the experience is not 1.3%, but 100%. I am very conscious that prolonged periods of unemployment can have a scarring effect, not only on the individual, but on their wider family.

That is why the Department works hard across a range of schemes and services to assist people out of unemployment. We do this through a range of schemes such as the back to education allowance scheme, employment placements with Tús and community employment, CE, employment subsidies to employers, and one-to-one employment advisory services. Over the past 12 months, the Department and its employment partners have engaged directly with 67,000 long-term unemployed jobseekers to help them develop and pursue a personal progression plan into employment, training or education.

This is a very significant commitment by the State, and a jobseeker has a right to and should receive supports, but they also have a responsibility to avail of those supports. Accordingly, where a jobseeker fails to engage with Intreo, they may have their payment reduced or face disqualification for a period of up to nine weeks. Budget 2027 and the Social Welfare Bill 2026 provide for an increase, but the length of time a jobseeker has this reduced rate is totally their choice in terms of their availability to engage. I will go into that in detail later.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Although the position of the deputy Head of Government is different, I am relieved that the position the Minister is putting forward is that unemployment is not, in fact, a lifestyle choice but a complicated matter that requires intervention, supports and some dedicated one-to-one attention. Will the Minister give consideration to re-establishing the jobs clubs because they were very useful? When they closed, they were sorely missed in many communities.

I also draw the Minister's attention to the rising number of young people on the live register. Nobody wants to see those people tipping over into long-term unemployment. For them, it most definitely is not a lifestyle choice. There are many challenges that face people who are long-term unemployed, such as access to transport, education and, sometimes, the inner strength to be able to engage with the jobs market. There needs to be a recognition that for some people, a tailored, bespoke one-to-one strategy is what is necessary. The Government has to approach this from the point of view that people want to be in work, and it should not try to demonise them or punch down on therm.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I will continue with my last answer. In 2025, reduced payment rates were applied to 8,463 individuals, of whom 6,893 were long-term unemployed. To the end of October this year, the corresponding figure was 5,587, representing 10% of the average long-term unemployed population. It is very important that I emphasise that reduced payments are lifted immediately when the jobseeker re-engages. Therefore, at any point in time, approximately 1,000 people are on a reduced payment rate.

The issue of jobs clubs was raised quite a bit during the debate on the Social Welfare Bill. I again welcome the participation in that debate. It is a suggestion that I will look at. However, we have extensive activation services at the moment. We have worked with over 60,000 long-term unemployed people in terms of specific solutions for their specific skills and what they can bring. As the Deputy said, every person is different. Every person's situation is different. Every person's experience is different. Through that response, we are ensuring that there are tailored responses.

Following 15 months of work and extensive public consultation, I will be publishing a new pathways to work strategy before the end of this month.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: We have near-full employment, which is a positive thing, but one in five workers is in poverty, so when we talk about employment and it being a root out of poverty, it is not always. Those people will need interventions and supports.

I welcome the Minister's statement that he will look at re-establishing the job clubs. They may not work everywhere, but they have worked in some areas. I visited one that was about to close a couple of years ago down in Kerry. Its staff could already anticipate what its loss would do. They knew the people they were dealing with by name and were working hard, not just to get people into work, but to tackle rural isolation and loneliness. Work should be a route out of poverty, but unfortunately, due to Government policy, it is not for many. However, there needs to be that focus and attention.

I welcome the forthcoming publication of the strategy, which we will engage with. We will of course welcome it if there is anything good in it, but if there is not, Government will hear from us. Looking at re-establishing the jobs clubs is a good place to start.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I wish to emphasise that, in my time as Minister, we have expanded the supports available under the working family payment, including the extension of the fuel allowance to people in receipt of the payment. There are some 50,000 people currently in receipt of the fuel allowance who are on the working family payment who would not have received it before.

We are looking to ensure that our activation is as contemporary and personalised as possible. Certainly, the good thing about the jobs clubs was that there was a local response. We will make sure we still have a local and individualised response. Most importantly, activation respects that each person who is long-term unemployed, and anyone who is unemployed in any situation, has a personal journey. They are not just a number or a percentage. They are a person who has a family, a community and a personal story. We need to make sure that we tailor our activation response to that personal story and particular personal challenge and not treat it as some sort of percentage that can be thrown out without context.

Social Welfare Payments

4. **Deputy Mark Wall** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he is aware that older people accessing payments such as the living alone allowance and fuel allowance are now losing such payments due to a family member having to move back home; and the steps he is taking to address the issue. [78258/26]

Deputy Mark Wall: I raised this matter with the Minister during the debate on the Social Welfare Bill the other evening. Could he comment on it now?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank Deputy Wall. He has raised this matter consistently.

The living alone allowance is paid to people who receive a qualifying social welfare payment and live alone. The purpose of the payment is to recognise that a person living alone must meet the cost of running and maintaining a household from a single income. Allowing the payment to continue where an adult family member has returned to live in the home would fundamentally alter the nature of the payment and could raise questions of equity and fairness with respect to other two-adult households to whom a living alone allowance would not be available.

The position with fuel allowance is different. A person does not automatically lose fuel allowance when a family member moves into the household. However, fuel allowance is a household-based payment, where the qualifying criteria target scarce resources to those households most in need. Where a returning family member is not in receipt of a qualifying social welfare payment, entitlement to the payment may cease. Disregarding the status of a household member when determining entitlement would, again, significantly change the household-based and targeted nature of the scheme.

I would have to consider any changes to the qualifying conditions of either scheme as part of the policy and budgetary process. I would also point out that in the recent budget, the means test for the fuel allowance for a single person over the age of 66 years increased from €534 per week to €640.80. We anticipate that between 8,000 and 10,000 extra people may qualify. As I have done previously, I encourage all Deputies to examine their constituency cases. I have noticed in my own office many people who were previously excluded from the fuel allowance who now qualify for it.

Deputy Mark Wall: I take the Minister's point on the living alone allowance, but unfortunately, I cannot take his point on the fuel allowance. I gave the example here the other night of a young lady of 24 years of age who had come back to live in the family home and was working part-time for three days a week. Her father is on a disability payment and they have lost the fuel allowance. I can provide the details to the Minister and his Department. I get a lot of these cases, and I cannot understand why, in a housing emergency, we are disallowing families fuel allowance when there is no other option for their family member but to come home. Otherwise, it would be up to the State to provide accommodation. It has thankfully gone up to €43 per week, but for a single person in my area, if a housing assistance payment, HAP, were provided, it would be €700 per month. The figures do not add up. The Government is saying that it will give someone €700 if they stay out of the family home but it will not give their parents €43 per week if they go under their roof. That is the reason I have raised this and will continue to raise it. In many cases, this is wrong.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Fuel allowance is not automatically withdrawn because a family member moves into the house. However, it may affect entitlement because the fuel allowance has a household composition and a means condition. The scheme specifies who may live with a claimant without affecting entitlement, and there are many options there. This can include, for example, a spouse or a partner, dependent children or another person who is receiving qualifying social welfare payments or may qualify in their own right. If an adult family member moves in and does not come within one of the permitted household categories, the claimant may no longer satisfy the household composition condition. That may arise where an adult child is in employment. I will look at the Deputy's case, but there could also be a situation where somebody in a very well-paid job moves in for a period. It is about how we come to balance that kind of situation, where the household income goes well beyond the means test.

Each case is considered on individual circumstances, and the broad change the Deputy is suggesting would be a major change to the fuel allowance scheme and may potentially undermine the targeted nature of the scheme. I do not want to do that. However, we certainly want to assist households that are under pressure and I do not want anybody to lose their benefit as a consequence.

Deputy Mark Wall: Maybe it is just the constituents I have in Kildare South, but I have a number of examples of people whom the Government has rightly targeted with fuel allowance who are now losing this payment. It is probably right of me to send those on to the Minister and his Department to show exactly what is happening. I have that case of a person from a clinic in Kildare town last Monday, but it is just one of many examples that I have. These

people do not have the family member coming back on large wages. In many cases, including the one I have cited, they are part-time wages. That particular person was going to college.

It is time to look at such cases because these families are losing out on their benefits. In most of the cases that I am dealing with, they need the fuel allowance. If they have a family member come back who is not on the substantial wages that the Minister mentioned, then they lose out. That is the targeted measure that the Minister mentioned and that I am looking for to take care of those people.

I will send on those examples to the Minister, and maybe then the Government could look at the type of person I am dealing with through my clinics.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Absolutely, we will look at those examples. In budget 2026, I expanded eligibility for the fuel allowance by some 50,000 families to include those on the working family payment. In budget 2027, we expanded the means test for single people over 66 from €534 to €640.80 per week. This could make another 10,000 people eligible. I am certainly interested in expanding the scheme, but doing so on a targeted basis that ensures the aim of the scheme is still respected. We also have to protect the viability of my overall budget.

I will look at the cases, in particular the engagement with HAP and other issues. However, it is important that we ensure that the scheme remains targeted and we keep its targeted and direct nature. The more targeted it is, the more resources I have to increase it annually.

Pension Provisions

5. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Social Protection the timeframe for setting up the cross-departmental review of the bereaved partners pension as recommended by the joint Oireachtas committee on social protection on Wednesday, 4 November 2026, in order that persons bereaved by the biggest life-changing loss are not locked out of secondary supports such as back to school allowance, fuel allowance and retraining for back to work without the fear of losing their pensions. [80540/26]

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank Deputy O'Donoghue for not just his question, but also his ongoing work on this issue.

I understand that the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Social Protection, Rural and Community Development heard evidence from representatives of bereaved partners on 4 November, which was last week.

I have not yet received a report or recommendations from the committee on these issues. Therefore, the Deputy will appreciate that no decision has been made on the establishment of a cross-departmental group, nor has a timeframe been set. I will consider the committee's recommendations when we receive them, as I always do.

We provide significant income supports to bereaved partners and their children, which include contributory and means-tested payments. The bereaved partner’s contributory pension is based on the PRSI record of the applicant or their surviving or deceased partner where the applicant has insufficient contributions. The payment is not means-tested and may continue to be paid where a recipient takes up employment or has self-employment. A recipient with a

qualified child may also receive a child support payment. Since July 2025, eligibility has been extended to surviving qualified cohabitants, subject to the relevant conditions.

Where a person does not qualify for the contributory pension, the bereaved partner's non-contributory pension may be available. A bereaved parent with dependent children may qualify for a range of schemes. The bereaved parent grant provides €8,000 to eligible bereaved partners with dependent children.

I recognise the sensitivity of this. I will engage with joint committee report. I know a number of Deputies, including Deputy O'Donoghue, have raised issues in this space. After I receive the joint committee report, I will engage with Deputies on an informal basis early in 2027. The bereaved partners scheme will be two years in operation; I think it is a good time to have a review of it. I am very aware of the sensitivities and want to ensure that this scheme recognises those sensitivities and does so in as empathetic a manner as possible.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I thank the Minister for the work he has been doing on this. An awful lot of people in a bereaved situation are worried. We have people who have been bereaved. Both partners were working and they have children, and one partner passed away. If that other parent gets sick, they cannot get payment while they are out sick. They have their widow's pension while they are working but if they get sick, they will be worried for their children's future. They cannot get a payment while they are out because you cannot qualify for two parents. This is the one thing we are trying to correct for people. I know the Minister has been working hard on it. He has said he will arrange to meet us in early January or February to make sure we sit down with these people so that he hears about this at first hand. When the system is put in place, it must reflect all the issues that are there with people from bereaved families.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the committee members for engaging on this. I certainly will engage with the report when I receive it. I know the groups representing bereaved people were with the committee last week.

We have a number of issues in regard to the payment of schemes. We have a clear rule in the Department about how schemes can be paid out. We must ensure we maintain the viability of our schemes and maintain the eligibility, while recognising the very serious situation that many bereaved partners find themselves in, often suddenly and without any warning.

To the general point, I have made changes in this year's budget to allow for a longer payment period for pensioners. When a pensioner loses their spouse or partner, the pension will be paid for a longer period to deal with that cliff-edge where somebody loses a spouse or partner and is then faced with all of the costs but half of the income. I am very committed to assisting in that space as well.

I can give the Deputy a guarantee that I will engage with the report when I receive it. A number of Deputies across the House have raised this issue with me. We will have an engagement towards the end of January.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I thank the Minister. Another point I would like to bring up is the cohabiting of people who have been bereaved. A number of years after they have been

bereaved, they may get into a situation where they meet another partner. If you meet another partner and start to cohabit, the automatic thing is that you will lose your widow's pension. We have got to look at this. If you are bereaved and you meet somebody, they might not be the right person. You have to look at something for the long term. You have to give them a pathway if they meet someone. Eventually, if they decide they want to settle down with someone again, there has to be a limit for that. The automatic cut-off if you are cohabiting with somebody has to be looked at. As part of the reports that are coming out and the work of all the other Deputies involved in this, I want to make sure there is a package and a pathway for people to ensure that if they happen to meet somebody, there is not an automatic cut-off. It may be 12 months or two years before you decide that you are now in a relationship and you can see that it will be a long-term one. We need something like a pathway for people who eventually find love again.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I agree. I think that a pathway is important. At some point, a bereaved partner will be in a position to re-enter an employment situation. They may be able to return to their job or seek a new job, depending on their circumstances and how they are. I assure the Deputy and the House that recipients of a bereaved partner's pension can avail of the full range of employment supports and services that Intreo provides.

To my point earlier with Deputy O'Reilly, what I am trying to do with Intreo - it does this very well - is to ensure everybody gets a tailored response that is specific to their circumstances and recognises the challenge. Equally, there will be people who will not be able to avail of full-time employment or who will have family responsibilities. We will certainly engage with them in that area as well. That is currently available. That exists as we speak at the moment.

I think 2027 would be a good time, two years in, to have a full review of this and how it interacts with our other schemes. I look forward to the engagement.

Social Welfare Benefits

6. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the reason the core universal monthly rate of child benefit has remained frozen at €140 per child; if he acknowledges that the baseline rate has not seen a structural increase since 2017; and his Department's assessment of the way in which this prolonged freeze has impacted middle and low-income families. [80316/26]

Deputy Carol Nolan: Figures revealed in parliamentary replies I received from the Minister's Department show that at the end of last year, 347,736 social protection recipients in this State were non-Irish nationals, that is, 17.6% of our entire multibillion-euro welfare apparatus. The habitual residence condition, HRC1, is supposed to be a statutory firewall that protects our non-contributory safety net from exploitation and welfare tourism.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): I am sorry, Deputy. That is not the question that is on the clár.

Deputy Dara Calleary: It is the child benefit one.

Deputy Carol Nolan: It is related to HRC1 assessments in the past 24 months.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): No.

Deputy Carol Nolan: It is.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): The question I have on the clár looks for "the reason the core universal monthly rate of child benefit has remained frozen at €140 per child" and asks the Minister if he acknowledges that the baseline rate-----

Deputy Carol Nolan: I am sorry. This is the question I understood was-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Has the Minister got an answer to that question?

Deputy Dara Calleary: No, I do not have the answer with me. This is the question we were given. There was confusion over the Deputy's questions.

Deputy Carol Nolan: Okay. There is obviously confusion. Tá brón orm faoi sin.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I was given the question in relation to child benefit.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Does the Deputy have her question on child benefit?

Deputy Carol Nolan: No, but I can manage without it.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I have an answer for the other one. It will be-----

Deputy Carol Nolan: That is fine. I will be putting in more parliamentary questions anyway; that is 100%.

On the child benefit, can the Minister give us a review of what is being done, and answer the question with regard to the universal rate?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): I am sorry about that, Deputy.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The Deputy will get a written response in relation to the habitual residence condition.

As the Deputy knows, child benefit is a universal, monthly payment made to all families with children up to the age of 16. It is paid to over 680,000 families in respect of almost 1.3 million children. The annual expenditure on the scheme in 2026 will exceed €2.2 billion. The payment is also paid in respect of children until their 19th birthday who are in full-time education, or who have a disability.

Since 2016, the rate of child benefit has been paid at €140 per month, with higher payments made in respect of twin and other multiple births. Based on research by the ESRI and the minimum essential standards of living study by the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice, among others, our focus over recent years has been to target increases to payments to where they will deliver to families on low incomes and families reliant on social welfare payments.

Accordingly, we have implemented significant increases to child support payments, which are paid with most weekly social welfare payments. Compared to 2017, the rate for children under 12 has increased by 115% and for those over 12 it has increased by 182%. That means the payment rate in 2027 for children over 12 will be €84, compared to €29.80 in 2017.

Similarly, we have lifted the income threshold to access the working family payment by €284 per week, from €511 per week to €795 per week, compared to 2016. There are also the universal supports, such as the school meals programme, the free schoolbooks programme, the newborn baby grant and the free GP visit card for children. They give universal access and reduce the costs faced by parents. They should be considered in this context.

This targeted approach is more effective in reaching our child poverty ambitions. We will continue to keep all payments to children, including the universal payment, under review.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I welcome the Minister's response and the fact that there is a targeted approach, but families are currently finding it difficult with cost-of-living expenses and utility bills spiralling out of control because electricity companies have not been held to account. The increases are not enough. They are minimal. We need to see more measures to support families and children and ensure families are not left in a cycle of disadvantage for generations to come.

The Minister mentioned the school meals programme. I have spoken to many school principals and parents in this regard. It is an absolute disaster. There is a lot of waste. Reviews need to be carried out on the school meals programme. I am all for supporting families who need help, but I question the effectiveness of this programme. Should a targeted approach be taken, instead of having waste? I am hearing from school principals in my constituency that a lot of food is wasted and thrown out. I want to have a sensible approach and see families supported. Payments such as child benefit should increase for genuine applicants - I stress genuine applicants - in a targeted and fair way that matches the cost of living.

Deputy Dara Calleary: We are engaging and will be carrying out work throughout 2027 around a potential second-tier child benefit payment. It is complex work.

We carried out a comprehensive survey on the school meals programme, which I published in September. We contacted 600 school communities and some 80,000 parents participated in it. While there are challenges, it is certain that people see the scheme as a positive. There are challenges around waste but when issues such as absences are taken out, waste levels are as they were before the universal school meals programme was introduced.

As a former teacher, the Deputy will be aware that it is difficult for children. School lunches were always difficult. The universality of the schools meals programme is important. In any given classroom on any given day, we do not know what situation a child has come from. This may be their only chance to have a proper meal. We are making changes to the school meals programme to respond to that survey. Certainly, I look forward to engaging in this regard.

I also point out that the free schoolbooks programme, the school meals programme and the assistance available through the GP cards have all helped to reduce the cost of living for families. We will continue to focus on those supports.

Deputy Carol Nolan: To take up the whole point of the school meals programme, principals and teachers are clued into the needs of children in the school community. They are vigilant and they watch the children who need additional support and help. They should be commended for that. There is waste with the scheme. From speaking directly to school principals, I know there is dismay because they are finding it difficult to get an extension or resources for their school while, at the same time, they are seeing money wasted with the approach that has been taken. A better approach could be adopted in this regard.

Of course, we need to always help and assist children who are trapped in a cycle of disadvantage, whether it be through the schoolbooks programme, which I supported, or otherwise. I was one of those individuals who called for the free schoolbooks programme to be introduced. It is welcome.

Free GP cards are all well and good if we have the GPs, but we have a chronic shortage of them in rural Ireland. I have been raising this issue for a number of years. It is all well and good giving children free GP access, but there needs to be greater consultation with GPs because there is a chronic shortage.

Deputy Dara Calleary: To reiterate, we carried out a survey on the school meals programme. We surveyed some 2,420 teachers and principals, 740 schools, nearly 7,000 children and 86,637 parents. A total of 78% of the teachers said the meals were acceptable. The children were generally happy, and the parents were happy. There are issues around waste and nutrition, however. I have published a plan as to how we are addressing those issues. That work is under way in the interdepartmental group and will be completed before the start of the next academic year in September 2027. We could not run this programme without the engagement of the school communities, principals and teachers. Certainly, I will provide the results of the survey to the Deputy for her information and feedback. It provides a somewhat different story.

I totally understand the Deputy on the issue of rural GPs. We are trying to work on it. In our rural development policy, Our Rural Future, there are a range of different supports to get medical services into rural communities using the 420-odd hubs available for broadband connectivity. Certainly, GP access is an issue across the country, for both rural and urban communities. The Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, and the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Deputy Lawless, are working hard to expand access to training and degree places so that we can have more GPs on the ground.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Disability Services

7. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Social Protection for an overview of the budget 2027 supports for disabled people. [79888/26]

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Will the Minister outline the measures in budget 2027 that support people with disabilities?

Deputy Dara Calleary: As a result of budget 2027, over €30 billion will be invested in social protection in 2027, including almost €1.15 billion in new measures. The package includes a range of measures to support disabled people. It builds on the significant investment made in recent years.

A significant development is the introduction of the first permanent cost-of-disability payment. In the week beginning 15 February 2027, a lump-sum payment of €500 will be made to people in receipt of the blind pension, the disability allowance, the invalidity pension or the partial capacity benefit. Approximately 240,000 people are expected to benefit, at an investment of €119 million in 2027. However, further consultation with disabled people and their advocates is under way on the development and shape of the payment post 2027. The lump-sum option is not one that is generally favoured. However, we are involved in discussions with groups around that.

The cost-of-disability payment is only one element of a suite of measures in budget 2027, including a €10 increase in the maximum personal rate of weekly disability and carer's payments; a Christmas bonus double-week payment to be paid in December 2026; a €5 increase in the fuel allowance payment to €43 per week; and a €6 increase in the child support payment for each child.

I have also invested considerable time in encouraging disabled people to take up employment. I have increased the earnings disregard for the disability allowance and the blind pension by €10 per week, bringing it to €175 per week from July 2027. We have reduced the threshold of the wage subsidy scheme from 15 to eight hours per week, which is a measure that has been called for by many groups over many years. We have also increased the eligibility for the wage subsidy scheme to those moving from the illness benefit payment to the partial capacity benefit.

Budget 2027 provides a combination of increased income supports, a new cost-of-disability payment, improved earnings disregards and measures to support employment and participation.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I am familiar with many of the measures of the budget. It is the cost-of-disability payment I want to focus on. First, I acknowledge that the Minister's Department has been dealing with this issue for some time. The once-off payment was a measure designed to move quickly, while the co-design process is a measure designed to tackle this issue correctly and ensure the needs of people with disabilities are met.

This week, I met a group of people who are not in receipt of the cost-of-disability payment for this year because they are working. As part of the co-design process, we need to ensure those voices are reflected, along with the great work being done by the Irish Wheelchair Association, the Disability Federation of Ireland and so on. The Minister and I have met those groups over many years. The incentive to work and the need to prevent a trap for people who have a disability from joining the workforce are important. I encourage the Minister to focus on that in the co-design process.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Last week the Minister, Deputy Chambers, the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, and myself met a group representing workers with disabilities - Ann Marie Flanagan, James Cawley and Brian Dalton - with whom we had very good engagement. I have asked my officials to ensure they are involved in the co-design process and we are working through that at the moment. We are engaging with the Department of Finance around a potential tax credit in this space. It is very clear from our consultation on the cost of disability that those who are in employment have additional costs on top of those who are not in employment in terms of transport and other costs and we want to assist them in that.

However, it is also important that it is not just the Department for Social Protection that has a responsibility in relation to assisting people with costs of disability. A number of initiatives are under way in the Department of Transport. The Minister of State, Deputy Canney, is going to bring a proposal in early 2027. We are 15 years waiting for a vehicle adaptation scheme. He has a budget line for that. There is a range of other supports we need to provide that other Departments need to come together on as well the Department of Social Protection.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I welcome the Minister's comments particularly in regard to James Cawley, Ann Marie Flanagan and Brian Dalton who he met. It is really important because the Department has some trust to build in this space having previously got the process wrong and been forced to withdraw a previous proposal. It is crucial that a lot of work is done in the early part of 2027 to get this right, so we do not end up later next year where we are not in a position to put in a permanent payment. We have to be in that position and to be able to have one that suits everyone. That is the great difficulty. I do not envy the Minister in terms of the complexity before him but it is our job to make sure that complexity is reflected in a payment. Many people who are able to go to work have a huge contribution to make the workforce and can bring a greater perspective to many organisations. Having a cost-of-disability payment that is tailored to them as much as it is tailored to those people who are not in a position to be able to work is key. It is also about empowering them and ensuring they feel reflected and respected.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I absolutely agree with that. We have sought to include those voices. As part of the Presidency of the Council of the European Union. I have placed this issue at the core of my agenda. We commissioned research in this space which we presented at our informal meeting in July and which will be subject of some formal conclusions at our summit in December. I have put huge emphasis on this, and we will discuss it again in the next question on the wage subsidy scheme to encourage employers to get on board and give people opportunities. I want to commend those employers who do give this chance and opportunity. We just had a very successful disability-themed work and skills week in October. It was the first time we had a themed week in this space. I attended events here in Dublin as well as in Meath and Galway and a number of online events. The energy at those events was fantastic. There is a group of people with enormous skills who want to get the chance to showcase those skills and use them. Collectively, we all need to ensure they are given the opportunity to do that.

Departmental Schemes

8. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the plans that are in place to review the wage subsidy scheme appreciating the low level of employment among people living with a disability. [80227/26]

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: Disabled people are less likely to be employed than people without disabilities, as the Minister knows well. That is a sad fact. Ireland's gap between disabled and non-disabled employment rates are among the highest in Europe. What steps does the Minister believe need to be taken to attract more employers to use the wage subsidy scheme.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy. As we just discussed with Deputy McAuliffe, supporting disabled people and reducing the disability employment gap are key priorities for me. The wage subsidy scheme is an important disability employment support provided by my Department. It provides a valuable subsidy of up to €10 per hour per worker to encourage employers to offer substantial and sustainable employment to disabled people and in doing so aims to compensate for any risk or cost, real or perceived, that an employer may consider a barrier to hiring a disabled person.

In October 2026, there are 1,614 employers availing of the scheme and 2,695 employees supported through the scheme. Expenditure on the scheme in 2025 was €22.1 million. However, that is not enough. The scheme has undergone many changes and improvements over recent years. A review of the scheme was published in 2024. It recommended the minimum hours be reduced from 21 to 15 per week and the scheme was expanded to the voluntary, community and non-commercial semi-State sectors.

Budget 2026 provided for an expansion to people who acquire a disability while in employment and to those who transfer from invalidity pension to partial capacity benefit and provided for an increase in the subsidy rates.

Over the past year, I have engaged with a lot of disability groups and employers who feel that we should go further and in budget 2027, I provided for a further reduction in the minimum hours from 15 to eight hours per week and an expansion of eligibility to those coming from partial capacity benefit via illness benefit. I hope this will increase the number of employers availing of the scheme and encourage the hiring of disabled people. To that effect budget 2027 has also provided for an increase in the employee assistance officer grant, bringing it from €30,000 to €45,000 per year.

I am working with the Minister, Deputy Burke, in leading the employment pillar under the national human rights strategy for disabled people 2025-2030 and, as I just said, we have just completed a very successful disability themed work and skills week. I look forward to discussing this further with the Deputy.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: As the Minister knows, the State is committed to the UNCRPD. Article 27 of that convention in part commits us to ensuring that persons with disabilities can exercise their labour rights on an equal basis with others. The wage subsidy scheme as it stands does not seem to be attracting as many employers as was hoped. How can we better incentivise this? I look forward to hearing what the Minister says.

Those living with a disability can make an enormous contribution to our workforce if we help them. The demand for the wage subsidy scheme, despite increasing slightly in 2025, is not at the levels disability campaigners would hope for. The number of employers availing of the scheme in 2025 was 1,762. That is slightly up on 2024 but it is only 1% of employers in the State. The steps taken in the budget are positive, particularly the €15,000 increase in the grant for an employment assistance officer and the reduction of the minimum hours needed to qualify for the scheme. I encourage the Minister to go further and provide more supports for people with disabilities to participate in employment by increasing the wage subsidy scheme for workers with disabilities and rolling out career supports for young people with disabilities across the country, looking at schemes like the WALK PEER model that exist already.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I do not disagree with a lot of what the Deputy said. We are working towards this. What I have tried to do over the past 18 months is to change the wage subsidy scheme, both in response to the review that was completed in 2024 but also in response to disability advocacy groups, who engage with employers themselves on a daily basis, and get feedback from employers on what they perceive the inadequacies of the scheme are. The 15 to eight hours is one thing that will potentially be a major change in that. We are working through the operational details of that as we speak.

I am going to engage with employer groups throughout January in this space and, equally, I would say to them that they too can step up and offer more opportunities. I deliberately used the words "perceived risks" because I think employers sometimes feel there is a lot of risk in this and what we need is the champion employers. There are many good employers out there who are really helpful to us during work and skills week. I always cite Mr. Price. I think it is a super example. We used it during work and skills week to get out there and explain to fellow employers this can be done. I have seen an increase in communications from employers willing to take this on and, most importantly, not just doing so on a tick-the-box basis but doing so on a real basis and giving real front-of-house opportunities. The more we can collectively work to do that, the better. I am not happy with our disability employment gap. I want to change it and to change the narrative in this space.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I agree we need to reach out more to employers. The committee I chair, disability matters committee, will meet employers next week. One of those, which is one of the best, as the Minister mentioned, is Mr. Price, which has been proactive on this issue for a number of years. I appreciate the Minister's comments and his commitment today on the UNCRPD. Speaking to disability campaigners over years, a common theme is those with disabilities want to return to the workforce but fear of losing secondary supports is an impediment to this.

They worry about losing a medical card, fuel allowance, the household benefits package and other housing supports. Regardless of income level, those with a disability should be able to keep their disability allowance. We know that households with a disabled member have extra living costs that consume upwards of 50% of their income. I am going to let my colleague contribute as well.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: If the Minister wants to help people with disabilities to get back into work, and I genuinely believe he does, one of the things he could consider is extending the

cost-of-disability payment. I am glad he met with Ann Marie, James and Brian. They met a large number of people and they make a very convincing case. Obviously, co-design is important and will happen but I ask the Minister to give consideration now to extending the €500 payment. People who are working and living with a disability face challenges and costs that far exceed those of many others, and they could do with the money. They were very disappointed to have been left out of the payment, as I think the Minister will appreciate.

Deputy Dara Calleary: On Deputy Quinlivan's point, we want to continue to expand the opportunities that exist. We had a really good event in Limerick last spring, the WorkAbility and EmployAbility awards. The Deputy's local businesses were engaged and it was a very positive event. What we need to do is show the opportunities that exist for employers. I genuinely feel a lot of employers may want to do something in this space but they have perceived fears and we have got to address those, probably take them head-on and deal with them.

On Deputy O'Reilly's point, we engaged with the people referred to. Our budget line is set this year but I certainly agree with the Deputy on the need to support those in employment with the extra costs that come with employment and to recognise those extra costs. We had a good debate with Ann Marie, James and Brian. I wish to pay tribute to the late Avril Greham, who was very much part of that group and passed away just before we had the meeting. She was an exceptional advocate, not just for people with disabilities but also for her community in Ballina.

We are going to engage with the Department of Finance. My officials are engaging with the group about its involvement in the co-design process and how its members can be involved in how we proceed.

Question No. 9 taken with Written Answers.

Social Welfare Payments

10. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if pensioners with lifelong disabilities who are in receipt of the State pension (contributory) or State pension (non-contributory) will be eligible for the cost of disability payment on the same basis as working-age recipients of disability allowance or invalidity pension; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [79892/26]

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: I need to raise with the Minister the position regarding people who are on disability allowance or invalidity pension and who move on to the State pension. They are asking if they will continue to qualify for the cost-of-disability payment. Their circumstances have not changed, their disability has not changed and the extra costs they face have not changed. The only thing that will have changed is that they will have reached pension age.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy. My Department provides a range of income support payments for disabled people of working age but we have a different suite of payments for those who are aged 66 or over. In keeping with this, the new €500 cost-of-disability

payment will be made in the week beginning 15 February 2027 to recipients of long-term working-age disability payments, specifically blind pension, disability allowance, invalidity pension and partial capacity benefit. The payment will be made to approximately 240,000 people at an estimated cost of €119 million in 2027. It is intended that in future years a co-design process will guide how that payment will be structured.

Many of the factors identified as giving rise to additional costs for disabled people also apply – the Deputy is right – in the case of pensioners. For example, there are costs related to spending more time at home, with increased costs for heat and lighting, additional costs in relation to transport and health-related costs. However, in recognition of these costs, pensioners receive a significantly higher weekly payment than those who are in receipt of a disability payment and they have access to a range of other supports.

For instance, following budget 2027, the maximum rate of the non-contributory State pension will increase to €298. The contributory State pension will increase to €309.30, as compared with a disability allowance rate of €264 per week and an invalidity pension rate of €269.50. As part of our co-design process, the conversion of the cost-of-disability payment into a weekly or monthly payment is being considered. I will bring a recommendation on that process to the Government following its completion during 2027.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: I thank the Minister. I acknowledge the positive step of introducing the payment. It is a recognition. It is also a financial support, and it would be good to be able to continue to build on that.

For those people who would, for example, have been on invalidity pension and who would be moving over to the State pension, their disability has not disappeared or will not disappear at 66. As the Minister said, their higher costs will continue in relation to mobility, transport, heating, medical appointments and so on. There will also be people who will have, for example, a primary medical certificate for an adapted car. Through that certificate, the State is recognising their continued circumstances, and it will be important to be able to modify the payment to take into account the ongoing and continued disability.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I absolutely agree with the Deputy and accept that. The first priority this year was to introduce the budget line for the payment. It was not easy. Quite a lot of work had to be done to get to that point. I acknowledge the work of the team in my Department and all of those who assisted with the consultations in relation to that.

When we introduce a scheme, as with any of our other schemes, there is a cut-off point for qualification. That is important to protect the viability of the system. We hear right across the world a lot of debate around the viability of social protection systems at the moment.

Somebody on invalidity pension in 2027 will be getting €269.50 per week. The non-contributory old age pension is €298 and the contributory pension is €309.30. There is an automatic bump-up, an automatic increase to recognise the challenges that come with old age and that things do not change. I absolutely agree with the Deputy that the disability does not change but there is a substantial difference in the weekly payment at that point. It is over an extra €2,000 per year in the weekly payment for those who go on to a pension payment.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: I thank the Minister. As I was saying, and as the Minister alluded to, it is a positive move to introduce the payment, both in terms of the recognition and the financial support. As the Minister says, it takes a little time to bed in and fine-tune any new scheme. In the view of many people, including me, the scheme clearly needs modifications to take the affected people into account. Can the Minister outline the type of review that would be proposed and give an overview of the kinds of things he would be examining in it? He indicated that it would be in the new year. Does he have any further information on a timeline?

Deputy Dara Calleary: We have begun a process of engagement with the advocacy groups for people with disabilities on the payment, which will build on the consultation process we had and on the feedback we got. Within that consultation process, as extensive as it was, there were quite different and diverging views on the actual payment, and on whether it should be weekly or monthly. My initial focus was to get the payment established and out to people. That is why we went with a lump sum payment. That is only for 2027, however. We are engaging with the groups now.

On Deputy O'Reilly's point, we are also engaging with those who are working. I believe the best option for them is a tax credit. We are engaging with the Department of Finance on that. My main focus is to get the design of the payment agreed and implemented and to engage with those working-age people with disabilities.

We will definitely consider the circumstances of pensioners and those who are reaching pension age. Getting agreement on the shape of the payment and on the working-age payments at this point is going to be the work for 2027. We are absolutely aware of the challenges facing pensioners with disabilities. I can give the Deputy a guarantee on that and on the supports available.

Social Welfare Payments

11. **Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí** asked the Minister for Social Protection his Department's estimate of the number of families in Dublin that are eligible for, but not currently claiming the working family payment. [80154/26]

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: Can I ask for the Department's estimate of the number of families in Dublin who are eligible for but not currently claiming the working family payment?

10 o'clock

Deputy Dara Calleary: Mar is eol don Teachta, the working family payment is a tax-free payment that provides an income top-up for employees with children on low earnings. It is a targeted measure. It is directly linked to overall household income and therefore directly supports low low-income working families. Currently, there are some 57,000 households with approximately 114,000 children in receipt of the payment. Estimated expenditure on the scheme for 2026 is around €531 million. Budget 2027 saw the fifth successive increase to the weekly earnings threshold under the payment for all family sizes. It provides a €30 per week increase which will take effect subject to the passing of the Social Welfare Bill from January 2027.

The working family payment is not a means-tested scheme as the employment support eligibility is based on the overall household income, the number of qualifying children in a household and being in employment for at least 38 hours a fortnight. For these reasons, it is difficult to estimate take-up. There has been an increase in the number of new applications in recent years, which has been driven by both ongoing promotional activities and recent budget announcements, particularly that around the fuel allowance, which proved to be effective in promoting the scheme. Since 2023, 11,000 additional families are in receipt of the payment, representing an almost 20% increase in recipient numbers. The scheme is reviewed yearly. That results in churn as recipient incomes increase and exceed the thresholds.

I am committed to ensuring that eligible families are aware of the support available and that they can and will claim their entitlements. We ran national information campaigns across print, radio and social media in 2023 and 2024, and the payment has continued to be promoted through social media, employment services, online channels and direct engagement. There will be further social media campaigns this winter to promote the payment to cohorts who are eligible.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: The Minister has hit the nail on the head from my perspective because every now and then in Dublin Bay North, we are in contact with somebody who was not even aware of it. It is a good scheme. As he said, it is not means-tested. It is well-supported by Government and its value is increasing, rightly so, because families are under pressure with their household bills and costs. It is a real help, particularly to those who are working. I welcome promotional material, but is there any other way then that the Department can try and get a handle, even on a sampling basis, or to look at a geographical pilot to try to get hard data on who is entitled to it but is not earning it at the moment?

It is a really positive scheme, which is well- resourced. As the Minister said, there is a bit of churn. People come in and out as their circumstances change. There is a cohort of people who are entitled to it but are not claiming it because they do not know about it.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I want to zero in on that figure of 11,000 extra families, almost 20%, having access to the working family payment. From December 2025 to September 2026, we have seen an increase of 6,000 families. There has been much higher awareness throughout 2026. It came from the expansion of the fuel allowance. We are going to drive that on. This cohort are very social media friendly and engage with it, so we find the best way to get their attention for all our schemes will be through social media promotion. We intend to do that. I will provide Deputies and Senators with information about the scheme. It is complex. There is not straightforward eligibility in terms of who qualifies for it. I will ask my officials to provide each Deputy and Senator with information on the scheme because we may be able to bring details to the attention of our constituents. In nine months, we had 6,000 extra families, which represents a good direction of travel.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I agree with that. An additional 6,000 is interesting because that is a substantial uplift in those using the scheme. It is complicated to understand at times. Some information from departmental officials being circulated to TDs and Senators of this House would be useful, because as we meet constituents and they contact us, it would be useful to

have a ready reckoner that makes it easy for people, TDs and their constituents to understand and be aware.

There are other commitments in the programme for Government around the new working age payment and the examination of a targeted child payment. I would welcome and support work on those payments as measures that could support working families as well. It is not the Minister's Department, but I also welcome the basic income for the arts scheme. Putting that scheme on a longer term footing is very welcome. It is support for artists who are working. All these supports with which we can assist and support constituents are welcome.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I endorse what the Deputy said about the scheme for arts. There have been substantial changes in the working family payment thresholds since 2020. For a family with two children, the threshold in 2020 was €632. It will go up to €896 in 2027. For a family of four, it will go from €834 to €1,088 for 2027. We are making that scheme much more relevant and attractive. We have seen a substantial increase throughout 2026 in those who are accessing the scheme. Most importantly, 114,000 children are benefiting from the scheme. It is part of our ongoing work in addressing our child poverty. Throughout 2027 we will be looking at a potential second tier payment. The working family payment will be considered in view of that work. I will provide information on the thresholds and the qualification criteria in an easy to understand format for all colleagues because it is one of our more complex schemes and it is important that people are aware of the supports that are available.

Departmental Staff

12. **Deputy Eoin Hayes** asked the Minister for Social Protection his plans to change staffing levels and conditions in Intreo centres; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [80139/26]

Deputy Eoin Hayes: I am glad that the public sector strikes are not happening today but I was on the picket lines during the previous public sector strike. I went to about 20 different places. One of the places I went to was Bishop's Square, where there is an Intreo office. I thank all the staff in the Department of Social Protection and Intreo offices for all the work that they do. I would like to hear from the Minister on how he is going to improve conditions for those staff. They raised it with me.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I join the Deputy in thanking the more than 7,000 staff across my Department who do extraordinary work on a daily basis. The provision of accessible, high-quality public services to people across the country is a priority for me. We have 65 Intreo centres. They form part of our regional structure that allows us to provide social welfare and related support services to citizens across the State. These key services include income supports, community welfare services, employment services, information provision and identity management, including the allocation of PPS numbers and public services cards. Intreo services are demand-led. Staffing of Intreo centres is prioritised by the Department. We manage our allocated resources in the Department in agreement with the Department of Public

Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation under our employment control framework and the annual budgetary process.

We seek to fill any vacancies that arise as quickly as possible using the various recruitment options, which include internal and external competitions, mobility and redeployment. Intreo staff play a vital role in our Department. People generally will experience the Department through their engagement with our Intreo staff and they consistently deliver services with professionalism and, as importantly, with empathy. Staff receive ongoing training and support and they are encouraged to take up development opportunities that arise. I had the absolute privilege of visiting the National College of Ireland earlier this year to meet staff who have enrolled in accredited training with the college. Our customer satisfaction ratings, which are tracked by an independent research agency, consistently return high ratings for Intreo. Some 91% of customers agree that staff are friendly and try their best to help them. Some 90% of customers agree staff are very good at their jobs. Some 85% have rated their overall experience as satisfactory or very satisfactory. I continue to prioritise Intreo. I continue to prefer face-to-face engagement where that is possible.

I look forward to our discussion on this.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: I thank the Minister. After I met with the staff during the strikes I called Fórsa and I asked to meet with it and the representative of the staff. There is about an 80% density of unionisation within Intreo offices in the Department of Social Protection. They raised with me generally the question of co-operation between the unions and the Department. One of the issues that has been discussed a few times this morning has been community welfare officers. They gave me a shocking figure. There used to be 800 community welfare officers and the number has reduced to 160 over the last ten years. I am interested to know if that was a direction from the Department of public expenditure and reform or if it was a decision taken by the Department of Social Protection. There is an issue with a high turnover of staff. That was the other issue they reported. That is no wonder if the Minister has cut the community welfare officer headcount by about 80%. I would like to hear from him on that in particular.

Deputy Dara Calleary: As I referenced earlier, there has been reform of the community welfare service. That has aligned with a lot of customers - I hate using that word to be honest - who need that service - going online. The reason we did the event here last March was so that Deputies, Senators and their staff could meet their local community welfare officer and their local team. We brought people in from around the country.

I am constantly watching the availability of community welfare services, particularly the regional spread so that people are available. We also have fantastic flexibility. I commend community welfare officers. I take this opportunity to thank the team in Waterford who responded very quickly to the situation there. I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, Deputies Cullinane and Conor D. McGuinness, and the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, who raised it with me directly. That shows the commitment of our staff and their flexibility. They did that even during an industrial dispute. Our community services have a very good relationship with the unions. The unions are very good at ensuring that the service is available. That happens during storms. During Storm Éowyn last year, our community welfare team were available 24-7. They worked seven days a week. They relocated from across the country to the areas of high demand. I really appreciate that flexibility and commitment. We could not

have that flexibility and commitment obviously without the community welfare officers themselves, but particularly their unions.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: Notwithstanding the heroic work that was done in Waterford, there were reports of issues in Limerick, Portlaoise, Newbridge and there are genuine issues in localised situations in certain Intreo centres. In particular, one of the issues that was raised a lot was a challenging work environment in terms of verbal abuse, physical abuse, vacancies and understaffing - not just for the staff members, but also for the customers or the people who are attending Intreo centres. Many of these staff remain, persevere and contribute to the Department but the Minister does have an obligation to make sure that they are properly taken care of. He mentioned making sure that there are proper training supports for staff. It was pointed out to me that there is a formal training programme when a civil servant joins the Department of Finance or the Revenue Commissioners, for example, but there is no trauma-informed formal training programme for staff when they go into the Department of Social Protection or Intreo offices. One of the things I ask the Minister to consider is conducting an independent review of the staffing conditions and the working conditions for staff within Intreo offices so that they can provide proper services for everybody in the community.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I want to make it very clear that, as Minister, I will not tolerate any abuse of staff in my Department, in any part of the Department. My Department management is also exceptionally committed to the welfare of our staff. I try to visit Intreo centres when I am visiting areas and engage with staff directly. These are people providing a really important service. They are providing a service to people at a very difficult time in their lives and they should be given the maximum respect and the maximum backup, which they are. I assure the Deputy on that. If he has specific instances, he can bring them to my attention. I will certainly engage with Department management in relation to addressing them.

As I pointed out, there is support and training available and we have a partnership with the National College of Ireland for accredited training that is available, which allows people to attend the college but also to do online training. I will be very clear: I will not tolerate any abuse of staff in the Department for Social Protection. That is why we have security in place, and that is why we have the backup in place. If the Deputy has specific instances, he should bring them to my attention and I will make sure they are dealt with.

Question No. 13 taken with Written Answers.

Employment Schemes

14. **Deputy Tony McCormack** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he will report on the budget 2027 changes to the community employment, Tús and the rural social scheme. [79901/26]

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy for the question. The employment support programmes – community employment, CE, Tús and the rural social scheme, RSS - make a vitally important contribution to participants and communities across the State. As part of the overall budget 2027 allocation of €30 billion for social protection, we have made a number of changes.

There are currently 19,488 participants on CE schemes; 4,376 on Tús, and 2,822 on the rural social scheme. Government investment in these work schemes will amount to almost €565 million in 2026. In 2026, a budget of €415 million is available for community employment, €94.5 million for Tús and €55.7 million for the rural social scheme.

As part of budget 2027 measures, CE, Tús and RSS participants will receive an increase in their weekly payment, arising from the increase in core social welfare payments, of €10 per week with effect from January 2027. Participants will also receive an increase in the weekly top-up allowance, with the top-up payment increasing from €32.50 to €35.00 with effect from January 2027. Taken together, these changes ensure that the minimum payment for participants will increase from €286.50 per week to €299 per week from January 2027. Participants with children will also benefit from increases in the weekly rate of the child support payment. Budget 2027 also provides for a €5 weekly increase to the fuel allowance payment to €43 per week, amounting to an increase of €140 over the fuel allowance season.

We have also included measures to expand access to employment support services for those on the schemes. The requalification period for participation on Tús has been reduced from three to two years, allowing former participants to become eligible for the scheme sooner. I have continued the expansion of the rural dweller pilot operating under the rural social scheme. It will go from 250 places to 500 places in January 2027. I am particularly pleased to report to the House that the 250 places provided in 2026 were fully subscribed. The new allocation will provide additional opportunities in this space.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I welcome the continued investment in the community employment, Tús and rural social schemes. These schemes have been hugely successful over many years, providing meaningful employment opportunities while delivering essential services in communities throughout the country. However, I regularly hear from organisations that are struggling to recruit participants despite having plenty of work available. Community organisations need workers and people who could benefit from these schemes are unable to participate because of eligibility restrictions. Surely there is an opportunity to address both problems. Has the Minister examined whether the current eligibility criteria are too restrictive? Would he consider introducing greater flexibility to allow more people to participate, particularly where vacancies remain unfilled?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Absolutely. I am very focused on CE and I am very conscious that many schemes have vacancies at the moment. We are looking at how we can do that. CE is an active labour market programme, and in the context of an economy that is at full employment, that is making it more challenging to get participants. I acknowledge the volunteers and the community organisations that do that. Sponsors have flexibility to extend some individual placements and to retain existing participants on the scheme where no replacement is immediately available. I am very conscious that CE is not just an employment activation programme; it is much bigger than that. For many of the participants on the scheme, it is much more than an employment activation programme; it is something that is very important to their physical and mental health. I have ensured that sponsors have a little flexibility in that space.

Regarding the RSS, we have increased the number of places in the rural dweller pilot. This has really expanded eligibility. We have gone up to 500 places for next year through the local

development companies and Údarás na Gaeltachta. I am always looking at how we can expand eligibility and I am very conscious that there are those who are on CE schemes for more reasons than employment activation.

Deputy Tony McCormack: We also need to recognise that these schemes serve different purposes for different people. For some participants, they provide valuable training and a pathway back into mainstream employment, which is exactly what we want to encourage. For others, particularly older participants who may have limited opportunities to return to full-time employment, these schemes provide structure, purpose, social interaction and an opportunity to make a valuable contribution. We should not underestimate the importance of that, both to the individual and to the wider community. Will the Minister consider reviewing the length of participation rules in order to recognise these different circumstances, allowing greater flexibility for participants who are making a valuable contribution and wish to remain involved?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Absolutely. I constantly look at eligibility. In May 2024, we had a pilot scheme that extended CE eligibility for over-50s who were signing for jobseeker's benefit. At the end of last October, there were 397 participants on this pilot. We have also changed the requalification period for Tús to allow people to go back onto Tús more quickly than before.

In respect of RSS, we have the rural dweller pilot. It was slow to be taken up, although we have reached the full allocation of places. Some local development companies that are super. For example, the initiative behind this came from Galway Rural Development, GRD, in particular. I say to all development companies to make sure that we fill the places during 2027. That pilot has been very successful.

I am open to any proposals in relation to eligibility for the schemes. CE, Tús and RSS are incredibly important, not just for the communities that are benefiting from the schemes and the services they provide, but especially for the participants.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): We will move on to the last question. We only have three minutes remaining, so I will allow the Deputy to ask his question and the Minister to reply.

Disability Issues

15. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he will provide an update on the disability payment following the recent cost of disability summit. [80231/26]

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: In budget 2027, the Government committed to introducing a cost-of-disability payment of €960 per week during 2027. The introduction of the payment is welcome but what is proposed is well short of what is needed. Following the cost-of-disability summit in May, it is disappointing to see this one-off payment fall short of what is needed by those living with disabilities. The 2023 Central Statistics Office, CSO, survey on income and living conditions, SILC, showed that one in four people who are working is at risk of poverty and one in five lives in poverty. The date for the receipt of this one-off payment is awaited, but would the Minister acknowledge that the payment needs to be multi-annual and increased?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy. In budget 2027, the Government provided for the first ever cost-of-disability payment. This will be paid in 2027 as a lump sum payment of €500 in the week beginning 15 February to those receiving a long-term working age disability payment, specifically blind pension, disability allowance, invalidity pension, and partial capacity benefit. The payment will be made to approximately 240,000 people at an estimated cost of €119 million in 2027.

The public consultation process received over 1,100 submissions. In addition, the contributions at the strategic focus network summit that I hosted in the Aviva Stadium in May, and the discussions with disabled people and their advocates at many engagements, informed the approach that we, across Government, have taken in budget 2027. Reflecting these inputs, it is intended, in co-operation with people with disabilities and their advocates, to look at the potential to convert this payment into a regular weekly or monthly payment. We have begun this work and, as far as possible, we will involve disabled people and their advocates in that co-design process. This was the main agenda item at my Department's quarterly disability consultative forum on 2 November. This co-design process will build on the detailed consultation process and the information that has been gathered as part of that process. It is my intention to bring recommendations to the Government arising from this process towards the middle of next year. As discussed earlier, we have also met the advocates representing people with disabilities who are working.

However, it is also important to factor into the process the contribution that can be made to addressing costs incurred by disabled people by other Departments in respect of training, health, transport and the role that tax credits might play for disabled people who are in employment. These will be matters that will be considered as we progress our work next year. I will engage with Government colleagues on this. The cost-of-disability payment is only one element of a suite of measures made by my Department in budget 2027 to support disabled people.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

These include an increase of €10 to the maximum personal rate of weekly disability payments, increases in child support payments and increases to the fuel and living alone allowances, to mention a few. I also provided for a number of measures specifically aimed at making it easier for disabled people to take up employment or increase their level of employment, such as a €10 increase in the employment earnings disregard for the disability allowance and blind pension and a reduction of the minimum hours required to qualify for the wage subsidy scheme from 15 hours to eight hours per week.

I trust that this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Rural Schemes

97. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Transport the measures he is taking to improve public transport services in rural Ireland; if he anticipates a further slowdown in Connecting Ireland; and if he will commit to delivering a Tralee town bus service in 2027. [80082/26]

Deputy Louis O'Hara: I am taking this question for Deputy Pa Daly, whom I know is looking for an update on the Tralee bus service. I will have a couple of local queries also.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Jerry Buttimer): There has not been a slowdown. This Department and the Government are very much prioritising rural transport in particular. As Minister of State at the Department with special responsibility for rural transport, I recognise the importance of connectivity throughout rural Ireland. The Government has committed to rolling out the Connecting Ireland rural mobility plan and to continuing investment in new town bus services nationwide. As part of this budget, we are investing over €1 billion in public transport services that people rely on every day, with €1.042 billion allocated to public service obligation, PSO, services in 2027 across our bus, light rail and heavy rail networks. This represents an 11% increase in the core PSO allocation compared with 2026, providing the certainty needed to protect and sustain vital public transport services right across the country.

The Connecting Ireland rural mobility plan is a programme of investment in new and improved public transport services for rural areas, including Kerry. Under the programme, upwards of 600,000 people now have access to daily public transport services for the first time and over 180 new and improved rural regular public transport services have been provided, resulting in a fivefold increase in passenger numbers on rural public transport services.

The town bus service programme continues to be developed. Currently, there are 12 town bus services across the country, serving Kilkenny, Drogheda, Navan, Athlone, Clonmel, Carlow, Portlaoise, Sligo, Balbriggan, Dundalk, Mullingar and Ennis. With a view to building on this success, the Department, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, and I, working with the National Transport Authority, NTA, are assessing plans to propose additional or enhanced bus services. Implementation and announcements will be made in due course as part of our service plan for 2027. We continue to work on the plan for next year. That reflects our strong commitment to expanding and improving public transport services for communities and commuters across Ireland.

I will come back to the Deputy with further points in the supplementary reply.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: We have only had four new services delivered in 2026. When you look at the pressure our public transport system is under at the moment, that is simply not acceptable. It shows a real lack of commitment and ambition from the Government. At the same time, fares are being increased. Commuters are being expected to pay even more, so it seems that the Government has its priorities upside down. Every time I am in this Chamber for parliamentary questions, others and I are raising issues about capacity on services. We see that on the trains in and out of Galway. There is a real lack of capacity there and failure to progress infrastructural improvements that are needed. "Prime Time" had a very good feature on this recently that showed the impact that this was having on commuters and about the slow pace of delivery of new carriages and infrastructure improvements. It is the same story on bus

services right across my constituency. There are capacity issues and people being left at the side of the road. When will this NTA plan be published and what specific improvements will we see in the short term for constituencies such as my own?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: It is a bit like reading *Animal Farm*. All is bad on one side and all is good on the other side. Let me say again, there has been a 46% increase in the PSO to €1 billion.

Let me just give the Deputy an example. I do not want to pick a fight but we have more people using rural transport and more connectivity. Has the Deputy read the Our Rural Future document, which the Minister, Deputy Calleary, and I launched a couple of weeks ago? It shows how that policy is leading and feeding into what we are doing in the Department in terms of the importance of connectivity. Let me make it quite clear and repeat again that €1 billion is being expended, recognising the importance of transport and connectivity. At the very heart of what both our Departments are doing is connecting people.

Of course, there will always be challenges, and there are challenges. Deputy Farrelly, to be fair, made a very good contribution yesterday in the House on public transport. For rural transport, we secured €31 million last year, which was an increase of 38%. It is about stabilisation. Something the Deputy does not recognise is that we have stabilised the situation, with a view to going forward to plan for the future again. We are ambitious.

I share the view that the glass is three-quarters full, not that it is a quarter empty, because more people are using services and we are providing services. The Minister of State, Deputy Canney, answered the Deputy the last day regarding the Deputy's own area.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: Documents are no good to people.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I did not hear the Deputy.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: Documents are no good to people. We only had, as I said, four new services introduced last year. It is not enough and we need to see more next year. That is the bottom line.

I look at my constituency and Athenry. We were promised a bus service there two years ago. A PSO was put in place but it is still not there today. We should have a bus service for a town the size of Athenry. That has to be a priority for the Government and for the National Transport Authority, NTA, in its new plan. It needs to be funded.

It is the same story when I look at the likes of Loughrea in my constituency. Places like this have fewer public transport services today than they did five years ago, as do the surrounding villages, such as Craughwell, Kilrickle and Derrydonnell. This happened after the Bus Éireann service was lost. It makes it really difficult for people in that area. Loughrea is a large town, and buses are coming in full and buses are coming in late, making it impossible for people to plan their day.

These are the kinds of improvements and the ambition we need from the Government. Documents and figures are one thing but people need to see delivery on the ground, especially

in my constituency in places such as Athenry and Loughrea. The current situation is unsustainable and very unfair on commuters who are forced to rely on these services.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Notwithstanding the challenges, let me again reiterate to the Deputy that what is happening is not on paper and is not a policy. It is a fact. We are delivering an increase in the connectivity of people across the country. Look at the success of Local Link. Go into the transport committee and listen to one of the chairpersons of Local Link, Mary Coughlan, speaking and hear the story of the success of connectivity. I was in Ennis a couple of weeks ago launching a new service. Across the country, people are crying out for these services. We are ambitious and the ambition is matched by the increase in funding. When we announce the plan for 2027, I hope the Deputy will come in here and say we have succeeded in delivering. There is an increase in connectivity, improved mobility options and new county town connections. That is not a glossy document. It is a fact.

Of course, we have to do more and we accept that. That is part of our ambitious programme for the Department, working with the NTA and everyone in the House, because we anticipate more people will be using public transport and we want to see more people using public transport. It shows its importance. It is about getting people out of the car and we are very much committed to that. I look forward to working with the Deputy on the provision of more routes.

Public Transport

98. **Deputy Aidan Farrelly** asked the Minister for Transport if his attention has been drawn to capacity and reliability issues and related matters across the public transport network; and if he will detail his engagement and that of his officials with the National Transport Authority and Transport for Ireland to enhance the commuter experience. [80528/26]

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I thank the Minister and the Minister of State for their time. Has the Minister's attention been drawn to capacity and reliability issues across the public transport network and will he detail to the House his engagement, and that of his officials, with the National Transport Authority, NTA, and Transport for Ireland, TFI, to enhance the commuter experience?

Minister for Transport (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I thank Deputy Farrelly. At the outset, I want to be clear that passengers are entitled to public transport services that are reliable, punctual and capable of accommodating demand and ensuring safe, comfortable and efficient journeys as they travel. The passenger - the customer - has to be central to everything we do.

We are currently seeing record demand across the network, as the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, said. At times, that growth, together with traffic congestion and other operational constraints, has created capacity and reliability issues. I want to be straight about that too. More recently, traffic-related issues have affected journey times on a number of routes. Looking ahead, the NTA is working with operators to ensure the public transport network has the capacity and resources required to provide reliable services to passengers. That is what drives me, the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, and this Government.

The NTA very shortly expects to publish the 2027 service delivery plan for PSO services. It sets out significant enhancements for next year, many of which have been raised in the House by Government and Opposition Members. We have over €1 billion, as the Minister of State said, allocated for PSO services for the first time in 2027. That will help ensure reliability keeps pace with growth in passenger numbers. That funding supports a significant expansion and enhancement of our public transport network. We are looking at approximately 140 new and enhanced services during 2027. That will cover flagship programmes such as Connecting Ireland, BusConnects, new town services and rail improvements, other roads, as well as Bus Átha Cliath and Bus Éireann services and across the board.

To get to the nub of the Deputy's question, I meet the NTA regularly. I met the chief executive of the NTA last Friday. I think she has been an excellent appointment. She is focused on the customer and improving the customer experience. We have more work to do, absolutely. I engage with the NTA, as the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, and the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, do, nearly every week, and with our operators. I will come back in on the supplementary question.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I thank the Minister for that reply. I want to share in the collective optimism this morning. To be balanced, the vast majority of people I speak to who use rail and bus services in Kildare, which has one of the largest commuter populations, have a really positive experience. It is a really worthwhile experience and facilitates their commute. We have some of the longest commutes in Kildare. To strike a balance, while so many people have a really positive experience, for many there seems to be a creep regarding capacity and the constraints that come with that. Buses shown on the display then suddenly go off it. Carriages are full. We have reports of people having a very uncomfortable and unpleasant experience using rail. Ultimately, anything that encourages people back into their cars is something we should all try to avoid.

While the Department engages in the momentous DART+ and DART+ South West projects, which are probably medium- to long-term endeavours, when we see the battery-operated fleet come into operation on the Drogheda line, can as many of the diesel multiple units, DMUs, as possible then be allocated to Kildare to bolster the rail network, which is under pressure?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: To be Kildare-focused, the Deputy mentioned DART+ West, DART+ South West and the expansion of the rail network. The first 95 battery-electric carriages are being commissioned now. I have visited Inchicore and Fairview, where they are being tested on the northern line. Those carriages will be deployed by the end of the second quarter of next year. When that deployment of new carriages happens, it will give us additionality. That additionality will be focused on the heavy commuter areas, specifically and particularly in the greater Dublin area, GDA, and in the core commuter area. People will see improvements. There is no question about it.

Many very good things are happening, and I thank the Deputy for recognising that, but there are issues with certain services and issues with reliability on certain lines. That is why feedback in the House from both Government and Opposition Members is important. We take that on board. I use those specific examples to go back and speak to the NTA and the operators. I meet Bus Éireann, Iarnród Éireann and Luas representatives regularly, face to face, to discuss passenger experience.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: As a supplementary question, if and when the Minister gets details of where those DMUs will operate, and this is not an attempt to be parochial, I think the evidence will support the requirement for extra capacity on Iarnród Éireann services in Kildare.

Turning to the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, I also commend Mr. Alan Kerry. I am not sure whether the Minister of State has met him. He was an absolute visionary in Local Link in Kildare and was keen to connect communities through Local Link services long before it was Government policy. I worked with him for many years when I was a councillor and want to commend him, and anything we can do in this vein.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Yes.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: There is a tradition or stereotype of Kildare as being quite an urbanised setting and we have seen great improvements in our public transport in respect of our more urbanised or dense populations. The more we can invest in rural area transport in Kildare to enhance services and link rural communities to rail stations and the busier bus routes, the more helpful it will be. I thank the Minister and the Minister of State for their time this morning and look forward to the information.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: No problem, and the Deputy can be assured that in relation to rural links and Connecting Ireland, the new service plan will have a number of very significant improvements and new services.

On rail, the NTA and Iarnród Éireann have established a joint working group on timetable improvements, with a particular focus on the new trains that will be entering service in 2027.

Those timetable improvements and the additional rolling stock - we are targeting new trains from the end of quarter 2 next year - will add significant additionality. We will have to continue that. We have purchased 195 carriages. This is the first phase and there will be more. There will be the DART replacement programme. The course of these few years could be very significant for the commuter. Then we have next-generation ticketing, which we will roll out in testing phase at the end of next year.

Public Transport

99. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Transport further to his comments made in Dáil Éireann, if he still believes public passenger numbers will grow in 2027 despite the budget scenario he received from the NTA that projected that the fare hike will lead to a decline in passenger numbers (details supplied); and the analysis he or his Department carried out to evidence the claims he made in Dáil Éireann regarding an increase in passenger numbers next year. [80081/26]

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: In reaching the decision on its recent fare determination, the NTA considered a range of factors in consultation with my Department, including passenger affordability, operating costs, inflationary pressures, investment requirements, Government policy objectives and the long-term sustainability of the public transport network. The Deputy

will appreciate that the 15% fare adjustment is being implemented against a backdrop of strong and sustained growth in public transport usage. A record 363.5 million passenger journeys were made on TFI services in 2025, with the NTA reporting further growth of approximately 5.3% in the early part of this year. Funding has also been provided to support continued expansion of the network. As I mentioned, there will be a record €1 billion-plus in PSO services for next year and a further 140 new and enhanced services.

The NTA applies detailed statistical analysis of fare elasticity to assess the impact of fare changes on passenger demand. Despite any demand elasticity effects arising from the fare increase, it has advised that steady passenger growth is expected to continue throughout 2027, reflecting the continued strength of underlying demand for public transport services in a country with a growing population.

I think that the remarks at the joint Oireachtas committee were based on a European study and were not specific to Ireland. I expect passenger numbers to grow next year because we are growing the services. We are going to put another 140 in place across road, rail, rural and urban so unless no one uses them, which I do not imagine will happen, passengers numbers will grow next year. I will predict that here. If in early 2028 that has not happened, I will be absolutely shocked because the projections for this year are very strong. There will be new services and additional capacity next year. If people want to use public transport, they will.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: The Minister made those remarks before about how steady passenger growth was expected to continue in 2027. It was recently revealed that, in August, the NTA published a budget scenario for the Department projecting a decline in passenger numbers in 2027 as a result of the planned fare increases. In particular, it predicted a 1% drop in passengers on Dublin Bus, Luas and Bus Éireann PSO routes and other PSO services. It also predicted a 3% drop in rail passenger users and those availing of the rural transport programme next year. That is the exact opposite of what the Minister claimed before and again today when he already had the NTA analysis.

This is happening at a time when we should be encouraging people to use public transport. It beggars belief that the Government would make a decision that it knows will make it more difficult and less likely for people to use public transport when it increases fares. The Government is also making it more expensive for people to drive a car when it comes to fuel, insurance, toll hikes and so on. Will the Minister acknowledge that this fare hike is going to have a negative impact on commuters and will make it less likely for them to travel?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I know that Deputy O'Hara would love that to be the case and he probably dreams that, next year, there will be a reduction in public transport usage because that would give him and his colleagues an opportunity to come to the Dáil and cry and shout about it. We should all have a responsibility in here to work together to improve services across public transport, health and housing - the whole lot. They can either choose to do that or choose to hope and pray that there will be a reduction in demand, which there will not be. There absolutely will not be. We have a growing population. Look at the new homes being built, which is never recognised by Sinn Féin's housing spokesperson, who is more and more removed from the debate, should I say. It is acknowledged that we have a growing population, growing communities and a growing public transport network, which will lead to growing numbers of people using public transport. We will see that for 2026 when we get the end-of-

year figures. I expect the Deputy will come into the House and welcome that further increase in public transport usage.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: It is clear that the Minister does not want to acknowledge the findings of the NTA's analysis, analysis he requested from the NTA. I have raised many cases many times, for example, the previous question about overcrowding, capacity issues on bus and rail services, how difficult it is for people who have to travel on these services day in, day out, and who rely on them, and the struggles they face just to get to work, school and so on. The Government is going to make it even more expensive for them. They are going to have to pay more for the privilege of having to rely on, in many cases, substandard services. That is not fair on commuters; that is the bottom line. This analysis from the NTA suggests that it will result in fewer people relying on public transport. That is not good enough from the Government.

On the issue of fares, I want to mention that rail passengers between Athenry and Galway pay €5.10 each way for a 20-minute train journey when a commuter travelling between Clonsilla and Connolly Station in Dublin, a journey of roughly 30 minutes, can travel for approximately €2.60 each way. Athenry to Galway is a commuter route. There is a clear discrepancy between fares in Galway and Dublin. Is the Government willing to look at that?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We can get into predictions. The Deputy got into predictions and NTA projections. That does not take into account the growing population and growing number of services. We are going to bring in 140 new services next year. If you do the basic, simple maths and look at the capacity on those new services, that will be a significant increase, dealing with the demand and issues on certain lines and routes that the Deputy, as well as Government and other Opposition colleagues, have raised. We are endeavouring to address that. Let us look forward positively instead of trying to score points all the time.

The Deputy, to be fair, raised specific issues in his constituency. The NTA sets fares. That is the legal position. It makes the fare determinations. I assume the Deputy has raised that directly with the NTA. If he has not, I certainly will raise it on his behalf and get it to see if there is an anomaly. I am sure that there is not but if he has not raised it already, we will take a note of that from this morning.

Road Safety

100. **Deputy Ciarán Ahern** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to ensure that the Galway ring road delivers improved safety for vulnerable road users; and his views on an ordinary citizen with no legal representation who felt it necessary to take a judicial review challenge in order to secure basic safety measures for cyclists in the area. [80538/26]

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The Government is committed to reducing road deaths and creating safer roads for everyone in our country. I pay tribute to the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, for his leadership on this issue.

The N6 Galway city ring road is a strategic national road project designated as critical infrastructure, the objective of which is to support the movement of people and active travel.

National strategic travel is also important in this regard. The project is also a key component of the Galway transport strategy and will play a pivotal role in facilitating the implementation of active travel and public transport measures in Galway city and the metropolitan area by removing through-traffic from existing city roads, allowing for the reallocation of road space for more sustainable forms of transport including safer walking and cycling for vulnerable road users. This is the first road project to have received designation as critical infrastructure. This means that the project will be supported by closer interdepartmental and interagency co-operation. It will allow for avoidable delays to be reduced while retaining all legal, planning and environmental requirements.

The proposed project comprises 12.5 km of motorway between the existing N6 at Coolagh in the north east of the city to the existing Ballymoneen Road in the north west and continues as a single carriageway road for a further 5 km of protected road west of Barna.

The new orbital route travels around the city and will include a new crossing of the River Corrib. Transport connectivity within Galway city will be essential to help the region to charter a steady course for economic growth. The additional bridge crossing of the Corrib will provide this accessibility to the west by reducing traffic volumes on the existing road network. The proposed project will improve journey times and allow for a safer, more reliable journey for people. It is anyone's entitlement to take a planning decision and I very much respect that. As a Government, we are committed to enhancing road safety for all road users.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I thank the Minister of State. I am referring to a judicial review against the proposed ring road taken by the Galway active travel advocate, Shane Foran. All Mr. Foran wants to do is make Galway safer for people who cycle and walk. Campaigners in Galway have been fighting for this for years and they have been getting nowhere. Mr. Foran withdrew his judicial review last week following high-level negotiations between himself and Galway City Council and Galway County Council, mediated by former TD Frank Fahey. An agreement was signed between the parties, overseen by five Government TDs, including three Ministers. All of this was just to get some commitments from the county council to do things it should already be doing. I cannot be the only one who thinks this is just a complete farce. It is quite unbelievable. I want to know how we got here. How will the Minister of State ensure his Government colleagues live up to the commitments they have made to Mr. Foran as part of his withdrawal of this judicial review?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The first thing is that the Government is committed to the development of the road. Second, we are looking to enhance public transport but also enhance safety not just on this road but on roads across the whole country. As the Deputy knows, a process has been engaged in. I do not think it would be appropriate for me as a Minister of State to comment on a judicial review which has already been settled and, as the Deputy said, withdrawn. The right to bring a judicial review is part of any statutory approval process. If anyone has a view, they should feel entitled to say that. As a public representative of 22 years, I fully recognise that. I deal with people on BusConnects and the proposed Luas for Cork. We have an issue in my own GAA club that is undergoing a process at the moment. We must have engagement. There must be constructive conversations with everybody. In this case, Galway City Council engaged constructively. The judicial review applicant was involved. The engagement of any public representative, from whatever party or hue, shows the importance of

the road. I think the Deputy shares my view that transport connectivity is critical. The views of people being heard is important and then you enter a process.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I welcome that the issue has been settled and the project will be able to proceed. The point I am getting to is that we have a climate Act that requires public bodies to consider climate objectives when exercising statutory functions. A design manual for urban roads and streets, which is mandatory, has been in place since 2013. There are design guidelines and standards that are mandatory for local authorities when designing roads. We have a national cycle policy framework in place since 2009. The problem here is that the local authorities are not complying with these mandatory guidelines. You then have lay litigants coming into court and trying to ensure the councils are doing what they should already be doing. Where is the supervision and intervention from the NTA, the Department of Transport or the Minister when councils plan, design, construct and engineer roads that clearly do not comply with national standards? That was at the heart of Mr. Foran's case. I hope this will not have to happen again. I would like to see more intervention and supervision from the Department when it comes to the design and enforcement of our standards.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I do not want to have a row with Deputy Ahern. From my position as a public representative like him, I see the councils engaging with climate commitments and active travel. To be fair, the independence of the planning system cannot be compromised by us. It arrives at its determinations independent of all of us. The point I have always made, and I hold to it very firmly, is that when a person has a view or opinion for or against a project, they can put in an objection or an observation. As a Government, we are committed to expanding our active travel and greenway infrastructure. We are also committed to the provision of sustainable transport options. That is what we are committed to. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, and I are anxious to see that expand. We have spoken on it in the past two questions. We have a very good system in this country where the right of an individual is heard. The end here is that there was engagement, and the judicial review was withdrawn on the basis of agreement and conversation. That is healthy.

Bus Services

101. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Transport if he will commission a review of the bus services in the Dún Laoghaire area, including but not limited to the 4, L25, E1 and E2 routes. [80527/26]

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I am asking for an urgent review of bus services in the greater Dún Laoghaire area, including the 4, L25, E1 and E2 routes but not limited to those routes, because of the ongoing problem of the ghost bus. The bus is coming, coming and coming and then it is just gone. It keeps happening. When you try to make complaints to Transport for Ireland, it tells you it is taking them seriously but it does nothing, closes them and there is no response. I have multiple complaints about these buses. I have some explanation of the reasons, which I will go through.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I thank the Deputy. The Dublin area bus network, including services operating in Dún Laoghaire, is being revised as part of the BusConnects Dublin

redesign programme. In 2025, phase 6A of the BusConnects redesign programme was implemented, with new routes being introduced across Dún Laoghaire, including the E1 and E2 routes that the Deputy mentioned, as well as revisions to route 4. The E1 and E2 routes, which operate at a high frequency and also operate overnight, are the busiest routes in the Dublin area network.

The National Transport Authority, NTA, has confirmed that in preparing for the introduction of the new B-spine services, the latest information on passenger demand will be taken into account prior to the implementation of these services. Aside from passenger usage data and trends, the NTA will also collate information pertaining to housing development and utilise this information further with regard to further network changes that might be required to support increased demand and improve access to public services. The NTA also monitors demand and service performance across the Dublin area network. We get complaints and it is important that they are acted on. That includes taking into account requirements for the provision of additional capacity on additional services. I am aware that the NTA carried out a further review of capacity requirements using autumn 2026 passenger numbers.

Under the budget I mentioned earlier, we are investing over €1 billion in public transport services. It is actually closer to €1.6 billion, but the PSO is over €1 billion. That will enable us to improve existing routes, capacity and frequency and to roll out about 140 new and improved services. The NTA has confirmed that future capacity enhancements will be prioritised on the basis of identified need, taking account of overall available funding. The NTA has confirmed it will continue to keep the performance of routes operating across Dún Laoghaire under review. I am interested to hear the experiences of the Deputy's constituents this morning.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Quite a lot of money is being spent, but what it is supposed to achieve is not happening. The NTA's contract with Capita for the TFI contact centre, which handles passenger complaints, is worth €42 million. When you complain to them, they tell you they will do something and they do absolutely nothing. That costs €42 million and it is not working. A further €68 million has been spent on a contract with Trapeze on tracking systems for buses in Dublin Bus which has not been implemented. It is not tracking the buses. It has been rolled out in Waterford but it is not happening in Dublin, even though the money has been spent. What is really happening? First, there are not enough bus drivers. That is why buses get cancelled. Second, the rosters that bus drivers are being asked to drive are completely punishing. A bus driver used to have one route and now, they have four routes. There are split shifts. There are route times that are completely unrealistic. There is a PressIt box system which says you are too early and you need to slow down. They will slow you down if you are too early but if you are late, they will take the bus off.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The Deputy needs to slow down a little bit. We will get to the points.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Time is running out. Our time system is working.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I know that. The Deputy mentioned the automated vehicle location, AVL, system, which has been rolled out. It is fully operational in Waterford and it

will be rolled out further. That will make a massive difference because it is a big frustration for people. They look at the app and think the bus is arriving in three or four minutes, but it does not or it just disappears. That is not acceptable. That is a priority for me. I get the Deputy and he makes a fair point on that.

The TFI complaints structure, whereby complaints are lodged and then trickle down or are passed down to the actual bus or train operators, is something we are looking at.

11 o'clock

There are issues in this. If a passenger lodges a complaint or a TD does so on their behalf or on behalf of constituents it needs to be responded to. I am telling Deputy Boyd Barrett straight that sometimes the lead time between a complaint being made and a response being given is not acceptable. This is something we have identified, and it has been raised here, and we are looking at it. AVL will make a massive difference for passengers. I will come back on additional services in the supplementary reply.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: In some cases the people making complaints are told their complaint is being escalated but that is the end of the story, or there is no response at all. A lot of money is being spent. This is outrageous and something has to be done. Bus drivers are being punished for an understaffed system with unrealistic route times. A bus is told to slow down because it is ahead of time but if it hits traffic further down the road it is taken off the road because we have a system of fines that punishes the operator if it is ahead of time. It is only interested in when the bus starts the route. This does not make any sense. There are also punishing rosters. There are split shifts for people who are on four buses, with bus drivers shifting around three or four different buses. The bus drivers are under pressure and, therefore, young people say they do not want to be a bus driver because the job is so punishing. This means operators are having difficulty holding on to people. We need to treat bus drivers properly, we need realistic route times, and we need to address many other issues.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We do need lots of things but we had 365 million public passenger journeys in 2025. We are seeing a further increase this year and there will be a further increase next year. We are investing to improve services and to provide additionality. AVL will make a big difference because it is real-time data. If passengers plan their journey and arrive at a bus stop when they expect the bus to arrive they could miss the bus if it arrives five minutes early. It has to be balanced. We also need cross-city routes. We need to utilise the stock better, which is being done, so that a bus does not run on one route and then a driver will be sitting in town waiting for an hour or an hour and a half to come back on the same route. This is about route planning and it is one of the things being done now by the NTA.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The route plans are not realistic.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I have met bus drivers and I have been in the depots. I was recently in Inchicore with Deputy Shane Moynihan, seeing what is being done in the control room and the real-time data coming out. This is being worked on. The points Deputy Boyd Barrett made about specific routes and services in Dún Laoghaire are being looked at. I will keep an eye on them and we will revert to Deputy Boyd Barrett.

Rail Network

102. **Deputy Shane Moynihan** asked the Minister for Transport for an update on the delivery of DART+ South West; the progress made on funding and procurement to date; and the anticipated timeline for commencement of construction. [80263/26]

Deputy Shane Moynihan: This question is to ask for an update on the delivery of DART+ South West, the progress made on funding and procurement to date and the anticipated timeline for the commencement of construction. As I have discussed with the Minister on many occasions, the area served by the Dublin-Kildare line, and what will be served by DART+ South West, has seen substantial residential development over the past few years. Congestion is an ever-present fact of life for many of my constituents. There is a real demand for increased public transport services. One of the pillars of this is DART+ South West. I would welcome the Minister's engagement on this project.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I thank Deputy Moynihan, who rightly says he has been advocating for this. It is a commitment we have made and we will deliver it. I want to put some context on it. If we look at budget 2027, there is agreement to invest another €6 billion in the delivery of MetroLink to 2030. The total public transport investment in the period is €18 billion. The progression of the DART+ programme, including DART+ South West, is a key part of this investment programme. I want to be really clear because I know there are some on the ground who are trying to stir up issues regarding DART+ South West. We are committed to it and we are going to do it.

DART+ South West will connect a number of major housing developments, including Clonburris and Adamstown, to a more frequent, higher-capacity public transport service, supporting decarbonisation and housing goals. National development plan funding has seen compulsory purchase orders proceed and commence along the DART+ South West and DART+ West corridors in February and September respectively this year. DART+ West will be the first major infrastructure element of the programme to enter heavy construction. As the Deputy knows, we started the enabling works last weekend and this is great to see.

What I expect on both projects, and it is really important that people understand this so I will say it on the floor of the House, is that they will go to the TII board. I expect the TII board to approve both projects together. They will then come to me. I expect to bring a memorandum to the Government in the coming weeks on DART+ South West and DART+ West. This will very clearly set out that we will be able to tender these projects together. One matter relates to the depot, which we know about, and the heavy civil works will all be tendered together. DART+ West and DART+ South West interlink so there are elements of staging and phasing. Anyone who thinks we are not committed to this project is incorrect. We are committed to it. I have met residents and constituents with Deputy Moynihan and I know the importance of the project. The Government is committed to both projects. Both will come to Cabinet in the coming weeks for formal approval and we can then move on to procurement.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: I thank the Minister for the very encouraging update. As he knows, colleagues and I have been pushing consistently to see delivery of this programme.

While we are waiting for the national development plan review we should not lose any time on procurement and moving forward to tendering. I welcome the Minister's announcement that all the packages for DART+ South West will go to tender at the same time as DART+ West. This means that as soon as funding is made available we will not lose any time.

Irish Rail appeared before the transport committee two weeks ago and I raised the same matter with it. It indicated to me that on this timetable it could see a contract possibly signed before the end of 2028, with services then in operation by 2034. This cannot come soon enough, and I have bent the Minister's ear about it enough over the past few months. For my constituents who rely on this, it is crucial. I welcome the announcement, which is a big step forward. I look forward to a further update from the Minister and I will come back to other things we can do in the short term in my next supplementary question.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I thank Deputy Moynihan. For the avoidance of any doubt on this, the contract frameworks for electrification, signalling and civil engineering works will be common across the programme. As Deputy Moynihan rightly said, this will help expedite the delivery of DART+ South West. This is exactly what we are going to do. There is phasing in the physical works and we have already started the DART+ West enabling works. It is a really exciting time for the delivery of major transport infrastructure projects throughout the country. These communities have fine homes, which we as a Government were involved in delivering, and it is now about providing additionality. In the coming weeks a memorandum to Government will clearly set out the contract frameworks I have outlined, including the civil engineering works, and these areas of work will be brought forward together.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: I look forward to getting an update on the memorandum to the Government. I look forward to continued progress on this and I and others will continue to engage with the Minister on advancing the project. In the interim there are significant pressures on commuters who use Clondalkin-Fonthill, Adamstown, Kishoge and Hazelhatch stations. I noted the Minister's earlier comments about the prioritisation of additional carriages for the Dublin-Kildare line. I ask for his support in getting as many of these as possible onto the line because of the substantial residential development we are seeing, particularly in my constituency.

After a lot of campaigning, I am pleased the NTA has made progress on designing new bus routes for Adamstown and Clonburris to help take some of the short-term pressure off. We had the consultation earlier this year. This is something I have been advocating since being elected. I hope to get the Minister's support for funding to get these routes up and running as soon as possible. We want to make public transport the go-to habit of choice and we have to put these services in place to respond to it. I acknowledge the huge investment the Government has made in public transport and I want to see us go further. I ask for the Minister's support for additional carriages on the Dublin-Kildare line and funding for the Adamstown-Clonburris routes designed by the NTA.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: On the DART+ fleet and the new carriages we are getting, which will assist right across the country, we have placed an order for 285 electric battery-charged carriages. The first order of 95 is now in testing. We have lodged the application with the European rail safety agency on the basis of the testing to approve these trains for the tracks.

They will run first on the northern Belfast-Dublin line, serving Donabate, Malahide and Portmarnock into the city and then further north to Drogheda. This will enable us to redeploy good carriages and good rolling stock to other areas. Heavy usage areas will be a priority. Earlier I mentioned Cork, the greater Dublin area, Kildare and Dublin. This is just the first 95 carriages and we have 285 in total. On the NTA service plan for the provision of additional bus services, the Ministers of State, Deputies Buttimer and Canney, and I will be going through that in detail.

I met with the NTA directly last Friday. That relates to the new services that will be rolled out. I expect that to be published in December. It takes on board the feedback Deputy Moynihan and other Deputies have given us.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Road Projects

103. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Transport for the provision of dedicated pavement works funding to address sections of a road (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the mater. [79898/26]

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: The N22 road from Coolcower to Ballincollig has continued to deteriorate, as have sections west of Baile Bhuirne near the county bounds. This is a key strategic route between Cork and Kerry that carries up to 35,000 commuters a day in and around the edge of the city. Funding is needed to do maintenance work on this road. Can TII allocate funding to Cork County Council to do the necessary surface work?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thank Deputy Moynihan for raising this issue. He is right. It is a hugely important road. I commend him on his advocacy and work in highlighting the issue. As he will know, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and the Department of Transport have responsibility for Exchequer funding for national roads. As part of the annual allocations process for national roads, TII prepares an annual booklet listing funding for each project for the year ahead. Approximately €139 million has been allocated to Cork County Council for national roads in 2026. This includes over €2 million for paving and safety upgrades on the N22 west of Ballincollig at Srelane, which will be completed in December. TII has been actively discussing locations of intervention on the N22 between Coolcower and Ballincollig with the county council's pavement team in the Cork national roads office. Deputy Moynihan is correct that the road is deteriorating. There is a pothole there that is nearly bigger than the county boundary itself. I pass it regularly. I have also been asking TII and Cork County Council about the matter. I am told that both TII and Cork County Council will continue to work to maximise the amount of pavement improvement works delivered next year, in 2027, on a priority basis within the funding available.

As all of us in this House, including Deputy Moynihan and I, will know, the Ballincollig bypass project has been a success. The additional 8 km section bypassing the Baile Bhuirne bends, which has been opened to traffic, has been a great addition. Notwithstanding that, the points Deputy Moynihan has made in the context of the road he referenced and the volume of

traffic on it are correct. Under the programme, depending on the grant category, funding is provided on either a *pro rata* basis between the county councils of Cork and Kerry or after case-by case determinations of the applications put forward. The road the Deputy has mentioned is a very important one. There has been an increase in the volume of traffic and a marked deterioration in the quality of the road surface.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: I acknowledge the works under way in Srelane and, more recently, just west of Macroom around Fountain House and the Danone facility. These works are a big help, but they are sections of a much longer road that needs attention. I draw particular attention to those pieces of road that are outside the protection of speed limits. On these faster parts of the road, motorists would be hitting the big potholes at greater speed, which is more dangerous. Cork County Council gets allocations from TII. There is certainly a need for the overall road to be rebuilt. Everybody acknowledges that this will not happen overnight. In the meantime, the surface has continued to deteriorate. Are there applications for funding from Cork County Council? Can TII funding be allocated to resurface the road between Macroom and the county bounds?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thought I was a representative for Cork North-West because I was meeting huge deputations of people from Srelane. Like the Deputy, I welcome the increase in funding. I thank the Deputy for the work he has done. The volume of traffic on this road, its usage and its priority have all increased exponentially. We will be going through the roads allocation for next year in the coming weeks. I cannot give the Deputy a definitive answer but I will support the prioritisation of this road. The Deputy is right when he says that the rebuilding of the road is not going to happen overnight, if it does happen. We have to be honest about this. There is a real need for it. If we were living in a Utopian world, we would have brought the Macroom bypass all the way into Ballincollig. That would have made sense. As with the Cork-Limerick road, it is about funding. I have spoken to Padraig Barrett, director of services, on this. To be fair, he is very progressive and proactive on the matter. I hope that we can all sit down and have a conversation on the allocations.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: People understand that the full N22 upgrade will take time but they cannot understand why they should have to wait years to get resurfacing and improvements to the existing road. It is one of the busiest roads in the region, carrying almost 35,000 in traffic each day. Sections are being done in Srelane and, more recently, east of Macroom. There is a crying need to have works carried out on those sections west of Srelane as far as Macroom where the limit is 100 km/h and on the section on top of the county bounds. TII funding needs to be allocated to Cork County Council to do that road resurfacing. Are there applications for funding for the N22 from Cork County Council? Can they be prioritised to ensure that road is put in much better shape for the thousands of commuters who travel along it each day?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I agree with the points the Deputy has made. Cork County Council and TII need to prioritise this section of road. We will be discussing the allocation of roads funding. I will certainly support what the Deputy has spoken about. The fixed speed camera on that road has been a huge help. It has helped to save lives and it has slowed traffic down. However, the Deputy is right that the volume of traffic has increased. If you go the reverse

route, out of Ballincollig under the bridge at what was the EMC facility, now Dell, you see the traffic backed up to Podsie O'Mahony's pub as you go out. The points the Deputy has made are valid. I will certainly work with him and other Members of the House on the provision of funding. I have spoken to Padraig Barrett on the matter. It is important because it is a strategic route. Given the investment in industry in the area around Macroom, it has to be looked at in a different context. I say that as a Cork person but also from an economic point of view. I again thank the Deputy for the work he has been doing. I know he has been a long-time champion of this cause and has raised it repeatedly. He is right. The people of the area require a solution and an improved road surface.

Transport Policy

104. **Deputy Tony McCormack** asked the Minister for Transport the measures being taken to ensure that transport infrastructure investment is aligned with the Government's housing delivery targets, particularly in growing regional towns. [80207/26]

Deputy Tony McCormack: What measures are being taken to ensure that transport infrastructure investment is aligned with the Government's housing delivery targets, particularly in growing regional towns?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I thank Deputy McCormack for this very important question. Transport infrastructure is a critical enabler of housing and sustainable development. For this reason, the Government is committed to ensuring that transport investment and housing development are planned together. Transport-orientated development, TOD, is an approach that focuses new housing, employment and mixed-use development around high-quality public transport corridors and interchange hubs. It ensures that homes, jobs, services and facilities are located within walking and cycling distance of public transport, making sustainable travel more accessible and reducing reliance on private cars. TOD is explicitly committed to in the national development plan through a set of linked policies that tie new housing, regeneration and economic development to high-capacity public transport corridors.

Investment in our rail network is already supporting housing delivery right across the country. Earlier this month, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage announced housing infrastructure investment funding to accelerate the development of new train stations in Blarney and Water Rock in County Cork and in west Maynooth in County Kildare. This will facilitate the delivery of more than 12,000 homes adjacent to these new public transport facilities. At Oranmore Station in County Galway, a new platform and passing loop will provide the proposed 1,000-unit residential development at the station with access to frequent public transport.

Procurement will also commence for MetroLink early next year. This is a transformative project for the Dublin region with the potential to support approximately 77,000 homes along its route and more than 120,000 homes in the greater Dublin area.

Finally, in fulfilling its statutory remit, the NTA works closely with the Department of housing across the country to ensure that transport strategies and plans are aligned with housing targets, population and planned development under the national planning framework.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I welcome the Government's ambition to significantly increase housing delivery. We are in the middle of a housing crisis, but we have to recognise that building homes requires more than just land, planning permission and finance. It also requires transport infrastructure to support those houses. My concern is that we can have different arms of the State working towards the same overall objective but operating to completely different timelines. A local authority may identify land for hundreds of homes but the necessary road improvements or public transport infrastructure could be years away. We need to ensure that infrastructure delivery is supporting housing rather than becoming another obstacle to it. Is there a co-ordinated national mechanism to identify transport infrastructure projects that are directly restricting housing delivery? Can those projects be prioritised for investment?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: There is, and the Deputy raises a very fair point. It was a criticism in previous years that development was undertaken in particular areas without the provision of public transport. We are completely interlinked, and the national planning framework in particular drives that. In practical terms, the Departments of Transport and housing are linked on housing delivery, and the local authorities are a critical part of that, as the Deputy rightly said, when they zone or rezone land. In the national planning framework, we have highlighted the importance of transport orientated development, TOD. I have seen good examples of that in the recent round of rezoning and identification of new lands for housing development in close proximity to either existing rail or bus services or proposed ones that will be delivered alongside. A great example of that was the new train station beside Shanganagh Castle that was opened and developed as part of the housing development. That is where we are going and what we are doing.

Deputy Tony McCormack: One of the issues I have consistently raised is the cost of delays in delivery infrastructure. The longer we take to deliver a project, the more expensive it becomes, and ultimately, the taxpayer pays that additional cost. We have an opportunity to be much more proactive in how we plan infrastructure alongside housing. Rather than waiting until a town reaches capacity and then beginning the lengthy process of addressing the problem, we should identify future requirements and progress projects in advance. This is particularly important in our growing regional towns where relatively modest infrastructure investment can sometimes unlock significant housing potential. Transport projects that can demonstrably unlock substantial development should receive accelerated assessment, funding decisions and delivery, rather than progressing through the normal timelines.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The Deputy is right. When it comes to the efficient delivery of infrastructure, times and delays are the greatest costs, so that is why we manage these on a project basis.

To get back to his original question, we had the TOD working group between the Departments of Transport and housing. That informed the revision of the national planning framework. Transport orientated development is in planning objectives 10, 97 and 99, combined, and that is what guides us. The NTA also aligns its transport strategy and investment priorities with national growth projections contained in the national planning framework and the regional, spatial and economic strategies.

My Department is the Department of heavy infrastructural delivery. We manage projects on a project-by-project basis, but with direct engagement with the ministerial team as well. Over the coming period, we are going to see a significant uplift in the provision of infrastructure and particularly public transport infrastructure. One in every €4 being invested in the NDP between now and 2030 is in transport. That shows how important it is.

Public Transport

105. **Deputy Edward Timmins** asked the Minister for Transport for an update on PSO program discussions in relation to the promised increase in the 132 Bus Éireann regional commuter service, which was scheduled for April 2025 and the commencement of the 199 local link service from Bray to Glendalough. [80314/26]

Deputy Edward Timmins: I am raising an issue related to two bus services that I have brought up several times in the Chamber. A year and a half ago, I was told that the 132 bus service would double in capacity in April 2025. I was also told that there would be a new bus service, the 199 Local Link, from Glendalough to Bray. Neither of those has happened. Will the Minister of State give me an update?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thank the Deputy for raising this very important matter. As the Minister of State with responsibility for rural transport, I recognise the frustration that the Deputy is experiencing in the need for these services. I recognise the vital role that these bus services will bring and that enhanced connectivity can play in supporting communities not just in Wicklow, but across rural Ireland, including the east and south east.

There has been considerable investment in services throughout the country under the connecting Ireland rural mobility plan that is improving how rural communities access public transport. I am pleased that passengers are responding to this continued investment, with TFI Local Link services recording a combined 6.97 million passenger journeys in 2025, which was a good year, and a 19% increase on 2024. Demand has continued to grow this year, building on the record passenger numbers in 2025 on TFI Local Link services, as well as across the public transport network as a whole.

In the counties of Wicklow, Carlow and Kilkenny, funding increased by 25% between 2024 and 2025, to over €4.6 million, boosting passenger numbers by 81%. A great example is the 183 route from Sallins to Arklow. This enhanced route offers connectivity to Avoca, Rathdrum, Rathnew, Wicklow, Roundwood and Laragh.

As we said earlier, under the Government's budget this year, we have seen an increase in the public service obligation, PSO. We are now investing €1.042 billion in public transport services. To be fair to the Deputy, his constituency colleague, the Tánaiste, has also been on to me about it, but we are working with the NTA on the plan for next year that will be announced in due course.

I am very conscious of the request the Deputy has made, and it is an issue that he has repeatedly raised in the context of the 2027 service plan. I will certainly work with him to ensure that we see an outcome that is of benefit to him and the communities he serves because he has repeatedly raised this, and there is a real need here.

Deputy Edward Timmins: I recognise the Minister of State's bona fides, but that answer is just a general answer. It does not address the two specific projects I am talking about. I met with the NTA on 1 April 2025 - I have it in my diary - and I was told four weeks later that the 132 service was going to double from four to eight buses. I was not even looking for it to double. Even if it went to six buses a day, it would be transformational. Nothing has happened since the meeting, and I still have no explanation as to why that is. Expanding the service is part of the programme for Government. It is the only public transport service to most of west Wicklow. I am from Baltinglass. It is the only way to get from Dublin from the likes of Baltinglass and that area of south-west Wicklow. It goes four times a day, and the last bus leaves at 3 p.m. When I was a student a long time ago, the last bus left at 6 p.m. The service is appalling, and we really have to do something about it.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I agree with the Deputy. As a Department, the Ministers, Deputies O'Brien, Canney and I are working on the new service roll-outs with the NTA. As the Deputy heard earlier, the Minister met with the NTA. I have been engaging with them, and we both have an ambition to see that enhanced connectivity piece with joined-up thinking on the routes the Deputy has referred to this morning as examples.

I share and recognise the Deputy's frustration. He may think it is a preordained script. It is not because I have gone off it. As the Minister of State with responsibility for rural transport, I am keen and anxious to invest, as are the Ministers, Deputies O'Brien and Canney, in rural transport in Wicklow, Kilkenny, Carlow and the south-east region that the Deputy speaks about, but particularly in Wicklow. To be fair to him, he has been using his oral questions to persistently raise these matters, and I am acutely aware of that.

Deputy Edward Timmins: On top of that, and to add insult to injury, I also ask that the current service be at least reliable. It is regularly cancelled. When there are only four buses a day, they must be 100% reliable. If the last bus is leaving Dublin at 5.30 p.m. and it does not show up, people have no way home.

Second, the proposed 199 bus service from Glendalough to Bray would serve Laragh, Annamoe, Roundwood, Kilmacanogue and Bray. I was told in autumn last year that the NTA was planning for commencement shortly. I was told in January that the procurement process was completed. I constantly raise this matter in the Dáil and with the NTA. This service must be delivered.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I concur with and share the Deputy's view. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and I are acutely aware of the need for the two buses he has mentioned. We had the debate yesterday during Private Members' time about bringing that certainty and reliability to the commuter that the bus will not disappear and that the passenger real-time information is correct. Deputy Boyd Barrett also discussed it earlier. It is unacceptable, and the Deputy is right. We have seen an exponential growth in passenger numbers but commuters and members of the public are right to have this expectation when they want to use public transport and it is our job to give it to them.

As part of our budget negotiations, we have seen an uplift in the PSO but I look forward to chatting to the Deputy further in 2027 and I hope he will not be here to raise this matter again.

Driver Test

106. **Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil** asked the Minister for Transport the measures in place to support the long-term provision of driving test services in north Kildare, including the possibility of a permanent driving test centre and permanently assigned testers in Leixlip. [80175/26]

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: What measures are in place to support the long-term provision of driving test services in north Kildare? The Leixlip driving test centre was established in September and has been massively successful, with over 1,800 tests being completed in the past two months alone. However, it has not been established on a permanent footing nor have the testers, who have been coming from Tallaght.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta as ucht na ceiste sin ar an ábhar tábhachtach seo. The Deputy will be aware the Road Safety Authority, RSA, has statutory responsibility for the operation of the national driver testing service, and in particular, the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, has been very focused on getting improvements to the waiting times, so I can assure the Deputy we watch and discuss this regularly.

In May 2025, the RSA was directed to produce and publish a service recovery plan to meet the ten-week average national waiting time target by September 2025, which was achieved. However, in some areas, waiting times have slipped. The average waiting time is about 12.3 weeks as of the end of last month. However, I am pleased to say it is about nine weeks in Naas and that is the most up to date information I have. I can assure the Deputy the RSA is working to reduce the waiting time at all test centres in line with the ten-week target. It should also be noted that at the end of June, the full sanctioned complement of 200 driver testers were employed by the RSA, which is a significant increase on the 151 testers available at the beginning of 2025 and doubles the permanent posts since June 2022. However, demand for driver testing services is increasing, with 13% more applications received from January to October this year when compared to the same period last year.

To increase capacity and meet demand, the RSA is continuing to increase the number of test centres, with new centres having been opened in Mitchelstown and Drogheda as of last May. As the Deputy rightly said, in September a new test centre opened at the Springfield Hotel in Leixlip. I have been informed that the RSA is working to secure a permanent site in Kildare. I am told five testers have been assigned to Leixlip and 11 testers assigned to Naas. This is reflective of a distribution model based on demand for driving tests and takes into account application volume, size and location of driving test centres and routes available. We are working on securing a permanent site in the area.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: I acknowledge the work the Minister and Minister of State, Deputy Canney, have done in reducing the waiting time for driving tests. It was a particular issue a year and two years ago but there have been significant efforts to reduce the waiting times and that needs to be acknowledged.

I welcome the new test centre that has opened in Leixlip, which is marvellous. However, the fact of the matter is the demand proves the need. As I said, there have been 1,800 driving

tests in the past two months, which is incredible. That is 900 per month in a new test centre that is just up and running. At the same time, 2,548 new applications were received in the same period. Waiting times in Leixlip have now gone up from 11 weeks to 12 weeks. I ask that those five testers assigned from Tallaght be assigned permanently to the Leixlip test centre. I appreciate the RSA is looking at a permanent location, possibly outside of the Springfield Hotel, but we need those testers assigned permanently.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I will certainly take back the Deputy's feedback. Looking at Leixlip, it is just short of a 13-week turnaround while Naas is at nine. The RSA is working on bringing that back and I have asked for it to specifically do so, also on foot of the Deputy's representation on this. This makes a real difference for people. Many are looking for driving tests to secure jobs. They could be carers caring for an adult, going to college or doing various different things. It is a very important step in a person's life to be able to get a driving licence and to get the test done, so it needs to be done efficiently. Trust me, we are watching this every month.

Regarding Leixlip, that was originally on a 12-month basis. I take the Deputy's point on the assigned testers, and we will need to have testers assigned in the Kildare area. I will discuss that with the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, and I know the Deputy makes a strong case for this. Securing a permanent site in Kildare would also be very important because this will bring permanence with an allocation of people and testers. I will keep the Deputy informed of progress, and I thank him for his support this and for his constituents.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: I thank the Minister for that. As I said, there has been considerable effort made by him and Minister of State, Deputy Canney, in getting the waiting times reduced. The interesting thing about the Leixlip test centre is that already, within two months, it is the sixth busiest test centre in the country.

When TDs such as myself are advocating for the likes of test centres, we come with evidence and the information required, and this is proof of that. I also acknowledge Aidan and Cliodhna Jordan from Leixlip who have done a serious amount of work in this area, particularly around their own driving school and road safety in the north Kildare area.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Fair play. I thank the Deputy for that. It is a case in point that the data and the matters raised here, supported by facts, allow us to respond to that and then deliver for the Deputy's constituents. The fact it is now the sixth busiest test centre in the country bears that out, which is something I spoke to earlier today. While we can have differences, and I do not mean the Deputy and I, we have a responsibility in this Chamber to bring forward issues, as Deputy Timmins has done in his constituency and the Deputy has in his, to try to respond to them effectively. We are messengers of the people, and these issues matter. I will keep the Deputy informed of progress on this, and I thank him for his support.

Question No. 107 taken with Written Answers.

Rail Network

108. **Deputy Edward Timmins** asked the Minister for Transport for an update on the planned introduction on the battery-operated train service from Dublin to Wicklow; and for confirmation that it is still on target for 2029. [80319/26]

Deputy Edward Timmins: I am again bringing up a subject I have brought up several times. There are three big items in Wicklow, and I have mentioned the two buses. The third has not happened yet but is promised, and I hope that promise materialises. A train leaves Wicklow town at 9 a.m. and there is no further train until 3 p.m. That is a six-hour gap with no train. The tiny capacity and unused track is truly shocking. Can we do everything to ensure the promised hourly battery train to Wicklow town for 2029 happens?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thank the Deputy for raising the matter.

Progressing the DART+ programme from planning into delivery is a priority for this Government, with significant funding set aside in the national development plan to 2030. To bring the benefits of the programme to more people more quickly, we will be deploying innovative battery-electric technology that will allow frequent, zero-emission services to operate beyond the electrified network in advance of overhead electrification works. These battery-electric trainsets are currently undergoing safety testing and certification, and it is expected that the first services will go live from the second quarter of next year by extending DART services to Drogheda. This will be the first tangible benefit of the DART+ programme experienced by rail passengers.

Looking beyond this, we also intend to extend battery-electric services south as far as Wicklow town from 2029. This will require the installation of charging infrastructure at Wicklow railway station. In August, Iarnród Éireann issued tender documents to engage a design and build contractor to deliver this charging infrastructure. Subject to relevant approvals, construction of this infrastructure is expected to commence next year. For the DART+ programme more generally, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, attended the sod turning for DART+ West enabling works last month, which represents an important milestone in the delivery of the programme. Iarnród Éireann commenced compulsory purchase order processes for DART+ South West in February and DART+ West in September. In the coming months, it will be issuing invitations to tender for a range of major contract frameworks for the delivery of signalling, electrical, civil engineering and other major works associated with the programme. I hope that gives the Deputy a bit of good news.

Deputy Edward Timmins: Only yesterday, I sent an email to Iarnród Éireann asking it to give exact timelines or a Gantt chart on milestones of how we are going to reach this.

I welcome the fact that the electrical infrastructure went for tender a couple of months back but we need to stick to the timelines.

The whole country knows of the Rosslare line and how bad it is. I met with the new CEO of Irish Rail on a couple of occasions. I have also met with senior infrastructure people on several occasions and I am constantly raising this. They understand the problem and the challenge. Wicklow trains have only four carriages and limited track length. In the morning, when the service gets to Wicklow town, it is already full so anyone who gets on must stand. There has been no improvement in 40 years. The train service really is the Cinderella of train

services in Ireland, yet Wicklow town, its surrounds and towns further south have all increased hugely in population in that time and continue to expand.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The Deputy has raised the issue and there is a real need to have those timelines met. It is important that there is accountability in regard to those milestones being achieved but also that there is transparency in the process that the Deputy and the travelling public deserve. As the Minister said a short time ago, he is a messenger of the people so he is representing the views of people. He is their voice.

To be fair, we are all cognisant of the Rosslare line and of the need to see further investment - not just on the Rosslare line, but the Deputy mentioned Wicklow in particular. It is a good news piece. I think there will be investment. I recognise that passenger growth has happened and that the population has increased. As a Department, we are ambitious and want to see significant enhancement of services that will allow for more people in a high-capacity transport sector to travel and use rail quicker and with reliability and certainty.

Deputy Edward Timmins: Can we please stick to that deadline? That is the whole point. The N11 is the only alternative way of travelling into the city from east and north Wicklow. Unlike other parts of the country, there is no road alternative because of the Wicklow Mountains. This also results in physical constraints on widening the N11. People do what they have to do. They get into their cars and this leads to dreadful traffic jams in the morning and evening. It is a double-whammy: a really limited and outdated train service and a one-road option.

I urge the Minister and Minister of State to do everything to ensure this battery-operated train happens as envisaged and promised. Please do not let it become a missed promise date, like the buses, which I spoke about earlier.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I am smiling because within the degree of confidence that I have, given that we have seen the planning permission tender documents being issued and we have engaged a design-and-build contractor to deliver the charging infrastructure, it is imperative that we do not have a missed opportunity here and that we deliver. I will give the Deputy a commitment that I will work with him to ensure we prioritise this. He is right that modal shift investment is critical. He is also correct that the N11 is the only thoroughfare for vehicular traffic. The point he makes is that people want delivery. This is a critically important one and on the three projects the Deputy mentioned, I am optimistic about the future. We are always thinking about tomorrow, as the song says. We need to invest here and I will work with the Deputy on that.

Road Tolls

109. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Transport if he has considered proceeding with the planned toll hikes in January 2027; the review that has been carried out on the impact of toll hikes on reducing congestion; and if consideration has been given on their impact on the cost of living. [80164/26]

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We had a good debate on this and, in fairness, Sinn Féin used its Private Members' time on it. I got an opportunity to explain the legal position. I do not set the tolls. I do not increase, decrease or stop them. It is not a matter for me but we know that the toll revenue across the motorway network, which has grown substantially since the early 2000s with all our major cities connected, is really important for the maintenance of those roads and to keep them safe. A mechanism for doing that is tolling. Nobody loves tolls. Toll increases of ten cent, while in monetary terms are relatively small, for continued use on the motorways are an expense for motorists and businesses but that money is invested in ensuring the roads are maintained and safe, and that the road surfaces themselves are up to standard. We have seen significant inflation in the past two or three years as well around materials for roads and for services that are provided.

There are very clear criteria set as to what the permitted toll increases are. They cannot go above the consumer price index, CPI, and they have not. The Dublin Port tunnel is critical infrastructure, particularly for heavy goods vehicles, HGVs, and goods coming in and from the island. It is very important that the Dublin Port tunnel be protected for the HGV route, too.

I am conscious there is a cost to people. No one likes increasing costs but the legal position - I want to be very clear on this - is that I cannot step in and tell Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, that it cannot apply these increases. We are contracted to it.

On the piece of work we are doing, I will come back in on a supplementary reply.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: These increases have a significant impact on drivers who rely on the motorway network. They do not reduce congestion or change the behaviour of people who rely on these roads to get to work, school and so on. However, they are very good news for the private tolling companies and there is an issue regarding how these contracts that were signed, which are very lucrative for these companies and gave a very bad deal to the taxpayer. They are punishing drivers who are already dealing with significant increases to the cost of fuel and so on. We also have the increase in the cost of public transport fares. It seems that the Government is determined to hit everyone every which way. No matter who you are or which way you travel, you are going to be paying more money for your commute come 1 January.

Before the last general election campaign - and this is what the Minister did not address during the Private Members' business the other evening - he said that these toll increases should be scrapped. In the Dáil last year, he said the toll increases were far too high, but he has allowed them to go ahead anyway. The reality is that as his predecessor did back in 2023, he can stop these increases from proceeding, and that is what he should do.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: When tolls were paused before at a different time, they had to be paid for by the Exchequer out of central funds. We do not just pull money out of a tree, which I know is the basis of Sinn Féin economic policy.

The reality as well in the context of public transport usage is that over a quarter of our population can use public transport for free, and I have expanded that to all children up to and including the age of eight. We have expanded, with the Minister, Deputy Calleary, the companion pass for those people who have special needs or disabilities, and for our seniors.

We are one of very few countries that does that. It important to state that nearly 1.5 million people have the ability to travel for free.

I am very conscious about the price of fares in particular. We have done fare comparisons across sister cities in the EU and Britain. Even with the fare adjustment brought forward by the NTA, our fares compare very favourably and are cheaper than most.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: The reality is the Minister can stop the hikes, as he admitted. In regard to the cost-of-living crisis, they are making people's lives more difficult. It is the wrong call. People from Galway travelling to Dublin have to pass through two tolls, or three if they are going to Dublin Airport. All of those costs really add up.

On the subject of roads and congestion, we have a real problem in Athenry. The next section of the Athenry ring road, which I have raised with the Minister previously, will be really important in tackling that congestion. I met with the Minister's officials a few months ago on this. I was concerned with the feedback I got from them on the potential cost of the road. It seemed that the Department did not really have a willingness to proceed with this project. The project has been stalled for some time, which is concerning for people in Athenry. We need this road project. It is critical infrastructure for enabling housing delivery and taking congestion and traffic out of the town but what is being talked about now is a reduced or shortened road project. Can the Minister look into this and ensure this full road project proceeds?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We have had a good discussion. I know the Deputy is clear that we are investing, through the public service obligation, PSO, and the fares, in new routes. Additional capacity, which he has understandably called for in public transport services in his own area, gives us the ability to do that across the country.

It is not to plug a gap or to come into central coffers. It will go directly into new and improved routes and services. It will be for the provision of those services.

The Deputy raised the next phase of the ring road in Athenry. Deputy Albert Dolan and others have raised it too. Over the coming weeks, we will be looking at road allocations for next year across our regional, rural and national network. I have already asked officials for a report on a number of projects. They will be taken in the round. I thank the Deputy for raising it in the Chamber this morning.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is Deputy O'Hara taking Question No. 110?

Deputy Louis O'Hara: No. I am taking Question No. 112, which is in my name.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: That is the question regarding the NTA. That is not Question No. 110.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: No. It is Question No. 112.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: It is the one about County Galway.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Deputy Ó Murchú is arriving into the Chamber.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Déan deifir, a Ruairí.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy can take his time. We will hold on for him.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I am not as fit as I thought I was.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: God, the Deputy is correct; he is not.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I did run this morning, however.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Fair play.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Ó Murchú to take Question No. 110.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Leas-Cheann Comhairle.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The train was late from Dundalk.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: The bus was on time. It was how long it took me to run from the bus was the problem.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The Deputy should get help from his friend behind him. Deputy Donnelly is a great runner.

A Deputy: Without interruption.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Yes. It is disgraceful, really.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I am giving the Deputy a chance to recover.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: In fairness, it will take me about 40 seconds to read my question.

Disability Services

110. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Transport if public transport passengers are required to vacate wheelchair spaces when needed; the full fares charged to free travel pass holders on 4 July on Irish Rail services; who authorised Expressway and Irish Rail reservation fees; their EU legal basis and revenue recipients; if he will outline Irish Rail's free seat allocation and €10 return reservation charges; and the proportion of Bus Éireann commuter buses that are low-floor wheelchair accessible. [79330/26]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Are public transport passengers required to vacate wheelchair spaces when needed? Will the Minister outline the full fares charged to free travel pass holders on 4 July on Irish Rail services? Barry Kenny, corporate communications manager for Iarnród Éireann, came back to me in that regard. Who authorised Expressway and Iarnród Éireann reservation fees, what is their EU legal basis and how much are their revenue recipients? Will he also outline Iarnród Éireann's free seat allocation and €10 return reservation charges, as well as the proportion of Bus Éireann commuter buses that are low-floor, wheelchair accessible? It is all about accessibility. I am fairly sure the Minister will have a spectacular answer for me. I am looking forward to it.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Tóg go bog é. Tóg suíochán and get your breath.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Go raibh maith agat.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I thank the Deputy for the important question. Iarnród Éireann has confirmed that wheelchair users have priority over designated wheelchair and mobility scooter spaces on Iarnród Eireann's services. Other passengers are required to vacate or leave these spaces free when they are needed. On inter-city services, on-board customer service officers can assist customers if an issue on board arises. They will ensure the seats are kept for the intended customer.

Both Bus Éireann and Iarnród Éireann have confirmed that their policy with regard to public passengers vacating wheelchair spaces when needed is in line with the approach taken by the National Transport Authority, NTA, in that wheelchair users take priority in these areas. They ask other passengers to respect that approach.

Bus Éireann has confirmed that, at the end of October 2026, over three quarters - 75.2% - of its non-urban vehicles were low-floor, wheelchair accessible vehicles. Access for those with disabilities is a matter I raise regularly with all operators. I am fully committed to improving accessibility across our public transport system, in line with the National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030. My Department leads pillar 5 of that strategy, which concerns transport and mobility.

The DART+ fleet will begin entering passenger service in the second quarter of 2027, including on the train line the Deputy and I share. It represents a major step forward in user accessibility. The new fleet features an automatic retractable step at each doorway, which minimises the gap with a standard-height platform, thereby facilitating level access between the platform and trains without the need for assistance. To complement the fleet, Iarnród Eireann is also progressing the DART platform accessibility project, which aims to reduce ramp usage across the DART network by reviewing platform heights and layouts and making investments to reduce the step between trains and platforms. I will come back in my supplementary reply.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It is about ensuring that Iarnród Éireann, Bus Éireann, Dublin Bus and beyond have the necessary stock capable of being properly accessible. I have heard fears regarding some stock that Bus Éireann has purchased recently. We must ensure stock is accessible and has wheelchair spaces. We have all been approached by people in our

constituencies from time to time with stories of how a bus, which should and may have been accessible, landed at a particular space but the ramp did not work and the person could not be facilitated. That happens far too often. We must ensure we deal with those anomalies. They should not exist.

There is also the question around the cost of pre-order tickets for those with disabilities. There have been dates when it has been more difficult for those with disabilities to pre-order. Some of those instances happened around the time of the all-Ireland final and semi-finals.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: There are a few other things I wish to cover. Accessibility is critical. Two years ago, in advance of the general election, I met a constituent from Donabate who, at that stage, had to ring the day before she planned to travel to inform the stationmaster that she intended to take a journey into town so that there would be a ramp or someone available to facilitate her. That does not happen anymore. Iarnród Éireann has worked hard right across the country in this regard.

On the northern line, from Connolly Station to Drogheda, works will be completed on the platform for full accessibility in advance of the new fleet entering service, which is scheduled for quarter 2 2027. They are fully accessible trains. I have been on them. They are much wider and better laid out. They are much more accessible internally as well.

On the booking fee, Iarnród Éireann has informed me that 73% of seat-only reservations were booked for free, while the remaining 27% were charged €2.50. These figures relate to customers who are possession of a valid ticket, including weekly, monthly and taxsaver tickets. There is-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Minister.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I have one line remaining. There is no requirement for free travel scheme holders to book train journeys online in order to use their pass.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It is about dealing with that cost they face, which should not be the case. We need to find the means of taking that cost out of the equation altogether. We all realise that those with disabilities have greater costs than any of us in this Chamber can even imagine.

When it comes to new purchases of buses, we must ensure they are wheelchair accessible and that there are sufficient spaces on them. It is not only about being able to get on a bus; it is about making sure the space exists internally as well.

Beyond that, a particular issue has been brought to my attention within the last period, which particularly concerns Iarnród Éireann. We must ensure supports are in place for people with mobility issues, who might not necessarily have a wheelchair. I refer to older people with walkers and such. We must put the necessary supports in place for them. Again, we do not want a situation where everyone has to pre-order supports.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: There is no requirement-----

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I know.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I know the Deputy knows that. He is not saying otherwise. We have made serious improvements with regard to accessibility on public transport services but more needs to be done. I assure the Deputy that any bus that is purchased has to meet certain design requirements. The Deputy asked specifically about Bus Éireann. No new Bus Éireann buses are being bought that are not fully accessible. I assure the Deputy of that. If he has specific examples, he should let me know.

In the context of accessibility for those with disabilities, I attend and chair the public transport user forum. All different cohorts of passengers and stakeholders are involved, as well as advocates and those with lived experience of using public transport with special or physical needs or, indeed, other special needs. They are to the forefront of our minds. That is why we are leading on pillar 5 of the national human rights strategy for disabled people. Good improvements are being made. All new rolling stock will be fully accessible. That will make a difference on the northern line. Any new buses purchased have to be fully accessible as well.

I thank Deputy Ó Murchú for raising the question. I have been clear on the issue of the booking fee. There is no requirement for anyone with a free travel pass to pay to book a ticket.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Does Deputy O'Hara wish to put Question No. 112 to the Minister? We are waiting for the Minister, Deputy Burke, to take Leaders' Questions.

Question No. 111 taken with Written Answers.

Public Transport

112. **Deputy Louis O'Hara** asked the Minister for Transport the timeframe for the NTA to publish its plans for public transport service improvements in 2027; if he has engaged with the NTA in relation to these plans; and if there will be improvements to public transport services in County Galway where capacity issues have been identified. [79511/26]

Deputy Louis O'Hara: I raised Athenry and Loughrea services earlier as part of the new NTA plan. I was going to raise the services in south Galway. The 350 and 351 bus services serve Kinvara and other areas. The Bus Éireann 51 Expressway route serves Gort.

12 o'clock

We have a real issue with capacity on all these routes. People are being left on the roadside, there is a lack of late options and so on. In the context of the new plan that is coming forward, I ask the Minister of State to look at all of these areas and make sure that they are prioritised for additional capacity. These are large and growing areas that urgently need it.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I would be happy to engage further with Deputy O'Hara. Given the time available here, the response would be too long and we would go over time. I will say that, as part of the service plan discussions, I will raise the points he has made. Regarding this issue in particular, I ask that the Deputy email me because I could hardly hear him. I will

engage with the NTA on the routes. As we have said in response to previous questions, we are engaging in the service plan delivery as part of the 2027 plan.

The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, has met the NTA and I have also engaged with it. We will meet it again to discuss further the programme of service enhancements. On Galway specifically, the Deputy will know that the BusConnects Galway programme is critical for the advancement of a number of projects, including the ones he mentioned. It is also important to say that the redesigned network is intended to make public transport more useful to people across Galway city and county. I will come back to Deputy O'Hara further on the matter because it is important that we get the service plan correct. If the Deputy has any information, I will be happy to share that with the NTA.

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

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Gan dabht tá daoine ag streachailt le billí nach féidir leo a íoc agus tancanna ola nach féidir leo a líonadh. Tá airgead don siopadóireacht atá caite sula dtagann an deireadh seachtaine. Tá daoine amuigh ansin atá ag baint an chraicinn de dhaoine ar gach taobh. Tá na praghsanna ag dul suas agus suas. Ar mhaithe le Dia, an stopfaidh an Rialtas an tseafóid agus an laghdóidh sé faoi dheireadh an costas ar ola téite baile? An gcuirfidh sé fíor-chuidiú ar fáil do dhaoine atá a gcuid billí fuinnimh ag dul suas agus an gcuideoidh sé leo ó thaobh a gcuid siopadóireachta?

The Government will roll out the red carpet today for European leaders, staging a glossy showcase of Ireland as a modern, progressive and prosperous nation, but the people it governs are not living in that showcase. They are living with bills they cannot pay, oil tanks they cannot afford to fill and grocery money that runs out before the end of the week. People are being fleeced at every turn. Diesel, heating oil and electricity cost more, rents and mortgages are punishing people, and the Government has just signed off on another round of increases for January. Tolls, public transport, diesel and petrol are all going to go up – another bill for just going to work. The cost of home heating oil has nearly doubled in a year. In a real home, that means parents staring at an emptying tank. It means knowing that the refill may cost more than the family has, turning down the heat, putting another jumper on a child and hoping that the cold will pass. It means deciding on whether to spend scarce money on heat or whether to save it for food.

That is what the Government is leaving people to face. The energy regulator's figures expose all of this and the scale of the failure. Record numbers of households are behind on their bills. August was the worst August on record. More customers were left in arrears than ever before over three months. One in four homes across the State cannot pay its gas bill. These are not just figures - they are real people. These are unpaid bills on kitchen tables, people avoiding answering the phone, and families wondering what they will go without next.

The Minister will point to the budget but after months of warning by us in Sinn Féin, the Government's answer still falls nowhere near the scale of the crisis. It refuses to deliver the

€400 energy credit that Sinn Féin has proposed and that families need, it refuses to deliver the €500 everyday essentials card to help people with their shopping, and it continues to let energy companies rip off their customers while they rake in massive profits instead of forcing them to pay their fair share. That is the choice at the heart of all of this. Families are told by the Government to cut back, go without and manage. Energy companies, on the other hand, are protected - no windfall tax for them - and the Government carries on with the pageantry.

The job of any government is to make the life of its citizens easier and make life easier for its people. However, this Government is making it harder while dressing up the country for visiting leaders and pretending all is well. For goodness sake, will it get real? Stop the performance and finally act in the interests of ordinary Irish people. Will the Government do what Sinn Féin has been calling on it repeatedly to do, namely, remove the carbon tax on home heating oil, put energy credits into people's pockets, help people with the cost of their groceries, and stop the energy companies ripping their customers off and make them pay their fair share through a windfall tax? Will the Government finally act in the interests of the Irish people?

Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Peter Burke): I thank Deputy Doherty for his question. What he set out there is basically the Sinn Féin policy of promising everything. The budget it has put forward says: everyone gets a €500 shopping card; everyone gets €400 in electricity credits; and abolish student fees, local property tax, LPT, and carbon tax on home heating oil.

Deputies: Yes.

Deputy Peter Burke: Who pays and what are the consequences? Consider that Sinn Féin's answer to tackle the increased price of groceries is to give everyone a €500 card or shopping voucher. The critical point is that, in doing that, it has not tackled high prices. It has just paid the bill. Sinn Féin has not done what the Government has done, which is to look at supply chains and try to reduce the cost of groceries on the shelves.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: How is that working out for the Government?

Deputy Peter Burke: We are trying to support people who are most vulnerable through targeted measures like we have in the context of budget 2027. We have done that with targeted measures to protect the most vulnerable. We have increased the fuel allowance, which is important for many vulnerable citizens. Almost 470,000 households across the country receive the fuel allowance. Some 40% of people in Ireland either have a medical or GP card, supporting families with the increased cost of living.

We come from a perspective that is very honest and clear. The Government cannot eliminate the whole cost of living. To suggest otherwise is dishonest. What we can do is absorb the shock and that is what the Government is trying to do. It is trying to tackle the structural costs that drive inflation but also to absorb the shock for families. That is why we have focused in the budget on giving people more of their hard-earned money back into their pockets. We can see that in terms of the 1.1 million people who pay the 40% tax rate to whom we have given a significant tax reduction. We have protected the most vulnerable workers by increasing the minimum wage by 5.6% for the 200,000 workers in that cohort. Look at the public service.

We have worked hard with our unions to give a very significant increase for those in our public service. We have grown our public service. There are 70,000 more people working in it since 2020 and now we have come forward with a 10.75% increase over the next 33 months. More importantly we have come forward with an 18.3% increase over that horizon for lower paid workers in that cohort. That is protecting the most vulnerable. It is using the resources to best protect the most vulnerable in our economy, be they those with disabilities, where we are coming forward with a €500 disability payment, or pensioners with targeted payments for home heating oil and reducing excise. We are being quite honest here. If you eliminate all carbon tax on home heating oil, it will not move the dial because the commodity price has increased so much over the last year by about 60%. You will not wipe out the increased cost of a fill of home heating oil by taking away the carbon tax, but what you will do is leave the economy unable to change the dial, to retrofit the 10% of homes that have been done now, to fully fund our warmer homes initiative whereby some 40,000 homes in our State have had fully funded retrofits, to bring forward a scrappage scheme for boilers and retrofitting, and to ensure that people can reduce the cost of heating their home. That is how you change the dial from an economic perspective, not by just throwing money at it or not answering the questions of what the consequences are and who pays in the economy.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I will go down to the finance committee after this and I will show the Minister exactly who should be paying. The Minister and his party, along with Fianna Fáil and the Independents, will vote against the amendments we have tabled. The Government should stop the banks getting away with paying only 1% when they are raking in €5 billion in profit.

It should stop handing developers hundreds of millions of euro of hard-earned taxpayers' money to build apartments that are already being built. It should make sure that energy companies that are ripping off their customers, charging unprecedented prices for electricity and gas, pay their fair share through a windfall tax. It should stop the landlords and vulture funds paying no tax whatsoever on the astronomical rent they charge young Irish citizens across this island. It is simply wrong what the Government is allowing to happen.

What can the Government do? It can do exactly what I have said. It can help decent, ordinary Irish families who are struggling at this point. One in four people – these are not my figures – cannot pay their gas bill. Hundreds of thousands of people cannot pay their electricity bills. Groceries and all the bills keep on going up. Seven months ago, the Minister told RTÉ that the Government was going to bring down the cost of shopping. It has gone up since. We need serious action from the Government. Therefore, it should get rid of carbon tax on home heating oil to help people heat their homes. It should make sure that it delivers the energy credit that is needed for families so that they can pay their bills. It should deliver the €500 shopping voucher to 1 million low-income households across the State and stop allowing the energy companies to rip off their customers. It should make them pay their fair share, introduce the windfall tax and take a side that is not always that of the vested interests. The Government should stand up for ordinary, decent people.

Deputy Peter Burke: It would be very clear to anyone listening to the Deputy's contribution that it is economically illiterate. It is not in the real world. I have demonstrated how we as a

Government are protecting the most vulnerable in targeted ways while also recognising that many middle-income earners are finding it difficult.

Critically, the Deputy's answer is a shopping list. It is a cheque for every household and a cheque and promise for every constituency but with no clear way of establishing who pays and what the consequences are.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Government does not listen.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Maybe the Deputy should listen to the reply.

Deputy Peter Burke: Time and again, we see the magic money tree in the Sinn Féin budget. What would Sinn Féin do? It would tax more. It has an expenditure list worth €13.4 billion in its budget. When the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council said we are spending too much anyway, Sinn Féin wants to put 55% more expenditure right on top of the State. It wants to promise more, like it always does – promises, promises, promises. It does not answer the questions on what the consequences are for Ireland and who ultimately pays the bills.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I told the Minister.

Deputy Peter Burke: The Deputy's answer to increased prices is to put the bill back on the State. That does not tackle the problem.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I just told the Minister the answer.

Deputy Peter Burke: It will not leave families right across this country in a position to tackle their energy costs. We need to be able to change the dial, put in the capital expenditure, retrofit homes and ensure that, at every turn, we protect the most vulnerable and are honest with the people in doing that, which the Deputy has no clue about.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: A ten-minute walk from here, in my constituency, there is a homeless shelter. I met a man there recently who was in his early 20s. He suffered abuse as a child, was placed in foster care and is now on the streets in Dublin city. He struggled with addiction brought on by the trauma of his past. He met his partner while homeless, a lovely young woman whom I also met, finding love in a hopeless place. He is quite understandably reliant on social welfare and the State to survive. My first question for the Minister is a simple one. Is the way of life of the man I met, who survived severe trauma and yet, despite all the odds, found love and support, worthy of the Minister's contempt and his party leader's contempt or our society's compassion?

I have to say that I found the comments from the Minister's party leader last weekend utterly deplorable. He chose to put a spotlight on a tiny number of people who are classed as long-term unemployed, just 1.3% of our labour force, using them as a public punching bag. Behind any numbers, though, there are real people. Many are lone parents who, under the Government's policies, will lose their benefits if they take up even a part-time job of 12 hours a week. These policies drive child poverty, which has soared under the Government, something

the party leader also failed to mention in his speech at the Ard-Fheis. There are now 260,000 children living in poverty, according to the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI. Of course, let us not forget the crown jewel of Fine Gael's legacy to the Irish people over the last 15 years, the gargantuan figure of nearly 18,000 people homeless, 12,000 of them adults, the highest ever on record. That has been on Fine Gael's watch.

None of these points was mentioned by the Minister's party leader in his speech. It was just a lazy attack from a political leader who was out of ideas. The truth is that Fine Gael cares more about distracting the public from its litany of failure than tackling the poverty in our society. It lacks the vision to provide solutions and it lacks the leadership required to face the problems.

Does the Minister agree with his party leader's comments demonising a small group of vulnerable people, and does Fine Gael now stand for turning vulnerable people into a punching bag?

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Colm Brophy): From the man who boasted about making people redundant? Does the Deputy not think that he is hypocritical? He boasted about making people redundant, yet he comes in here and delivers that speech.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Just one second.

Deputy Colm Brophy: That is crazy.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please.

Deputy Colm Brophy: I apologise to the Chair.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Too late. The Minister of State should not be doing it in the first place. He should be setting a good example.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: He should show the rest of them.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Do not start that now. I call the Minister.

Deputy Peter Burke: Deputy Hayes was very selectively quoting what the Tánaiste said last week. The Tánaiste was very clear in his speech, in that when life takes an unexpected path for people, they deserve support, that "social welfare must always be there for people when they need support", and that this is "the mark of any decent society". One thing that Fine Gael will not do is what the Deputy is doing, and that is turn its back on those who are long-term unemployed and leave them on the margins of society. We have to ask ourselves a question: should social welfare be a safety net or an employment policy? Our view is that it never should be an employment policy. It should be a safety net. We should work with people to ensure that those who are long-term unemployed are getting every assistance from the State so that they can get into employment. We should not leave them on the margins of society or be afraid to

tackle this issue. We should also ensure they can avail of training, personal development and the opportunity that we now have in this economy, having had 18 consecutive quarters of unemployment below 5%. We have a huge opportunity in every corner of our economy right now. Everyone should be entitled to grasp that opportunity for themselves and their families. We are clear that a job is about confidence. A job is about independence and it brings purpose to people's lives. That is why we want to ensure that we support people to get a job, which is so important for their personal development.

It does a great disservice to anyone in long-term unemployment to take the view that nothing more can be done, that society cannot do any more and that Governments will not look at the issue. We will absolutely look at it, and we will look at it to ensure that we get people back into the workforce. It is important to do that and it is an obligation of any government to do so. Our policy is very different from the Deputy's. We are rewarding work. We recognise that a strong economy is needed to drive our public services and protect the most vulnerable. We are clear that there can be many reasons and many complications in life. One thing I always say is that, in my political view, people always deserve a second chance. We as a State want to work with people to give them that second chance.

We will absolutely talk about the long-term unemployed. We will absolutely look forensically at the 52,000 people who are long-term unemployed and we will work with every service in the State to get them into employment. We will not ignore them or leave them on the margins of society. We will work to bring them into employment and do what every responsible society does, which is to ensure that everyone who can work, who is available for work, makes their contribution. That is key in any functioning society.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: The Minister is right that there are differences in our policies. We would not stand over the homeless figures that he stands over. We would not stand over the figures for children in poverty that he stands over. We would have different policies in social protection that would help lone parents, tackle addiction and get people off the streets.

The Minister does not really get it.

Deputy Martin Heydon: But the Deputy does.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: How could Fine Gael possibly hope to lead the country if it is willing to disparage thousands of its citizens? The Minister for Finance, Simon Harris, said last weekend that penalising the long-term unemployed was "what taxpayers across this country expect us to do". What taxpayers really expect is a Government that actually tackles problems instead of one made up of epic wasters who cannot deliver basic services.

Can the Minister tell me how much the cost of the national children's hospital has increased since its inception? It has increased by over €1 billion. As an accountant, can the Minister tell me then whether it is the long-term unemployed who are the problem in this country or whether it is a man - his party leader - who has spent his entire adult life in the political system failing upwards?

Will the Minister stand by this version of Fine Gael that demonises the most vulnerable in our society?

Deputy Peter Burke: Deputy Hayes's disingenuous approach knows no bounds. If he is putting himself up as a prospective Government Minister, will he answer one question? When will Deputy Hayes go out to meet the media? He is a democratically elected politician in this House and he will not even stand on the plinth to be held accountable by the media in this country.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: This is not about me.

Deputy Peter Burke: Deputy Hayes will not do that. He is walking away. I am happy to stand on my record and on Fine Gael's record of driving up employment in our country.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: It is a terrible record. The Minister should not be happy.

Deputy Peter Burke: We will never ever let people languish in the margins of society without giving them help and getting them into employment.

Deputy Daniel Ennis: Unless they are homeless.

Deputy Peter Burke: People who are able to work and available to work should be getting every assistance from the State to get them into employment-----

Deputy Eoin Hayes: That is not what the Government is going to do.

Deputy Peter Burke: -----to give them the opportunity of confidence, independence and purpose. That is what my party stands for. Deputy Hayes is just trying to take advantage of one line out of context in a speech where I pointed out that social welfare should always be a safety net. It is never an employment policy. That is the difference between Deputy Hayes and me. I have the courage of my convictions to stand out on that plinth and argue my case, and Deputy Hayes does not. He walks off the pitch and hides.

Deputy Martin Heydon: His colleagues will not stand beside him. You will not get caught on that one again, Gary.

Deputy Colm Brophy: Does Deputy Hayes want to apologise for his own posts?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please. Do not make it personal, Minister of State. You breeze in here and make those personal-----

Deputy Colm Brophy: Sorry, if it is-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: No, sorry. Do not disrupt Leaders' Questions, and do not do it in the way that you are doing it.

Deputy Ged Nash: At the Fine Gael Ard-Fheis this weekend, there was a deliberate focus on unemployed workers. I cannot let the week pass without condemning on the record of the Dáil the Tánaiste's premeditated attack on those who are reliant on our social safety net. Dumping on the tiny number of long-term unemployed is the worst kind of divisive dog-whistling designed to distract from the Government's failures. We have seen similar tactics deployed from Fine Gael and indeed Fianna Fáil against migrants and civil society bodies. It is never an accident. It is always about punching down on the most vulnerable. If we are serious as a country about supporting people with complex lives to work, we also need to be serious about tackling low pay, and the Government evidently is not. The coalition has abandoned its promises on a living wage and its promises on statutory sick pay. Every single workers' rights initiative brought to this Chamber and to the Seanad by the Labour Party, like our Seanad Bill to protect workers from extreme weather yesterday, has been voted down by the Government. The Minister decided to put the needs of SMEs above those of workers. Good government can accommodate both.

We have had an economically mad VAT cut for profitable hospitality companies. We have new regulations to allow teenagers work until 11 p.m. in food businesses, but the Government denies them the dignity of a full minimum wage. A new test is on the horizon. Yesterday, the Dáil was told that the Government has not yet received any notification of collective redundancies at Dealz. Those employed in the 70 Dealz shops across Ireland will be particularly worried in the run-up to Christmas. I do not need to remind the Minister who Gordon Brothers, the owner of Dealz, is. On 12 June 2015, its actions saw almost 500 staff of Clery's dumped onto O'Connell Street with nothing but the dole. In the dead of night, they liquidated the company that ran the iconic department store, while simultaneously flipping the finest building on our national main street to a company called Natrium, which told the workers it was not their employer. Nobody, as far as they were all concerned, was responsible. This cynical property play sickened even business leaders who called this behaviour out.

Gordon Brothers has form. It is the worst kind of asset stripper imaginable. It is back in the news again because Poundland in the UK and Dealz here in Ireland are under threat. The Clery's debacle shows what this gang is capable of and why we should be wary. I worked long and hard, as the Minister knows, to introduce a Clery's law to ensure that workers who were caught up in insolvencies would have a right to be heard and to be consulted on their redundancies. That is now law. The Minister's first job is to work to ensure that the company has a future here and the 3,500 jobs are protected. We have all been aware of the possible threat to jobs since September. What has the Minister done since then? Have his Department and its agencies engaged with Gordon Brothers? If not, why not? Will he ensure that if the nuclear button is pressed, workers at Dealz will have the full protection of the law?

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy Nash for his important question. I would robustly push back on anyone who tries to categorise my party as one which punches down on those who are unemployed. I have been very clear about the context of the Tánaiste's speech over the weekend at the Fine Gael Ard-Fheis and the way he pointed out that the mark of any decent society is the way it supports people when they are unemployed. Critically, our view is that you never turn your back on people who are unemployed. You try to get them back into the labour force to give them independence and purpose in life and to ensure they are not left on the margins of society. Too many people, too often, ignore those who are in long-term

unemployment. We will not do that. Our new pathways to work programme will target people with training, assist them with personal development and get them back into the workforce, which is key.

On the issues the Deputy raised, I stand by the record of this Government on employment rights. Looking at the work we have done, I was clear about bringing forward an action plan on collective bargaining and resourcing it. I was also clear that irrespective of what position the European Court of Justice took, I was still going to come forward with our plan. We brought forward in the previous Government a ban on zero-hour contracts and legislation to protect tips. Remote working has taken hold in society. I brought forward the protection of employees during insolvency legislation, another key support for employees. Now we are bringing forward pregnancy loss leave. There is more legislation improving the lives of employees up and down our country. As I articulated in the previous response, we have done work on the new public service pay deal, with an 18% increase to protect lower paid workers over 33 months. This demonstrates that the Government is working to protect those who are in employment.

I am aware of the reports that Poundland has filed notice of its intention to appoint an administrator to the company in the UK. I appreciate the uncertainty for all during the media reporting, given that this situation is currently evolving. I confirm again that we have not received a collective redundancy notification from Poundland or Dealz at this juncture. Employers must comply with a number of legal obligations during the collective redundancy process, as the Deputy is aware. I know he was involved in those areas during his term as Minister of State. The obligations include the 30-day information consultation process with employees' representatives and notifying me as Minister of any proposed collective redundancies 30 days before any dismissal would take place. We will be strict in ensuring engagement and protection for workers.

The Deputy mentioned the difficult process of the closure of Debenhams and Clery's. The Government did significant work in that regard with Solas and our training agencies. In particular, there was €13 million to resolve the statutory redundancy payments for Debenhams workers at that time. In the new legislation we have brought forward, we are working on this. I acknowledge Deputy Nash did a significant proportion of that work with the Duffy-Cahill report in that period.

Deputy Ged Nash: The Minister has read the media as much as I have. His Department officials will be more directly engaged in that than either of us. They will have seen what is happening across the water with the Poundland stores. They got an extension of ten days from the High Court in London this morning to seek the protection from creditors. That is ten days for a potential rescue plan. The implications of that will have implications for 3,500 Dealz workers in Louth, Limerick, Wexford, Cork, Kildare and Fingal; all across this country. In the run-up to Christmas, this is particularly critical for workers who are working in retail.

The Minister has an obligation to pick up the phone and discuss with Gordon Brothers what its plans are for Dealz, for those jobs and for the 70 stores in this country. It seems he has yet to do that. It is good that he has not yet received any collective redundancy notices, but we cannot guarantee over the next two weeks that that will not take place. I do not want to be putting any additional burden on the shoulders of people who are working in Dealz who might

be watching in because they are concerned about their own jobs, but the Minister has an obligation to act and to ensure in the first instance that he works with the company to seek the protection of those jobs and the protection of the interests here in Ireland.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy Nash for his concern for the workers in question. I share that concern. I assure him that I will discharge my duties in connection with this. I have to be careful in terms of the statutory process and, critically, in relation to the fact that we have got no formal notification yet. I hear a lot of rumours about different entities from time to time that never come to pass. Obviously, this one is very concerning because we see the process that has commenced from the perspective of the UK. Among the critical things I do is putting the Workplace Relations Commission on notice, which is key in terms of any consultation period that goes ahead to ensure that employees' rights are protected. In 2024, we published an updated handbook for employees to be aware of their rights, which are very strong in this regard. I can absolutely assure the Deputy that all the supports of our State agencies will be made available if any event should happen. I assure him that my Department is very much engaged in this regard as well.

Deputy Michael Collins: A recent landmark court decision against Castlecor Potatoes in favour of Tailte Éireann, the agency which carries out valuation for rates, has extremely serious implications for every farmer in this country, but also for every householder in urban and rural Ireland. In the case of Castlecor Potatoes, rates were applied to its storage housing at Castlecor's main yard. Castlecor appealed this to the Valuation Tribunal, which found in its favour. However, the tribunal accepted a request from Tailte Éireann to have the matter considered at the High Court, where the decision was reversed, meaning that Castlecor is again liable for rates on the building where it stores its potatoes and onions.

This has far-reaching implications for agriculture, as Tailte Éireann is on the hunt and farming is its next step. I am delighted the Minister of agriculture is there beside the Minister because he has to take this seriously as well. Many agri-stores that dry and store malting barley in their stores. Outside air - not heated or changed in any way - is mechanically blown through perforated plastic pipes on the floor of the grain store in order to keep the grain conditioned and preserved for the customers when they want it. Basically, it comes out the way it went in. There is no processing. The agri-stores that do this are currently facing a judgment by Tailte Éireann. They are seriously concerned after the Castlecor Potatoes judgment that they will be considered as processors and rates will be applied. It is now widely rumoured that the dairy farmer could well be the next target by Tailte Éireann if farm stores are to be wrongly considered rateable because they keep barley dry and the potato grower is considered rateable because he cold stores his potatoes. What about Tailte Éireann's next target, the dairy farmer, who cools his milk in a specialised cooling tank until his local co-op collects it?

What exactly is the Minister doing about this crisis? I am raising it weekly in the Dáil Business Committee, of which I am a member, to bring a debate on this issue to the House but I am not getting anywhere. As I said at the outset, if this is not resisted by the Government, it will skyrocket the price of food, which will hit already hard-pressed families who, as we speak, cannot afford the cost of food. I have no doubt that if the Government does not step in here, the cost of purchasing food in this country could in some cases end up costing double, as all the rates being applied will have to be passed on to the consumer. The Minister, Deputy Peter

Burke, is the Minister for enterprise. Will the Government advise Tailte Éireann to immediately pause all rates proceedings against any farmer or farm store currently in its scope until the Government has taken the time to properly define the meaning of some of the words and terms in the rates Act that have brought the potential of rates taxes to the door of many farm families which, in turn, will have devastating consequences for all in this country? Will the Government act now and not leave each individual farmer or store to take costly legal cases against a State body, Tailte Éireann, which has the power of the State's finances from the hard-pressed taxpayer behind it?

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy Collins for this very important question. Obviously this has been a determination by the courts, which is hugely concerning for the Government. The Minister, Deputy Heydon, is in discussions with the Minister for housing, planning and local government in connection with the implications of the judgment and, critically, the precedent that it could potentially set. We are very much aware of the pressures affecting the farming community that are particularly acute in the horticulture sector and the tillage sector, which have seen very significant cost increases. The Government has come forward with a number of interventions to try to shore up costs and ensure we are reducing the impact of inflation we see on farms.

I am acutely aware of the whole impact of the farming and agri-community from an economic perspective, with about 300,000 people employed nationwide, and, critically, of the amount that farms bring to the national Exchequer. They are producing over €8 billion in direct agri output per annum, which is obviously very significant. We do not want to see any unintended consequences on foot of a judgment that has come from the Judiciary. Obviously, we are very respectful of any judgment. Potentially, it is up to us as a Government to act on the implications of the judgment, including whether that requires legislation or the Minister, Deputy Heydon, working with his colleagues. He is very much aware of this case. We will undertake to examine this and try to find a resolution.

As someone who comes from a farming background, I am aware of the challenges affecting the farming community. I mix every single week with farmers, particularly those on the tillage side, so I am aware that it is very challenging. We recently saw a new plant - a flour mill - which demonstrates how important the Government is taking its supply chains. Enterprise Ireland has put in a very significant investment, working with the Minister for agriculture in relation to it. It is a very exciting development, the purpose of which is to shore up the supply chains that are so important. I will endeavour to come back to the Deputy with a complete response when the Government has examined the court case. It has to examine the determination of the court case, the implications of it, and particularly the precedent that it potentially could set. We do not want inspectors calling out to farmers or those involved in horticulture and them having to try to fight with the State in relation to a rates valuation. That is not the intended spirit of the Government. This is something that we will try to resolve.

Deputy Michael Collins: I thank the Minister very much. I appreciate his reply. I cannot understand why the Government has not blocked Tailte Éireann from attacking the farmers of this country at a time when the householders and farmers of this country are under immense pressure because they do not have the money. Neither can I understand why the Taoiseach, who lives in a neutral country, handed Volodymyr Zelenskyy €25 million of taxpayers' money

yesterday. Our schools are being threatened. Some schools in west Cork spent 20 minutes dialling 999 for help and could not get it. On this issue of huge concern, the Minister is saying it should not have unintended consequences. He says the Government is looking at the determination of the courts. The bottom line is that Tailte Éireann is banging on the doors. The Government has the control. Tailte Éireann comes under the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, so will the Minister tell us here today that the Government will step in to deal with this Government's attack on agricultural products, which will in turn be an attack on the consumers of this country? Will the Government ask Tailte Éireann to wait until it has found out all the determinations and step aside from frightening the living life out of some people who are trying to make an income and provide food on our tables at an extraordinarily difficult time? That is what I want to hear. If the Government does that, it is quite acceptable and I will walk away happy.

Deputy Peter Burke: Given that I come from a farming background, as does the Minister, Deputy Heydon, I can absolutely assure Deputy Collins that we are always on the side of farmers. We provide solutions and work with them to ensure there are no unintended consequences of State regulation. He can see from the various efforts we have made - from Mercosur, to the derogation, to working on CAP to try to get a resolution - that we are providing solutions every step of the way and working with people across Europe and across the farming community. This will be no different. As I said, this judgment was made in connection with a particular case. We have to examine that judgment. The Minister, Deputy Heydon, has already been briefed on it. He has been proactive and spoken with the Minister for housing, or should I say his Department, to try to see what the consequences would be of any precedents set by this case. The last thing the Government wants to see is unintended consequences to farmers having to be rated when heretofore they did not face those costs.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I want to raise the importance of progressing the N20-M20 Cork to Limerick motorway project and, in particular, the need to maintain momentum and to ensure this critically important piece of national infrastructure advances to the next stage. The N20-M20 is about far more than simply connecting two of our largest cities. It is about unlocking the economic potential of the entire region, improving road safety, supporting businesses, creating employment opportunities and enabling better connectivity for communities right across Cork North-West and the wider Munster region.

For many years, the people of Cork and Limerick have been promised a modern, reliable transport link between both cities. The existing N20-M20 is simply not fit for purpose. It carries a significant volume of traffic, including heavy goods vehicles, and passes through a number of towns and villages creating congestion, delays and safety concerns for motorists and local communities. For towns such as Mallow, Buttevant and Charleville, and villages such as Ballyhay and New Twopothouse, the proposed project represents a transformative opportunity. These communities have lived with the impact of heavy through traffic for decades. Bypassing these towns and villages will improve quality of life, enhance road safety and create opportunities for further economic and residential development.

I understand the project is currently progressing through the design and environmental evaluation phase and that significant work has been undertaken on the preferred route and associated infrastructure. The proposed scheme extending approximately 80 km between Blarney in County Cork and Patrickswell in County Limerick is an ambitious and important project. The intention is to incorporate significant sections of the existing N20 alignment, while delivering the necessary new infrastructure is also welcome. However, I want to emphasise this project must be viewed as an integral part of transport investment rather than simply a road building exercise. I am conscious the current target is to submit a planning application to An Coimisiún Pleanála during 2026, subject to the necessary business case approval. That is an important milestone and I want to see every effort made to achieve it.

My questions are pretty straightforward. Will the Minister confirm the Government's commitment to the full delivery of the N20-M20 Cork to Limerick motorway project? What is the current position regarding approval of the business case and the anticipated submission of the planning application to An Coimisiún Pleanála? Will the Minister give assurances that the necessary funding and resources will be made available to keep this project on schedule with a view to going to construction in 2028? The time for delivery is now and I would welcome the Minister's commitment to ensuring the N20-M20 project is treated as a national infrastructure priority.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy O'Shea for this very important question. I know the work he has done in regad to the N20-M20 and his huge dedication to ensuring it progresses, along with a number of projects that have been delivered by the Government in his region, which have to be strongly called out, from the Ballyvourney to Macroom project, the Dunkettle interchange, the Adare bypass and the M28 Cork to Ringaskiddy project. Those are all key projects that really deliver for Munster and the region. The Government is absolutely committed to this project. I assure the Deputy of that. We will work with him and with the Minister for Transport to ensure that it becomes a reality.

Obviously, a very significant amount of work has taken place already, particularly through Limerick City and County Council and Cork County Council, to progress the scheme during 2026 when Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, allocated about €3.5 million. That was one of the Deputy's other questions, that is, that funding will be provided to keep progressing the project, which is very important. Preliminary design, traffic modelling and land valuation are currently ongoing and the design and environmental evaluation phase is approaching a conclusion at this point. The preliminary case is now expected to be submitted to the Department of Transport, so it is awaiting the preliminary case right now. Once that happens, Government approval will be required under the infrastructural guidelines and then the statutory documents will be prepared for the project to go forward to An Coimisiún Pleanála. That process is very much under way. We will keep the Deputy appraised of progress on it. I absolutely assure him that we are committed to seeing out this project, just like the other very significant projects we have in transport in Cork, to which we are very much committed to as a Government.

As the Deputy will be aware, we will have about €275 billion over the next decade in the national development plan, which is very significant, to go towards critical infrastructure projects, like the N20-M20. Next year, as an economy, we will spend about €20.3 billion on public infrastructure. In just over a four-period, that is up by about 65% from €12.4 billion.

That shows the Government's ambition to transform communities, to bring connectivity and to leave no region behind. With broadband, the lifeblood of our communities, we are ahead of pace, delivering to ensure the most remote parts of Ireland can get the best connectivity imaginable and, critically, for transport and infrastructure, you also need to achieve that. That is why the Government will be committed to working with the Deputy to deliver this very important project.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I thank the Minister for confirming the Government's commitment to the full delivery of the N20-M20 Cork to Limerick motorway project. For Cork North-West, the economic benefits of this project cannot be overstated. Better connectivity to Cork city, Limerick, Cork Airport, even Shannon Airport and the wider Atlantic economic corridor would make our towns and villages more attractive locations for investment, enterprise and employment. I am also conscious of the potential construction timeframe with works potentially commencing around 2028 and the completion project date around 2035. While I recognise the scale and complexity of a project of this nature, it is essential that we maintain an ambitious but realistic programme and do everything possible to avoid any more unnecessary delays. The N20-M20 is a once in a generation opportunity for the Cork, Limerick and wider Munster region and I thank the Minister for his continued commitment.

Deputy Peter Burke: I again thank Deputy O'Shea for his commitment to the project. Critically, we are very much aware of the implications, not only in terms of connectivity and the infrastructural importance of the project but also its ability to reduce the number of road-based collisions, accidents and fatalities right across the network and to provide more reliable journey times for businesses. We all know the one thing businesses really need is certainty and very significant projects like this provide that certainty on a large scale, as well as have a very significant positive impact on communities.

The Department of Transport awaits the preliminary business case and once that has happened, it will go forward for Government approval and on to An Coimisiún Pleanála for a formal application to be lodged. The Government is very focused, through its expressed, enhanced infrastructure delivery guidelines, on delivering these projects faster because we know we have to do that to really ensure we are moving the dial and transforming so many communities right across the country.

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

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Yesterday, the Taoiseach said that no proposal had come to Government and no decision had been made on Irish participation in the EU mission in Lebanon. He also said that Irish troops would not be put in harm's way there and that any role would be limited to non-partisan activities. However, the Minister, Deputy McEntee, said she wants troops deployed as part of the mission. She described a role that could include peace enforcement and said the mission's military strand could involve force protection. She also said the triple lock must be changed to allow Ireland to take part in that strand.

What is the Government's position? Is Ireland seeking a military role in Lebanon or is the Taoiseach ruling out the role the Minister, Deputy McEntee, has advocated? The Taoiseach

and the Minister, Deputy McEntee, are contradicting each other. I put it to the Minister that the Government should stop ducking and diving and tell the Dáil, and the Irish people, very plainly what its intentions are. Neutrality and the triple lock belong to the Irish people. Will the Government put any proposals to remove the triple lock to a referendum and let the people have their say?

Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Peter Burke): I thank the Deputy. The first thing I will take the Deputy up on is that Ireland is very much committed to neutrality and it is not an either-or. It is not neutrality, and the triple lock. They do not go hand in glove.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: They do.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: The Taoiseach said they did.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Yes, the Taoiseach did say it.

Deputy Peter Burke: We are very different in our approach. We want to continue Ireland's unbroken service-----

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Answer the question.

Deputy Peter Burke: Please let me finish. We want to continue Ireland's unbroken service wearing the blue helmet and the great work we have done with the United Nations.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Will the Minister address the question?

Deputy Peter Burke: Critically, what is very challenging here as I listened to Leader's Questions today-----

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The Minister is speaking down the clock. If he could answer the question, it would be helpful.

Deputy Peter Burke: Will the Deputy let me finish? I am answering the question and she will not let me finish.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: That is not an answer to the question.

Deputy Peter Burke: If she will not let me answer the question, that is all right.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy continues to engage.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: We have to get an answer.

Deputy Peter Burke: I want to be very clear here. We heard today a number of speakers call out the EPC; 47 European leaders meeting in Ireland this morning. They are meeting to protect Europe against the aggression of Russia and other aggressors. The Deputy's party votes with those types of people in the European Parliament and supports them.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: If the Minister will not answer the question, he can take up his own offer and sit down.

Deputy Peter Burke: We are very clear as a democracy that we want to ensure Ireland decides where its troops go and what missions its troops go on and that-----

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: It was a very simple question. If the Minister does not have the answer and it is above his pay grade, that is fine.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We will move onto the next question.

Deputy Peter Burke: -----the decision is not left to China, Russia, the US or anyone else. A democratically-elected Government takes that decision. That is what our troops and their families want, to ensure we can serve in UN-----

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: If the Minister does not have the answer, suigh síos le do thoil

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please, Deputy O'Reilly. I thank the Minister. If there are any further interruptions to questions, we will just drop the question and move to the next one. I call Deputy Ennis.

Deputy Daniel Ennis: Tusla has reported that children as young as eight, nine and ten years of age are being groomed into drug gangs and into crime. These primary school children. I have a nine-year-old son and I am raising him in the north inner city, so this worries me. It really hits home for me because I come from the north inner city, live there and represent it. We have seen the deployment of resources into the north inner city this week when the State needs it but not when the community needs it. Where is the same urgency when these communities are crying out for resources and protection from these drug gangs? Children are being petrol-bombed in their front sitting rooms but there is still no action and still no resources.

It is no fluke that these children live in communities with the highest rates of child homelessness and child poverty. Criminals are preying on that vulnerability. Years of Government neglect have left our communities without the support they need. The way the Tánaiste is speaking at the moment, I would not be surprised if he blamed the children themselves for this. How is the Government supporting this? Why is it throwing resources in for one week for EU meetings but not for communities which have needed them for generations?

Deputy Peter Burke: The Government takes very seriously any impact on children which the Deputy described. Critically, we have record levels of support for An Garda Síochána. The

Deputy will be very much aware of the Dublin city task force and the work that has been carried out to rejuvenate our city centre, working to try to empower communities and ensure they have the resources.

That should not be compared to Ireland taking to the stage on the geopolitical landscape, working to get peace and to try to bring Ireland's values to a European stage. We will always stand by communities that are under pressure.

Deputy Daniel Ennis: It is hard not to stand up against that.

Deputy Peter Burke: We have a very strong record in it. We have a very strong record in the north inner city that we are proud to stand over.

Deputy Daniel Ennis: No, you do not.

Deputy Peter Burke: We established the Dublin city task force to work and to secure-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Ennis, please.

Deputy Daniel Ennis: Kids as young as eight, nine and ten are selling crack cocaine on every corner. That is where regeneration starts.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We will abandon the question and move to the next question.

Deputy Daniel Ennis: I-----

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I hope the Minister had a good time in the great county of Cork when he was there last weekend. It is a pity he did not take the five-minute drive to Cork University Hospital, CUH. Last week, the Taoiseach told this House that it was his understanding that the regional executive officer, REO, of HSE South West had never referred to instructions from his office when saying there would be a performance assessment of the chief executive officer, CEO, of CUH. The audio recording released at the weekend reported that he did. The official has since apologised and said he received no such instructions. The Dáil record must be corrected.

I want to back Jennifer Kearney and the staff of CUH. When a hospital chief executive raises concerns about patient safety, she is doing her job. She and her staff deserve the Government's backing.

On Monday, the chief executive reported that CUH had no intensive care beds available and that its emergency department was operating at twice capacity. Nine clinical directors have backed the CEO of CUH and asked for an independent staffing assessment. Will the Government commission it? If the answer is "No", will the Minister tell the staff and patients of CUH why?

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy for his question. First, I will outline the support successive Governments have given CUH. Between 2019 and 2025, funding increased by 98%, from €303 million to €600 million. Between 2019 and 2025, staff numbers in CUH increased by 41%, from 3,456 whole-time equivalents, WTEs, to 4,870. In 2026 alone, CUH has grown by a further 324 WTEs, or 6.6%, from 4,870 to 5,194. The Government is very much focused on supporting CUH.

We are very clear regarding the health and safety and patient report that came forward on 15 September. The overall position gives some reassurance but the Government is working to ensure that hospital continues to be supported and that we get efficiencies across our hospital system to ensure there is more consistency in hospitals delivering.

We know demographics are changing. More than 1 million people will be over the age of 65 by 2030. That creates more challenges but resources are also at a record level and we have to stand up and see those efficiencies as well.

Deputy Paul Murphy: October marked 15 years since Celia de Jesus drowned in the 2011 flood. She was trapped in the basement apartment she was renting. Since then, her death has been characterised as death by misadventure caused by the flood but it was not just the flood that killed her. It was a breach of planning law and a failure by the local authority to protect tenants such as her from substandard housing conditions.

The landlord had never obtained planning permission to divide the basement of their property into two rental units. Her unit was later described as "not of a habitable standard", and bars were put on her small window, making escape impossible when she could not open the door. Breaches of planning law and the failure of the local authority and her landlord to protect tenants had as much to do with Celia's death as the flood. We need an apology from the State, a public statement on the full circumstances of her death and an immediate review of the coroner's report and its final verdict.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy very much. I absolutely understand the huge concern about this very important issue, and my sympathy goes out to Celia's family. It is obviously a very difficult circumstance for anyone to pass away. I will relay the Deputy's comments to the Minister for justice regarding what the Deputy is asking for. I also put on record that there have been significant changes in planning law since that date for the better in connection with flood plains and regulations. A lot of things happened two decades ago in construction that should not have happened, quite frankly, and, hopefully, we are in a better place now to protect citizens in the future.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: The hoax school bomb threats caused what I call avoidable panic yesterday. Official guidance from the Department and An Garda Síochána was slow to arrive and, in one south Dublin school, Garda and departmental advice conflicted. Across the country, many principals were left isolated. Some were moving hundreds of pupils onto pitches or sending them home in confusion. Others were criticised for following the delayed guidance because parents were worried for their kids, and some parents took them out of schools that remained open.

Some teachers contacted me suggesting some practical steps should this situation arise in the future. First, principals should be alerted directly the moment the Department becomes aware of a widespread threat. Second, an immediate national emergency statement should be issued to stop social media scaremongering. Third, if such threats are deemed likely to recur, a proper off-site evacuation protocol should be created for moving hundreds or up to 1,000 students, backed by emergency kits with foil blankets for primary school children. Fourth, it should be ensured that officials or gardaí formally clear schools as safe before pupils return. Finally, there should be an explanation of how threat credibility is assessed so principals and parents can trust the advice given. Were the sources of communication tracked yesterday? Did the threats originate from overseas, for example? Will the Government commit to improving communications and supports in future?

Deputy Peter Burke: I absolutely understand the concern of many parents. I was one of them because my children received this concerning, threatening notice on 11 November. This is the second such incident in less than a month, which shows its seriousness. An Garda Síochána evaluates the circumstances when a principal and school report an incident. It liaises closely with the school on every incident and assesses the impact on safety under its protocol and whether the school can open safely.

The safety of our students is most important. I will raise the issues the Deputy has brought forward on the floor of the House with the Minister for education. I assure the Deputy that, working and liaising with An Garda Síochána and the school authorities, we take these issues very seriously. The protection of our children is always the most important consideration in our society.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: I want to make the Minister aware of the shameful action of the Department of Defence over decades in letting the old military barracks on Summerhill in Nenagh rot and decay. This issue has affected my home town for years but I have been trying to do something about it since I was elected to this Chamber. In June 2025, the municipal district contacted me and asked me to arrange a meeting with the Department to find out what could be done. That meeting took place in July 2025. Also in July 2025, I arranged for local schools to engage with the Department concerning possibly acquiring some lands.

At the meeting in the Department in Dublin, we received a firm commitment, as public representatives and in front of officials from Tipperary County Council, that the Department would survey the buildings on the site to find out how bad they are, what condition they are in and what is listed and what was not. Since that day, the Department has given me back every possible excuse as to why it cannot do that survey, despite it telling me on 1 August 2025, after the meeting, that it was procuring surveyors to do it. That was in 2025. To date, it still has not done that survey, despite the commitment to public representatives like me and county council officials at that meeting. I ask the Minister to bring this issue back to the Minister for Defence and for her to discuss this issue with her officials. We cannot accept this building and this site continuing to rot any longer.

1 o'clock

Deputy Peter Burke: I fully accept the Deputy's frustration in connection with timelines not being delivered over 2025. I will raise it with the Minister for Defence, Deputy McEntee. As a Government, we should be very focused on rejuvenation, working on supporting older buildings in particular those like the Deputy described with a huge amount of character, history and historical significance. I will raise that with the Minister after this session.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: I raise a housing issue affecting a family in Carlow who are trying to sell their home and downsize. Their house has never been flooded in 40 years and is not on a flood plain but because the OPW is currently reviewing flood maps in the nearby area, potential buyers are having difficulty getting flood insurance and consequently cannot get mortgage approval. This lovely family home has gone sale agreed twice and on both occasions the sale has fallen through because of this issue.

At a time the Government is working really hard to build more homes, with almost 27,000 homes completed in the first nine months of this year, we also need to make sure people can buy and sell the homes they already have. Will the Minister please speak to the relevant Ministers and ask them to work with the OPW, insurance companies and mortgage lenders to find a practical solution for families who cannot sell their homes simply because these flood maps are being reviewed?

Deputy Peter Burke: I acknowledge the work the Deputy is doing in this regard. I also acknowledge the stress homeowners experience when faced with these challenges when selling their property or getting insurance or valuable public services for their homes. I will raise it with the OPW and the Tánaiste. Critically, through the action plan on insurance reform, we are doing a huge amount of work trying to ensure that many homes get access to supports, which is key, but also, through the OPW, that the mapping procedures are fair. I will raise it with the Minister of State responsible for the OPW as well as the Tánaiste.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I raise the terrible devastation that has been brought upon the people of Cuba by the horrific sanctions and embargos by the United States regime. The people of Cuba are on the brink of starvation due to a lack of food. Senator Andrews, who recently came back from the country, gave a harrowing account of daily life due to the sanctions. The infant mortality rate, once the lowest in the world, has doubled. It is next to impossible to get basic medicines and people are being told to go home and die.

This is a man-made catastrophe. Trump, Marco Rubio and their regime are using starvation as a weapon against the Cuban people. Will the Minister call for an end to the sanctions and declare the United States is breaking international law by using food and committing war crimes?

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy for his genuine concern on this issue and the impact sanctions can have on vulnerable citizens. I will raise it with the Minister for Foreign affairs and Trade, Deputy McEntee. She deals directly with issues such as this. I will let her know the Deputy's concern as raised in the House this afternoon.

Deputy Carol Nolan: Inné, bhuail mé le hionadaithe ón eagraíocht iontach IMEASC a bhí ag iarraidh an Ghaeilge agus oideachas trí mheán na Gaeilge a chur chun cinn. Rinne an

eagraíocht seo suirbhé agus de réir torthaí an tsuirbhé sin tá oideachas trí mheán na Gaeilge ag teastáil ó 49% den daonra a thug freagra sa suirbhé.

IMEASC, an Irish organisation that does fantastic work promoting the need for Irish-medium education, carried out a survey. In that survey, 49% of respondents said they would opt for and would prefer Irish-medium education. The programme for Government states that Government is willing to provide Irish-medium education in line with demand.

Taking on board the results of that survey and the survey by the Department of Education and Youth that showed that 25% of respondents wanted education through Irish, what actions will Government take to ensure it is meeting the demand and indeed the rights of people?

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy for raising this concern. I will have to ask Deputy Naughton, the Minister for Education and Youth, to respond to the Deputy directly because she is over the detail of this issue.

Deputy Jen Cummins: There is a serious problem with horses in Dublin city. I am a TD for Dublin South-Central. Recently, I have had many reports of what is happening in Dublin 8. In Brickfield Park, a horse was beaten until it bled with whips and was kicked by children. In Kilmainham, horses are being kept in what according to Dublin City Council is a proper stables. I have been around horses for a long time; I am not sure I agree with that. There are issues. There have been complaints about it. Carriages are being driven around this city at dangerous speeds. The animal welfare involved in that is a concern. I am contacted so often about horses. Sinn Féin has legislation to bring forward but somebody is going to be killed on a carriage. Horses are being damaged and killed. My Lovely Horse constantly has people going out to rescue horses in Dublin 8. Horses are being driven at speed along motorways. That also happened recently in Dublin 8. What can be done to prevent people and horses being killed in this city? How fast can it happen?

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon): I thank the Deputy for raising this important point. Animal welfare is of huge importance to me and the Government. It is the responsibility of my Department. The urban horse is a key focus. The implementation of the 22 recommendations in the Paddy Wall report has enhanced greater traceability around equines, which is critically important. My new animal welfare strategy has a review of the Control of Horses Act 1996 as part of its focus as well as enhanced powers for local authorities, a greater enforcement process and ensuring sure the welfare of horses.

To the Deputy's point on motorways, we are working across cross-departmental groups led by Deputy Michael Murphy, chair of the transport committee, on sulky racing to make sure it is banned and not continued into the future on our roads.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: A serious incident happened in my constituency, Dublin Fingal West, on Hallowe'en. A canister of nitrous oxide gas was left beside a bonfire. The heat effectively turned it into an explosive device. Tragically, it exploded and a young girl was hit and injured. She came close to losing her leg. First and foremost, I would like to wish her well and wish her a speedy recovery. While we wait for further legislation around nitrous oxide, we

need urgent action now. We need a dedicated national awareness campaign to educate everybody about the real dangers of the substance.

Ella, who is in the Gallery, is a transition year student on placement with me this week. I thank her for input. She highlighted something concerning. She has been unable to find any accessible information about these dangers through her school or through social media. County councils spend an inordinate amount disposing of these canisters at significant cost to the taxpayer. They are not only used as a recreational drug ; they can become explosive devices. We need an education, awareness and prevention programme to be rolled out.

Deputy Peter Burke: I acknowledge nitrous oxide is a significant issue and the challenges and dangers the Deputy described. I thank Ella for her engagement with the Deputy in raising this issue and doing the research. I will speak with the Minister for justice and ask him to come back to them both. We need legislation but we also need to highlight awareness.

Deputy John Clendennen: Last week, hoax bomb threats were sent to radio stations across the country. They play an important role. People turn to radio in cases of unexpected events and adverse weather conditions. This is highlighted in the Government's Be Emergency Ready booklet. In rural Ireland, radio plays an important role in people staying connected, informed and represented.

I met representatives of the Independent Broadcasters of Ireland during the week. There is a real concern around the regulatory levy. There was a 39% increase last year and it has increased by 69% over two years. This is a real viability concern. The regulator needs support and the sector does not disagree with that but this level of increase in one fell swoop is significant. It is leaving a serious question around viability. A precedent was set in other European countries to address this matter.

I ask that the Government to ensure this increase is offset to protect local journalism and ensure the future viability of local radio stations, which are essentially small and medium enterprises.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy for raising this very important issue. I am very much aware of the concern among the independent radio stations on this issue. As someone who is in a rural constituency like the Deputy, I see first hand the valuable work our independent broadcasters provide. They are really getting information to citizens who rely on it for local content, which is so important. I have met with the assistant secretary responsible for this area in the Department this week because of my new responsibilities. I am waiting to receive a proposal from Coimisiún na Meán shortly, which I hope will be positive. I am also looking to see what additional schemes we can put in to support valuable public service information that many of these broadcasters are bringing to the listeners, including very vulnerable people who need that information. We will see if we can put some additionality into the schemes that can be applied for by our independent broadcasters. We have a lot of work to do in this regard and I very much hope to make progress in the coming weeks.

Deputy Seamus Healy: This summer, a devastating wildfire swept through Slievenamon and destroyed thousands of acres of land and forestry. It was a wildfire and local farmers had no

hand, act or part in setting the fire or in authorising the setting of the fire. In fact, they came together with their families, friends and local community as a meitheal to fight the fire. They stood shoulder to shoulder with Tipperary Fire and Rescue Service, Civil Defence and others fighting that fire for days and nights on end. Only for their efforts, the effects of that fire would have been much more devastating. Their thanks is that there is a proposal to cut their farm payments and penalise them. Is this for real? These are farmers who put themselves in harm's way to help out. I want the Minister to give an assurance to these farmers that their farm payments will not be reduced or cut and they will not be penalised in any way.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank the Deputy for raising this really important point. I understand the concern there is among farmers and landowners in the Slievenamon area. I commend the farmers whose swift action saved their community from so much more damage. Direct payments, whether it is under the basic income support for sustainability scheme, or forestry payment, are EU-funded and we have audit obligations. My Department cannot determine the cause of a fire. If somebody deliberately sets fire to their property, that land then does not come available to receive payments for agricultural use. There is the *force majeure* measure and I have communicated this very clearly to the landowners who have contacted me through local representatives from the area. I have made it very clear that in the circumstances where there is correspondence from the gardaí or authorities proving this fire was started in the way it was, which was accidentally during the drought, that can make a very significant impact on an appeal for *force majeure*. That *force majeure* measure is there to support this and I am very hopeful the innocent farmers who have been impacted by this will find resolution through that mechanism. This is EU money and it is paid for agricultural produce on land. When land or adjoining land is burned, that can be impacted and this process has to be gone through. It is not with a view to penalising farmers, who are innocent in this regard.

Deputy Peter Roche: I want to raise an issue with the Minister around maternity cover within the children's disability network teams, CDNTs. I hear the replacement cover is not being sanctioned in time, leaving already stretched teams short-staffed and children facing further interruptions to essential therapies. Maternity leave is foreseeable or at least it should be. Staff must be supported but children's services must also continue in tandem. Will the Minister ask or engage with the Minister for Health to ensure maternity leave cover is properly planned, sanctioned and funded across all CDNTs? Will he also seek confirmation that the two-week approval process is being implemented consistently across all teams?

Deputy Peter Burke: I acknowledge the important issue the Deputy has raised, which is critical for the continuity of services that so many vulnerable children receive. I will bring it to the attention of the Minister. As of June 2026, 145 whole-time equivalents within the CDNT services were reported as availing of maternity leave with an additional 20 availing of parental leave. As the Deputy quite rightly pointed out, this can be planned for. There is no doubt that structures can be put in place to ensure there is no compromise of the services that so many vulnerable children receive. I will raise that with the Minister.

Deputy Joe Neville: I welcome Ruby Boyle and Emily Quinn to the Visitor's Gallery. They are two transition year students who are with me for the week.

On a serious issue, I am calling on the Department of justice, alongside the Department of Culture, Communication and Sport to review and strengthen legislation on the sharing of antisocial behaviour on social media in Ireland. Recently, in my constituency of Kildare North, we have seen an increase in antisocial behaviour, which is being filmed, posted and shared on social media. Some of these videos have included violent attacks on young adults by people their own age, which are distributed around apps such as Snapchat and WhatsApp. I have recently met with three separate sets of parents and victims in relation to three different assaults. The most common point which they all raised was how difficult it was to move on from the incidents while the videos of the events continued to be shared online.

I have highlighted this matter with the Garda Commissioner at the Committee of Public Accounts and I now ask that Coimisiún na Meán, which falls under the Minister's new remit, reviews this matter and strengthens legislation to ensure, alongside gardaí, that these videos are taken down immediately and social media posts are brought to the Garda's attention as evidence later.

Deputy Peter Burke: I acknowledge Ruby and Emily and wish them the very best in the work they are doing with him.

The Deputy raised a valid point. Social media companies have a significant obligation here to the victims of crime and communities not to keep content on their platforms that can be very distressing and can cause significant concern for criminal cases that result, in particular.. That is one thing I have mentioned and raised in connection with the number of job losses in some social media companies. Those who are involved in moderating content and providing key protections are being replaced, in many cases, by bots and artificial intelligence. I have seen some horrific cases in which victims of very serious crimes were given a response by an AI bot that looked for a death certificate or something that is deeply traumatic to families. That has to stop and we have to ensure we hold companies to account in that regard. We have to take a strong stance as a Government and we will not be behind in doing so.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: The Minister will be familiar with this. Over six weeks ago, the diabetes day service in Mullingar hospital closed because of staff shortages, concerns about which were being raised for about a year beforehand. On 1 October, the Tánaiste told the House the suspension must be temporary and suggested redeployment as an option. On 15 October, I asked the Minister for Health whether deploying staff had been considered to get that service reopened. She said she did not know and committed to investigating and coming back to me. It is now 12 November. I am waiting for an answer from the Minister for Health and, more importantly, patients are waiting for an answer as to when their service will reopen. The Minister for enterprise is well aware this service supports hundreds of people across the midlands. Has redeployment been considered as even a temporary measure until those vacant posts can be permanently recruited for?

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy for her very important question. I am very familiar with the services of the diabetic clinic and have been working very clearly over the past number of months with the Minister for Health and the HSE in trying to get it restored. We have secured approval from the HSE for a new dietician, which is important, and approval for two clinical nurse specialists, one permanent and one temporary. I expect to have the clinic back shortly.

We are waiting for final sign-off by the Department of Health but I will raise what Deputy Clarke brought forward here and share the concerns. I have been working, day and night, with many patients who really rely on this clinic. It has been very distressing for them. I acknowledge that it is totally unacceptable. A lot of these issues can be foreseen and it should not happen. It is a valuable service to society and I will work with the Deputy and others to ensure it is brought back.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I again raise the issue of childcare fees for facilities that are not in core funding. The measure announced in the budget to reduce fees for institutions in core funding is very much welcome.

However, in his response I would like the Minister to forget about this and focus on what the Government intends to do to help with childcare costs in facilities that are outside of core funding. I have raised this a number of times in the Chamber in relation to facilities in my constituency. Recently, I was contacted by parents in Firhouse about a facility for which they were already paying almost €1,600 per month before the national childcare scheme. In January 2024 their fees went up by 28%, the following November they went up by 3% and the following year the increase was 4.5%. They have been told that there will be another increase this coming January. What is the Government going to do for parents such as those in Firhouse whose provider is not in core funding? What is it going to do to protect them from childcare costs?

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy Ahern and I absolutely share his concern. The Government is very much focused on getting more providers into core funding, which is key to resolving the challenges faced by people in his constituency. During 2027, we are looking to bring 16,000 more places into core funding so that parents and families can benefit from the reduction in childcare costs, which are going to be significant from September 2027, at €1,800 per month. It is important that we deliver these opportunities and get more providers into core funding. The challenge is not only to make childcare more accessible and cheaper for families but also to have places, and we really have to focus on this as a Government. I will relay the Deputy's concerns to the Minister, Deputy Foley.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

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

Dessie Ellis - To discuss funding arrangements for the Ballymun music programme.

Barry Ward - To discuss support families that have children in childcare centres that are not part of the core funding model.

Paula Butterly - To discuss the planned increases in motorway and road toll charges for heavy goods vehicles.

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

Paul McAuliffe - To discuss HSE-funded counselling services for young people in Finglas.

Peter 'Chap' Cleere - To discuss funding allocations for capital works in schools across Carlow and Kilkenny.

Naoise Ó Muirí - To discuss the increasing number of arson attacks and serious vandalism incidents affecting north Dublin playgrounds.

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

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

Maurice Quinlivan - To discuss the ongoing issue of wandering horses in urban areas.

Robert O'Donoghue - To discuss the need for an integrated, coordinated mental health emergency response.

Pa Daly - To demand the reopening of the Glenderry, Ballyheogue pump house and water supply.

Aisling Dempsey - To discuss the liquidation of a contractor company and consequent detrimental effects on a sports club.

Sorca Clarke - To discuss the delays in Tailte Éireann allocating folio numbers to new build developments.

Roderic O'Gorman and Pádraig Rice - To discuss LGBTI+ rights in Türkiye in light of the "My Family is Safe" operation being undertaken by the Turkish Government.

The matters raised by Deputies Naoise Ó Muirí, Aisling Dempsey, Dessie Ellis, Paula Butterly and Sorca Clarke have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Crime Prevention

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I thank the Minister of State for taking this matter. I want to raise the growing problem of arson and serious vandalism affecting playgrounds and public amenities on the northside of Dublin. Since October 2025, there have been seven serious arson attacks on playground facilities in Dublin Bay North. There were two attacks on the same playground in Kilmore, two on McAuley Park, two in Darndale Park and the destruction of newly installed eco-toilets in St. Anne's Park. The McAuley Park playground was newly installed following a campaign by local residents. It was built perhaps 12 to 18 months ago and has been attacked twice. I acknowledge and thank my colleague, Councillor Clodagh Ní Mhuirí, who has been raising this on the local community safety partnership and is working closely with Dublin City Council and local residents in responding to the issues.

There comes a point when it gets very frustrating. We cannot be expected to clean up the mess again and again and move on. It is hard to get into the mindset of people who would do this. It is not a class issue as facilities throughout Dublin Bay North are being attacked again

and again. They are built for communities and for people and families to use. It is very hard to understand why people would attack, burn and damage facilities and put them beyond repair. We need a stronger focus on prevention. I have spoken to An Garda Síochána about a number of these incidents. It has to investigate all of them but it is up against it. The incidents often happen at night, when there are no lights and no witnesses, so they are really hard to follow up. There is a fair bit of support within Fine Gael for CCTV to be used as part of a solution in this area. I find it hard to understand why local authorities are not more to the forefront on CCTV. They tend to be reluctant to get involved. I believe they have the frameworks to do so but they are slow to get involved.

On a related topic, we should also look at whether existing legislative provisions relating to parental responsibility are being well used. The Oireachtas has provided for parental supervision orders and compensation orders for a particular reason. I asked the Minister for justice about the use of these orders and he was very helpful. He followed up with the Courts Service but its response stated that court statistics are not compiled in such a way as to provide the information sought. The Courts Service further advised that this information can only be obtained by the examination of individual court files in court offices around the country, which would require the expenditure of a disproportionate amount of staff time. We do not seem to know about this and it does not seem to be a priority for the Courts Service. This is a real pity. We should gather this information and understand at the very least whether the orders are in use, whether they are effective and how many orders are being made.

I am sure this is also a problem on the southside of Dublin. I have heard of incidents in Sean Moore Park and other places. What can we do regarding CCTV? Can we get more data on supervision and compensation orders? Are there other things we can do to work with local authorities to try to deal with this?

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Catherine Ardagh): These acts of vandalism are not limited to the northside. We see them in all our constituencies, especially in the urban constituencies of Dublin. I thank Deputy Ó Muirí for raising the issue today.

Playgrounds have an essential role in our communities. They are not just facilities for young people across Dublin and the country; they are central hubs for social development where children can make sense of the world around them and people of all ages and backgrounds can meet and build a sense of place and community. When I see a vandalised playground, perhaps on my social media feed, my heart drops. It is gut-wrenching for us to see a playground, where we might have attended the opening a few weeks earlier, being vandalised. We need to ensure that we get to the bottom of this and that it does not become an everyday incident.

Every playground, park and public space represents considerable investment, not only in financial terms but also in terms of time and effort from the community, local authorities, their staff and the contractors who build these facilities in our communities. Setting playgrounds or parks alight is not a fun thing to do. It is a sign of disrespect for the local community and a lack of pride in where people come from. This vandalism is not only unacceptable; it is reprehensible. I am conscious of the concern arising from a number of recent incidents affecting community facilities in Deputy Ó Muirí's constituency and the impact these incidents have had on local residents.

I assure the House that An Garda Síochána will and does investigate these incidents thoroughly. However, ensuring a safe environment in our communities, including those in north Dublin, is not solely a policing issue. This is why the Government is supporting the new local community safety partnerships, which bring together local authorities, gardaí, community organisations and residents to identify and address local safety concerns. The National Strategy for Improving Community Safety 2026-2030, which was published this week, marks a significant milestone in how we approach community safety in Ireland. The Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration attended the launch. For the first time, we have a dedicated national framework to assist the Government, public services, local authorities, businesses and community organisations to come together to deliver safer communities. It will help ensure that everyone, regardless of who they are or where they live, can feel safe, supported and connected within their community.

The launch of the strategy marks the next chapter in the evolution of community safety in Ireland and is a key element of the new community safety infrastructure established under the Policing, Security and Community Safety Act. Each of the 36 local community safety partnerships supported by the strategy is developing a local community safety plan based on priorities identified by local communities. I understand the inaugural meeting of the Dublin Central local community safety partnership was held on 21 January this year. Partnerships such as this reflect the principles of the communities themselves. By bringing together people with local knowledge, public services and community leadership, we can develop responses tailored to local needs and focused on prevention as well as enforcement.

Deputy Ó Muirí raised the issue of parental supervision orders under section 111 of the Children Act 2001. Youth justice falls within my remit. As part of the youth justice strategy for 2027, we are looking to modernise the Children Act 2001. A review is under way with the Attorney General, especially concerning section 111, regarding the use and efficacy of parental supervision orders. I thank Deputy Ó Muirí again for raising the matter.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I am glad to hear that a review is under way. How will it be executed effectively if there is no access to the data? It is very important that the Courts Service tracks and makes this data available to the Minister of State, and as a Minister of State, Deputy Ardagh, can look for this data. There is a lot of verbiage in what I got back from the Courts Service but access to the underlying data is vital.

We cannot accept the normalisation of the destruction of public facilities. I cannot accept it. It is just not normal for people to go out and burn down playgrounds. It is not normal for them to burn toilet facilities. It does not matter where, northside or southside, we cannot accept it.

I am going to keep raising this. I know that the local authority is frustrated because it gets the tail end and has to pay for all the damage to be repaired. It is doing it two or three times after successive arson attacks on facilities. Local authorities are effectively reliant on the community to work with them to protect the facilities. It is just really difficult. An Garda Síochána then has an investigative responsibility. As the Minister of State will know, these attacks happen in the dark of night when gardaí are not around. It is really difficult for An Garda Síochána to get prosecutions. I just want to make sure that this issue gets the priority it deserves at Government level and that it is front and centre in the review. We must find a way

to move people away from doing this and to make them understand it is just not acceptable or normal, that communities are being affected and that public resources are going down the drain again and again. The local authorities are very frustrated. The local community partnerships can play a big role. Time will tell how this works out.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: I note the Deputy's points on the collection of data. It is probably fair to say that a negligible number of supervision orders have been made by the courts.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I do not know.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: That is the anecdotal information but we do not have the data. We cannot make decisions anywhere without data. I take the Deputy's point. I am aware of a number of serious incidents, including incidents of arson, at playgrounds in the Deputy's constituency. These include recent unpleasant events where play equipment was burned and destroyed. That is absolutely unacceptable. It is understandable that the local families who use these facilities are upset. Those responsible have shown total indifference to the local community, which relies on facilities like playgrounds.

As the Deputy is aware, the Garda Commissioner is responsible for operational policing matters, including Garda investigations and the distribution and stationing of Garda personnel throughout the State. The Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration is unable to intervene in these independent functions. However, new powers introduced this year under the criminal law and civil law Act 2026 will make it easier for the Garda to apply to court for antisocial behaviour orders in respect of adults and children. The Act reduces the minimum rank of garda who may apply for such an order from superintendent to inspector. This will bring increased flexibility to the making of such applications. Furthermore, the steady increase in Garda numbers should ensure that authorities are in a better position than before to deploy the required resources to investigate crimes, whether arson or vandalism. There are now 14,825 gardaí. This is the highest number in the history of our State. As of the end of September 2026, there were 792 serving Garda members assigned to the metropolitan region north division, which operates in the Deputy's constituency. This is an increase from 766. The Minister for justice has also been assured by the Commissioner that Garda management keeps the distribution of resources under continual review in the context of crime trends and policing priorities.

Sports Facilities

Deputy Aisling Dempsey: I thank the Minister of State for taking this Topical Issue on behalf of the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue. I ask for an examination of the supports that could be provided to sporting organisations like Athboy Celtic FC that have suffered severe financial losses following the liquidation of Clearwater Construction. I do so as a local representative for Meath West and for Athboy and as someone who has seen at first hand the enormous contribution that local sports clubs make to communities across the county of Meath and throughout Ireland.

Athboy is a small town with a soccer club that consistently punches above its weight. My own son, Liam, has been with the club for a number of years and my daughter, Hannah, is a mini-kickers recruit. My husband is also a very involved coach. Like thousands of families throughout the country, we know the value that sports clubs provide. They provide exercise and foster discipline, teamwork, confidence and friendships. They create a sense of belonging and give children and teenagers somewhere positive to spend their time, somewhere where they can feel that they are part of something bigger than themselves. None of that happens by accident. It happens because of volunteers. It happens because of coaches like James and Eamon who give up their evenings and weekends. It happens because of committee members like Bernard, Brendan and Senan who devote countless hours to their clubs. It happens because parents stand on sidelines in all types of weather and drive all around the county and, indeed, the country.

These are not wealthy organisations. They survive because communities rally behind them. That is why the impact of this liquidation has been so devastating. The club embarked on an ambitious AstroTurf pitch development project that was designed to secure its future and provide much-needed facilities. The funding was raised by ordinary people and small local businesses in the community through hard work, fundraising events, sponsorships and donations. I had the great pleasure of sponsoring and attending the club's "quid games" fundraising event recently, which many described as the greatest night in the club's history. Unfortunately, not long afterwards, the club suffered its worst night ever with the news of Clearwater's liquidation. The quid games demonstrated the incredible spirit in the club and the wider community. People turned out in force and gave generously because they wanted to build something lasting for their children and grandchildren.

When a company enters liquidation after taking substantial deposits from organisations like this, the consequences are profound. The financial loss is one thing but it cannot be right that voluntary organisations can spend years raising this money, commit these funds to vital community infrastructure and then find themselves exposed to losses of this magnitude with little protection or recourse. I ask that the Minister of State engage with the affected clubs to assess the scale of the losses involved and to examine what practical supports can be made available. Whether through Sport Ireland, the Department's capital programmes or even a targeted assistance scheme, we need to explore how communities that act in good faith can be helped to get these projects back on track.

There is also a broader question that must be addressed. We need to consider whether additional protections are required when community organisations undertake capital projects of this scale. Clubs should not be left exposed when substantial sums of community-raised money are paid over for projects that are ultimately not delivered. Athboy's club is exactly the type of organisation that public policy should be supporting. I ask that the Minister of State recognise the seriousness of this issue, engage with the affected clubs and help to ensure that communities that have done everything right are not left paying the price for circumstances that are entirely beyond their control.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Neale Richmond): I thank Deputy Dempsey for raising the issue of the impact of the liquidation of Clearwater Construction and Landscaping Limited on Athboy Celtic FC. I am responding on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Burke, and the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue. I thank

the Deputy for declaring her very clear familial interests in the club. It is a tale familiar to most of us, particularly those of us who have young children.

The Minister and Minister of State recognise the difficult position that the club is in. Its volunteers, members and supporters have put considerable time and effort into developing an all-weather pitch for their local community. Having paid a substantial deposit, the club now faces uncertainty as to whether it can recover that money and how it can complete the pitch. I appreciate the concern this has caused for everyone in the club. The Department of Culture, Communications and Sport allocated €106,864 to Athboy Celtic towards the construction of the artificial pitch. The club has submitted a payment claim for €72,270 in respect of works completed up to 10 September. An architect's certificate confirming the value of the completed works was submitted with the claim. Officials are processing this claim under the terms and conditions of the grant.

The community sport facilities fund supports eligible works and equipment. It has no provision to compensate clubs for losses arising from a contractor's liquidation. The contract was between the club and the contractor and any claim for recovery of the deposit must be pursued through the liquidation process. However, the Department can help the club identify how the project might proceed under its existing grant. Officials can work with Athboy Celtic to consider a revised timetable, any changes needed to the approved works and the grant requirements that would apply if the club appointed a replacement contractor. Any proposed changes would be assessed under the terms and conditions of the allocation. I assure the Deputy that officials will continue to engage with Athboy Celtic on its payment claim and on the steps available to help bring the pitch into use.

The Minister and Minister of State understand why the Deputy is asking what further help can be given to the club. Athboy Celtic's immediate concerns are the money it has already paid and the work still needed to finish the pitch. The Department is processing the club's claim for certified works. Officials can also discuss with the club what remains to be done and whether a revised timetable or changes to the approved works could help it complete the project under its existing allocation. As the Deputy is aware, the 2026 round of the community sport facilities fund is open until 26 February 2027. If the club identifies other eligible works, it can apply under that round. Any application would be considered on its merits under the published criteria.

I recognise what this project means to the club and the wider community in Athboy. The Department will continue to work with the club to establish what can be done within the terms of the programme to get the pitch completed. I greatly appreciate the suggestions the Deputy has made for future applications. The Minister and Minister of State will take these into account.

Deputy Aisling Dempsey: I appreciate the Minister of State's response on behalf of Minister, Deputy Burke, and the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue. Athboy Celtic has launched a GoFundMe page. I checked it last night, and it has just under €12,000 of its €150,000 goal. Donations have come in from the same people who originally fundraised the €150,000; the same parents and local businesses. In addition to that, we have seen a number of other local sports clubs come along. They are rivals on the pitch, for sure, but they are definitely in solidarity with Athboy Celtic on this matter. Navan Town Cosmos FC, Trim Town FC, and

Enfield Celtic FC have handed over their hard-earned funds, and it will not be forgotten by Athboy Celtic. I am sure that if the shoe was on the other foot, Athboy would do the same, but the point is it should never be the case that clubs have to do that for one another.

I appreciate a lot of the advice and resources that the Minister of State has offered. We could look more at the community sport facilities fund, or as we still call it, the sports capital grant. We should also ensure that clubs do not have to pay contractors upfront and then reclaim from the Department. That would really help our clubs and cut their risk. We should also implement some kind of VAT exemption or reclaim process on capital projects. This would save our clubs thousands of euro. We should ensure that the contractors are vetted and on an approved Department list, and as the Minister of State has already mentioned, the Department should work with clubs on best practices, supports and the expertise that it has at its disposal.

Our local sports clubs are important to the fabric of our communities. We need to support them in their time of need.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I again thank Dempsey for raising this matter. These are the sorts of matter that should be raised on the floor of our national Parliament. They matter not just to the fabric of the community supported by Athboy Celtic, but every community needs vibrant and viable sporting organisations that engage with the various schemes set up by the Government.

The Minister and Minister of State recognise the considerable distress that this liquidation has caused Athboy Celtic and other affected sporting organisations. Volunteers have invested substantial time and effort in these facilities and now face difficult decisions about how their projects can proceed. The Department of Culture, Communications and Sport will assist Athboy Celtic and focus on identifying practical options within the club's existing grant allocations and the conditions governing that funding. This approach will inform interactions with other impacted clubs, and departmental officials will work with affected grant recipients to establish how their approved projects can progress, considering the administrative flexibility available within the existing terms and conditions of the programme.

I assure the Deputy that the Department recognises the serious of the situation and will continue to engage constructively with affected clubs in order to help them identify realistic ways forward, while ensuring proper oversight of public funding. The Minister and Minister of State will keep the position under review as that work progresses and I encourage the Deputy to continue her level of advocacy directly with the Minister and Minister of State on behalf of the club and the wider community.

Departmental Funding

Deputy Dessie Ellis: The Ballymun Music Programme was established in 1996. It is one of the longest running community music education initiatives in Dublin. It began modestly as a small project in one primary school, St. Joseph's Senior National School in Ballymun, and from these small seeds it grew into a significant educational and cultural programme involving schools, families, professional musicians and the local community.

The programme grew out of the breaking the cycle initiative and was subsequently supported by the then Department of Education and Science and the Dublin Institute of Technology, DIT. It was initially known as the Ballymun Wind Band Project, and the idea of the initiative was to address both the educational and social disadvantage of children in Ballymun by giving such children, who might otherwise have had little or no access to formal instrumental music education, opportunities to learn through music and the arts.

The project was based on the following principles: music education should be accessible regardless of family income; children should have the opportunity to learn instruments from an early age; music can build confidence, discipline and self-esteem; and schools and the wider community should be involved in sustaining the programme.

The initiative gradually expanded beyond its original school and a partnership development between the DIT Conservatoire and schools in Ballymun and surrounding areas. The programme expanded to include wind and brass instruments, string instruments, choirs and singing, junior wind bands, and ensemble performances and concerts. Music educator Ron Cooney was an important figure in the development of this initiative, and he helped develop the programme's musical direction. This amazing programme involved a whole-community response between parents, schools, music teachers and the DIT partnerships. They have made this programme an outstanding success in the community. By 2008, the programme had developed a substantial musical infrastructure. A significant milestone was the opening of the Ballymun music room in 2009. Its opening was attended by representatives of the local community and dignitaries such as President McAleese and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. The music room provided a dedicated facility for music teaching and rehearsals, and this clearly showed that music education was an important part of community development, particularly as Ballymun was then part of one of the biggest regeneration programmes in Europe.

The year 2008 saw the creation of Ballymun Lullaby, a project to develop an original music composition for a youth orchestra and choir that subsequently involved the RTÉ Concert Orchestra and resulted in a documentary directed by Frank Berry. The documentary, released in 2011, followed young musicians from Ballymun and their musical development. Many of the talented students who came out of the programme progressed into more advanced music education and had opportunities to perform at the National Concert Hall, Trinity College, Dublin Castle and other prestigious venues. The programme also commissioned and performed original work such as "Fire" by Elaine Agnew in 2003.

The programme currently works with seven primary and secondary schools, and approximately 340 young people participate in the programme. A special 30th anniversary concert is scheduled for 30 November 2026 at TU Dublin's concert hall in Grangegorman.

The programme's current funding model is precarious, however. It is co-funded by Dublin City Council under the Ballymun social regeneration fund and by the TU Dublin Conservatoire. The Ballymun social regeneration funding is being wound down and reduced year-on-year. The Department of education must now play a significant role in the programme's future and should secure permanent funding for this truly amazing programme to continue.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I thank Deputy Ellis for raising this important matter, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Lawless.

I want to take this opportunity to acknowledge the significant contribution that the Ballymun Music Programme has made to the lives of children, young people, families and the wider Ballymun community over the past three decades.

The Ballymun Music Programme is a long-running and highly respected community music education initiative that provides free instrumental and vocal tuition to children attending schools in the Ballymun area. Led by TU Dublin Conservatoire and supported by Dublin City Council, the programme currently operates across four primary schools and three secondary schools, providing a structured pathway in music education from junior infants through to second level education.

As laid out by the Deputy, it was originally established as the Ballymun Wind Band Project under the breaking the cycle initiative in 1996. The programme emerged from a commitment to addressing educational disadvantage and expanding opportunities for young people through access to high-quality arts education. Over the last 30 years, it has grown into a flagship example of how sustained community engagement and educational partnership can support positive outcomes for children and young people.

Thousands of students have benefited from participation in the programme. Through access to free music tuition, instruments, ensemble performance and professional instruction, young people have had opportunities to develop musical talent, creativity, discipline and confidence. The programme has also helped foster resilience, teamwork and social inclusion while providing pathways for some participants to pursue further study and careers in music and related fields. Importantly, it has brought the joy of music and artistic expression to generations of children who may otherwise not have had access to such opportunities.

The Government recognises the important role that arts, culture and creative education can play in supporting educational attainment, personal development and community well-being. This is reflected in a range of supports provided across government through Departments, agencies and initiatives such as Creative Ireland, which contributes funding to the Ballymun Music Programme as part of its broader commitment to creativity, culture and well-being.

With regard to the present funding arrangements, I am advised that the programme is currently joint funded by TU Dublin and Dublin City Council, with both organisations contributing approximately 50% of the core costs each. Additional support is also provided through Creative Ireland. The Deputy will appreciate that higher education institutions are autonomous bodies with statutory responsibility for their own governance and operational affairs.

This autonomy extends to operational and financial decisions concerning programmes and projects they support. As such, decisions regarding the continuation, scale and funding of specific initiatives are primarily matters for the institutions concerned, having regard to their strategic priorities and available resources.

That said, the Government fully recognises the value local communities, participants, schools and public representatives place on the Ballymun music programme. The programme's longevity and impact stand as a testament to the commitment of all those involved, including teachers, programme staff, TU Dublin, Dublin City Council, participating schools, parents and students. The Department of the Minister, Deputy Lawless, remains supportive of initiatives that broaden participation in education and enrich the learning experience of young people. We

welcome the ongoing engagement between the relevant stakeholders and acknowledge the importance of exploring sustainable arrangements that can support the continuation of this successful and much-valued programme into the future. I commend the Deputy on raising this issue and advise him that the Government will continue to actively support the organisations as their discussions continue.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I thank the Minister of State for his response. I hope he will bring back anything I say to the Minister for education. As he said, this programme has been hugely successful for the past 30 years. Thousands of young children have gone through it. The benefits and contribution it has made to the lives of people in Ballymun and the surrounding area are absolutely immeasurable. However, there is a real concern that the Ballymun regeneration fund, which funds a certain amount of money for this project, has been reducing its funding in recent years and will eventually stop funding this programme because it is coming from Dublin City Council. That needs to be addressed, and there needs to be a proper funding mechanism that delivers on a regular and permanent basis. Whether it is funded from the Minister of State's Department, TU Dublin or Creative Ireland, they need to sit down with the people on the Ballymun music programme to sort out whether the funding will keep getting reduced, because this will have a knock-on effect on the whole programme. There are seven primary and secondary schools in Ballymun that avail of this. It could be expanded. At the moment, they are worried about what is happening to the present funding. The regeneration funding is critical in maintaining this programme. I urge the Minister of State and the Minister to talk to the relevant bodies, sit down with the Ballymun group on the music programme and address the issue of a potential major shortfall in the near future. This needs to be addressed because it is urgent.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue and highlighting the strong support that exists for the Ballymun music programme among students, families, schools and the wider community. Of course, there is broad recognition of the significant impact the programme has had over the past 30 years. It is very important to note how exactly this programme is funded, with contributions primarily from TU Dublin and Dublin City Council. The Deputy also alluded to the Ballymun regeneration fund and the small bit coming through Creative Ireland. While decisions regarding the allocation of resources and the continuation of specific projects are matters in the first instance for the organisations involved, I understand there have been concerns raised regarding the current funding arrangements, as well as the requests put forward by Deputy Ellis. The key request is that I go back to the Minister, Deputy Lawless, to update him on this debate and the points made by Deputy Ellis. I will also, on his behalf, acknowledge the value of the Ballymun music programme in his eyes.

I welcome today's debate, as does the Minister. I acknowledge the importance of the debate the Deputy has raised. We might find an element of progress on this as we look at the direct funders. This is about Dublin City Council and TU Dublin coming together. While the Minister directly relates to TU Dublin in that one instance, we have to ensure a level of autonomy and independence is there for our higher level institutions. The Minister will continue to engage with the authorities in TU Dublin to make sure it can make its financial contribution and play an active part in this. The Minister can contribute to that on the one hand, and on the other hand the Minister for local government can work with Dublin City Council.

We will do what is necessary. However, this is the primary focus and attention on this discussion. Hopefully, and most importantly, a resolution and certainty can be provided first and foremost to the young people in the schools in Ballymun going forward.

Road Tolls

Deputy Paula Butterly: Today, I want to discuss with the Minister of State an issue we cannot deny is a hot topic at the moment. I refer to the proposed toll increases in January, particularly those on the M1 corridor between Dublin and Belfast. This increase is going to have a huge impact on local hauliers and hauliers across Ireland, as well as on the goods that transit up and down the country, particularly between Belfast and Dublin, and on the cost of business. I appreciate everything Government has been introducing to tackle the cost-of-living crisis at its core - at the cost - rather than at the end by simply giving away vouchers willy-nilly to people. That does not do anything but put an inflationary pressure on the cost of living. As we see inflation creeping up again and again, we have to continue to have the eye on the ball and be aware of where the potential increases could come down the line across the supply chain.

Outside of the people who manufacture the goods, those who transport them are at the core of this debate. It is worth reminding people how food gets to their tables and how goods get into their fridges, cupboards and wardrobes. They are transported by our hauliers, including a considerable number of them in County Louth. The people who transport goods from the factory or farm to the supermarket shelves are the ones who are currently being impacted by the rising costs. We have done whatever we can to help them to reduce those costs, or at least to keep a lid on them right now. Quite frankly, adding an additional cost in the form of increased tolls is absurd at this moment in time. It is also unnecessary. We should not be allowing Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, to impose this on the hauliers when we have not done a financial impact assessment on the cost of business and on the supply chain.

Have we looked at that in the Department? Have we looked at the indirect consequences of these toll increases being imposed on hauliers? It is also an issue that affects commuters at the end of the day. The M1 motorway toll at Drogheda, which is the only tolled town in the country, is causing congestion. On top of the traffic congestion and gridlock in Drogheda every single day, it is proposed to add the burden of an increase in the bill to travel to work. That is clearly unfair to all the commuters. Nevertheless, the core of the topic here today is the impact on businesses. As a party that believes in supporting businesses, we have to look at every penny, dime and cent that could eventually impact them. They cannot absorb that forever. At some stage, they will have to pass that on. Who will they pass it on to but the consumer? The consumer is then faced with an increased cost of commuting to work, as well as the increased cost of their food, their clothes and everything else they put into a press or cupboard at home. I ask the Minister of State to analyse this and look at its potential impact to see if we can avoid putting in place these increases in January 2027.

Deputy Neale Richmond: From the outset, I acknowledge and thank Deputy Butterly not only for raising this but also for her consistent engagement on this issue and her advocacy for those directly and indirectly affected. It would also be remiss of me not to also acknowledge the Ceann Comhairle's own past in this area.

The Minister for Transport has responsibility for overall policy and Exchequer funding for the national roads programme. Once funding arrangements have been put in place with TII under the Roads Acts 1993 to 2015, and in line with the national development plan, the operation and management of individual national roads is a matter for TII in conjunction with the local authorities concerned.

2 o'clock

Therefore, matters relating to the day-to-day operations regarding national roads, including toll roads, are within the remit of TII.

There are 11 toll roads in the State, of which ten are on the national road network. Of the ten tolls on the national road network, two are essentially public tolls: the M50 and the Dublin tunnel. Revenue from these tolls is collected directly for TII by operating companies under contract to 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 public-private partnership company and is used to repay loans arising from the construction of the road 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. Maximum tolls are calculated for each vehicle category. TII calculates the maximum tolls for the Dublin tunnel and the M50 and decides the actual tolls that should apply. The PPP companies calculate the maximum tolls for the eight PPP concession schemes and propose the actual tolls that should apply. The mechanism for these calculations is set out in the individual toll by-law 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 the Minister when it comes to tolls. It is a matter for TII. Therefore, any analysis, as the Deputy has advocated, would be a matter for TII. It is important to note that TII does not have the right to unilaterally change the basis on which PPP toll rates are revised. It is also important to point out that many major new road developments in the last 25 years were funded through PPPs, meaning that the funding for the building and maintenance of the road came from both the Government and private businesses. These private businesses then charge for vehicles to use the roads that they have helped to build, via tolling. This has allowed for the rapid expansion of our motorway network.

Furthermore, 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 quality levels of service, accessibility and connectivity to transport users. In recent years, inflation has had a particular impact on the construction industry. This is particularly felt in relation to products such as bitumen which are used in road pavement repair, meaning the cost of the protection and renewal of the existing network has increased significantly. As such, toll revenue continues to play a vital role in the upkeep of our road network.

This does not for an instant dismiss the very real concerns that Deputy Butterly has raised today on behalf of so many road users, crucially with regard to the second-phase impact that any increase to tolls would have on homes, businesses and communities around the country. These decisions are not taken lightly or without justification. As I said, TII has used its calculator method, which it is able to do with the PPP companies, and has proceeded on this basis for the first time in quite some time with the proposed increases. That aside, I completely empathise with the points being made by Deputy Butterly.

Deputy Paula Butterly: I thank the Minister of State for that comprehensive reply setting out who is responsible for the setting of the tolls. While he noted that the Minister does not have a formal role to play in this matter, I am a great believer that there are more ways than one to skin a cat. While TII is responsible for the setting of the tolls and the policy, at the end of the day the Minister is the Minister for Transport and I believe that there are ways to encourage TII to take on board the pressures that hauliers are under.

Let us remind ourselves that these are not multinational companies; they are family-owned businesses. Many of the hauliers I know in Dundalk, Ardee and Drogheda are family-owned. They are father-and-son or father-to-daughter businesses and they employ vital people in my area where that is essential to the local economy. While TII will have done its analysis - I have not clearly understood exactly what that analysis is - I will go back to my first question. While it was looking at the inflation of construction work costs, etc., at the same time did it carry out an analysis of the impact this could have, indirectly and directly, on consumers at the end of the day? Those consumers jump into their cars at all hours of the morning to commute to work, and are strung out as they try to manage everything. Now they find that it is going to cost them more to go to work and come home from work. On top of that, it is probably going to cost them even more for a week's groceries. I ask the Minister of State where his informal powers would lie to engage with TII.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I am very grateful to Deputy Butterly. As she will be aware, over the past 25 years the Government has invested heavily in our national road network, with an extensive motorway system now in place. The motorway network has seen an almost tenfold expansion since 2000. As part of the programme for Government, there are commitments for increased funding for new roads and the protection and renewal of the existing network.

It is the intention of the Government, 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 during the 2026 to 2030 period. 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 Scramogue, N28 Cork to Ringaskiddy and Adare bypass projects.

In addition, this funding has allowed multiple major projects at an earlier stage of the project life cycle to progress. These projects include the Galway city ring road, which is the first road project in the State to be designed as critical infrastructure. Other projects such as the Limerick to Foynes project, the N20-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 can be improved on the network. The Government wishes to see the national road network, into which there has been so much public investment in recent decades, safeguarded for future generations. Toll revenue, therefore, is an essential component in achieving this.

While I acknowledge the Deputy's appeal for information on what informal influence the Minister could have over the process, it would be a little bit remiss of me to speculate on what, if any, informal process a Minister of State might follow in a very much parallel Department to the Department of foreign affairs. However, I encourage the Deputy to perhaps seek a deputation meeting with the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, or the Minister of State, Deputy Canney. I have no doubt that our colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, will be able to facilitate such a meeting on the specifics of toll increases before January.

Land Issues

Deputy Sorca Clarke: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, for taking this Topical Issue today. I am going to be very honest with him: I stand here, first, looking for his help and, second, in absolute frustration with Tailte Éireann. We know that at the end of October, there were over 70,000 land registry applications outstanding. More than 17,000 of them were lodged before this year. In May, Tailte Éireann's chief executive told the housing committee that clearing the arrears could take more than two years. This does not stop with home buyers. We know it affects property sales, farm transfers and business transactions. The Law Society has reported delays in obtaining copies of property documents. This is not a minor inconvenience; it is having real-life consequences for people simply trying to get on with their own lives.

I want to give the Minister of State a very specific example. I was recently contacted by constituents who are first-time buyers and who found themselves caught up in what I can only describe as an absolute nightmare. The application for approval for the development's scheme map was lodged with Tailte Éireann in September. Today, they can stand in the estate and look in the windows. The developer has given them access to the house so they can walk around their own future home but they cannot actually get the keys because of delays and that red tape. I have to put it to the Minister of State: I struggle to put into words the level of emotional toll this has taken on this couple. They were all set and ready to go. They had the date to sign on the dotted line and to get the keys for what would be their first family home, only to be told, "No, not today" and also, "We actually do not know when". To describe it as a kick in the teeth is the understatement of 2026. They have scrimped and saved up for the deposit. One of them has actually changed jobs from an entirely different county. They were so excited, and they should be. When you buy your first house, it should be an exciting time. They are distraught. They cannot draw down on the mortgage. The purchase cannot be completed. They have no keys and no indication of when this is going to change.

What I find incredibly frustrating is that this House was told in July that land registration generally happens after purchase and mortgage drawdown and should not delay the transaction. This is a scheme map application, the step before registering the individual sites.

The buyers' lender is absolute that it will not allow the mortgage to be drawn down until this is completed. That is the difference between saying something should not cause delay and something actually causing delay.

My office contacted Tailte Éireann and looked for a realistic timeline in this regard. My initial reaction to the reply I received was, "Thank you, Sherlock". I was told that the case was in a queue, but I already knew that. That is why I contacted Tailte Éireann in the first instance. Circular 25/2016 sets out a 15-day working day target for a substantive response to Oireachtas representation and requires departmental oversight of those standards. The reply I received was an exercise in copy and paste. It was not a substantive answer. It was a brush-off.

I am not excusing developers. If there is a problem with the maps that have been lodged or with the documentation, that is fine but tell me. I will hand it over to the solicitors and they can take it from there on behalf of the constituents.

I am looking for a solution. I need a resolution for this couple. It is grossly unfair. They are not asking for anything outside of information on where their case is in the queue. Tailte Éireann should not come back with another creative writing exercise telling them they are in a queue. That is the last thing they need to hear. What they need to hear is it is processing applications from July, that it has everything, and that it will be done in accordance with the rota and that it will be got to. If there is a problem, that is fine. Tell their solicitors what the problem is and allow them to take it forward. This couple went as far as installing an alarm in the property. That is how close they were. They were down to the 11th hour of walking out of the solicitor's office or the developer's meeting with a set of keys in their hands. Now, however, they do not have a clue what is going on.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): I thank Deputy Clarke for raising this important matter, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy James Browne, and for giving me the opportunity to clarify the position on the allocation of folio numbers to new-build developments and the role of Tailte Éireann in that regard.

Tailte Éireann is an independent Government agency under the aegis of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. Tailte Éireann provides a property registration system, a property valuation service and national mapping and surveying infrastructure for the State. Under section 8(6) of the Tailte Éireann Act 2022, Tailte Éireann is independent in the performance of its functions. Neither the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage nor the Department have any function in decisions in this regard.

The provision of a new folio number by Tailte Éireann occurs on the completion of specific application types, mostly by way of first registration on the Land Registry or division of registered land by deed of transfer or lease. Where the parent property, such as a developer's land, is registered on the Land Registry and has a folio number, applications to transfer part of the property must be lodged by the new owners for registration. The Deputy provided some outline of that, but I ask her to provide a bit more as to where precisely it is at the moment.

A separate application is required for each site or property within any development, and each application is lodged by the new owners. These applications require a compliant map to

be lodged, setting out the legal extent of boundary, which will result in a change to the registry map and a new folio number being provided for the relevant part of the property.

It may be noted that registration of or transfer of part comes at the end of the conveyancing process when all contracts and deeds have been executed between a developer and the purchaser, and after the owners are in occupation of their new homes. Any delay in the provision of a folio number in this case would, in the vast majority of cases, have no material impact on the new owner.

Where the property has not been registered on the Land Registry previously, an application for first registration is required. Applications for first registration of title account for approximately 12% of Tailte Éireann's overall intake. First registration applications are often complex and diverse. The first registration process often identifies issues on title or missing deeds, prolonging processing of applications significantly. Once a title is registered, it is guaranteed under the State's indemnification provisions. Each application must satisfy all legal requirements prior to proceeding to registration. On completion of the registered legal title, a new folio number is provided for the land in question.

It is not possible to determine whether any delay in a particular case is reasonable without knowing the history of progression of the case, or whether the application is in order to proceed to registration. In cases where any delay in registration could have a potential impact, Tailte Éireann makes every effort to expedite applications which are in order, where valid grounds exist and where doing so does not impose a conflict with regard to priority given to any prior lodged dealing. Lodging parties may contact Tailte Éireann in relation to a specific case by email at info@tailte.ie.

This is a very long answer and I will not reach the end of it. I understand the frustration of the Deputy's constituents. It is their new home. It is fully understandable.

In respect of scheme map approvals for large developments and multistorey buildings, the introduction of scheme map approvals for large scale developments was introduced by Tailte Éireann as a means to speed up the process of registering individual housing units once the development was completed. The developer submits the plans for the estate or multistorey building to Tailte Éireann to create a draft layer on the map of the relevant plots or sites in expectation of applications subsequently being lodged. No change is made to the parent folio at this stage and no new folio numbers are provided. Prior approval of a scheme map is not a legal requirement in the conveyancing process. However, by drafting all sites in accordance with an approved scheme, it removes the need for each individual house in the development to have an engineer set out its boundary accurately for registration.

Only on receipt of a valid application by the new owner will a copy of the approved scheme map be enclosed. Finally-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister of State will have two further minutes to come back.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: Yes, I will come back.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: I appreciate there is more in the reply than he has the time to read.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: The Deputy might just go through whether it is to do with the developer or with-----

Deputy Sorca Clarke: That is what I was going to say because I happen to agree. The Minister of State's reply stated, "…knowing the history of progression of the case and whether the application is [ordered] to proceed to registration". I cannot even get to that point. What I am getting back is that the couple's case is in a queue, but I already knew that. That is why I reached out to Tailte Éireann in the first place. I do not need another creative writing exercise, telling me they are in a queue in a different kind of way. I need to know where the case stands. Unless the couple can establish the point at which this application is, they cannot even look at making a case for an expedited application. They are hitting wall after wall. Their solicitor is telling them they cannot go ahead and the mortgage provider is saying they cannot draw down on this mortgage.

They know there is a folio number for the overall site. It is not even a big site. It is not multi-unit development. There are only about 12 houses in this development. It is a small development. They have a folio number for the overall site, but they do not have the individual jigsaw pieces, of which their houses is one piece, that make up the overall site. I am being generous when I say that both the couple and I are going in circles trying to find out exactly where this application is. As I said before, if it is a case of something missing, a mistake the developer made or something has not been signed that should have been, that is fine. Tailte Éireann should at least give them that information so that they can bring it back to the solicitors and they can move it forward. At this rate, who knows how long this could take. It could be next week or next year by the time this young couple have the keys of their home in their hands.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I thank Deputy Clarke for raising this important matter, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy James Browne, and for giving me the opportunity to clarify the position on the allocation of folio numbers to new-build developments and the role of Tailte Éireann in that regard.

Tailte Éireann has published on its website a report of all applications on hand currently, by year of lodging. It may be of assistance to the Deputy. I will provide her with the link. The report is updated on a monthly basis and includes the progress made on all applications received from each year or quarter year. Significant progress has been made in all areas of registration to reduce processing times for applications. I am confident Tailte Éireann has the resources and procedures in place to further reduce processing times for all applications seeking the provision of a new folio number. I expect that their solicitors have made contact with the Land Registry. Obviously, I will provide the Deputy with that link so that she can see this information online. She could also write to the Department and the Minister, and we can follow up on with this particular matter.

An Ceann Comhairle: If it is of any consequence to both Members, Tailte Éireann is the subject of a lot of submissions to me under Standing Order No. 55 on the basis of inadequate answers. The Minister of State might take that back to the Minister.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I will.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: They are exercises in creative writing.

An Ceann Comhairle: That concludes Topical Issues. We will have a sos for 40 minutes.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 2.19 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 3 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 2.19 p.m. and resumed at 3 p.m.

3 o'clock

Drug-Related Intimidation: Statements

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): Recent violent incidents in our communities, including the tragic deaths of the English family in Waterford, have brought renewed focus to the issue of drug-related intimidation and the devastating impact of organised crime. I wish to begin by extending my deepest condolences, and I am sure the condolences of this House, to the family of young Elliot English. He was only six years old. His death, and the deaths of his mother, father and two brothers, have shocked communities across the country. While the investigation of this horrific attack is a matter for the gardaí and relevant authorities, it has understandably renewed public concern about the harm that organised criminality, drug trafficking and intimidation can inflict on communities, families and individuals.

Drug-related intimidation is one of the most corrosive forms of criminality facing our society. It thrives on fear, exploits vulnerability and leaves families living under threat in their own homes. This behaviour is utterly unacceptable. It will not be tolerated and it will continue to be confronted through robust law enforcement, targeted interventions and co-ordinated action across government.

To anyone living under threat because of drug-related intimidation, whether through coercion, violence or attempts to collect so-called drug debts, my message is simple: you are not alone. The drug-related intimidation reporting programme operates nationwide and provides a confidential mechanism through which victims and families can seek support from An Garda Síochána. Gardaí assess each report based on the particular circumstances involved, with the safety and well-being of the individual or family as the foremost consideration. I urge anyone experiencing intimidation, anyone concerned about a family member or, indeed, a constituent, to contact An Garda Síochána. Reports are treated seriously, sensitively and confidentially. If people do not contact An Garda Síochána, regrettably they will find themselves responding to this threat on their own. They need to have confidence in the gardaí and be aware that they will get support provided confidentially and sensitively by the gardaí.

I have referenced the criminal networks that are behind the intimidation. I want to assure this House that our law enforcement agencies are working tirelessly to disrupt and dismantle these groups. Gardaí continue to tackle the importation, distribution and sale of illegal drugs. Operation Tara, the national Garda operation targeting organised drug dealing, is regularly producing seizures across the country, including €2.5 million of cocaine seized in north inner city of Dublin on Monday, 2 November. Three firearms and ammunition were also recovered in this operation, with two men and a woman arrested.

On Sunday, 8 November, as part of an intelligence-led operation, members of An Garda Síochána's Wexford drug and detective unit seized cocaine with an estimated value of €1million. Within the past week, gardaí have also made drug seizures in Limerick, Laois, Clare and Kildare. Intelligence-led operations, co-ordinated investigations and targeted enforcement activity, undertaken by the Garda national drugs and organised crime bureau, together with regional Garda units and the Criminal Assets Bureau have also led to criminal networks being deprived of drugs, cash, assets and the profits that sustain their illegal activities.

Operation Fógra, the Garda operation targeting drug-related intimidation with a victim centred approach, also runs in tandem with Operation Tara. Between Monday, 2 November and Friday 6 November, four people were arrested under organised crime legislation as part of a search and arrest operation in north Dublin. Quantities of cash and luxury items, as well as a vehicle, were seized. These arrests brought to 12 the number of people arrested and detained in respect of a criminal organisation operating in north Dublin.

I commend the work of the gardaí in these, and all the other, daily interventions they undertake to make our communities safer. Every seizure removes profits from criminal organisations. Every arrest disrupts criminal networks. Every intervention weakens the ability of those involved in organised crime to intimidate and exploit vulnerable people. These operations demonstrate that An Garda Síochána continues to target not only those involved in the supply of illegal drugs, but also those who seek to use fear and violence to maintain criminal control over communities.

Since taking office, I have made increasing Garda numbers and strengthening front-line policing a key priority. Recruitment is continuing at a strong pace and recently An Garda Síochána has reached the highest number of sworn Garda members in the history of the State, with 14,825 members serving across the country. That number will increase when we have the final attestation of the year next month bringing the numbers of sworn members of An Garda Síochána to 15,000 or very close to that.

Criminal organisations are sophisticated, well-funded and persistent. The State must be equally determined. I remain firmly committed to ensuring the gardaí have the resources they need. The additional investment being provided through budget 2027 will support the recruitment of up to 1,000 gardaí, strengthen specialist policing capabilities and ensure gardaí have the resources necessary to tackle organised crime at every level. These are not simply budgetary figures. They represent more gardaí in our communities, greater investigative capacity and a stronger response to intimidation, violence and organised crime.

Drug use is a scourge on our communities. We must also recognise and acknowledge, however, that no single intervention can eliminate organised crime, drug trafficking or drug-related intimidation. This is, as Members of this House know, a complex issue. It requires robust law enforcement but it also requires health services, family supports, community organisations, youth services and local leadership working together. Enforcement alone cannot address the underlying harms experienced by the individuals and families affected by drug use, intimidation and violence. This is why the Government is pursuing this dual approach: disrupting organised crime groups responsible for intimidation while ensuring victims and affected families can access practical supports and protections. This balanced approach recognises that community safety is about more than enforcement alone. It is about building

resilience, strengthening communities and ensuring that those affected know that support is available.

The long-term answer to organised crime requires stronger communities, stronger local partnerships and stronger opportunities. That is why the Government is supporting the new local community safety partnerships, which bring together local authorities, gardaí, the HSE, Tusla, community organisations, residents and councillors to identify and address local safety concerns.

The national strategy for community safety was launched by me earlier this week. It marks a significant milestone in how we approach community safety in Ireland. For the first time, we have a dedicated national framework to assist government, public services, local authorities, businesses and community organisations in coming together to deliver safer communities. It is about ensuring that everyone, regardless of who they are or where they live, can feel safe, supported and connected within their community. The launch of the strategy marks the next chapter in the evolution of community safety in Ireland and is a key element of the new community safety infrastructure established under the Policing, Security and Community Safety Act 2024.

Each of the 36 local community safety partnerships supported by the strategy are developing a local community safety plan based on the priorities identified by local communities themselves. These partnerships reflect a simple principle: communities themselves must be part of the solution. By bringing together local knowledge, public services and community leadership, we can develop responses that are tailored to local needs and focused on prevention as well as enforcement.

Alongside the measures outlined, the Government is also supporting communities through the DRIVE programme, a Department of Health-led initiative designed to respond to drug-related intimidation and violence. DRIVE brings together the gardaí, health services, drug and alcohol task forces, family support services and community organisations to ensure that those affected can access co-ordinated support. More than 800 practitioners have already received specialist training through the programme. The Government remains fully committed to this work. Budget 2027 provides an additional €300,000 in recurring funding, doubling investment in the programme and supporting its expansion nationwide.

I am conscious that some victims of intimidation may feel trapped and believe there is no way out. I want those individuals and families to know that support is available. The Government stands with victims and affected communities. We stand firmly against those who seek to profit from fear, violence and addiction.

I want to be clear in stating that organised criminal groups will not be allowed to control or own our communities. They do not define our future. The State has the resources, determination and resolve to confront them, and we are confronting them daily. I want those who live under threat to know that help is available and that the Garda will treat reports of intimidation seriously and confidentially. I want those engaged in intimidation and violence to know that the Garda will continue to target their activities, disrupt their operations and bring offenders before the courts.

Our approach is clear. There will be strong enforcement, practical support for victims, resilient communities and sustained investment in public safety. That is how we will protect communities, support victims and ensure that organised criminals are relentlessly pursued.

Of course, what is funding all of this illegal activity is the profits that are made by criminal gangs from dealing in illegal drugs. I know there are very many people in our society who, tragically, are addicted to drugs, and it is very hard for them not to seek drugs daily. We need to acknowledge, however, that there are many people within our community who use drugs for recreational purposes. They are not addicted to drugs and they decide to use them for their own selfish gratification. They may not be aware of it but it is important that we in this House emphasise to them that by involving themselves in the industry, they are funding the type of violence that we saw in Waterford recently. They are enabling drug dealers to engage in the type of intimidation and violence that all of us abhor. It is important that I, as Minister for justice, communicate a message to those people who use recreational drugs that by doing so, they are facilitating and encouraging the activities that everyone in this House wants to see stopped.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Cuirim fáilte roimh an deis labhairt ar an gceist seo arís.

Drug debt intimidation is destroying lives and families and leaving entire communities living in fear. The Government recently accepted Sinn Féin's motion on drug debt intimidation, which was welcome, but the communities affected by this criminal behaviour need more than just talk. They need action. That is what the Sinn Féin motion demanded. Families living under the threat of violence, intimidation and coercion cannot wait for another report, another review or another debate. They need to see a real and sustained response from the Garda and from all State agencies.

Since we last debated this issue, as the Minister has acknowledged, sadly another member of the English family, poor six-year-old Elliot English, has passed away. I express my deepest condolences to the family and to acknowledge the unimaginable trauma they are continuing to endure. I recently visited Waterford and I am aware of the devastating impact this incident has had on the entire community and of the determination that exists to ensure this never happens again in that community or in any other.

What happened to the English family in Waterford shocked us all but communities right across the country know that drug gangs have been inflicting fear, violence and intimidation on many families for many years. We need to appreciate the scale of the problem. In Dublin alone, there were 35 arson attacks on council homes in a single year, with many linked to drug debt intimidation and gang feuding. Families have been forced out of their homes, houses have been petrol-bombed, cars have been burnt out and parents, grandparents and siblings have been targeted. Tragically, we have seen people die by suicide in the hope that it would end the torment for their families. People are terrified. The majority of incidents go unreported and many people just pay so-called debts off because the truth is that they fear what would happen if they went to the Garda. Many people - this is important to note - are not aware of the supports that are available, so there has to be greater public awareness of the services that exist and much stronger supports for victims and families experiencing intimidation. We need people to know that if they are experiencing intimidation, there is help available.

However, we also need to recognise that support services on their own will not be enough. There has to be a dual approach. First, we need an immediate Garda crackdown on the drug gangs that are responsible, as well as a concerted focus by the Criminal Assets Bureau on targeting their assets. Second, we need a long-term strategy to tackle the conditions that allow these gangs to flourish in the first place.

On enforcement, the message has to be clear. Those involved in intimidation, extortion, violence and coercion have to be identified, arrested, prosecuted and imprisoned. We see drug debt intimidation and the activity of gangs escalate when the gangs think they can get away with it.

Communities also need to see visible policing. There needs to be an increased presence of community Garda on the ground, building relationships, knowing what is happening locally and engaging with young people. The reality is that many of the affected communities do not have that Garda visibility. They are living with the consequences of the systematic reduction in the number of community gardaí since Fine Gael entered government in 2011.

While drug debt intimidation can affect any community, we know that working-class communities are disproportionately impacted. We know that poverty, disadvantage, social exclusion and a lack of opportunities create the conditions for criminal gangs seeking to recruit and exploit vulnerable people.

One issue that requires particular attention is the grooming of children and young people into criminality. Today's comments from Tusla highlighted again something that many youth workers, teachers, community organisations and, indeed, political representatives have been warning about for years. Organised criminal gangs are deliberately targeting vulnerable young people for involvement in criminality and drugs and also for sexual exploitation. If we are serious about protecting children from criminal exploitation, grooming and recruitment by organised criminal gangs, we have to strengthen early intervention services and invest in communities. Ending this grooming and exploitation is also crucial to the disruption of the activity of criminal gangs.

Too many young people experiencing persistent school absence, traumatic upbringings, mental health challenges or educational disadvantage are not receiving the support they need early enough. Most disgracefully, we know that those who are in the care of the State are particularly vulnerable to such exploitation.

Educational welfare services play a crucial role in identifying vulnerability and supporting families before problems escalate. We know these services are seriously overstretched and understaffed, resulting in opportunities for early intervention being missed and children falling through the cracks. We need stronger intervention at the earliest possible stage. We need more education welfare officers, more youth workers, stronger school support and wraparound services that support children and families before they reach crisis point. We then need to examine whether our laws are adequately equipped to deal with the grooming of children into criminal activity. If the laws are not working or are not resulting in prosecutions, then we need to address this as a matter of urgency.

Communities also need long-term investment. They need properly funded youth services, addiction services, recovery supports, mental health services and diversion programmes. They need outreach workers and family support workers. They need safe community spaces and

facilities that provide alternatives for our young people. We have the resources to invest in communities and to support those who are most vulnerable to exploitation. We have the resources to ensure communities have proper policing but the question is one of why there is not the political will to do this. Communities deserve to be safe. Families deserve to live free from fear. Children deserve to grow up free from the threat of criminal exploitation.

The Government has acknowledged the seriousness of the issues, which I welcome, but communities now need to see action. They need to see the type of policing response and community investment that is so urgently required.

Deputy Mark Ward: Drug debt intimidation is a scourge on our community and it is not a new phenomenon. This has been going on for decades. However, the violence inflicted on people has reached new levels, levels that I have not seen before. Drug debt intimidation has no place in our communities. The people who are doing this suck the lifeblood out of our communities and offer nothing in return. Those involved in drug debt intimidation often exaggerate the amount of money that is owed.

Drug debt intimidation takes many forms.

Criminal gangs are grooming children into crime. They are letting them run up drug debts and forcing them into the drug trade. If the child gets caught with drugs, there are few or no consequences in the courts, as they are minors, but the parasites who groom these children will demand the money back, so the vicious cycle continues. Last year there was even a report from the Blanchardstown drug and alcohol task force that outlined that children as young as seven have been acting as drug runners. Cuckooing is when drug gangs take over the homes of vulnerable people to sell drugs. The vulnerable people often become prisoners in their own home. We have also seen reports of vulnerable women being coerced into sex to pay back debts that they owe these unscrupulous drug dealers.

The firebombing of homes is becoming a *modus operandi* for these thugs. We witnessed the recent tragedy in Waterford. I offer my condolences on the recent passing of the young child there. In my own area alone, dozens of homes have been firebombed. I have raised this numerous times. It leaves ordinary residents in the area absolutely terrified. The first thing that our communities need is more gardaí on the street, just to allow them to breathe and get on with their daily lives. High-visibility policing works to keep our communities safe and it needs to be rolled out across all affected communities. We need a Garda operation to crack down on drug debt intimidation. The Government needs to fund community services. We need to address poverty, inequality and exclusion. This is what allows criminal gangs to take hold. We need to be able to give our communities the resources so they can build resilience against these criminal gangs.

Deputy Ann Graves: I stand with the families and communities who live with the consequences of drug-related violence and intimidation. They have the right to live without the threat of violence and intimidation by anyone. I have met families, listened to their devastating stories and witnessed their heartbreak and fear. We stood with families and victims of intimidation outside the Dáil at the recent vigil organised by Family Addiction Recovery Ireland, FARI. I promised FARI to call for action from the Government. It has two simple asks. It is looking for funding for a co-ordinator and representation on the national drugs

strategy oversight committee. I urge the Minister to meet its members and to respond to their asks as a matter of urgency. Violence and intimidation continue to affect people right across Ireland, particularly in areas that are already disadvantaged and dependent on overstretched public services.

Tackling violence and intimidation cannot be left to drug task forces or youth services. There must be a comprehensive all-of-government approach, which must include all of our stakeholders such as the Garda, youth services, local authorities, drug task forces, education providers and HSE. This week, the Minister had the opportunity to put tackling drug-related violence at the centre of Government policy with the launch of the national strategy for improving community safety. The strategy mentions numerous types of violence but fails to highlight drug-related intimidation. That is disappointing, but it is also a missed opportunity. I urge him to address this omission and ensure that drug-related intimidation is central to the community safety strategy.

The newly established local community safety partnerships are well placed to work with the relevant stakeholders to tackle the causes and consequences of violence and intimidation, which I welcome. The Government supported the recent Sinn Féin motion on drug-related intimidation, which was solution-focused. If the Minister is serious about tackling violence and intimidation in our communities, he must support those solutions. The canal communities community-based safety strategy is an evidence-based public health approach to violence. The project has two full-time staff and I ask for a commitment from the Minister to fund this project, which has already yielded results. This week, we see a greatly increased Garda presence across the city centre and some communities have benefited from this extra presence. I hope that once the dignitaries have all left, people can look forward to an increased Garda presence in communities that need a strong and visible policing service. Since the Sinn Féin motion was agreed, there have been a number of serious violent crimes against families and sadly the English family of Waterford has suffered yet another tragic loss, that of six-year-old Elliot, who lost his battle for life. How much can a family sustain? It is time to break the silence and for Government to support communities battling against drug-related intimidation and violence.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I cannot believe that I am going to say this, but in less than a year, four children in this State have been murdered by arson and petrol bomb attacks on their home, along with other members of their family, including their parents. That is incredible and extraordinary. A child just lost his life on Friday because of an arson attack on his home.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I know.

Deputy Gary Gannon: We are in a national crisis and the urgency of this crisis has been given the attention that it deserves. That is not to try to insult, undermine or to cast blame. This is a national failure, but it needs a national response. Today, the head of Tusla, Kate Duggan, talked about 300 to 400 children in this State being coerced into crime and criminality. The profile of those children, though they may range in age and are in different parts of the country, can almost be painted. They inevitably come from a background that may have involved poverty or addiction. The child's vulnerability is what makes him a target of exploitation. In this State right now, we have the head of Tusla telling us that this is happening. We have to see this as endemic and we have to get out in front of it.

It will require a multitude of different approaches. We have the drug-related intimidation and violent engagement, DRIVE, programme. The DRIVE programme in many ways is a good initiative. There are issues which I would seek to fix but even the data that the DRIVE programme gives us tells us that there were more than 1,100 incidents of drug-related intimidation between 2024 and 2025. That is 1,100 instances of a family or an individual being terrorised, either they as their person being threatened, their home being threatened or their children being threatened by criminal gangs and entities seeking to exploit and gain financially. This is exactly why this should be the biggest issue that we are facing across the State. In the Minister's Department, it is which we have to give a collective effort to resolve. I have met many families who talk about the grooming of children into crime and criminality. This is not just a case of someone seeing a vulnerable child giving them money. It is far more insidious than that at times. This is a child who is vulnerable being exploited either through the threat of physical violence, the act of physical violence, or instances of sexual exploitation. Those children are being conditioned to commit crimes of the most horrible form against other people in the community. Two things can be true at once. A young person can commit crime and be groomed into criminality. Fagin's law was brought in a couple of years ago. There have only been 17 convictions, prosecutions and charges under that law, so it is clearly not working.

I ask the Minister from the bottom of my heart to make this a national emergency and come at it in a plethora of different ways. That should involve the Department, Garda, youth workers and health professionals. We need to come at the means by which people are profiteering, the addiction that sustains it, and the gang violence that threatens it. We will work with the Minister on that.

Deputy Rory Hearne: The Minister knows the ongoing issues. It is deeply upsetting and disturbing that we have this level of intimidation across the country. It is not acceptable that families and children are being terrified. Their lives are being completely absorbed by the grip of gangs who are engaging in criminal activity that is destroying communities and the lives of children who should not have to be exposed to that level of vulnerability. In my constituency, where the Minister has been to visit areas such as Ballymun, there are children who have been given no other option and have been forced into it because gangs control areas. That is not acceptable and the Minister should not accept it.

In particular, there is a need to fund projects like DRIVE properly. We need to ensure that gardaí are visible in our communities and that we have a sufficient number of them. The Ballymun Implementation Board has met with the Minister. Specifically in relation to it, will the Minister commit to extend the life and existence of that board because there are significant community safety issues in Ballymun that are jeopardising the massive progress that has been made in that community in terms of work being done? I refer to the Ballymun Athletics Club, the Ballymun Tidy Towns group and the drugs task force, of which I am a part. Incredible community work is being done around recovery at a local level with schools and community services. I urge the Minister to commit to that.

Deputy Daniel Ennis: We are seeing children losing their lives now and petrol bomb attacks all over the city. It is really scary stuff. The Minister knows Dublin Central, especially the north inner city. He has been there and he has met the groups and the children we are working with. We are working with hundreds of kids; trying to save them. We are the safety nets. The

Minister knows the supports we need. We would not get a two-bedroom house for the €350,000 that has been put into drug-related intimidation initiatives. We are looking to build sports complexes - to build safety nets to stop kids falling into that river of crime, addiction, etc. It used to start at 13 and 14 years of age but now it is starting at eight, nine and ten. Tusla was telling us that this morning. It is scary.

I am raising a nine-year old son myself in the north inner city. I was a kid that was saved by a good youth diversion programme and a crime prevention plan through a sports club. We need to invest in those services. The gangs on Sean McDermott Street in Dublin 1 are using the playground in Diamond Park to sell drugs. I have seen videos of grown men cutting up playgrounds so kids or people would not use them because there is too much activity in them. That is a stone's throw from O'Connell Street. We are talking about regenerating the city centre. We are talking about lovely glossy glass buildings. It starts with this. It really does. If we want to see the regeneration of Dublin's city centre, it starts with this work. Communities, community groups, sports clubs and residents of the north inner city in Dublin Central have been screaming about this for generations. This was always coming. The services that are there are doing amazing work but they are just pulling kids out that river. We have to go to the start of where that river is and stop them from falling in; and €350,000 is simply not enough.

Friends and families whose kids are finding drugs on the balcony of their flats are reaching out to me. Two minutes later they ring, after they have told me the story, saying: "Jesus, Daniel, whatever you do, don't tell anybody, don't tell the police, don't tell the authorities. I'll be thrown out of me place. Me place will be petrol bombed. It'll be torched." That is not the way. That is not representation. We are not doing enough for these people. We are really not. Could the Minister do more and give more to this fund? This is a nationwide issue. He should not get me wrong; it is multifaceted but we need to be giving communities more. We have seen the resources that were deployed to the north inner city, for instance, because of the EU meetings. We need that not just for one week but we need it every week, and we need sustained multi-annual funding. The community groups, sports clubs and the residents know the fixes to the problems in their areas. Let us listen to them. Let us give them the tools to fix the problems that we are seeing.

Deputy Tom Brabazon: I want to begin by extending my deepest condolences to the English family and the wider community in Waterford following the horrific murders of Philip and Kim English and their two young children, Callum, Jayden and Elliot. Drug-related intimidation is one of the most destructive issues facing communities across this country. I know from my own constituency the level to which ordinary decent families have been subjected to appalling threats and intimidation by criminal gangs. These cases often begin with a young person incurring a drugs debt, and when they cannot pay, the threats begin. Before long, their parents and other family members are being threatened over debts that they themselves have absolutely nothing to do with. Many families are terrified of coming forward. They feel that if they speak out about what is happening, it will only make matters worse and so families that have committed no crime find themselves living in fear in their own homes, worried about who might be outside the door or what might happen to their children. This cannot be allowed to become normal.

I acknowledge the gardaí and the wonderful work they are doing to tackle criminal behaviour. However, we need to make sure that they have the personnel and the resources to

take on these gangs and to bring them to justice. I heard another Deputy talking about the grooming legislation. The level of prosecutions on that are very disappointing, to say the least. We can see grooming taking place all over the city. It does not take a lot of undercover work to detect it, so I am perplexed as to why there are not more prosecutions of that.

Above all, families need to know that when they come forward, they will be listened to, protected and supported. Nobody should have to live in fear of criminal gangs, and no family should be left feeling that they have nowhere or nobody to turn to. We need to close off opportunities to these criminal gangs. We need to do this by further investment in youth diversion. We need to increase the Garda presence in troublesome areas. We need to design out crime. In the UK, there is strong legislation where the local police forces are involved in the planning process where they design out criminal opportunities.

We also need to increase specifications on buildings to make those buildings more impenetrable. In my constituency, I am dealing with families on a particular street where the buildings are not that long built. They were built under the current building regulations yet they are easily penetrable by criminal gangs who use the common areas in the apartments to get up their nefarious activities: hiding and stashing drugs, charging up their e-bikes and their other equipment. In some cases, they are using the common areas as toilets. It is absolutely unacceptable behaviour by these gangs and we really need to stamp it out. We need to be more innovative in how we deal with this on a policy level.

Deputy Grace Boland: I welcome this opportunity to speak on the issue of drug-related intimidation. This is an issue causing enormous harm to families and communities right across Ireland. We need to speak honestly about the fear and intimidation being experienced by ordinary families behind closed doors. I know of families close to me in my constituency and beyond whose children went from smoking weed recreationally to being drawn into a cycle of debt and exploitation. What started as casual drug-taking quickly escalated. They fell into debt to dealers. They were then pressured to sell drugs themselves to pay off that debt. When that was not enough, the pressure moved to their families. Parents found themselves being told that their son or daughter owed money. There is no ledger and no contract. There is no evidence of any debt, yet these families paid because they were terrified. They feared something would happen to their child or their home, and they feared for their other children. They feared the consequences of refusing criminal gangs who had already demonstrated what they are capable of. Once that first payment is made, there is often no end to it. Another demand follows and then another. The family becomes a source of income in its own right. That is one of the cruelest aspects of drug-related intimidation because the victim is not just the person using drugs, the entire family becomes the victim. Parents who spend years working hard to provide for their children suddenly find themselves living in constant fear and handing over money that they cannot afford to lose.

Increasingly, criminal gangs have realised that parents and grandparents are easier to intimidate and a more reliable source of income than the person who originally incurred the drug debt. That should concern every one of us in this House. We have all seen how these situations can escalate. We have seen homes attacked and petrol-bombed. We have seen innocent people lose their lives. Behind every headline is a family whose world has been shattered.

That is why we must continue to support An Garda Síochána. The Garda are on the front line tackling organised criminal gangs, investigating intimidation and protecting communities. They need the resources, personnel and powers required to disrupt these criminal networks and to hold the people responsible accountable. Enforcement alone is simply not enough. We must also invest in prevention and intervention. We need to support young people before they become caught up in this cycle. Organisations such as Foróige do exceptional work in communities right across the country. I see the value of that work at first hand in Balbriggan, Skerries, Rush and Lusk. Every day they provide positive opportunities, trusted adults and safe spaces for young people who may otherwise be vulnerable to criminal influence. Investment in youth services and wraparound supports is not simply social spending, it is crime prevention and it is community protection. We also need to recognise that the challenges are not the same in every community. Areas experiencing the highest levels of drug-related intimidation should be prioritised for additional resources.

That means more youth diversion projects, family support workers, addiction services, counselling supports, Garda visibility and community interventions operating together in the same location. Too often, we see families passed from service to service when what they need is co-ordinated support.

We need better supports for families facing intimidation. Too many parents do not know where to turn. They need safe reporting mechanisms, practical advice and confidence that they will not face the situation alone. Drug gangs rely on fear, silence and isolation and we must prove them wrong. This requires a whole-of-society response involving An Garda Síochána, schools, youth organisations, local communities and Government. We must protect vulnerable young people, support families living under intimidation and relentlessly pursue those who profit from fear.

At the heart of this issue are not statistics or policy papers, but parents lying awake at night worrying about their children. There are families who are afraid in their own homes. Those families deserve our support, they deserve our protection and they deserve to know that we will stand with them against those who seek to profit from intimidation, fear and misery.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: The scourge of drug debt-related intimidation is one I have experienced in my constituency of Dublin North-West. The level of threats, harassment, violence or even coercion connected to illegal drug activity has grown substantially in recent years. My constituency office constantly hears from distraught parents and families about a family member who has accumulated a drug debt. Drug dealers are coming to their family homes to put pressure on family members to pay off that debt. These innocent family members face demands for money and threats of violence or damage to the family home if money is not handed over. Family members can also be coerced into storing, transporting or even selling drugs to offset the drug debt.

More concerning is the exploitation and grooming of young people who can often be pressurised into carrying out acts of violence and intimidation. This harassment of innocent family members has caused great stress and anxiety for those under this insidious threat from unscrupulous criminal elements, who have shown in the past through their actions that they are capable of anything and have little or no care for the safety or well-being of innocent people. People are genuinely afraid to report these instances of threats and intimidation to the Garda

for fear of retaliation for providing information that might lead to the conviction of these criminals and drug dealers. People also lack confidence that if they do report such intimidation, they and their families will be kept safe. Due to this distrust of the authorities and a reluctance to seek help, the intimidation continues without abatement.

It is not just the families who are affected. Very often, you will find that communities live in fear of these drug dealers. The recent tragic events in Waterford have given rise to a greater awareness of drug-related intimidation. No person - man, woman or child - is safe from their demands and actions. This has been going on for years and it should not take such a tragedy for the Government to act. There need to be better protection and support for intimidated families, safer and more confidential reporting arrangements for those being threatened, and more accessible counselling services for those under threat. The drug and alcohol task forces and community services need to be properly funded, as they play an important role in the community, particularly where families are experiencing threats over drug debts. The Garda, schools, social services and community organisations should co-ordinate a co-operative response to such intimidation. These families under threat are victims and it is an issue that cannot be ignored.

It is also an issue that is not just confined to economically vulnerable areas, given that the scourge of drugs has reached into all areas of society. The Criminal Assets Bureau, CAB, needs to target these drug gangs and all associated with them. No family should have to live in fear of having their house petrol bombed or ransacked, windows broken, their car set on fire or an innocent family member being physically attacked.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I want to reflect first on the horrific and tragic loss of the English family, with six-year-old Elliot being laid to rest tomorrow. It is just incomprehensible the level of suffering that has been inflicted on those boys, their parents and all of their extended family and friends who now have to try to live in the aftermath. We remember Tadhg Farrell as well and his grand-aunt Mary Holt as we approach a year since their awful murders.

Imagine getting a knock at the door and being told that you owe thousands of euro for drugs you have never taken. The person at the door knows where your children go to school and tells you they will be back on Friday. What do you do? Do you go to the Garda and risk what the person at the door said would happen if you did? Do you borrow the money and hope that paying it will make them go away? Do you send your children to stay with a relative and try to explain why they cannot sleep in their own beds? That is the position families are being put in, and when we tell them to come forward, we owe them a clear answer about what happens once they do.

I acknowledge the families who stood outside Leinster House last week at the vigil organised by Family Addiction Recovery Ireland. Some spoke publicly about the threats to their children and the attacks on their homes. They should never have had to disclose some of the most frightening moments of their lives to get the attention of this House. Gardaí must be allowed to do their work and establish the facts. We in this House have work to do as well.

The first national DRIVE project report recorded 1,027 cases of drug-related intimidation disclosed to drug and alcohol services. That included 873 cases in 2025 and a partial set of records for 2024. We must think about who is missing from those figures: the parent who is too frightened to make the call; the teenager who is afraid to tell anybody who he or she owes

money to or why; and the grandparent who hands over his or her savings and tells nobody. Drug debt is a means of controlling people. The amount owed can change even after a family pays. A young person can be told to carry drugs or collect money from somebody else to clear what they supposedly owe. By the time a parent finds out, their child can be both a victim of intimidation and somebody who is being made to intimidate others. We need gardaí, youth workers and schools to be able to recognise that coercion early and act on it. There is already a Garda reporting programme and there is good work being done through DRIVE and our community addiction services.

I want the Minister to take us through what that means for a family in practice. Who is their named contact? Who assesses that threat? If they cannot safely stay in their home that night, who takes responsibility for finding somewhere safe for them and their children? I want the Departments of justice, Health and children to agree a common response with the Garda, the HSE, Tusla and local authorities. A family should be able to tell their story once and know who is dealing with their case. They should know when they will hear back. In a town where people may be reluctant to walk into their local Garda station, they should know that they can also approach a community service in confidence and get help taking the next step. The Garda must have the resources to investigate threats and assaults and establish who is directing them. Follow the money. Use the CAB, where appropriate. Judge the response by what happens to the family after they report. Can they stay in their home safely? Have the threats stopped? Can their children go back to school without fear?

If we are serious about tackling intimidation, we also have to talk about drug use and the harm it is causing. The Health Research Board recorded more than 15,000 cases treated for problem drug use in 2025. Cocaine was the main problem drug in more than four out of ten of those cases. There is a market for cocaine in our cities, towns and rural Ireland. Some people who buy it on a night out will go home and think little more about it. The money they spent still goes into a market where debts are collected at front doors and children can be threatened in their own homes. We should be willing and able to say that plainly.

We also have to make it easier for somebody to ask for help before his or her drug use becomes a crisis. As a former teacher, I think about the pupil whose attendance drops off, who starts turning up exhausted and who is worried about what will happen when they go home. A teacher can notice that change. A youth worker may be the first adult that the young person trusts enough to tell. Both need somewhere to turn and that young person needs a service they can see will help them while they are still willing to talk. In my own constituency in north Cork, we have a community addiction hub in Mallow. I acknowledge the work that Coolmine Therapeutic Community and its staff do there. Recent HSE figures put the wait following a referral at 12 weeks in north Cork compared with three weeks in Cork city north and two in Cork city south. I know from my own family what it takes to get somebody into treatment.

My brother has been in treatment twice over the past two years. The first time, it cost €8,000. We love him and we hope that treatment helps him. There is a part of recovery that only he can do and, as a family, we can be there for him while he does it. I think, though, about a family facing the same decision we had to make and with no way of finding that €8,000. When somebody is ready to get help, there should be a service ready to see and serve them.

I want a funded plan to bring down that waiting time in north Cork, give people an early assessment and a named point of contact, fund community treatment and family support, and

make sure that there are residential places for people who need them and follow-up care when they leave. If somebody has no secure place to live while waiting for treatment or is going back to an unsafe home afterwards, the HSE and local authorities should be working on that with them from the first assessment.

That brings me, although it is outside the Minister's remit to an extent, to supervised injecting facilities. I wholeheartedly support welcoming one in Cork city. It might not be popular to say that. I want the Government to give the HSE a clear mandate to start that work, with a timetable and early engagement with residents, businesses and front-line services. At Merchants Quay Ireland, MQI, in Dublin, my colleague, former Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin, worked extremely hard on it. We have seen that the Department reported 560 overdose interventions by 24 September, all non-fatal. Let us think about where those overdoses could otherwise have happened: in a lane, in a public toilet or somewhere else a person could be on their own at a time when they needed help. In a supervised facility, a trained person is there to respond. There is also somebody who can speak to them about a wound that needs treatment, an addiction appointment or where they are going to sleep that night.

Residents and businesses have every right to ask how a Cork facility would be managed. They will want to know the opening hours, who they can contact if a problem arises and what will be done about discarded needles and public injecting. Those are reasonable questions. Put the answers in the plan from the beginning, give residents a named contact and report back to them on what is happening in their area. I will not stand here and speak out of both sides of my mouth about intimidation tactics while not supporting a supervised drug injecting facility in Cork city. The early evaluation in Dublin reported evidence of less public injecting and less drug-related litter nearby. Cork should be able to learn from that experience. The Government can start by asking the HSE to assess local need, identify the services the facility should connect people to and set out what it should take to get it open.

I want to hear the Government making three commitments. It should give every family who reports intimidation a named contact and a plan for their safety. It should set out how it will cut the wait for addiction support while liaising with the Department of Health. The Department of Health needs to give Cork a clear timetable for progressing a supervised injecting facility. The next time a family gets that knock at the door, it should know exactly who it can call. When it makes that call, somebody should take responsibility for what happens next.

I take this opportunity to thank members of An Garda Síochána, locally and nationally, for the fantastic work they are doing regarding drug-related intimidation. It is not easy for members of An Garda Síochána to be doing this. They often live in the communities where they are doing this investigative work, so I fully and wholeheartedly support them. As legislators, we must support them also. An underlying issue, of course, is that we also have to support the families suffering from this issue. These are the families who come into constituency offices and tell us that they are going down to the local credit union to take out a loan of €10,000, €20,000 or €30,000 to pay a drug dealer for a drug debt for drugs they did not consume themselves. That is the reality, unfortunately. I wholeheartedly support every initiative that both the Minister and the Minister of State bring forward, in any way, shape or form, to help drug addicts and their families and to support their communities.

Deputy Paula Butterly: I raise the issue of the growing problem of drug-related intimidation in County Louth, which is causing immense fear and hardship for families. Drug-related intimidation is not an abstract issue. It is happening in the estates, town centres, communities and countryside of County Louth that I represent every day. Families in Drogheda, Dundalk, Ardee and similar communities throughout Louth are living under a shadow of threats from criminal gangs that use fear and intimidation to maintain control and collect debts. I have seen and heard stories of houses being petrol-bombed, curtains catching fire, families fleeing for their lives and families going into credit unions looking for the few euro to pay a debt that is not theirs. I have heard of a young man sleeping in his car who has not returned to the family home in a couple of years because the drug debt is so high and the intimidation of the family so severe that he fears not only for his life, but for the lives of his family. He will not return home.

For too long, these organised criminals have preyed on vulnerable people struggling with addiction. What starts as a small debt can quickly escalate into a campaign of intimidation. Homes are targeted. Family members are threatened. Parents and grandparents, often completely uninvolved in these criminal activities, become victims because they are related to somebody who has an addiction. No community is immune to these threats. Even in the heart of the countryside, these gangs get their putrid claws into our children. In Drogheda, we have seen at first hand the devastating impact that organised crime can have on a community. For years, criminal gangs have sought to establish fear as a means of control.

An Garda Síochána, through initiatives such as Operation Stratus, has made significant progress in targeting organised crime. We have seen the results go through the courts and those people put behind bars. However, their power and influence still loom large over the town of Drogheda. The legacy of intimidation remains for many families. I have spoken to constituents who are afraid to answer the door. I have met parents terrified that their children are being groomed by criminal networks, particularly in some of the more disadvantaged areas. Community workers, teachers and addiction support services across Drogheda and Dundalk consistently report that families are living with stress, anxiety and isolation because of threats related to drug debts.

We have also seen how criminal gangs are deliberately targeting young people, some as young as seven. Let us pause for a moment and dwell on that: these are children as young as seven. They are being used as drug mules to take bags of drugs to school gates. By the time they are nine, they graduate, but not from school. They graduate from simply being the mule who brings the drugs to being the pusher. What chance have these children got? They are exploited for their vulnerability. They are offered money, status and a sense of belonging. The reality is that these gangs could not care less about our young people. They care only about money. Young people are viewed as assets to be exploited and discarded when they are no longer useful.

That is why the answer cannot be policing alone. I know the Minister has been very good in the past and has listened to my concerns about this issue. We need to punish the crime severely where it has been committed, but we also have to get stronger on preventive measures. This has been focused on a lot in Drogheda, but much more work has to be done. I acknowledge the work being done by An Garda Síochána in Drogheda, Dundalk and the mid-Louth area. I also recognise the contribution of local organisations such as the Red Door Project, Drogheda

Homeless Aid, Mid Louth Youth Service and the Redeemer Family Resource Centre in Dundalk. These are people who have put their hearts and souls into working day and night with members of their communities. Every day, these services are helping individuals and families to rebuild their lives. However, they need greater support. Very often, they are going from pillar to post, scratching and looking for the coins under the sofa, or applying, reapplying and going through red tape to access the funding they need to offer these vital services. We need additional investment in addiction treatment services in the north east.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I begin by expressing my deepest sympathies to the English family and their friends and wider families following the horrific tragedy in Waterford. The loss of five lives, including three children, is heartbreaking.

4 o'clock

I also want to remember Tadhg Farrell and his great-aunt Mary Holt, who only a year ago lost their lives in Edenderry while watching television.

Drug-related intimidation is one of the most sinister forms of criminality in our society. Those who use threats and fear to control vulnerable people are in many ways the modern-day slavery traders of our communities. They exploit addiction, trap people in debt, threaten families and force vulnerable people into criminal activity. They use fear to take control of people's lives. Drug-related intimidation cannot be tolerated or excused and above all it cannot be normalised but I fear we are becoming increasingly accepting of the culture that allows this criminality to flourish.

Drug-taking is increasingly treated as an ordinary part of social life. Drug dealers display their wealth and lifestyles, presenting criminality as a route to success. Those buying drugs socially may believe they are doing no harm but that money helps to sustain the criminal industry responsible for intimidation and exploitation. We must challenge the glorification of drug taking, drug dealing and the criminal lifestyle that surrounds them. I welcome the work by the Minister and the Government. The increased investment in An Garda Síochána, Operation Tara's work targeting drug trafficking networks and Operation Fógra's focus on victims are all important. The DRIVE programme is another significant development, bringing gardaí, health services and community organisations together to support those affected.

We must recognise the difference between protecting somebody from intimidation today and preventing them from becoming a victim tomorrow. We must do the first but unless we invest properly in the second, we will be having the same debate here in ten or 20 years' time. Drug-related intimidation is a visible symptom. Beneath it lies a cycle of addiction, disadvantage, exploitation and criminality, which we must always fight to break. If we are serious about breaking that cycle, education, early intervention and continued care must be central to our response.

I recently visited the Acorn Project in Edenderry in my constituency in Offaly. I was genuinely blown away by what I witnessed. I met young people, some of whom have experienced extremely difficult circumstances. What struck me was their confidence and abilities and the opportunities being opened up to them. These young people are being given something every child deserves - love, attention, encouragement and somebody who believes in them. They are learning practical skills for life including cooking, performance, psychology,

open communication and personal development. More important, they are learning how to make decisions, overcome challenges, build relationships and take responsibility for their futures. Having spoken with these young people, I can say with confidence that in many respects they are better prepared for the real world than most.

Acorn demonstrates that a young person should never be defined by the circumstances they were born into or the difficulties they have experienced. Their potential is still there. Sometimes, they simply need somebody to recognise it and help them to realise it. I sincerely acknowledge the extraordinary work by everybody involved. We already have 92 youth diversion projects nationwide. I welcome the emphasis on prevention in the new national drugs strategy but we must build on that work, learn from programmes like Acorn and ensure early intervention is followed by continued care into adulthood.

Drug dealers seek to control vulnerable people through fear and dependency. What I witnessed in Edenderry is the complete opposite. Drug dealers exploit vulnerability; education builds resilience. Drug dealers create dependency; education creates independence. Drug dealers take away opportunity; education gives it back. We must continue to confront drug-related intimidation with the full force of the law. We cannot keep dealing with the same consequences generation after generation without breaking that cycle. If we want fewer victims of drug intimidation tomorrow, we must invest in education, early intervention and continued care today.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I spoke on this issue two weeks ago following the tragic murders of members of the English family in Waterford. As that horrific violence showed, intimidation and violence can impact any family member regardless of whether or not they use drugs. More than 19% of recorded cases of intimidation relate to family members impacted by another member's drug debt.

Drug-related intimidation is unfortunately an issue that is all too familiar in my city of Limerick. Over the years and again this week, I have spoken with families who have suffered this intimidation. Whole communities as well as individuals face this intimidation. To exercise control, criminals seek to destroy all that is good in these areas. In one Limerick estate, a playground became a no-go area for kids because one criminal gang destroyed it and intimidated anybody who tried to use it. Kids who want to do well in school, play sports and live normal lives are being taunted by the wealth of these often young criminals. The drug crisis worsens. This week, I was told that kids in school uniforms were buying crack cocaine openly. Unfortunately, this came as no surprise to me whatsoever.

Communities of hardworking and good people should not be living in fear of a small few drug barons. A robust and dedicated Garda response to this issue is needed with a focus on the seizure of the proceeds of crime. Drug gangs can replace low-level dealers and those who use violence are increasingly forcing people into sex work on their behalf. Where we can actually hurt them is in their pocket. One of the most powerful tools we have is the Criminal Assets Bureau. One of the most positive initiatives in recent years is the development of community safety fund. This year, €4.8 million was provided back to 56 communities. I would like to see the process for applying to the fund simplified and a greater weight given to projects in areas that have suffered most from drug use. These criminals often drive around in nice cars, wear expensive trainers and top brand clothes and are often from families who have never worked

or contributed anything to our society. The seizure of illegally gained assets and of properties purchased through criminal profits is the most visible way of showing communities the behaviour of these criminals is not acceptable to us.

Too often, however, we are reacting to crime, not preventing it. In Limerick, there is an going dispute over the continued funding of a vital crime prevention tool, the CCTV monitoring station in Moyross. Without a funding guarantee, this crucial tool will close in the days before Christmas. It beggars belief that despite calls from Limerick TDs, Limerick council, the Mayor of Limerick and Limerick Chamber of Commerce, funding has not yet been committed by the Department of justice.

I will again as I have many times call on the Department of justice to return to community policing in urban areas to promote safer communities. Over the past few months, the presence of gardaí on the streets of Limerick city centre has had a really positive impact, making people feel safe in the city again, and people are coming back into the city. This positive initiative demonstrates what can be achieved by having our gardaí where they are needed. Their presence has prevented crime, as it would do if they returned to community settings, which must be done as well.

Deputy Paul Murphy: We are talking about this today because of the despicable murders of members of the English family in Waterford. When I was listening to what the English family went through, the cries for help and so on - I am sure it was the case for other Deputies - it resonated with some of the experiences I have had in dealing with people and trying to assist them. It seems it is only a matter of luck that something like those tragic murders did not happen in my constituency or in others earlier and at an earlier crisis point.

We will have a debate now and everyone rightly will decry drug-related intimidation. We will talk about the scourge in communities it represents and how widespread it is but what is going to be done about it? That is fundamentally what it comes down to. Right now, the State is not doing a whole lot about it. It is not putting its money where its mouth is. Look at the particular area of drug-related intimidation. I submitted a parliamentary question last week about the €300,000 referenced in the budget 2027 fact sheet for the national drugs strategy and about where that money is going. There is €300,000 for the DRIVE project, which is about drug-related intimidation. That is great and welcome. I am in favour of the €300,000 but for a national programme, that is nowhere near enough money. There is no extra money for the task forces to actually implement projects to assist people.

I will give an example from my constituency. There is an excellent project run out of the Whitechurch addiction support project targeting drug-related intimidation in particular. It has helped the guts of 200 families over two years. It was able to hire a dedicated worker for families experiencing drug-related intimidation and got two-year funding for that from the community safety innovation fund but that money has now run out. The project is continuing until the end of the year, funded by general funds from the local drugs task force but there is no central funding coming.

It is not clear if the project can be funded next year. If we are serious about supporting families who are facing drug-related intimidation, we have to provide the funds at the local level to actually have projects to assist people. In the past few days I was dealing with a particular family and saw upfront, day-by-day, that the assistance they got from this project

meant that in this scenario of absolute fear and terror, they finally had someone who was clearly and unambiguously on their side, who knew how the system worked, who knew what the gardaí were looking for and who was able to advise them what was in their interests in terms of their health, their well-being and their lives and in terms of getting moved to a safe place, which is often what needs to happen.

That goes to a broader point relating to one of the things in the area of drugs that frustrates me. There is a rhetorical commitment by the Government to a health-led approach. In reality, the opposite type of approach is being implemented. This law-first, policing-first approach simply does not work. It is a continuation of the failed war on drugs. Drug-related intimidation is proof that the drug gangs are operating freely. The Government does not have a solution, other than doubling down on failed policies. Fundamentally, a health-led approach means funding our task forces, which are massively underfunded. In my opinion, they are being deliberately run down, year after year, because the Government fundamentally does not support them. A health-led approach means decriminalisation, which involves taking control away from the criminal gangs and having a State monopoly, State control and State regulation to avoid the whole thing being controlled by criminal gangs. We can put the criminal drug gangs out of business by making different policy choices and by pursuing a health-led approach. Unfortunately, we are not choosing to do that, despite all of the evidence.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: Drug-related intimidation is one of the most insidious and corrosive forms of criminality affecting communities in Ireland today. For those who experience it, it means being afraid to answer the front door, threats being made against family members and parents living in fear because a son or daughter has become entangled in addiction and criminal gangs are seeking to exploit that addiction. Drug-related intimidation causes immense harm and warrants a serious policing response from the State. We need more gardaí to be recruited and trained to directly support communities where these activities are taking place.

In my own area of Dublin 15, unfortunately we have seen real people's lives impacted by this menace. In Blanchardstown, people have seen an increase in drug-related intimidation since 2014. We know from research that has been done by the Blanchardstown Local Drug and Alcohol Task Force that just a quarter of cases are being reported due to fear of the intimidation being escalated. Residents have also reported that drug-related intimidation has caused their housing situation to be compromised. Our local gardaí in Blanchardstown are doing an excellent job but they are spread too thin across too many policing demands.

I agree with other speakers that enforcement is just one part of the equation because this is not only a policing problem. The growth of the illegal market for drugs and the criminal gangs who control it through fear and violence is also the result of drugs policy that too often prioritises punishment over harm prevention and criminalisation over a public health approach. Organised crime is nurtured by the illegal trade in drugs. Criminals derive their power from prohibition and from the vulnerability of people struggling with addiction. Every person who is unable to access treatment, every family left without support and every community affected by social exclusion creates opportunities for these criminals to expand their influence. That is why harm reduction and harm prevention must be central to our response. Both the UN Office on Drugs and Crime and the WHO have linked a health-based approach to crime reduction and prevention. Treating addiction as a health issue leads to better outcomes for individuals,

families and communities. This approach also reduces stigma and helps to break the cycle of dependency and exploitation. We know that approach works, but the progress here in Ireland has been too slow.

The Citizens' Assembly on Drugs Use undertook a thoughtful and evidence-based examination of our approach to drugs policy. Its recommendations reflected a growing understanding that addiction and problematic drug use cannot be addressed through criminal sanction alone. The assembly called for a stronger public health approach, greater investment in harm reduction measures, improved treatment services and significant reform of how the State responds to drug use. Yet, many of these recommendations remain unimplemented. At a time when communities continue to experience the consequences of the illegal drugs trade, including intimidation and coercion, the Government's failure to act with sufficient urgency is deeply disappointing.

A serious response to drug-related intimidation requires a serious commitment to reform. It means expanding access to addiction, treatment and recovery services. It means investing in youth work, family support and community development. It means ensuring that harm reduction measures are available and accessible. It means recognising that people experiencing addiction need support and healthcare, not stigma and marginalisation. Of course, there remains an essential role for An Garda Síochána in tackling organised crime. Criminal gangs that threaten families and communities must face the full force of the law. Enforcement alone cannot solve this problem. If we want fewer families being threatened, fewer young people being drawn into criminality and fewer communities living under the shadow of organised crime, we must reduce the harms that make people vulnerable to exploitation in the first place. Drug-related intimidation thrives where vulnerability exists. It thrives where addiction is untreated and where communities feel abandoned. Our responsibility is not simply to respond to the consequences of this harm but also to prevent it. That means building a drugs policy rooted in evidence, a public health approach and compassion.

Deputy William Aird: Drug-related intimidation is destroying lives, putting families under enormous pressure and spreading fear in communities across this country. It is a problem we cannot ignore and it is certainly not confined to our cities or larger towns. Behind every case is a person or a family living in fear. Parents are worried about their children. Families are being threatened over drug debts. Some are facing demands to hand over money, property, machinery or even land to satisfy criminal gangs. This is completely unacceptable. I particularly highlight the impact on rural Ireland. In smaller towns and villages, the pressure can be immense. People know one another. Families can be reluctant to come forward because they fear retaliation, embarrassment or being ostracised in their own communities. We must not allow that fear to protect the criminals who are responsible.

The first national report on drug-related intimidation, which was published in May, recorded 1,027 cases among people accessing drug and family support services in 2024 and 2025. Cases were reported in every county in the country. Perhaps most concerning is that almost half were resolved informally without formal intervention. That tells us something important. Many people are struggling to come forward and ask for help. I welcome the work of An Garda Síochána through its drug intimidation reporting programme and the DRIVE initiative. Having a dedicated Garda inspector in every division provides an important and confidential point of contact for families and victims. However, we cannot stop there. I want to see three things

prioritised. First, confidential support must be accessible to everyone, including people in rural communities who may be a considerable distance from specialist services. Second, there must be stronger co-ordination between An Garda Síochána, addiction services and family support organisations. Families should not be left to navigate this crisis on their own. Third, we need greater investment in prevention and early intervention, particularly for young people vulnerable to exploitation, coercion and drug-related debt.

We must be absolutely clear on one thing: no family should have to surrender their home, land, machinery or livelihood because they have been targeted by drug criminals. No parent should have to live in fear. No young person should be left vulnerable to exploitation and nobody should feel that paying off a criminal debt is their only way out. Drug-related intimidation thrives on fear and silence. We must break that silence. I want the Minister to ensure that victims and their families know the State is on their side, confidential help is available and they will not be abandoned when they come forward. Rural communities deserve the same protection, the same Garda resources and the same access to support as every other community in this country. That must be standard and it must be delivered. Can I put the following question to the Minister: did any of us ever think in our schooldays that we would be here debating this?

I never thought I would be standing in the Houses of the Oireachtas making a speech like this on behalf of people in my community who are suffering. This has all escalated in the past 15 or 20 years. It is obviously driven by money and profit. I plead with those people who are called recreational users. I ask them to take two steps back the next time they are out socially and are deciding whether to use drugs. I ask them to look at who is bringing in the drugs and look at the consequences for those who may be more unfortunate than themselves and get hooked on them. That is where the trouble is. For me, there is no such thing as a recreational drug. I plead with those people to take two steps back and have a look at themselves.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I thank the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, and the Minister of State, Deputy Ardagh, for being in the Chamber to listen to the contributions. As Deputy Paul Murphy said, it is important for each of us to put on the record the experiences we are having in our constituency clinics. We meet mothers and fathers who tell us that their child or adult child has accrued a huge debt, either because they were involved in petty dealing or because they built up arrears. Now, as parents, they have to deal with the huge intimidation that comes with the debt and the demand for payment.

I recall a young mother who had separated from her partner shivering and in tears in my clinic because she did not know how to deal with the intimidation arising from the debt associated with her former partner. Let us imagine our marriage falling apart and having to deal with thugs at the door threatening to burn down the house. Let there be no doubt that the blame lies with those who are involved in an industry that exploits people with addiction, those who are involved in an illegal trade and those who are willing to use the shame and stigma that come with all of this to intimidate people.

We started the year in my constituency with a family home being firebombed on New Year's Eve while a mother and three children were inside. In May we had a serious incident in which a car reversed into a house and damaged a gas main which, thankfully, did not explode. In October we had a similar incident involving an arson attack. We know far more about drug

intimidation now because any one of these incidents could have resulted in what happened in Waterford. I extend my condolences to the English family. Any one of those incidents could have become another tragedy.

We also know more about this now because of the establishment of the DRIVE initiative. I commend the Minister of State, Deputy Murnane O'Connor, on establishing DRIVE and doubling its funding. She is the first Minister of State with responsibility for the national drugs strategy to give the drugs task forces unrestricted funding, with a budget provision of €100,000 for every drugs task force and additional funding for the HSE regions. Others who held that portfolio in the past might be our coalition colleagues but they did not make the same strides in terms of funding for drugs task forces. I want to put this on the record and thank the Minister of State.

The DRIVE report is stark to read, particularly when we compare the figures by population. While the southern and eastern region has the highest number of reports of intimidation at 87, in my constituency there were 32 reports in Ballymun and 15 in Finglas. When we adjust this for population, it means that in Ballymun there were 20 incidents of drug intimidation reported to DRIVE per 10,000 people. This is the highest rate per population in the country. The next closest is 14 per 10,000 in the north inner city.

When such a small concentration of population experiences such a large amount of intimidation and violence, the chilling effect on the entire community is horrendous. I spoke with a former city council official who said we can feel it when it happens in the community. A man crossing the road was mown down and killed in what we think was attempted murder. This had a knock-on effect. A child picked up a firearm and discharged it in the community but the gardaí could not come and retrieve it because they were involved in another incident on the other side of Ballymun. All of these things show us the scale of the problem. The gardaí are doing tremendous work in tackling organised crime and this is significant. We only have to look at the extradition back to Ireland of those involved in crime and the level of seizures. We can do all the battling we can, but it is like putting our finger in a dam. The scale and resources of these organised crime gangs are absolutely massive and we have to try to match them.

Part of the solution is how we deal with drugs and addiction. I welcome the health-led approach and the Minister who has rolled it out. I go back to my point that when demands for money are being made of their children, the biggest problem for parents is that they do not want their children to be charged with an offence. The parent does not want the child to face criminal sanction as well as possible violence from an illegal gang. I say to the people out there that in my experience the gardaí are very good at dealing with this. I advise them to reach out and get help. There are liaison officers and programmes in place to support families. Dealing with addiction and the drugs trade from a health-led perspective helps to remove some of the stigma and makes people freer to raise the alert when they are in this situation.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I agree with the Minister that when somebody falls into a position of drug-debt intimidation and they get a knock on the door over a debt their kid or grandkid has built up through involvement in drug dealing or drug taking, the family is in a very vulnerable position. I agree that the best-case scenario is that the family reports the intimidation to the Garda, even in cases where they do not intend to follow through, give

evidence or pursue a prosecution. I have seen people who have done so and who stood absolutely firm. They were much better for it but it was incredibly difficult. It is very easy for me or anyone else here to say it. The vital thing I have seen is that when people brought information to the Garda it meant gardaí looked at these particular drug dealers and put them in a different bracket because they were threatening violence and, in some cases, had used violence. The Garda deals with it. Nobody particularly cares about how we get rid of dangerous criminals from our communities where they are causing huge harm.

Unfortunately, we have had another tragedy with the death of young Elliot English. What are we talking about? We are talking about a family that was wiped out so that a drug dealer could maximise profit. That is the reality. We are in an emergency and a crisis. I agree with what many have said, which is that we need to put together a means of dealing with this. I understand it is not easy and is multifaceted. It is about youth work, interventions, youth diversion and, in particular, the work of the Greentown project in taking people away from criminality. I have seen youth diversion projects in my constituency that are now working with younger people. I can talk about the Family Addiction Support Network, the Red Door Project, MQI and Turas Training and the great work being done in many community centres in Dundalk, but the fact is that it is the tip of the iceberg.

We need to get really serious about dealing with this. We are talking about gangs. We can go into any estate and we will know where the drug dealers' homes are. These are people who have had houses and cars taken from them by CAB. I accept that the community is generally happy when it sees this but we do not see enough of it. We all need harm reduction and a health-led method of dealing with this. We all know this. We need very early interventions and supports. We need to deal with the underlying issue of poverty. However, we also need to be able to deal with abject criminality. We need to deal with all of these facets, which is everything from the Garda, the councils, the education that needs to be done and those serious interventions.

As somebody said, Daniel Kinahan is exactly where he should be. There will be multiple seizures but the fact is that the price of cocaine will not be impacted. I agree with everyone else who has said that people need to get real and realise what they are doing.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: Is mór agam an deis seo a thapú labhairt ar imeaglú a bhaineann le drugaí agus trádáil drugaí inár bpobail. When we hear a story of the harm caused by drug-related intimidation, whether it is the absolutely abhorrent firebomb or arson attacks on innocent people's homes we have seen or the stories constituents in our communities come to us with, the overriding emotion many of us feel is powerless anger. We want to reef out of it the person who would effect such harm on the person who is sitting in front of us or contacting us. That emotion was shared by the entire country when we saw the horrific events in Waterford. Many also share in it when they speak to neighbours who have been at the centre of this sort of drug-related intimidation and see the harm being caused. There is an unfairness to it as well. Someone else is being held accountable by a hostile actor for something that is not ultimately their doing. Together, that sense of unfairness and that uncontrollable powerless anger should be harnessed to drive us to take a really systematic approach to addressing this.

Yes, it is about Garda enforcement. I subscribe to a lot of what Deputies Ó Murchú and McAuliffe said in that regard. I welcome the fact that we are not only resourcing the Garda in

terms of overall numbers, but also training gardaí to address this. The families who have come to me having dealt with An Garda Síochána on this matter have remarked on how professional and helpful gardaí have been. We need to keep upskilling gardaí and making that training available.

However, in many ways, that is dealing with the symptoms of the issue rather than getting to the nub or causes of it. Core to this is the health-led approach and taking the stigma away from people who find themselves in trouble or in the sphere of addiction. Deputy McAuliffe has mentioned the DRIVE initiative. I again compliment my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Murnane O'Connor, not only on what she has done in respect of that initiative, but also on the proactive way she is dealing with drug and alcohol task forces and recognising that the national drugs strategy and taking a governmental approach to drugs policy have to be at the core of dealing with the underlying issues that are characteristic and symptomatic of this general problem in our society.

I first came across the extent of this problem when I was chairperson of the South Dublin County Council joint policing committee. We started getting anecdotal evidence and then systematically collected data on the numbers of drug debt intimidation incidents being recorded across the county. In fairness to the local authority, it undertook an initiative to provide Ring doorbells to a lot of those families because they did not have the resources to get one themselves. That provided a modicum of safety but when you hear about the intensity and horror of the attacks being perpetrated, you wonder whether it is enough. That again brings me back to the point regarding the underlying causes and symptoms.

There is no doubt that, as Deputy Aird said, there is an issue with large cohorts of our people and our population purchasing these recreational drugs and ultimately financing all of this. I look at some of the estates in my constituency. There are hard-working families within them. They are mainly council-built estates. I see the Audis or Mercs pulling in for ten or 15 minutes. We all know what they are doing. They pull right back out again. They have no idea of the devastation and destruction they are leaving in their wake. We have to go beyond awareness campaigns and information campaigns and hold the people who consume illegal narcotic drugs accountable for their actions and what they are fuelling.

The third point I want to make has regard to youth diversion programmes. This is not as visible or as tractable. It is not something we can immediately point to and say that it is the same as increased Garda numbers. We really need to make sure there is buy-in not only from An Garda Síochána, which there is to a large extent, but also from other sponsoring agencies like Tusla and the drug and alcohol task forces. They must all be involved in the conversations around referrals to youth diversion programmes.

We must also design youth diversion programmes that are appropriate to the incidents in question. Deputy Seán Crowe. will be aware of the Connect 4 Project in Tallaght, which is also being rolled out in Balgaddy in my own constituency. This is a really good example of a programme being designed to meet young people where they are. They are so far out of the reach of the State that we need a bespoke programme to address their needs. I encourage the Minister to look at the likes of the Connect 4 Project to see if it could be expanded to other parts of the country to develop those skills. It is hard work. There are high rates of burnout in that sector. However, those involved are the sort of people we need to pull back in those people who have been marginalised. What these drug lords and drug gangs are offering them is a false

hope and a false economy that will ultimately end in tragedy not only for them, but for their families as well.

I hope that, when we are speaking about this again in a year, that same feeling of powerless anger does not define the debate and that we will see traction, recognition and people being held accountable for their actions, which are fuelling something that is utterly abhorrent and inflicting terror and horror on many innocent people.

Deputy Seán Crowe: Drug-related intimidation and drug dealing have become normalised and rarely hit the headlines unless a death or deaths occur. Extortion payments are being demanded outside homes, workplaces, post offices and social welfare offices. We see severe beatings and arson attacks. This is the new normal in the drugs trade. It is a growing issue that cannot be ignored, minimised or treated as somebody else's problem. Victims talk of fear, anxiety, desperation and a mounting sense of helplessness. Families are threatened and young people are being recruited into criminal networks. Individuals and households are being subjected to threats and harassment over alleged drug debts. That is Ireland in 2026. Fear and threats are the primary weapons used to maintain influence and control over people who owe money for drugs.

The Government must stop pretending that its efforts are working. It is getting worse and it is a lucky family that is not affected. More of the same will not solve this problem, which has existed for decades. Criminal adults are exploiting vulnerable children and using them as disposable assets to work as drug couriers but nothing is being said or done about it. These children, some as young as eight, nine or ten, deserve a better and hope-filled future. We need properly resourced and visible community policing. An Garda Síochána must have the personnel, resources and local knowledge necessary to tackle open drug dealing, to identify those responsible for intimidation and to disrupt the criminal networks operating in our communities.

Without a properly resourced, accessible and viable plan to respond to drug-related intimidation, victims and their families have nowhere to turn. The State has a responsibility to protect all of its citizens. They should never be left feeling that they are carrying this burden alone. We must strengthen the work of our local drug and alcohol task forces, community organisations and youth services. They cannot deliver more with less resources and with what is, in reality, a cut to funding. Criminal gangs cannot be allowed to profit from the misery they inflict. The proceeds of crime need to be put back into community safety and diversion initiatives and active projects that prevent young people from becoming involved in criminality and the justice system.

There is enormous strength in our communities. There are dedicated volunteers, youth workers and community activists working with young people every day and supporting those impacted by addiction and drug crime. They are not looking for sympathy or empty promises. They are looking for leadership, resources and meaningful action. A community should not have to live in fear of criminal gangs. Every family has the right to feel safe in their home. Every young person deserves the opportunity to fulfil their potential. Nobody should be left in fear, intimidated into silence or left alone to deal with a drug gang and its enforcers but, unfortunately, that is what is happening across this State. Unfortunately, I do not have any

positive message for those people. I think it is going to get worse. We need to work together to make sure that does not happen.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Catherine Ardagh): I thank the Deputies who contributed. It is very clear that this issue is more widespread than we believe and that Deputies are deeply affected. It goes beyond the usual constituency queries we deal with. I assure the House that this matter has our undivided attention. It is complex and there is no one way to deal with it but we are very much focused on alleviating this issue, which affects all of our communities. I join with the Minister in offering my condolences to the English family, especially on the death of Elliot, who was only six years old, the same age as my own sons. This tragedy is incomprehensible. The grief their wider family and community must be suffering is unimaginable. My thoughts are with their family and community in Waterford.

It was horrifying, not just because of the level of the callous violence it displayed, but also because of the tragic consequences for those targeted as they slept in their beds where they should have been safe and sound. I join with everyone's condemnation for those responsible for the callous acts. An Garda Síochána continues to investigate it, and I commend gardaí on their work supporting victims of drug-related intimidation not just in relation to this matter, but in relation to all of the matters reported to them.

Drug-related intimidation and violence causes immense harm to individuals and that is borne out by the testimonies given in this House. It is a scourge on our society, and we have to be cognisant of it and send a clear message to recreational drug users to ensure they understand that there are consequences to taking drugs recreationally. It feeds into a drug culture, children being taken into gangs and drug-related intimidation as a whole. As Deputy Kenny said, when people buy illegal drugs, it feeds into the whole ecosystem where they might end up being in the chain of a house being petrol-bombed or other types of drug-related intimidation.

Behind every statistic is a person living with fear, uncertainty and under coercion. Behind every incident is a family worried about their safety, a community struggling with the influence of organised criminals and victims who deserve to feel the full support of the State. The Government recognises the seriousness of this issue, and we know that drug-related intimidation extends far beyond those directly involved in drugs. Parents, grandparents, siblings and other innocent family members are often threatened and targeted over alleged drug debts.

Organised criminal groups deliberately use fear, violence and intimidation to exert control over their communities, and we are determined to ensure that those involved in organised crime are relentlessly pursued, prosecuted, convicted and deprived of their profits using the follow-the-money actions of CAB.

There is no place in a civilised society for criminal gangs who terrorise families and exploit vulnerable young people and undermine our communities. We know that this matter is complex and is a huge challenge. It is not as simple as some said earlier as moving families out of their homes. A lot of people want to stay in their homes and their own communities. A successful response requires strong law enforcement, effective victim support, prevention measures, youth

interventions and resilient communities. It requires action not only against criminal gangs but also against the conditions they seek to exploit.

One of the most disturbing aspects of organised criminality is the exploitation of children and young people. We know that drug-related intimidation touches on every age group. Young people across the country see the money and designer brands that those dealing in drugs flaunt. As Deputy Ó Murchú mentioned, we need to examine programmes we have like greentown, which diverts children away from gangs and decouples children from gangs. We need to send a message to gangs that our children are out of bounds, that we will pursue the gangs, and that our children are very much off-limits. To use Deputy Butterly's phrase, they will have to take their putrid claws away from our children.

Many young people are not aware of the consequences of engaging in the criminal world. They do not understand that the ill-gotten trappings they see are merely a recruitment tool and not a sign of success. If a person fails to make deliveries or pay debts, the threats, intimidation and violence that arise quickly exposes the callous nature of those engaged in organised crime. Those who run these criminal organisations rely on silence, fear, coercion and threats to keep those they exploit in line.

Once that silence is broken, that control shatters. This is why we urge anyone who is the victim of drug-related intimidation or who is the parent of a young person who they think has become a victim to report the matter to An Garda Síochána. The Criminal Justice (Engagement of Children in Criminal Activity) Act 2024 provides new tools to target those who groom, recruit and exploit children for criminal purposes. The legislation recognises the lifelong impact and harm done to a child by drawing them into criminal activity. The Act makes it an offence for an adult to compel, coerce, direct or deceive a child for the purposes of engaging in criminal activity and to induce, invite, aid, abet, counsel or procure a child to engage in criminal activity. Those found guilty of these offences may face imprisonment of 12 months on summary conviction and up to five years on indictment.

Alongside this, our response includes continued investment in youth justice, youth diversion and early intervention programmes. Record levels of funding are being invested in youth justice initiatives because we know that preventing offending is every bit as important as prosecuting offenders. This includes a record investment of nearly €50 million in the budget in 2027 to fund youth justice measures, including the nationwide roll-out of 92 youth diversion projects and four specialised targeted diversion projects, including greentown. These services provide practical interventions for young people at risk of criminal involvement and support thousands of children and families each year.

In relation to those young people who come to the attention of criminal justice, the Government's focus on diversion and early intervention is a cornerstone of our approach to addressing and preventing youth offending as set out in the Youth Justice Strategy 2021-2027. The strategy emphasises early intervention, prevention, family support and community engagement, and is aimed at promoting positive behavioural change so that we can break the cycle of offending by children.

The Children's Act 2001 and the Government's approach to addressing youth offending is rooted in the principle that the detention of young people should only be used as a measurable last resort. However, this does not mean that young people do not face consequences for their

offending behaviour. We operate a graduated response ranging from diversion to detention, and as offending increases in severity, so does the criminal justice response.

As the Minister outlined, An Garda Síochána continues to target organise crime groups responsible and is making significant seizures, arrests and prosecutions. Front-line gardaí are supported by intelligence-led operations, co-ordinated investigations and targeted enforcement activity undertaken by the National Drugs and Organised Crime Bureau, regional Garda units and CAB. These operations are depriving criminal networks of the drugs, cash, assets and profits that sustain their activities. This includes the identification of criminals operating within our communities and targeting their criminal assets.

A key component of CAB's current model is the nationwide divisional asset profiler network operating across Garda divisions nationwide. This network of profilers trained by CAB identifies criminal assets at local level, facilitates the development of intelligence on individuals whose assets or lifestyles indicate criminal conduct and provides a clear mechanism for referrals to CAB for assessment and investigation. Furthermore, legislative reforms have reduced the proceeds of crime threshold from €13,000 to €5,000, broadening the Criminal Assets Bureau's ability to target assets associated with lower-value criminality and the criminal activity causing significant community harm.

The proceeds of crime Bill currently under scrutiny in the Oireachtas will make significant changes to the Proceeds of Crime Act and strengthen the ability of CAB to target the proceeds of crime. The Bill will ensure that a court can take immediate action to ensure that a criminal holder immediately loses the benefit of an asset. It will also speed up the process to dispose of an asset for the benefit of the State. The Bill will also see improved information exchange powers between CAB and law enforcement agencies in other jurisdictions.

Finally, I want to address the demand that sustains organised crime. I urge anyone who uses illegal drugs to reflect carefully on the consequences of that choice. We cannot separate illegal drug use from the damage caused by organised crime. Those profits fund the violence that terrorises neighbourhoods, the intimidation that silences victims and the criminal enterprises that leave families and communities to live with consequences. If we are serious about tackling organised crime, we must be equally serious about addressing the demand that sustains it. Every decision to purchase illegal drugs strengthens the grip of criminals and contributes directly or indirectly to the pain, suffering and destruction they leave in their wake.

Non-Fatal Offences against the Person (Amendment) (Spiking) Bill 2023 [Seanad]: Second Stage

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

It is my very great pleasure to introduce the Bill on Second Stage because this a Bill that I introduced as a Senator along with my colleagues in the Seanad on 25 May 2023. It went through all Stages, including Second Stage on 31 May 2023, Committee and Remaining Stages on 12 July and 25 October 2023, respectively. It passed those Stages in the Seanad, and it was sponsored by the Fine Gael group of Senators at the time, which included Regina Doherty, now an MEP and who continues to be very supportive of this Bill; Senator Ahearn who is now the Leader of the Seanad; Paddy Burke; Senator Maria Byrne, now the Leas-Chathaoirleach of the

Seanad; Micheál Carrigy now a TD; Senator Martin Conway; Deputy John Cummins, now a Minister of State; Deputu Emer Currie, now the deputy Government Chief Whip; Aisling Dolan; Seán Kyne, now a TD; Tim Lombard; John McGahon; Senator Joe O'Reilly; Mary Seery-Kearney; and me. It was brought to me by members of Young Fine Gael. It had a campaign, which it rather pointedly called PricklessNights. It was about the experiences that they and their members had in pubs and clubs throughout the length and breadth of this country. They saw that this was an area of concern for people and brought it to us as a Seanad team.

We were very happy to take that and turn it into legislation, the import of which makes it a stand-alone offence in Irish law.

I acknowledge the presence in the Public Gallery of the current president of Young Fine Gael, Jamie Malone, but also his predecessors, Art O'Mahony and Eoghan Gallagher, who was president at the time. I also acknowledge the support they had from Spiking in Ireland, in particular Mary Crilly, whom I spoke to last week about this Bill. She was very helpful in identifying the policy pathway that could be taken to establish this as a Private Member's Bill. It is rare for somebody to have the opportunity to introduce a Bill in one House, bring it through all Stages and then happen to find themselves in the other House to carry on the baton as it is moved here, but it is my great pleasure to do so.

As I said, the Bill puts spiking on its own statutory footing. There is a lot of debate about whether spiking is an offence. It probably is, in reality. Spiking is when a person with a nefarious intention essentially puts a substance in someone's drink that incapacitates, drugs or makes them unconscious. It can also be introduced through a very fine needle or done in some way for them to ingest a substance that causes them to essentially lose control of their faculties and no longer be able to deal with situations they might otherwise be able to repel. The intention is usually for a nefarious purpose, very often for sexual assault or worse. Unfortunately, this is the experience of many people all over Ireland.

When we talk about spiking, we probably imagine it in a nightclub in Dublin. However, that is not the only place spiking takes place. Spiking can happen to anyone, anywhere and of any age in any circumstance, and it does. While this was initiated by Young Fine Gael and we are happy to take on board the research it has done and the feedback it has given us, it is something that affects every sector of society. The danger is we pass this off as a young person's issue when, in fact, it has the potential to affect all of us. Unfortunately, I suspect everybody in this Chamber has dealt with somebody in their constituency who has been the victim of spiking. It is something that happens all the time and, unfortunately, very often those instances are not reported to gardaí, which is another problem.

The debate regarding whether it is an offence comes down to the fact it does not have a stand-alone status in legislation as the offence of spiking. I suspect it is an offence under the non-fatal offences Act already, either as a poison or as a simple assault, as it requires the application of pressure in an illegal context. That argument could be made, but the difficulty is where there is a debate on whether something is an offence, this automatically diminishes the status of that act as a criminal act. Here, we are sending out a very clear signal that not only gives it status in itself, but it also says to anybody contemplating this activity that spiking somebody's drink or food with a substance that is going to incapacitate them is a very serious criminal offence. With this legislation, we are trying to send out a loud and clear signal to anybody involved in this activity that they will be caught, prosecuted and there will be serious

consequences. The best way to do that is to give this offence a stand-alone status. That is why this Bill essentially amends the Non-Fatal Offences Against the Person Act 1997 to create that, and I will go through some provisions of the Bill to be clear on what it does.

Section 1 deals with definitions or interpretations within the Bill as it stands, and hopefully the Act as it will be. It talks about the terms used. The main offence is set out in section 2, which describes spiking as an offence in subsection 1 as follows:

> (1) A person commits an offence if he or she intentionally - (a) administers a substance to,(b) by whatever means, injects a substance into, or (c) otherwise causes a substance to be taken orally by, another person - (i) knowing that the other person does not consent, or being reckless as to whether or not the other person consents, and (ii) with the intention of overpowering, or sedating the other person, for the purposes of - (I) engaging in a sexual act involving the other person, (II) causing harm to the other person, (III) making a gain, (IV) causing a loss to the other person, or (V) otherwise committing an offence with, or against, the person.

There are a couple of savers in section 2 as well, that in any proceedings for an offence under the section that, "it shall be a defence for a person to prove that the substance was administered, injected or otherwise given - (a) for a lawful reason or with a lawful excuse, or (b) with the other person's express and conscious consent." That is a saver to exclude any medical treatment or any circumstances where such a substance is used. Very often, the substances used for spiking are substances that have a legitimate medical application but are being used illegally by a person for their effect. Section 2(3) sets out the penalties for a person guilty of an offence stating they are liable "on summary conviction", which is in the District Court without a jury, "to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 12 months, or to a class A fine, or to both". However, in the case it is prosecuted on indictment, paragraph (b) states it will be "on conviction on indictment, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 10 years". That is a significant penalty. It also sets out that penalty in the context of what I have said regarding the debate as to whether this is an offence, or what way it would be charged in the event a complaint was successfully upheld. This Bill sets out very clearly the range of penalties available to the Circuit Court in the event it is prosecuted successfully on indictment, and that is up to ten years' imprisonment.

The Bill also makes a clear statement about the level of seriousness that plays on the spectrum of criminal offences where we are pitching this matter as being at ten years. It is up there among the most serious offences that could be dealt with by the Circuit Court. We are talking about very serious stuff here. Just imagine what spiking really is. More often than not it affects women, but it is both and can be all ages, but when a person in a pub is on a night out, let us say, and somebody pops something in their drink, injects something into them or puts something in their food, they are incapacitated. They are not necessarily unconscious; they might just be in a dreamlike state, but they are unable to resist actions being taken by a third party against them. They might be removed from the pub or club and taken somewhere quiet or unseen within the place, where they are then massively vulnerable to all kinds of abuse. In the Bill, we have referred to the reasons someone would do this, such as engaging in a sexual act, causing harm, making a gain, causing a loss or otherwise committing an offence. That covers a multitude of things. Of course, this includes rape, which is so often the consequence

of spiking, so let us not in any way underestimate the seriousness of spiking, and where it happens, the effect it has on the individual concerned.

Most of us in this House will have dealt with constituents who have been the victims of spiking and the possible consequences of spiking up to and including rape. I am sorry to say I certainly have, so we cannot underestimate the seriousness of this matter or the effect it has on this person. Where we have set the tariff for penalties very much says this is a very serious thing. This is a very serious offence. It is not just taking away the autonomy of a person or removing their free will by drugging them, but it is also what is done to them while they are in that state. It is about making a very serious statement about the consequences for anybody who does this, what they are exposed to and with the indictment, it is ten years in prison. Members will know that the decision on whether it goes to the District or Circuit Court is one made by the Director of Public Prosecutions, DPP. She will make an assessment based on the Garda investigation file and where it lies. However, in circumstances where we are dealing with the kind of things we are talking about here, I suggest these matters be tried on indictment if it goes that far or if the result of the spiking is the serious criminality I have described. In those circumstances, the person guilty of the offence would be exposed to ten years in prison. That is not in any way unreasonable or over-egged. This is serious stuff, and that is the point we are trying to make here. That is also why putting it on its own statutory footing clarifies any doubt there might be around where this lies in the canon of criminality. It is up there with the most serious offences. There will be no doubt now, when this Bill becomes law, that the people who engage in this kind of behaviour are engaged in serious criminal activity, up there with the worst of it and deserving of serious treatment by the courts.

There is one issue I want to deal with, which is a possible criticism of the Bill that has to be addressed. It is something Mary Crilly spoke to me about in the past week. That is whether there needs to be a statement in section 2(1)(c)(ii), which states that basically the offence is committed when the person intentionally administers a substance by whatever means and does so knowing the other person does not consent or it is reckless, but with the intention of overpowering or sedating the person for the purpose of the offence we are talking about.

5 o'clock

The question then is: in a prosecution for spiking under this amendment to the Non-Fatal Offences against the Person Act, is it the case then that the court has to prove that there was intention? There is a concern among many quarters that proving that intention may be difficult and I acknowledge that as a legitimate criticism of the Bill. I have no difficulty, by the way, with amending that and I hope that when we get to the next Stage and deal with amendments from anywhere in this House that we would be able to address that concern, and maybe remove the reference to express intention. We could, maybe, talk about circumstances where it is reasonable to infer that this happened. There are lots of ways we can address that but if there is a flaw in this, in terms of creating an obligation on the prosecution to prove intention on the part of the spiking party, if I can say it that way, then let us address that.

What I want to acknowledge, because he is here, is that Deputy Mark Ward also brought forward a Bill on this subject in the past month, I think, or certainly in the past few weeks. We have had a conversation about this. Sinn Féin clearly acknowledges - as do Labour, the Social Democrats and other parties and Members with whom I have had discussions - that this is an issue that needs to be addressed, so I welcome what I hope will be cross-party support for this.

In regard to making this Bill better, we are open to whatever it is that is required to improve it. If it is the case that the issue of intention needs to be addressed, then I am open to amending the Bill accordingly to ensure it reflects the best possible iteration of a criminal offence that can be successfully prosecuted in our courts, that does not lead to ambiguity, or that does not lead to a situation where a person who has been involved in very serious criminal activity can find a way to escape the provisions of the legislation that we have, in good faith, set out with a view to dealing with exactly this problem.

I do not come here with this Bill suggesting that it is perfect. It is, of course, a matter for this House as to how the final iteration of the Bill comes about. I know the Minister for justice is here and that the matter was considered by Cabinet this week, and I look forward to hearing what he has to say. I welcome the serious and considered approach that Cabinet has taken to this Bill, and I would welcome hearing what the Minister has to say in that regard.

What we have here is an opportunity as a Legislature, with a Bill that has already gone through one of the Houses, to make a very clear statement of our intention - if I could put it that way - to mark this kind of behaviour as absolutely unacceptable and deeply damaging to the victims of that behaviour, and as something we as a State take incredibly seriously, that we will not tolerate and that we are willing to put on a statutory footing to say, "No further with this. No doubt about this". If you are spiking, you will be punished, prosecuted and you will go to jail. There are serious consequences to this. It is a serious legislative statement that anybody involved in this kind of appalling behaviour will suffer the full rigours of the law and the full criticism and penalties available to the court, and they will be held responsible.

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I will start by thanking Deputy Ward for bringing forward this very important piece of legislation. Without identifying them individually, I also commend the Fine Gael Senators, colleagues from the previous term, who played such an important role in getting it through the Seanad. It is a significant achievement to get a Private Members' Bill through either House.

As the Deputy indicated, the objective of the Bill is to amend Non-Fatal Offences against the Person Act 1997 by introducing a specific stand-alone offence of spiking. Importantly, it should be noted that the Bill aligns with a programme for Government commitment to strengthen the legislative response to drink spiking. At the outset, I am pleased to say I have secured the Government's support not to oppose this Bill on Second Stage and I look forward to it passing the House and working with Deputy Ward to ensure we progress it further through the Houses of the Oireachtas.

Deputy Ward indicated that this is not simply a Dublin problem. I agree with him entirely. I know from speaking to my colleagues, Deputies Michael Cahill and Séamus McGrath, who have raised this matter with me on a number of occasions and on the floor of the House, that they have a concern in respect of the incidence of this heinous behaviour, not just in Dublin but in their own constituencies.

As I have said before, spiking is a serious and abhorrent crime that preys on vulnerability. It undermines consent and it can have a devastating impact on victims. This applies even if the spiking is not used to facilitate a further offence. Spiking victims may suffer severe effects on their physical and mental health as well as their emotional well-being. They describe feelings of fear, loss of control, loss of confidence, and anxiety, which can have lasting impacts on their

lives. It can be very difficult or even impossible for spiking victims to ever again feel comfortable in social settings after being subjected to such a traumatic experience. Incidents of spiking also have a significant effect on the wider public. Spiking undermines people's confidence in being able to enjoy a safe night out. It creates fear, distrust in public spaces and uncertainty around personal safety when engaging in night-time entertainment or other social activities.

The programme for Government commitment in respect of spiking appears in the context of measures relating to domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. We are aware that many reported incidents of spiking involve concerns that a substance may have been administered for the purpose of facilitating sexual offences. Data obtained from sexual assault treatment units indicate that approximately 19% to 20% of service users in recent years have reported concerns that they may have been subjected to drug-facilitated sexual assault. As Minister, I am committed to fostering a zero-tolerance approach to all forms of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence and I would like to briefly highlight the work being done in my Department and across the Government to tackle it.

This work is being co-ordinated by Cuan, which is overseeing implementation of the Government's zero-tolerance strategy. We secured increased funding of €5.3 million in last month's budget to support Cuan and services working to combat such violence, and we now have a total budget of €84 million to deal with the scourge of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. Among other very good work, Cuan continues to lead the Consent Ed project, a sexual violence prevention resource for young people that complements the social, personal and health education, SPHE, curriculum.

In July, Jennie's Law was enacted to increase transparency in relation to domestic violence convictions. New offences targeting the exploitative practice of sex for rent were also introduced. These laws were part of a broader Government commitment to combatting domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. Work is also continuing on legislation that will strengthen the law on consent in sexual offences, including how belief in consent is assessed in rape and sexual assault cases.

It is important to point out that the conduct we are referring to when we discuss spiking is already recognised as a serious crime. There are several existing offences under which this conduct can be charged and prosecuted. This is not intended, by the way, to detract from the argument for strengthening the legislation and introducing a stand-alone offence. I very much agree with Deputy Ward in regard to the impact a stand-alone offence can have in seeking to target a certain type of unacceptable behaviour. It is rather to ensure that anyone following these discussions is aware that spiking does constitute criminal conduct. Whether it is drink spiking or spiking by way of injection, victims should report incidents to the Garda, which will be fully investigated and there are significant supports available for victims right now.

I will give an example of how spiking could be dealt with under current law. It is important to note that if somebody is subjected to spiking or believes they are subjected to spiking, there are laws that can be used at present. I do not want people who are out - and I am sure no one in the House wants this for people who are out at present - to think, if they are subjected to spiking, that they do not have a legal basis on which to make a criminal complaint. Spiking may be charged as poisoning under section 12 of the Non-Fatal Offences against the Person Act. It criminalises anyone who intentionally or recklessly administers a substance capable of

interfering substantially with another person's bodily functions, which explicitly includes unconsciousness or sleep and would certainly encompass an intent to stupefy or overpower. The offence of poisoning carries a maximum penalty of three years' imprisonment.

Depending on the nature of the substance that is administered, it may also be possible to charge a perpetrator with endangerment under section 13 of the same Act. This provides that it is an offence to intentionally or recklessly engage in conduct that creates a substantial risk of death or serious harm to another. The offence of endangerment carries a maximum penalty of seven years' imprisonment. In addition, it may also be possible to charge a perpetrator with assault causing harm in spiking cases where the substance is administered via injection. This offence now carries a maximum sentence of up to ten years' imprisonment.

I wish to emphasise that where spiking is perpetrated in order to facilitate the commission of a further substantive offence - for example, rape, sexual assault or theft - the perpetrator may also be charged with that offence or, where that offence was not completed, an attempt to commit that offence.

The principal question is not whether our criminal laws currently apply to spiking – they do - but, rather, whether a specific stand-alone offence will materially improve the effectiveness of the criminal justice response.

Since this Bill was first introduced in the Seanad, my Department has engaged heavily with An Garda Síochána and the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions on the issue of spiking. We have also engaged with Forensic Science Ireland to gain further insight into practical issues around evidence-gathering and testing. Data provided by An Garda Síochána indicates that there were 107 reported cases of suspected spiking in 2022, 52 reports in 2023, 61 reports in 2024 and 58 reports in 2025. However, robust data on spiking remains limited due to under-reporting, evidential challenges and delays in toxicological testing. Clearly, a difficulty in these cases is that any testing to confirm spiking must be done quickly. Most drugs leave the body within 12 to 72 hours, so testing needs to be carried out as soon as possible. Unfortunately, the effects of spiking - be it from drugs, alcohol or otherwise - may leave the victim in a state of confusion. Blackouts and memory loss are common symptoms. By the time the victim has recovered, it may be too late to successfully perform a forensic toxicology test. As highlighted during my Department's engagement with An Garda Síochána, evidence-gathering is a significant challenge in these types of cases. Notwithstanding that, it should not be a barrier to our proceeding with this legislation but it is something we need to recognise. If people believe they have been spiked, it is important they try to get a toxicology test carried out as quickly as possible to ensure that evidence is available for any subsequent prosecution.

I would say, in passing, that even where there is a delay in reporting an incident, victims should know there are other ways and means of gathering evidence. They should still contact An Garda Síochána as soon they can. The perpetrators may have been caught on CCTV or there may have been witnesses to the crime. Most night-time places or bars will have extensive CCTV footage. It may be possible to identify a perpetrator inserting a substance into a victim's drink.

The question of whether current criminal legislation adequately addresses spiking has been the subject of a detailed policy review by my Department. It examined the prevalence of spiking, the adequacy of existing criminal offences and the potential options for reform, both

legislative and non-legislative. A number of legislative options have been examined, including the creation of a stand-alone spiking offence, as advocated for in this legislation. This Bill gives us a welcome opportunity to further consider this approach. The creation of a stand-alone spiking offence would provide a clear legislative condemnation of the conduct. Legislation is important, not solely for the wording of the legislation but also the message it sends out to the public at large. It would recognise the serious nature of spiking and the significant public concern associated with such behaviour.

Against this, however, some concerns may arise around duplication and interaction with existing offences, increased complexity for prosecutors and uncertainty regarding the practical operational benefits that would arise from the introduction of a new offence. There may also be a question around the intent element of a stand-alone offence and how the intent to commit a further offence might be established. However, I hear what Deputy Ward has said in this regard. I am happy to work with him on this legislation. If amendments need to be made, they can be made on a subsequent Stage.

However, the fact our criminal law does not currently contain a specifically labelled spiking offence may give rise to public concern regarding the visibility and deterrent effect of the existing legislation. We have done it before in respect of stalking and other certain types of behaviour, which could have been covered by existing criminal law at the time. Therefore, I do not think it is a barrier to introduce legislation simply because there is an existing law that covers the offence.

Also, based on my Department's engagement with the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions, it appears that a low number of prosecutions are occurring under the existing poisoning offence for spiking incidents. When we think of poisoning, we are thinking of something else as opposed to the type of offence that is the subject matter of this specific stand-alone legislation. Additionally, as the poisoning offence carries a maximum sentence of three years, it is not an arrestable offence. Therefore, the detention of a suspect for further investigation of such an offence is not permitted. This represents a significant practical challenge. For these reasons, it is important to give full and proper consideration to any potential options to strengthen our legislation in this area.

In any case, it is clear from the work and engagement carried out by my Department that the challenges in tackling this crime are not solely legislative in nature. Nonetheless, I am supportive of it and I will seek to work with Deputies in respect of this legislation. There is a benefit in having a stand-alone piece of legislation.

With regard to other measures not solely legislative in nature, barriers to prosecution can arise due to under-reporting, evidential challenges, delays in toxicological testing and uncertainty regarding the causes of reported symptoms.

When it comes to non-legislative initiatives to combat the spiking of drinks, last year, the Department of culture launched a new safety training initiative, Safe and Sound, aimed at a wide range of businesses in the night-time economy, such as pubs, restaurants and nightclubs. The free online training is specifically tailored to provide night-time workers with an increased awareness of their responsibilities and duty of care, as well as training to identify and reduce risks. It offers modules, including drink spiking prevention and response strategies.

More broadly, the implementation group for the report of the night-time economy has been in place since 2022. It was established to oversee the implementation of the recommendations of the night-time economy task force. These include a range of actions aimed at tackling the challenges to a safe night-time economy. This year, a dedicated night-time economy subgroup was formed to develop strategies to support a safe, welcoming and inclusive night-time environment for those enjoying a night out or working in the night-time economy. Other initiatives to tackle spiking include awareness campaigns undertaken by the Government in conjunction with Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn as well as educational initiatives delivered through the sexual assault treatment units. The Health Service Executive has also released public health guidance around spiking risks and prevention, along with a number of harm-reduction initiatives that can be found on the HSE's main website and on the HSE's *drugs.ie* website.

It is important to ensure supports are available and accessible to anyone who may be a victim of spiking and, crucially, that victims are fully aware of these supports. Aside from the medical services and An Garda Síochána, victims will find support from the Crime Victims Helpline and the sexual assault treatment units, among others. While the majority of spiking incidents involve young females, these supports are available to victims of all ages and genders.

Having said all of this, there is a significant benefit to further considering a stand-alone spiking offence, including increased visibility of the conduct and enhanced public awareness. For these reasons, I am not opposing this Bill. I look forward to seeing this Bill proceed to Committee Stage for detailed legal scrutiny and further consideration and engagement on its provisions, as well as any amendments that may be required. I am happy to work with Deputy Ward and others in respect of this piece of legislation.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mark Wall): We have nine other Members who have indicated that they wish to speak on this important Bill. The first speaker is Deputy Mark Ward.

Deputy Mark Ward: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Bill. I commend Deputy Ward on getting it to this Stage. As he said, there is not one person in this Chamber today who does not know someone impacted by spiking. Sinn Féin will not be opposing this legislation at this Stage. I welcome Deputy Ward's openness to work with Members on amendments because there are ways to strengthen this Bill. I will touch on them as I speak. They will make the Bill stronger as well as easier to enforce.

When Deputy Ward was speaking, I was thinking that usually it is a row between one side and the other in this House. This might be an opportunity to have cross-party collaboration on something that will benefit the people we represent. I would like to see this Bill go through the Houses of the Oireachtas with that cross-party collaboration and some amendments to make it stronger. It is not a case of my Bill being better than Deputy Ward's or anything like that. It is just something we need to get across the line.

I took an interest in this Bill. I know three young women very well who have been victims of spiking in the past 12 months. Thank God, none of them were victims of secondary events but the lasting impact the spiking incidents had on them is still ongoing. We need to be cognisant of that. As I said, I tabled a Bill on spiking two weeks ago to make spiking a stand-

alone offence. The Bill that we are discussing today aims to make spiking an offence when there is an intent to cause certain harm to the victim. That intent is outlined in the Bill as engaging in a sexual act involving the other person; causing harm to the other person; making a gain or causing a loss to the other person; or otherwise committing an offence with or against the person.

Like Deputy Barry Ward, I have engaged with stakeholders such as Spiking in Ireland and Mary Crilly. They tell me that the intent to commit an additional crime could be difficult to prove. I have to accept their bona fides on that. I have also engaged with victims and survivors of spiking. Aoife Rose O'Brien, one of our councillors in Wexford, has been an activist on this for a long time. She gave me permission to tell her story if I needed to do so, which I did when I introduced my Bill. She is of the same opinion as me.

We often speak about spiking in the context of what might happen next. In other words, whether someone intended to sexually assault, rob or otherwise harm the person that they spiked. We need to recognise that the act of spiking is already a violation. A person's bodily autonomy has been taken from them. Their ability to make decisions about their safety has been interfered with. Their consent has been disregarded entirely. This is harm in its own right, regardless of what follows.

As the Minister said, there have been 278 spiking incidents reported to the Garda since 2022. Sexual violence centres estimate this is only the tip of the iceberg but none of the reported incidents since 2022 have resulted in a prosecution under the current legislation. This tells me that the current laws are clearly not working and people are being let down.

What is often lost in the conversation about spiking and crimes like this is the lasting impact on the person who experiences them. The impact does not necessarily end when the substance leaves the system. It can follow them into their next night out or social gathering. It is important that we do not wait for something worse to happen before we acknowledge that the person is harmed. Spiking should not have to lead to sexual assault or robbery to be a crime. The absence of a further offence does not mean the absence of a victim. That is why the Sinn Féin Bill would make spiking a stand-alone offence. This is the first area in which we will either make amendments to strengthen the Bill or support Government amendments to it, whichever comes first.

Another area which was not really touched on - the Minister touched on it slightly - and in the context of which we would like to see the Bill strengthened relates to the introduction of a statutory toxicology pathway for victims of spiking to assist them in both their care and their pursuit of justice. At the moment, this does not exist. From my engagement with the HSE, I am informed that there is currently no national reporting mechanism or specific data that captures presentations for suspected spiking. Therefore, it is not possible to provide a verified national figure for the number of individuals who have presented to hospital emergency departments with suspected spiking incidents. As the Minister said, robust data is not there. Such data would be invaluable to protect the victims and also give them the answers they are looking for because they do not know what substance has been in their system. It is very frightening when you do not know what has been injected or dropped into your drink. It would also inform us and other stakeholders about what substances are being used to spike people. That would help us to combat what is happening.

The HSE also informed me that it would be very supportive of the development of a clear national pathway for the management of suspected spiking presentations and would work in collaboration with other healthcare services, An Garda Síochána, forensic services, laboratories and other agencies to develop these pathways. That is an area in respect of which we will table amendments. Anyone who presents to the Garda or the health services and feels they have been spiked would be referred to this statutory toxicology pathway. The Minister did advise people to get toxicology reports as soon as possible if they feel they have been spiked. It does not always happen that way. I offer the example of Aoife Rose O'Brien's story, which she told me and which I spoke of when I introduced my Bill, in this regard. She was spiked. She woke up in a strange home having been sexually assaulted. When she got back to her own home, she called CareDoc to come out. She told the person from CareDoc that she felt she had been spiked but did not disclose the sexual assault. The person would not test her and sent her to Wexford emergency department. She went to the hospital and told the staff that she thought she had been spiked the previous night. She did not disclose the sexual assault. They would not do a toxicology report. She felt then that she had to disclose the sexual assault. Like a lot of the people who are victims and survivors of sexual assault, feelings of embarrassment, shame and so on came in, but she wanted to know what was in her system so she had to disclose the sexual assault at that stage. After that she was referred to Waterford Hospital, where she did get the toxicology report some 24 hours after she had been the victim of spiking. Luckily enough - or unluckily - the substance was still in her system so she was still able to find out what had been put into her. It is not easy to get a blood test or a toxicology report if you go to your doctor or the emergency department. A statutory toxicology pathway would help with this.

As I said, the impact of spiking does not end when the substance leaves a person's system. It can follow them on their next night out or social gathering and the next time someone wants to buy them a drink. Spiking is an insidious and violating crime. It catches its victims off guard and often leaves them with little recall of what happened beyond the fact that they have been spiked.

While not part of the legislation, I would like to see an awareness campaign in the lead-up to Christmas, particularly as a couple of the people who contacted me were spiked around this time last year. We know that Christmas is a time of celebration, enjoyment, parties, work events and family nights out and gatherings, but, unfortunately, the risk of spiking can increase during the festive season. I ask people to be vigilant and to watch each other's backs over the Christmas season.

Victims might wrongly blame themselves for being spiked. I want to be very clear: there is only one person to blame and that is the perpetrator of the crime. As Deputy Barry Ward said, and I think everyone else would agree, there have to be consequences for that.

Deputy William Aird: I am pleased to speak in support of the Non-Fatal Offences against the Person (Amendment) (Spiking) Bill 2023. I want to thank Young Fine Gael for its sustained campaign to have spiking recognised as a stand-alone criminal offence. I also want to thank Deputy Barry Ward for the great work he has done and the Minister for justice for being here for the debate on this Private Member's Bill and for showing his interest in it.

Let us be clear. Spiking is a sinister act. It involves deliberately giving a substance to another person without their consent, whether through drink, injection or by any other means. It is a serious violation that can leave victims vulnerable, traumatised and fearful. In some cases it is linked to other serious offences including sexual assault. This issue commands our attention. The Garda received 339 reports of spiking between 2020 and the end of 2025, with women accounting for 87% of reported victims. This is a problem that affects communities across the country, including rural Ireland.

The Bill addresses an important gap in the law by creating a stand-alone offence of spiking that will carry a maximum penalty of ten years in prison. That is a significant increase on the penalties available under broader poisoning legislation and reflects the seriousness of the behaviour involved. I particularly acknowledge the work of all the people who have brought the Bill to this point by means of the longer, safer nights campaign, which engaged with young people, victims' groups and industry representatives, and who are helping to keep this issue firmly on the political agenda. As already stated, I commend Deputy Barry Ward, the Minister for justice, Young Fine Gael and everyone who played a part in bringing this Bill before the House today. I welcome the words from Sinn Féin and other Opposition parties that we are all rowing in the one direction in respect of it.

While legislation is essential, it must be accompanied by effective investigation and support for victims. People who have been subjected to spiking must be assured that they will be taken seriously when they report it. Nobody should have to fear being deliberately drugged and placed in danger while enjoying a night out or a social occasion. That is why this Bill is very important.

I was only elected to the Dáil at the most recent general election. I spoke at the session before this on drugs, and now here we are discussing spiking.

If, going home to Portlaoise this evening on public transport, some of the many people I will meet ask me what my day was like, which they do ask, I will say that this has been the worst day I have ever had. I never thought, when I was a young person socialising, just like every one of us here, that spiking would ever happen.

I remember when the drink-driving legislation came in. It was a huge change in that, from then on, you would have to have a designated driver. There were arguments about who drove the previous night and so on. The legislation worked and everybody co-operated, and everybody was able to enjoy themselves. Then drugs, which we spoke about here today, came on the scene. I said there was none of that when I was socialising, when I was going to school. You would hear an odd titter about drugs or whatever, but now they are all over the place in my town, Portlaoise, and in every other town and village in County Laois. Everybody will tell you this. In not that long a time, that has happened.

Now we are talking about spiking somebody's drink, by injecting or other means. It does not matter how it is done if it is done. It is awful for young people. It is frightening for their parents to think it can happen. They themselves and their parents before them could go out at the weekend, have a social night out with their friends, meet people, share stories and whatever the case may be, have a few drinks, go to a disco and be 99.99% sure they would come home safe. Now a fear is being instilled in young people and we are going to end up in a situation in which young people will be fearful of going out. That is going to destroy the whole social

fabric for young people. We can see what happened during the Covid epidemic, when young people could not go out, and all the consequences of that. There is going to be a fear instilled even in parents that this can happen. Vulnerable people can be preyed upon. All I can do is ask all young people, when they are socialising with their friends, to keep an eye out. It nearly reminds me of the day when the drink-driving legislation came in. Somebody among a group of friends is going to have to stay completely alert now so that if something happens, they will be lucky enough to see it.

That is why I am saying I want to support this Bill. What I do not know, and I was asking my colleagues here, is how long a Bill takes to go through the Dáil. I am told it can take a couple of years. We are all public representatives. Every one of us here is in agreement on this Bill. In my opinion, this is a test of democracy at its best, to see what we can do to put this Bill through as fast as possible, because we owe this to the young people of Ireland. It is not only young people who will be affected. Look at what we are after speaking about today. Look at the statistics on drugs. Look at what is happening. This is the start of a trend. Another drug is involved. It is the start. We could stand up here and ask what the people who came before us were doing that they did not bring in tougher legislation for drugs. It is with us now. It is my responsibility; it is my colleagues' responsibility; it is all our responsibility. All I can ask is that this Dáil, the seat of democracy, pass this Bill as quickly as possible. All hoops have to be jumped through to do that. That is how we can turn around and say to our young people that we are representing them to the best of our ability to ensure they can go out and socialise in a safe manner.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I completely agree with the sentiments of Deputy Aird in that we all want to work on a cross-party basis to see a good, new revised law passed quickly in the Houses. I commend Deputy Ward for bringing the Bill here from the Seanad. It will have the support of the Labour Party. I am pleased to hear that the Minister is not going to oppose it, which means it will, hopefully, proceed to Committee Stage. We will put a bit of pressure on the Minister or the Chair of the relevant committee to arrange for that as soon as possible.

Spiking is an incredibly serious crime that unfortunately seems to be increasingly prevalent. It is a horrific, predatory thing to do to someone. It is so frightening for a victim and so undermining of their personal sense of human dignity. Of course, it will affect how you go about your life, including your social life. I cannot imagine the effect after an event like that. It is something that all of us across the House want to see a crackdown on.

The Labour Party's previous justice spokesperson, Aodhán Ó Ríordáin, had proposed an amendment on this a number of years ago. We have councillors in Cork, including Ciara O'Connor, and in Galway, including Mayor Helen Ogbu, who have been calling for change in this regard. My colleague Deputy Eoghan Kenny is going to go into that a little later.

I have read the Bill, sponsored by Deputy Mark Ward. It is interesting in that it requires no intent, which presumably is because of the difficulties in proving intent, which was spoken about. It is definitely worth thinking about. There is a new UK law or an updated UK law going through at the moment that does include a requirement for intent in a spiking offence. It is an intent to injure, aggrieve or annoy, which is an interesting definition in itself, but it is pretty broad for these purposes. I definitely support the toxicology testing pathways that Deputy Ward has put into his Bill. That is food for thought for the next Stage. We certainly

agree that there is a need for a standalone offence of spiking. We will have a few constructive suggestions on the drafting and how it might be amended on Committee Stage. I trust that they will be taken in the spirit in which they are intended, to make this the best law that it can be.

In the context of the increasing influence of toxic masculinity in our society, it is important for us to talk about how misogynistic and chauvinistic views and talking points, often propagated online, can very quickly translate into the real world and result in physical acts of violence, often sexual violence, against women. Spiking is another example of this.

We know that an alleged spiking incident is being reported to the Garda on average once every six days. A total of 339 cases of a person's drink being spiked or an individual being unknowingly injected with a drug were reported between January 2021 and December 2025. This may only be the tip of the iceberg, given the stigma that persists in relation to reporting. We as an Oireachtas need to eliminate that stigma and make it clear to victims that they are not at fault in any respect and that reporting is absolutely vital to the prosecution of these crimes. We do not, unfortunately, know how many prosecutions have taken place because there does not seem to be any court data available. This is because spiking is not a standalone offence. That is another reason to make this change.

The existing offence on our books is punishable by a maximum sentence of three years, but I think it is clear that the existing provision does not capture the essence of spiking as opposed to poisoning, the difference being the motive, which in the case of spiking is generally to enable the commission of a sexual offence. There can, of course, be other motivations, but the commission of a sexual offence is clearly the most egregious and common motivation and, in my view, should be the primary focus of this law. For us in the Labour Party, this makes spiking a more serious standalone offence that deserves a lengthier maximum sentence.

Aodhán Ó Ríordáin tabled an amendment to the 1997 Act a number of years ago that would have created a new offence, based on the then UK law, which we called administering a substance with intent. The definition, just for the record, was that a person who administers to or causes to be taken by another person, C, a drug or other substance, knowing that C does not consent to what is being done and with intent thereby to stupefy or overpower C so as to enable himself or herself or any other person to engage in sexual activity with or involving C is guilty of an offence. That was the definition we had put forward. The intent to engage in non-consensual sexual activity was central to our previous definition of spiking. The then Minister, Deputy McEntee, pointed at the time to the existing offence of poisoning as already covering this offence but, in fairness, things have moved on since then.

There seem to me to be two important differences between spiking and poisoning offences that are justified as stand-alone offences. The spiking offence should be more serious, given the underlying intention, and it should entail a longer maximum sentence than three years. Ten years would seem appropriate here. The maximum sentence of three years for poisoning means that it is not an arrestable offence and the Garda instead have to proceed by way of summons. My understanding is that an offence has to be punishable by five years or more before gardaí automatically have powers of arrest.

Second, the current poisoning offence states that inducing sleep or unconsciousness is covered, which suggests that anything less than that, such as stupefying people or overpowering their faculties while they remain conscious, may not be covered by the existing law. This is

relatively speculative because I do not believe there are any decided court cases on this precise point, but in general a criminal statute has to be given the interpretation most favourable to an accused. Some of the most common drugs suspected of use for sexual assault or that can be used to commit physical and sexual harm can sedate or incapacitate victims without necessarily making them unconscious, but making them more vulnerable to attack. The definition in Deputy Ward's Bill refers to the intention of overpowering or sedating someone, and it is arguable that that covers a case of someone who has been incapacitated without being made unconscious, but perhaps that definition could be looked at again in that light, just to be certain about that.

Another point I would like to raise is the reports we have heard of the takedown game, where lads essentially go around spiking people's drinks in nightclubs as a dare or for the craic. That is obviously unacceptable in its own right, but I think it would not technically be covered by the current definition in Deputy Ward's Bill, which currently would criminalise spiking for the purpose of engaging in a sexual act, causing harm to the body or mind, including pain or unconsciousness, making a financial gain or causing a financial loss, or otherwise committing an offence with or against another person. It is likely that spiking just for a laugh, so to speak, will continue to be unlawful under the existing lesser offence of poisoning. Arguably, because of the absence of the most serious sexual assault intent, it is a less serious offence and therefore should attract a lesser penalty, but overall it might be more coherent to combine the old and new offences into one two-tier offence. That would mean a basic offence of spiking with no further purpose which would be arrestable with a sentence of five years and an aggravated form of spiking with the purpose of committing a sexual offence attracting a sentence of ten years. They could both be inserted into the 1997 Act. That is something we might propose if Deputy Ward's Bill reaches Committee Stage, as we hope it does.

All of this is to underline the need for a separate offence. It is to support Deputy Ward in his endeavours in pursuing this legislation and it is to support the victims of spiking who are at the heart of everything we are talking about today. Like the Minister said, whatever we do and however we go about this legislatively, we want to improve the effectiveness of the existing law.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mark Wall): Before I call Deputy Kenny, I let Members know that they are entitled to ten minutes, but we want to try and get everybody in, so if anyone can finish up that minute earlier to allow everyone to get in, it would be very much appreciated.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I will do my best. I reiterate our support in the Labour Party for this Bill and genuinely thank Deputy Barry Ward for bringing this Bill before the Dáil. I acknowledge his colleagues and those who worked on it in the Seanad. It passed the Seanad in October 2023 and, three years on, we have an opportunity to move it forward. I support it going to Committee Stage.

I am the youngest TD in this house. I might not look at it anymore but I absolutely am. It is interesting to listen to Deputy Aird reference the fact that maybe, when he was going to school, it was not an issue or it might not have been spoken about, particularly with regard to drugs. I have grown up with it. I have never been in an environment where the presence of drugs and spiking is not ultimately an issue. It is a reality that, unfortunately, we live with

across the State. I often think of the words, which, thankfully, none of my own friends have said to me, "I think I have been spiked." Do people believe the person immediately, do they take it as a joke or do they take it seriously? If they do, where do they go for help? If they get to an emergency department, can a sample be taken in time? The Minister referred to that issue. If people are unsure about making a report to the Garda, who explains those options to that group of young people?

We are asking those questions of people who may be frightened, disorientated, and unable to remember several hours of their lives. They may be trying to piece together what happened from messages on their phone or from what friends can tell them. The State should have worked out where they can go and what happens when they get there. I acknowledge my Labour Party councillor colleague, Ciara O'Connor, who is vice-chair of the Cork city local community safety partnership, who brought this issue before Cork City Council. Her motion was passed unanimously, supported by Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, and every party and Independent. It is the same with Labour Party councillor Helen Ogbu in Galway City Council. I note Labour Party councillor Cathal Rasmussen, who chairs the Cork county local community safety partnership. Those newly established local community safety partnerships are working. Across our cities and counties, these partnerships can bring gardaí, health services and community organisations together to improve how we respond to issues like this when someone reports suspected spiking.

A national strategy would give them a clear plan to work from. I recognise Dola Twomey and Mary Crilly of the Sexual Violence Centre in Cork. Through Spiking in Ireland and Safe Gigs Ireland, they have taken this issue to festivals and to music events. When I have been, they have listened to people who have experienced spiking and made sure that those experiences are heard nationally. I am proud that Cork has helped to lead that work. The people who have come forward also deserve to see and to lead the change. As Deputy Ward said, spiking can happen literally anywhere. It is not just, as we sometimes think about it, in a nightclub, in a pub or at a festival. It can happen anywhere. It can happen in a room full of people that a person knows. That is, unfortunately, the reality. Consent is ultimately at the centre of it. If somebody deliberately gives you a substance without your consent, they have taken a decision about your body that only you have the right to make. That violation matters in its own right. It matters whether or not a sexual assault, a theft or another offence follows.

Deputy Ahern referred to section 2 of Deputy Ward's Bill, which would create a specific offence of spiking. It covers deliberately giving someone a substance, including through a drink or by injection, where the person doing it knows there is no consent or is reckless about consent. As drafted, it also requires an intention to overpower or sedate the person for one of the purposes set out in the Bill, such as causing harm, making a gain or committing another offence. It provides for up to ten years' imprisonment on conviction on indictment. On Committee Stage, I would appreciate it if we could examine how that requirement to prove a particular purpose could work in practice. I was thinking earlier of the case of somebody who deliberately puts a substance into another person's drink and then later claims that was actually only a prank. How would the proposed offence apply and what would the prosecution have to establish about that person's purpose? We should test that wording against cases like this before we settle the law. As Deputy Ahern said, the Labour Party has raised this before. In March 2023, former Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin moved an amendment in the House to create a specific offence for spiking intended to facilitate sexual activity. This June, Senator Laura

Harmon called for a public information campaign on spiking and for clear national reporting and support procedures for sexual violence and harassment across further and higher education.

Students should know who to contact, what help is available and what happens after they come forward. I would appreciate it if the Department of justice would commit to a dedicated way of recording suspected spiking and to regular publication of national figures. We should be able to see how many incidents are reported, how many lead to charges and what happens to those cases. That would help us see where people are encountering difficulties and whether changes to the law and to services are actually making a difference.

I support there being a prevention campaign and practical training.

I am a former part-time barman. If the State could provide practical training to bar staff, security staff and event organisers, that would be roundly supported, not just by people in this House but people working in the industry as well. Ultimately, if a person who believes they have been spiked, or a friend, comes up to a member of staff and says they suddenly feel unwell and they believe the drink has been spiked, the member of staff should know how to help and how to preserve anything that might be of evidence as well. What we should look to achieve here is ensure that the next time someone is able to say to a friend or staff member in a nightclub or bar that they think their drink has been spiked, we can stand over the answer they receive as to where to go, who will help them and what will happen next.

I fully support the Bill. It is essential from the perspective of a young person. We have referenced the fact that it is not just young people who are affected. From the perspective of a young person who has grown up in a society where there has never not been an issue of spiking or drug-taking, legislation like this is essential to provide younger women predominantly, but also younger men, with some advice and guidance and to show that the State supports them. I appreciate the Bill.

Deputy Paula Butterly: I will be brief to facilitate my other colleagues to speak. I commend Deputy Barry Ward for bringing the Bill to the House. I also thank members of Young Fine Gael who, for some years, have worked solidly on this legislation. They brought it in because of their personal experience. Having spoken to numerous members of Young Fine Gael, it dawned on me that back in the day, when I used to bop my heart out at Thee Place in the Rossnaree and no doubt the Minister of State, Deputy Ardagh, bopped her heart out in Copper Face Jacks, we had many things on our minds, but spiking was not one of them. What struck me most when I heard Deputy Aird speak was how times have changed. As a result, the changing times must be reflected in the law we make. Nothing is as important as the spiking law at the present time. As the Deputy said, we were talking about drug intimidation but spiking itself is an offence that is horrific and affects families. The valuable contributions we have heard in the Chamber in regard to consent are equally important because of the very idea that somebody is going to put something into your drink that takes away your bodily control, does not give you the possibility of consenting and takes away your consent. I again point to the statistic that this affects 87% of women, which is absolutely horrifying.

As I said, when I used to go out and about, I had many things on my mind, but I was always confident that I would get home safely. That is not the case now for young people. Are we putting young people in a position where they are even going to fear going out in the first place? Some have spoken about the Covid effect, how Covid affected young people and their attitudes

towards socialising. Surely this is not going to be another roadblock. Surely we can do something that does not put the fear of God into them about simply enjoying a night out with friends. This legislation is very important.

I have listened to all the contributions. There are amendments to be made and considerations to be had. I welcome both Deputy Ward's willingness to have this treated as a cross-party issue and as cross-party legislation because it affects us all. When the legislation goes through, we will have to look at educating young people and staff members in bars, restaurants and discos. As the Deputy pointed out, it does not only happen in those settings, so we have to educate people to know that this is not a prank or a bit of craic; this is very serious. It can affect another person's physical health but also their mental health and, therefore, it has to be treated as a stand-alone offence.

The Minister was right when he spoke about poisoning. When we talk about poisoning, we do not see poisoning and spiking as the same sort of thing. Until we have spiking as a stand-alone offence, and until we start talking about spiking and educating people, not just young people, about what it actually means and does to somebody, we will not have the achieve the desired effect with this legislation. I commend the Bill. I also commend Deputy Ward and Young Fine Gael.

Deputy Grace Boland: I very much welcome the Minister's support for this Bill and the cross-party support we have seen today, with very constructive amendments suggested for Deputy Ward to consider. Let me be clear: spiking is not a prank, it is not harmless and it is not a joke gone wrong. It is an abhorrent, deliberate act, one that affects women and men in society and takes away a person's control. It creates fear and leaves victims dealing with consequences long after the incident itself. That is why I welcome this legislation to create a specific offence of spiking. It sends a clear message that this behaviour will be treated with the seriousness it deserves.

I acknowledge those who have worked for years to bring this issue to the point where we are debating it on the floor of this House today. In particular, I congratulate successive executive teams of Young Fine Gael, who, in 2023, identified this issue, long before it received the level of public and political attention it deserved. Well done to Jamie Malone and all his colleagues in Young Fine Gael. In their campaign, they engaged with young people across the country, through surveys, petitions, policy development and legislative proposals. They ensured that this issue remained firmly on the political agenda.

What is particularly encouraging about this Bill is what it says about the role young people can play in shaping our country. The Bill shows that when young people get involved, use their voice and bring their experience to the table, they can influence public policy and help change law. That is democracy at its best. It is a powerful reminder that politics is not something that happens to people, but something people can help shape. The Bill also sends an important message to young people across Ireland that their voice matters, their ideas matter and they can make a real difference in Irish society when they choose to get involved.

I also recognise the work of my colleague, Regina Doherty, and others in the Seanad who championed this issue and helped bring it into the political spotlight. Equally, I acknowledge Deputy Barry Ward, who has continued that work and helped progress this legislation to the floor of the Dáil. I agree with the Deputy's comments on strengthening the Bill. I have no

doubt he will work on a cross-party basis to do just that. I congratulate Young Fine Gael's campaign, Prickless Nights. If I may be so bold, would the world not be a better place if we all had a prickless night? Ultimately, this Bill is about protecting bodily integrity and personal autonomy and ensuring that those who seek to exploit or harm others face appropriate consequences for their actions. It is a sensible Bill that addresses a genuine concern, and I am very pleased to support it.

Deputy Gary Gannon: This is vitally important legislation and I thank Deputy Ward for bringing it to the House. The Social Democrats support the Bill and all of the objectives behind it.

When we first look at this legislation, the immediate reaction is to ask why we have not done this already. Spiking is a disgusting, predatory crime. Spiking is already criminal under existing law but the fact that we are still debating whether it should be explicitly recognised as a stand-alone offence is frankly disgraceful.

6 o'clock

This is a very basic question of safety, of consent and of somebody's right to have control over his or her own body. A woman should be able to go out with her friends, have a drink and enjoy her night without somebody deciding they have the right to take that control away from her. For far too long the conversation around this has placed the responsibility on women - watch your drink; keep your hand on your glass; do not accept a drink from somebody; and do not go anywhere on your own. Let us think about what we are asking women to do: to spend their night anticipating somebody else's decision to harm them and then risk being asked afterwards whether they took enough precautions. Where is that same insistence when it comes to the behaviour of men? Where is the expectation that men challenge their friends, take women's concerns seriously and intervene when they see somebody behave in a predatory way?

The responsibility for spiking lies entirely with the person who does it. No woman should ever be made to feel she has failed to keep herself safe. This Bill is a step towards putting that responsibility where it belongs but it must be followed by proper enforcement, support for victims and a response that takes people seriously when they come forward.

We will support the Bill and we should all get on with progressing it. Most Members who have spoken have talked about how we need to bring some rapidity to bringing this Bill before a committee and advancing it. I again thank Deputy Barry Ward and will fully support the Bill on every Stage through its progression.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I commend Deputy Barry Ward on the work he has done on this Bill and, in particular, as all the speakers have mentioned, the members of Young Fine Gael. I spotted a few of them in the Gallery and they are very welcome. Their contributions are also very welcome. The Young Fine Gael president, Jamie Malone, and former Young Fine Gael president, Eoghan Gallagher, have put a lot of time and effort into highlighting the need for stronger protections in this area. I fully support the Bill. It is shocking that my daughters on a night out must consider the possibility they could be unknowingly administered drugs or alcohol or even subjected to needle spiking. No one should have to live with that fear. The

consequences of spiking can be devastating. Victims can suffer serious physical and emotional distress and lasting anxiety long after the incident itself.

The Bill addresses an important gap in our criminal law by creating a specific offence of spiking and, as Deputy Gannon said, this should have happened before now and it should be a specific stand-alone, seriously punishable offence. While perpetrators may in some cases have been prosecuted for related offences, the absence of a distinct offence has made it more difficult to ensure accountability. This legislation represents an important step forward.

I have one suggestion I would like to see considered at a later stage. My understanding is that as currently drafted, the Bill requires the act of spiking to be linked to a further offence such as overpowering or sedating a person, engaging in a sexual act, causing harm, making a gain, causing a loss or other offences. I question whether that additional requirement is necessary. The act of secretly administering drugs or alcohol to another person is in and of itself a serious crime and a serious violation. The act itself is wrong. A victim should not have to prove that some further offence was intended or carried out before the law fully recognises the harm that has been done by that specific administration of drugs, alcohol or other substance. Where a person deliberately spikes another individual's drink or otherwise administers a substance without his or her knowledge or consent, that alone should constitute an offence regardless of what happens afterwards.

I hope the Aire Stáit will consider progressing this Bill in the coming months during Government time. I thank everybody for their work so far.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Catherine Ardagh): I thank the Deputy Barry Ward for championing this Bill through the Seanad and Dáil. I thank all the Deputies for their contributions in respect of this Bill. I reiterate the Government as a whole, including me, are committed to combating spiking. It is clear that efforts to stamp out this deplorable crime require a wide Government response that must involve non-legislative measures, including training for barmen and so on. As Deputy Kenny outlined, evidential and forensic challenges will remain relevant regardless of whether additional offences are introduced. However, it is important to fully assess any potential legislative reform options as part of this Government's examination of effective responses to spiking. As such, this is an important Bill, which I will be pleased to see progress. Due consideration must be given to potential benefits of creating a stand-alone offence, including increased visibility of the conduct and enhanced public awareness.

I come from a generation where we went out as a group of girls and we always minded the drinks. We never left the drinks unattended. Now, the phenomenon of needle spiking is absolutely abhorrent and something that is very new to me. It makes this type of crime even more egregious. That is why this Bill has moved on and there is an urgency as well in making this a stand-alone offence. This is not just an increase visibility but so that victims know it is an egregious offence and that perpetrators know it will not be tolerated and the rigour of the law will be brought to bear on them for committing this type of crime.

A lot of the time when people are spiked they are second-guessing themselves. As others pointed out, sometimes people might be spiked in a familiar surrounding like a house party. They might be among friends or acquaintances and it might be weeks or months later that they realise they were spoked that night and it might come back to them. A lot of the time, women

who are affected by this. Let it be known that it is a very devious crime and there is no questioning the serious nature of spiking. It is evident there are significant public concerns associated with such behaviour and whether more can be done to address it. We need to address it.

Once again, I acknowledge the work that has been done in the development and congratulate the members of Young Fine Gael, who are in Gallery. I fully acknowledge and support the intentions behind the Bill and I look forward to engaging further on how we can adopt spiking as an offence following the passing of the Bill in the House.

Deputy Barry Ward: I thank all those who took the time to contribute to this debate and to add substance to what we have been discussing. I acknowledged the other Bill brought forward by Deputy Mark Ward earlier. I was particularly struck by the speech given by Deputy Aird and the context of young people being in fear when they go out, which is at the heart of this. I said at the very beginning of this debate that the Bill is not about young or old; it is about anybody who might be the victim of spiking. I thought Deputy Aird's description was quite striking of how things have changed over time - and many other contributors said this as well - and the fact that we have moved from the simple situation of going out and having a good time with friends wherever that might be. There is the fact that has now changed to put a fear in everyone is deeply regrettable. I also welcome his sincere comment, since we are apparently all agreed on this, about accelerating the passage of the Bill. There is the capacity to get the Bill through, and quickly. We do not have to wait for years for this to become law. I acknowledge this is something that affects everyone but I also acknowledge that 87% of people who are affected by spiking are women. By the same token, 59% are aged between 18 and 25, so although it can happen to anyone, there are certainly people who are more vulnerable. Some 47% of cases are likely to happen in Dublin, for example, and 55% in licensed premises. Even with those statistics, there are quite a lot of scenarios that are not covered by them involving men, for example, older people, people outside Dublin or people in domestic homes.

I acknowledged my colleagues in the Seanad in my opening contribution. I also acknowledge the work Ms Regina Doherty, MEP, has done this week promoting this issue and joining with us, and the work Young Fine Gael did to bring this to the fore in the first instance. Their collective efforts in their campaign but also the liaison they have had with Members of the Oireachtas has been positive. I also acknowledge two transition year students Blackrock College, Tom O'Donovan and Freddie Horne, who have been with me this week and helped me in preparing some of the statistics and hard data for this speech. In terms of the debate, I particularly welcome the expression of support from the Minister and Minister of State and the indication the Government is considered this and will not oppose the Bill. The Minister said at the outset that this also relates to a commitment in the programme for Government to strengthen the law in this area so I welcome that and look forward to the co-operation of the Government in this regard as well.

He quite correctly outlined that a range of offences can be used to prosecute the kind of behaviour we are talking about but he also acknowledged that having a stand-alone offence is important form the point of view of highlighting this as an issue and making sure it is clearly something that is unacceptable.

What is also interesting in relation to what Deputy Ahern said is that, because it is not a stand-alone offence, it is very difficult to garner statistics on the number of actual prosecutions for what we term "spiking" and, more importantly, the number of convictions that have occurred. The Minister also referred to the fact that, in addition to this offence, it would be open to the DPP to prosecute somebody for the offence that he or she intended to commit after the spiking has taken place or that he or she has attempted to commit after the spiking has taken place. He is, of course, right about that. I do not take away from it. However, I acknowledge that prosecuting attempted offences is substantially more difficult than prosecuting offences that have been committed. The statistics for convictions for attempted rape, for example, are minuscule.

Coming back to the point about intention, Deputy Ó Muirí also mentioned this. The administration of the material in spiking, in and of itself, is a serious matter. I acknowledge what has been said about the loss of bodily and emotional integrity and the effect it has. I think Deputy Butterly also referred to the huge effect it has on a person's emotional stability after a spiking, as well as potentially on their physical health, as a significant offence. I am not saying we need to hold on to the intent bit in this Bill.

To come back to what Deputy Ahern said about certain things that I will term "japery in general", these are not covered by the Bill. That is correct. I do not want a situation in which we unduly criminalise somebody who is doing something in jest, however ill-advised it is. The damage it causes in and of itself is clear and acknowledged, but it is not really the intention of the Bill to target that behaviour. We are trying to target not just the administration of a poison or substance, but also why that is being done and the consequent effect. The intention bit is there to acknowledge that the crime is massively exacerbated by what the person who is spiking actually does afterwards. I would, therefore, favour instead a recategorisation in section 2 using wording such as "where there are reasonable grounds for suspecting", or something similar, which might make it easier from a prosecution point of view to establish the offence.

As I said at the outset, though, I acknowledge all the supportive remarks from colleagues on both sides of the House and that there is cross-party support for this Bill. I look forward to working with all colleagues to find a formula of words or combination of elements within the Bill that is acceptable and progressive and will result in a law that can be prosecuted in real terms. We know there are laws passed by these Houses that do not really find their way into the courts for the simple reason that they are inoperable or unworkable. We should not in any way allow the Houses to pass a law that might find itself in that position.

I acknowledge what Deputy Mark Ward said. While this may feel like there is a feast of Deputies Ward here, he has done work on this issue and it is worth acknowledging. He spoke about the statutory toxicology pathway and that is really important. I am not sure about the statutory basis for it. I think that might complicate and delay things, but the point he makes is absolutely relevant. I am referring to the idea that we should be preparing people to seek out the toxicology information in the case of an event like this, and that there should be a clear pathway for them to obtain it, because that is really important evidence for prosecutions.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny also referred to training for people in licensed premises, for example, to deal with somebody who suspects he or she has been poisoned, spiked or administered a substance. These are really important measures. I support the idea that we would put in place a known toxicology pathway for people and use a public information campaign to ensure

people know that when something has happened there is something they can do and there are steps they can take.

There is so much positivity around the Bill. What is important to take away is that there is an opportunity for us to pass something here that will make a tangible difference to the lives of Irish people, young and old, urban and rural, in public and in private. An issue has been identified not just by Young Fine Gael, but by individual Members of the House, groups such as Spiking in Ireland and groups that work with victims of sexual offences. They know this is happening. We have heard the statistics from a number of speakers during the debate. The fact that this is happening is a problem. Nobody is saying it is acceptable or lawful. There is also a recognition, though, that there is not a very clear legislative basis for prosecuting somebody for spiking as a stand-alone offence. The Bill will change that.

I ask that, in the spirit of cross-party co-operation and the support we have received from the Minister and the Minister of State, we do not allow this legislation to languish in a lottery waiting to be selected. The reality is that as a Government-backed venture, I do not get opportunities to bring forward matters like this very often. I rely on the lottery at this time of the week to bring a matter forward, and we are lucky that this Bill was picked out of that lottery. Let us not wait for the lottery to get this legislation moved on further, whether on Committee Stage before the justice committee or the committee of the whole Dáil, or on Report Stage later on. Let us positively move this on because there is an acknowledgement that this legislation is needed, that it advances a situation we know is problematic and that it addresses the issue in a way that puts it up in lights. As I said at the outset, it shows anybody contemplating this criminal, hurtful and damaging behaviour that it will not be accepted or tolerated, that it will be prosecuted and that there will be consequences.

I am very grateful not only to all the people I mentioned in Young Fine Gael and my colleagues in the Seanad who initiated the Bill three years ago, but also to those Members of the Dáil who have taken the time on a Thursday evening to come here to debate this issue, give their views and constructive commentary on the Bill and say what they think is good and what they think can be changed.

I am open to that. Let us get on and do it. Let us get on and make spiking a stand-alone offence and do something that will make a tangible difference to people across this island.

Question put and agreed to.

Message from Select Committee

An Ceann Comhairle: The Select Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, and Taoiseach has completed its consideration of the Finance (No. 2) Bill 2026 and has made amendments thereto.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 6.17 p.m. go dtí 1 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 17 Samhain 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 6.17 p.m. until 1 p.m. on Tuesday, 17 November 2026.