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DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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SEANAD ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 8 Deireadh Fómhair 2025

Wednesday, 8 October 2025

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach i gceannas ar 10.30 a.m.

Machnamh agus Paidir.

Reflection and Prayer.

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad

An Cathaoirleach: I have received notice from the following Senators that they propose to raise the following matters:

Senator Manus Boyle - The need for the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to make a statement on the staffing and service provision at Glenveagh National Park, County Donegal.

Senator Gareth Scahill - The need for the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment to make a statement on the introduction of legislation to enhance the resilience of the electricity grid and the measures in place to ensure the electrical network's integrity in the interim.

Senator Eileen Lynch - The need for the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality to provide an update on the timeline for the completion of the new adult disability day services building at Horizons, Montenotte, County Cork.

The matters raised by the Senators are suitable for discussion and they will be taken now.

Nithe i dtosach suíonna - Commencement Matters

Tourism Industry

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy to the House.

Senator Manus Boyle: I thank the Minister of State for coming. I wish to raise an issue about Glenveagh Castle, which, as the Minister of State knows, is a major tourist attraction in County Donegal. The castle has been closed on Mondays and Fridays since last year. This has led to visitor frustration, especially at peak times. It is damaging to the reputation of Donegal tourism. The existing staff are dedicated and must be praised for what they are doing. They

are doubling up on their work to try to keep the castle working. There are approximately 200,000 visitors annually. It supports local businesses, such as cafés, bed and breakfast accommodation and tour operators. The closure means less spending in the local area, which leads to reduced revenues for shops, coffee shops and everything else.

I have been told that 14 positions have not been filled in Glenveagh Castle. Will the Minister of State confirm whether there is a plan to restore full weekly access to Glenveagh Castle? What is the current recruitment plan to restore staff levels to operational needs? What funding is going to be allocated for infrastructure to upgrade over the next three years? He knows Donegal well and has been to Glenveagh many times. It is a great natural asset. We are not getting the rub of the green here. We need him to come out fighting and stand with Glenveagh. Let us get it working right. We must keep promoting the area. It is lovely, as he knows. I hope he has a reply for me.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Colm Brophy): I thank the Senator. I know Glenveagh and have been there many times. It is a lovely place. It is one of Donegal's great treasures, as the Senator knows well. He has been a strong supporter on this issue.

I am here representing the Minister. The National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, within the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage has primary responsibility for nature conservation, wildlife protection and the preservation of our national parks. I assure the Senator, on behalf of the Minister, that Glenveagh National Park remains open to visitors seven days a week all year around and as with all national parks managed by the NPWS, entry is free. In addition to amenities such as walks, trails, viewing points and toilets, the visitor and exhibition centre, castle gardens and shuttle bus remain available to the public almost every day. A charge is levied for the optional use of the shuttle bus and to tour Glenveagh Castle itself.

I appreciate that while the information desk in Glenveagh Castle also remains open seven days a week, tours of the castle are only operating on a five-days-per-week schedule, with tours currently not scheduled on Mondays and Fridays. This arrangement was introduced to ensure health and safety requirements are met and to ensure available staffing resources are maximised across the park, while reflecting patterns of visitor demand and minimising the impact to the public. It is not unusual to manage such sites on a five-day, rather than a seven-day, basis with reduced services on weekdays. This will be reviewed over time in line with the Department's workforce planning. In that regard, and the Senator asked specifically about the issue, staffing levels across the Department, including the NPWS, are kept under regular review, in line with emerging business needs and Government policy on public sector pay and staffing as advised by the Department.

While there were recent retirements addressed in terms of staffing levels, Glenveagh National Park currently has a strong staffing complement of over 50 permanent staff, including a dedicated park manager, a new role that was filled in 2024. Nevertheless, as part of its ongoing workforce planning, the Department keeps this matters under constant review in to ensure that all priority vacancies are filled in a timely manner and that resource allocations are balanced across the Department to meet key priorities, as necessary. The Department's latest round of

formal workforce planning is under way. This process seeks to strategically assess gaps in service delivery that can be addressed on a priority basis in light of available resources.

Senator Manus Boyle: I thank the Minister of State. As he said, the information desk is open. The castle needs to be open on Mondays and Fridays. From what I hear from tour operators, the five-day opening does not work into their plans. There are problems with having enough personnel and staff. I ask the Minister of State to go back to see how many we can get. From what I was told, we appear to be short gardeners and tourism industry staff throughout the house. Perhaps we could get a report that is more tied down in the near future. I thank the Minister of State.

Deputy Colm Brophy: I will, of course, bring the Senator's concerns to the responsible Minister and ensure he hears those concerns. I will also add my knowledge of Glenveagh and how wonderful it is. It is important from the perspective of tourism in Donegal that we seek to maximise accessibility to places such as Glenveagh. I recognise the Senator's concerns and will bring them to the attention of the relevant Minister. I will ensure he is fully aware of what is happening.

Electricity Grid

Senator Gareth Scahill: I thank the Minister of State for coming to the Chamber this morning. This is my fifth Commencement matter for the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and he has not entered the Chamber at all yet. I just want to put that on the record.

We have just had Storm Amy and a lot of my constituents in Roscommon once again spent the weekend without power. That follows on from Storm Éowyn back in February when 768,000 customers across the country were without electricity supply because of that storm. On the August bank holiday weekend Storm Floris, on which we had a small little yellow weather warning, also left a large part of west Roscommon without power.

The common denominator is the corridors we have in forestry and the need for the electricity supply (amendment) Bill 2025 to be prioritised and enacted as quickly as possible. I have a press release from 29 July 2025 with a headline stating that the Minister has secured Government approval for legislation to bolster the storm resilience of our electricity grid. I know we are only back, but it is now 8 October and a large number of people across the western part of this country are looking at the next storm in the coming weeks and wondering how long they are again going to be without power.

I spent Friday morning visiting people in Ballinlough outside Roscommon who were without power. I engaged with Deputy Fitzmaurice throughout the weekend about the large number of people without power all across Roscommon. Deputy Kerrane has social media posts with pictures showing these corridors. We all know where the problem is. The ESB needs support for it. We need to enact this Bill. We must compensate forestry owners. We must deliver on this.

The 29 July press release referred to the winter 2025 grid resilience plan. One of the calls in that regard is for "a formal storm review to identify recommendations to prepare for future storms". It is too late for that. We cannot wait for another review on this. This is a problem

people are experiencing on the ground today and it must be prioritised. An emergency must be declared in Roscommon or the western part of the country to deal with this. Everybody knows the problem.

I have a letter from a lady I met on Monday. She was going around to her neighbours trying to get them to sign it before sending it in. I will not give her name.

Once again, over the weekend, power lines were brought down where they run through forestry in our local area. This is now the second time [since August] this has happened on this section of the line. The same stretch was damaged during Storm Floris in August when forestry trees fell on the line. Then, during the storm in January, a feeder line from this main line was also brought down in the forestry due to falling trees.

In total, the local area has been without electricity for over three and a half weeks ... [so far this year].

While we all understand that storms are outside anyone's control, what is within the control of ESB Networks is the management and removal of trees that are too close to power lines. It is clear that these trees continue to pose a serious and ongoing threat. Unless this is addressed, the next storm will undoubtedly cause the same problem again.

I have also been in contact with Coillte regarding this matter, and they have confirmed that ESB Networks is responsible for managing vegetation around power lines.

I do not believe that is the case. A multi-agency approach is required. We need to enact this plan and we need to be strong on this. I welcome the Minister of State's statement on the matter.

Deputy Colm Brophy: I thank Senator Scahill for raising this matter. I apologise that the Minister is not here. I appreciate the Senator's comments on the importance of Ministers addressing these issues when Senators raise them. I am aware Senator Scahill has been very active in raising this matter.

The Minister has asked me to make the following statement. At the beginning of this year Storm Éowyn caused unprecedented electricity outages and exposed critical vulnerabilities in our grid system arising from unmanaged vegetation and the proximity of forestry to infrastructure. Following the storm and consultation with utility operators, the Minister has directed officials at the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment to explore legislative provisions to safeguard electricity infrastructure when passing through forestry. Heads of the Bill were approved by the Government for priority drafting on the 29 July.

The electricity (supply)(amendment) Bill will update the Electricity (Supply) Act 1927 to provide for enhanced vegetation management powers for ESB Networks. It will provide a statutory basis for the establishment and maintenance of forestry corridors - areas within a given distance of the electricity network within which forestry vegetation and related activities can be restricted by law. The Bill will protect the rights of affected landowners by establishing a framework for compensation. It will also attach maintenance responsibilities to landowners for the upkeep of forestry corridors, with backstop powers for ESB Networks to intervene where required. The Bill will uphold our environmental obligations under European law, confirming the applicability of the habitats and birds directives. It will also outline screening

thresholds for environmental impact assessments, in keeping with the requirements of the Planning and Development Acts.

The Department is working with legal counsel from the Office of the Attorney General and officials from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine to progress drafting, ensuring consistency with the forestry licensing regime established under the Forestry Act 2014. In drafting this legislation, the Department will engage with all relevant stakeholders to ensure the Bill protects the rights of landowners and is in keeping with Ireland's afforestation and environmental goals. Consultation on specific aspects of legislation, including the dimensions of corridors and principles for engaging with landowners and compensation, will include multiple Departments and bodies and the wider forestry and landowner representative bodies through a series of workshops. Members should note that these works are not expected to result in direct costs to the Exchequer, as costs associated with improvements to grid resilience are typically covered by network tariffs set as part of periodic price reviews which are under the oversight of the Commission for Regulation of Utilities.

In parallel with this legislation, in the wake of Storm Éowyn the Government directed ESB Networks to prepare a winter 2025 resilience plan. This plan was published in April and implementation continues. Post-storm patrols of the transmission and 38 kV network have been completed, with the vast majority of priority hazards made safe. The survey of the medium-voltage network is complete, with high-priority resilience issues identified. Analysis of customers most affected by treefall has identified priority areas for remediation. Timber harvesters were procured and began to cut timber during the summer. Replenishment of ESB Networks' emergency stocks of spare parts and materials to double its previous capacity is now 80% complete. Medium-term staffing and contractor resources are to be increased through the provision of targeted training programmes via the education and training boards. To address capacity shortages, the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment and the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment have progressed permits for skilled workers from outside the EU to advance urgent forestry work.

ESB Networks is leading a working group to establish formal arrangements with European distribution system operators for mutual aid during extreme weather. An agreement is drafted with ratification targeted for October. External consultants have been appointed to carry out a review of international storm experiences. Meanwhile, ESB Networks is currently concluding a formal review of its response to Storm Éowyn.

Senator Gareth Scahill: I thank the Minister of State very much for the response. A total of 768,000 customers were without electricity in February. We face another winter with the same uncertainty. Probably the only certainty is the chance that we will have power outages.

I could bring anybody in the Chamber to forestry in west Roscommon right now and show them which trees are going to come down and take out which power lines and knock out which group of people in the coming weeks. My constituents and the people of the west deserve to get support on this. They deserve a network that is resilient and our efforts to rectify this problem, which everybody spoke about in February and March but, as of this moment in time, we are still facing another winter with the same problem.

In the last line of the Minister's press statement it states, "The legislation and the regulations it will enable will strike an appropriate balance – between infrastructure resilience, the viability

of the forestry sector, environmental impact and control of costs." We are looking for that to happen in a timely manner. We want action now.

Deputy Colm Brophy: I very much appreciate the Senator's sentiments he expressed regarding the importance of timing. I will take every opportunity to convey that and the other comments made by him today to the Minister. I have no doubt he will also continue to engage directly with the Minister on this very important issue. I appreciate that it is vitally important to his constituents that they have this type of information and an update on timing. The Government is committed to learning the lessons of Storm Éowyn. As I said, the legislation and the accompanying resilience plan are being progressed as a matter of priority, in keeping with the programme for Government commitments to prioritise investment in our electricity grid. I will, of course, pass the Senator's comments directly to the Minister.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Pat Casey): I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, for coming to the House today.

Disability Services

Senator Eileen Lynch: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit. I want to highlight an urgent and important matter concerning disability services in my county of Cork, specifically the long-awaited completion and opening of the new building for the Pathways adult disability day services programme, which is hosted by Horizons, formerly known as Cope, in Montenotte in Cork city. This facility was promised as a modern, purpose-built space to support adults with intellectual disabilities. These are individuals who deserve access to safe, structured and supportive environments in order to live full, meaningful lives in their communities. Horizons previously provided two adult disability day services at the Bonnington training centre and the NASC training centre. Pathways was established as a new programme for adults who would not be suitable for either of the existing two programmes, given that these are adults with quite complex needs.

The families in Cork who were to be part of this programme were told an improved service would be delivered through this new service, yet today, despite massive anticipation, the building remains unopened. There is no confirmed timeline for when it will be fully completed or properly staffed, or when service users will actually be able to access the service. The seven approved service users do not currently have access to any service, despite being promised in June that this service through Pathways would be available in mid to late-September. To the best of my knowledge, the building is yet to be completed and is currently not staffed.

As we can imagine, this uncertainty is causing serious distress to families, who have been left in limbo. Parents and carers, many of whom are ageing themselves, are also carers for older family members or other children in the household. They are exhausted. I spoke to a parent last night who simply does not know what to do. Her adult son wants to go to a service but he cannot. He is missing his service. He finished his special school, the equivalent of secondary education, in June of this year. He wants to go back to school but he cannot. His mother does not know what to do. She is at the end of her tether. This is placing undue stress on her but, of course, it is also placing undue stress on her son as a service user.

These families have carried enormous responsibility. They were led to believe the facility would offer care and structure for their loved ones but also, as I said, peace of mind because they would be able to access the service. Instead, they have been left with inconsistent communication and a lack of transparency as to what is causing the delay. It is simply not good enough. The communication has been incredibly poor, at best. There have been a lot of phone calls, as opposed to emails and the reasons being put in writing, which, again, is something I would have an issue with.

This is about dignity, inclusion and the basic right to access a service for some of the most vulnerable in our society. It is about delivering on a commitment that was made. They were told this service would be put in place. I am seeking as clear an update as the Minister of State can provide as to when the building for Pathways in Montenotte will be completed, when it will be fully staffed and when these service users will be able to access the service. The families and service users deserve answers and security. We need accountability on this matter.

Minister of State at the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): I thank Senator Lynch for raising this important issue and offering me the opportunity to respond. Day services are Health Service Executive-funded programmes for people with intellectual disabilities, autism or complex physical disabilities. That includes a range of centre-based and community-based activities. Access to services is based on an individual's needs rather than on their diagnosis. The focus is on supporting people to participate in mainstream activities and in the life of their community, in line with their wishes.

Pathways adult disability day service is part of Horizons adult day services in Montenotte, Cork. The HSE advises me that refurbishment works being carried out are expected to finish this month. In the interim, another area within Horizons, Montenotte, has been identified for the Pathways programme. The HSE further advises that the school leavers referred to this programme commenced their transition in the week commencing 29 September 2025. All parents have been contacted by Horizons, and weekly schedules have been sent out outlining the days their children will attend the service during the transition period.

The HSE has confirmed that the recruitment of staff for the Pathways programme is ongoing, with some of the staff currently in place. Staff are working with the young adults as part of the transition plan. Once recruitment is finalised for the staffing of the Pathways programme, the young adult service will increase to 30 hours per week. Families will be kept updated by Horizons on a weekly basis.

As the Senator knows, Government investment has enabled the development of much-needed locations, such as Pathways in Montenotte. Within the sector, the New Directions policy has guided a major programme of change to reconfigure adult services, based on the core values of person-centredness, community inclusion, active citizenship and high-quality service provision.

There are over 20,000 individuals with a disability in receipt of day services, together with a further 2,049 in rehabilitative training services. These services are provided at 1,091 locations around the country by 97 service provider agencies. As the Senator knows, we had the budget yesterday. A sum of €3.8 billion has been allocated for specialist disability services in the budget, representing a 20% increase year on year. This includes funding for a new cohort of

1,400 school leavers and also 50 day service places for non-school leavers, for example, people who acquire a disability later in life.

I acknowledge and agree with the Senator's comments on the importance of dignity and inclusion. It is people in her constituency like the mother she was talking to last night who are the exact families and individuals we want to be able to accommodate when they leave school. That is why we have allocated 1,400 new day service places for school leavers for next year. With regard to the Montenotte facility, my advice from the HSE is that the refurbishment work will be completed this month. I will keep in contact with the Senator because I know it is something she has raised with me previously. We will keep in contact regarding progress and the delivery of the service.

Senator Eileen Lynch: I thank the Minister of State for her response, which I appreciate. I welcome the funding under the Department in yesterday's budget and the extra hours for adult school leavers. I note what she has said on this issue. However, today is 8 October. I am a little sceptical that all the refurbishments will be done by mid-October. I am also concerned that, as per the Minister of State's reply, even if the building were to be finished tomorrow, it is still only partially staffed. How far along the line is the recruitment? Have jobs been offered and are awaiting acceptance, or is it at the advertising stage for these positions?

I take the Minister of State's point that the transition started on 29 September. Indeed, in the individual case I referred to, the person was reached out to, although, as I said, not in writing, which does not sit well with me. However, her son's issue is largely related to epilepsy and he often suffers epilepsy attacks. He has been in hospital for the past ten days, which prevented him from accessing his one day on site. These adult service users need routine and consistency. Even if he had been able to make his day, it would be very difficult for him to adjust to going into a different building than the one that the service will be provided in. The hours the service users will be getting during the transition period will not be the same. That lack of consistency and routine is unsatisfactory.

I genuinely appreciate the Minister of State's answer. I know things are ongoing and, obviously, they take time.

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: I hear the concerns the Senator is raising. I will continue my engagement with the HSE to make sure the service gets up and running. I have been told by the HSE that some of the staff are in place and that recruitment is ongoing. I absolutely accept and understand the consistency and surety that are needed for individuals who want to use this day service, and they must get that. We need this building up and running. The recruitment drive is ongoing.

11 o'clock

I look forward to keeping in contact with the Senator and the HSE to make sure this is opened fully and staffed fully as quickly as possible. This is exactly where we want to go with our national disability strategy, ensuring we have residential, respite and day services in place with staffing. Let us keep in contact on this to ensure it is progressed as soon as possible.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Pat Casey): I thank the Minister of State for coming in this morning.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 11.01 a.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 11.32 a.m.

Sitting suspended at 11.01 a.m. and resumed at 11.32 a.m.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: The Order of Business is No. 1, statements on budget 2026, from the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, to be taken at 1 p.m. and to conclude at 3 p.m., if not previously concluded, with the time allocated to opening remarks of the Minister not to exceed ten minutes, those of group spokespersons not to exceed eight minutes, those of all other Senators not to exceed five minutes, time may be shared and the Minister to be given not less than ten minutes to reply to the debate; and No. 49(2), motion regarding supports and services for patients with head and neck cancers, to be taken at 5 p.m., with the time allocated to this debate not to exceed two hours.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I thank the Deputy Leader for the opportunity to raise Portumna Forest Park, which has been raised previously in the Seanad. There are two elements. When Storm Éowyn landed some months back, it did untold destruction. I compliment the work Coillte did to ensure our paths and trails were open all summer. Although they were open, there is still an awful lot of debris from fallen trees. Those fallen trees need addressing. We need them to be properly taken away and harvested. I have no doubt a lot of other trees on the Coillte sites right across the country need addressing. I am asking that we bring in the Minister with responsibility for Coillte before us, so we could have a conversation or a debate to get an understanding of how prepared our semi-State agencies are for the next storm when it comes. These environments are very precious. We saw the value Coillte provided during the Covid-19 pandemic by providing access to such wonderful amenities. We need to ensure those amenities are protected and safe in the event of storms.

Coillte has plans for Portumna Forest Park, which it recently put before the people of Portumna and the surrounding areas and before us as elected representatives. Unfortunately, some of the proposals that were put to the people in the surrounding areas are unpalatable. The main aspect that is unpalatable relates to tourist residential accommodation in the middle of the park. It might sound ideal. It might seem very nice that a person would be able to hire a little cottage on the banks of the Shannon, trek through the trees and be cut off from the outside world. However, it is not safe. We saw that with Storm Éowyn and the number of felled trees. Moreover, as a local community, we do not feel that is the right environment. Portumna Forest Park is accessed by all the locals. They want to continue to be able to access it. We do not need an erosion of the natural habitat. We would like Coillte to upgrade the toilet services that are there. The toilets in Portumna Forest Park have been closed for the last three years. They have put in an eco-toilet, but it is not accessible to people with additional needs. It is not accessible to people who have bad hips or are of an older age. They are not going to use it. At the same time, we do not have any sheltered areas for picnics. My ask is that we invite the

Minister to come before us to give us a concrete plan for recreational development by Coillte across the country.

Senator Garret Ahearn: Opening up new markets across the world was mentioned in the budget statements yesterday, and one aspect of that is getting direct flights between different countries. I ask that we have a debate with the Minister for Transport about that. Obviously, relationships with America are unstable - that is probably the best way to put it - and we need to diversify our markets. Tokyo and Japan are really good opportunities for Ireland. I was there last week as part of the foreign affairs committee. Japan is very similar to Ireland in terms of its nervousness about having stable relationship with America. They are looking to the European Union, and they see Ireland as the only English-speaking country in the bloc. They see a real opportunity to enhance business between both countries but that can only be done by having direct flights between Dublin and Tokyo. That sends a message of confidence that both countries can work together. Japan is a country where you do not really get a deal today or tomorrow but once you show commitment, they really buy into it. That is why Ireland and the Department of foreign affairs has spent almost €20 million on a new embassy in Tokyo, Ireland House, and the ambassador is doing phenomenal work. In the last number of months, half the Cabinet have visited expos over there. The Taoiseach opened the embassy in July. Japan is the biggest country in Asia financially, it is part of the G7 and it is a country with which we have built up a really strong relationship over the past 70 or 80 years. When we talk about opportunities, that is one we should deal with.

I had the opportunity to meet the Mayor of Hiroshima who wanted to pass on his gratitude at being able to speak in this Chamber to Members last year. He wished everyone well. He knew there had been an election. He acknowledged the Cathaoirleach's re-election and noted that our former Cathaoirleach had progressed onto a higher level. He had fond memories of last year when he was here and he wanted to pass on his regards.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I agree with the Order of Business. I thank the Leader for making adequate time today for debate on the budget. I will not say too much about it at this point, but I want to take the opportunity to acknowledge the very significant and important work of the Parliamentary Budget Office. For those who have not called down to its stand in LH2000 this morning, I suggest they do so. If anyone has not had the opportunity overnight to read its commentary on the budget, it makes for very interesting reading. I will go into this later in the debate on the budget. The Parliamentary Budget Office is critical. It is really healthy and great in a democracy that we have a stand-alone, independent Parliamentary Budget Office that can stand over its analysis, figures and commentary with great integrity and impartiality. That is a sign of the health of a democracy and a really important service for us. They are always there to support us, as is the Library and Research Service. I want to acknowledge that.

I will take the opportunity to touch on one issue, namely local government. As there are so many segments to the budget, it is important we have the opportunity to go through it section by section. We can do that later on or hopefully throughout the next few weeks. I want to acknowledge funding of €801.7 million for local government and electoral reform which is positive. It represents an increase of €117 million. That is a significant change for local government which is to be acknowledged and I want to support that. It is about funding equalisation, the local property tax, fire services, enhanced services for local authorities, greater

inclusion and awareness of local government and greater participation in local government. That is great. The Minister of State with responsibility for planning and local government, Deputy Cummins, has done a lot of work in this area. He comes from a strong background in local government, has huge expertise and is fiercely committed to it. I want to acknowledge that. Local authorities are at the front line of essential services for our citizens. As they impact on the daily lives of our communities and citizens, any additional money to local government has to be commended. I acknowledge the Minister of State's statement that he has dedicated funding for the local democracy task force, in which this Seanad, on all sides of the House, has played a huge role. I acknowledge the Cathaoirleach's work on that. The Minister of State said in a Government press statement this morning that a significant amount of money will be provided for in this budget for the implementation of the task force. I particularly welcome this but we may need more detail. Given the significance of local government and its interrelationship with the Seanad and those here whom it elects, I ask that we be given a briefing note, if possible, on the resources and funding for the local government task force which the Minister of State has committed to. I thank him.

Senator Joanne Collins: I want to raise public transport, particularly in County Limerick. I have received a couple of emails from commuters in east Limerick who travel from Kilfinane to Colbert Station, which is the train station in the city. They travel from the east of the county to the city for work or college. I am informed that every day, there are between 70 and 80 people trying to get on a 52-seater bus. This means that at least 20 people are standing at a bus stop somewhere having to wait for the next one, which might not come for two hours or might not turn up at all. These people are finding it very difficult to get into work or college. College students who cannot afford to rent in the city and are staying at home and trying to commute in and out. The same thing is happening in west Limerick with the Killarney bus, which passes through Abbeyfeale, Newcastle West and Adare on its way into the city. By the time it hits Abbeyfeale, which is the first town it reaches in County Limerick, the bus is full. The next bus does not arrive for another two hours. Anyone trying to get into college or work for 9 a.m. does not have a choice. These young people are looking at having to buy cars and get car insurance. We all know how much car insurance is for young people. These students, and the workers, are trying their best to commute but the services are just not there. I raised this with the NTA at the transport committee before the summer recess. Its response was that it would look at capacity. Nothing has changed since. We are still in the same situation, with a lack of capacity and timings that do not work for people who need to be at certain places at certain times.

On the brighter side, I want to give a shout out to Local Link, which is absolutely amazing for a certain age group. If you are looking to get somewhere at a certain time and be back at a certain time, Local Link does not work. It is more for the middle of the day and it does not go to all locations where people need to go. For college and work, we mostly rely on Bus Éireann. We also use Dublin Coach because it goes down to Killarney but it is unreliable at the moment between capacity and timings.

Senator Paul Daly: I want to raise awareness among the greater public of the issue of avian flu. There has been a confirmed case in a commercial flock in Northern Ireland. Imagine going to bed last night as someone who rears turkeys commercially and has just one major pay day in the year. You would be living on tenterhooks. It is important that we raise awareness among

the public. Someone who has a backyard flock of a few hens needs to be aware of this. If one of them gets sick and dies, they need to be honest and go to the correct authorities to report the incident. Similarly, if someone comes across a dead wild bird, it is not just a case of walking by or kicking it into the hedge and letting nature take its course. It needs to be reported, analysed and tested. It is vitally important that there is awareness among the public so that we keep this infection out of our commercial and backyard flocks at all costs. My heart goes out to those who rear turkeys in particular. They have one payday in the year. We can imagine how they would feel if there was an outbreak of this disease. I would say they are having sleepless nights. If we can help in any way, we should. People should be vigilant. It is all about biosecurity and we all have a role to play in biosecurity. If people see a dead wild bird, I ask them to take the correct action and report it to the relevant authorities.

Senator Gareth Scahill: I had a Commencement matter this morning on Storm Amy. I failed to acknowledge and recognise the staff of the local authority who worked all weekend across Roscommon and the west cleaning up the mess, along with the staff from the ESB and the forestry management services. I want to congratulate them now and thank them for doing this work in difficult times.

I also want to congratulate the 72,833 people who are receiving their junior certificate results this morning. They will be visiting school to get their results and later they will be able to get them online. I want to congratulate them and wish them every success in the future.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: As someone who lives in Kildare, I know the Deputy Leader is very much aware of the Defence Forces and everything to do with them. It is a matter of concern to me that Ireland is one of the few countries that did not apply for the funding that was made available through the EU SAFE fund, with €150 billion set aside to assist countries to bring their militaries up to speed given the level of threat that exists in the world today. As we approach Ireland's Presidency of the Council of the European Union, in light of the shutting down of Copenhagen Airport as a result of drone activity and given that other members of the European Union have provided naval service support for Denmark during its Presidency, we need to have a debate in this House - now is the time to do it - to establish exactly what plans we have to ensure dignitaries arriving into the country can land in Baldonnell Airport and can be securely transported into Leinster House, Dublin Castle or wherever meetings will take place. Similarly, we need to know what protections are in place for our skies. As the Deputy Leader knows, the air defence regiment was stood down in 2012 and we do not have one at this point in time. If somebody decides to come in here with drones, what are we going to do about them? How are we going to keep the airport open? We saw the catastrophe of the joint cyberattack and bomb scare at terminal 2 in Dublin Airport a couple of weeks ago. If I am not mistaken, 600 flights were cancelled over that period. I ask that we have a debate with the Minister for Defence to establish exactly where we are going as we approach the Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

Senator Joe Flaherty: Yesterday was budget day, an important day in the life of any democracy. I assume many other Members, like me, were deeply troubled to see several streets in the perimeter of the Government buildings closed down. There was no protest, and no people were gathering. A small number of businesses on nearby streets were closed off. There were

tourists looking at what was going on and wondering why. We have a new Garda Commissioner, Justin Kelly, and I wish him well. He has been enthusiastically welcomed by members of the gardaí. I have no doubt he will be a force for good. His predecessor, Drew Harris, probably got matters wrong when the riots unfolded in Dublin. I think he reacted heavily-handedly with his subsequent security measures around Dublin, particularly around this House. Who took the decision on the policing yesterday? There had to be north of 100 gardaí on duty yesterday for absolutely no incidents, nothing whatsoever. If I was a trader or if I lived in a community in Dublin that is rife with crime and I was looking at that, I would be annoyed. As a member of this House, I am embarrassed. We are told the Garda has highly sophisticated intelligence and is able to monitor social media to know exactly when protests are coming. Was this a decision of An Garda Síochána or was it a decision of the management of this House? This is important in a modern democracy, and we pride this House and Ireland on being a modern and progressive democracy. This is one of the few parliaments in the world where you can readily have access. You just need to contact your local TD or Senator and you can get access to the House for a tour with our wonderful ushers. We pride ourselves on the access we give but we gave a terrible message yesterday to Ireland and to Europe that we are afraid to govern. That was essentially the message. I would be troubled to think the management of this House gave that message yesterday. Was it a decision of An Garda Síochána to close down this area yesterday or was it a decision of the management of Leinster House?

Senator Pauline Tully: I want to raise the hunger strike being undertaken outside the Dáil by five people who are survivors of industrial schools. It has been going on since 21 September. I know many other Senators have raised their concerns in this House. I am very concerned about their health and the ongoing health issues they may endure later as a result of this hunger strike. I acknowledge there has been some engagement with the Minister for education, Deputy McEntee, and higher up in government. That door has been left open for engagement but I do not think any commitments have been made that would persuade them to come off their hunger strike. Maybe whoever is involved can dig a little bit deeper to give them some commitment to persuade them, but they are very headstrong and committed. As someone said to me, they do not feel they have anything to lose at this stage. That is also worrying. I do not think they are asking for an awful lot. They are looking for the Health (Amendment) Act medical card, which would give them increased medical supports, more than the enhanced medical card, for example. Medical supports for survivors and priority on the housing list are things that are very important for them. The last thing we want is for any one of them to be back in an institution in later life. If we could provide medical supports and caring supports, they could remain in their own home and be able to live a comfortable life. They have already suffered enough at the hands of this State.

Senator Paraic Brady: I wish to raise an issue of caution for our farming community. We have seen record prices being paid for cattle over recent months. Last week, we saw a springer heifer in my local area making €15,500 at Carrigallen mart. I caution the farming community that everything has a ceiling, and everything has a price and a fall value. There are a number of sales coming up, and there seems to be panic among farmers that they must meet targets to match up with the ICBF star rating. However, and this is where I have a concern, somewhere along the line you have to look at the cost of your produce, what you are buying in and the cost of what you are losing in your scheme. It might be advisable to take the penalty from the

Department rather than investing in high-cost stock. We see heifers now being sold for €7,000, and upwards, on average. If it is only one animal you are losing, you are losing €300. I caution the farming community that certainly they need to look at that in the context of an investment of €7,000 or more. They need to sit down and look at the books to assess what return will be made on such an investment. There is a fear right now that farmers have lost control of spending when prices are good. I urge caution on that.

Senator Tom Clonan: I wish to make some comments in light of the budget. While I welcome the modest increase in spending on disability and caring supports, the Government still has not come to grips with the fundamental human rights-based approach to disability that is necessary. The question of political judgment has been bandied about in the past number of days. I argue that political judgment on disability rights still has not got the message after last year's referendums. Let us see what happens in this month's presidential election.

I want to read from an email I got from a lady regarding disability. It really stopped me in my tracks:

Hi Tom. I have been following you on social media for a while and for some reason, at 3.30 a.m. on a Saturday, I feel compelled to tell you my story. My 11-year-old girl feels a lot of stress and worry about her brother. He has autism and a learning disability. He is a beautiful, loving boy who has many challenging needs and has no supports or services. My little girl suffers from time to time with serious stress and anxiety over her realisation that one day, she will become her brother's carer. This is a father's worst nightmare for what is currently my life will one day become hers. I would not change my life for anyone's. My whole life, my whole reason on earth, is to care for my children. I know my little girl will grow up and become a person in her own right but who will care for my son when I am gone? That sadness lives with me every day for I know that nobody will look after and care for him as much as me. I know that sometimes it feels like you are beating your head off a wall when it comes to carers' and disability rights in this country. I feel like that too but without you, without us, there would be silence.

Every single family is traumatised. Every single family is suffering moral injury and moral distress for the lack of a human rights approach. I would like a debate on this in the House almost a year to the day since we signed the optional protocol to the UN Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It is abundantly clear that the Government has not got the message on disability rights. We need a debate on that matter.

Senator Maria Byrne: I rise today to welcome the budget yesterday. I have two or three things to say.

First, €50 million is being provided for tillage farmers. This is a huge issue. I received my nomination for the agriculture panel from the Irish Grain and Feed Association. I know the significant impact that this €50 million will have for these farmers.

12 o'clock

There is also investment in apprenticeships. I believe that apprenticeships are having a positive impact. It is about encouraging people to apply for them. Some people previously did not consider apprenticeships as an option. There are many openings for people to go through

different stages. They can start their apprenticeships, go on and do their certificate and diploma, up to degree level, while being trained and working at the same time. It is a positive move and I compliment the Government on its investment in apprenticeships.

People such as carers are being considered in budget 2026. Significant resources are being put in place for those people, who carry out worthwhile jobs. Many of them help to keep people out of hospital and in their own homes. They need to be looked after on an ongoing basis.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: We started today with Senator Rabbitte, who spoke about Portumna Forest Park, which is a beautiful place, in the context of Storm Éowyn. She acknowledged the good work done by Coillte in the clean-up after the storm. There is, however, still debris with fallen trees. From a safety point of view, it is important they be removed. The Senator was right to say that is the case across the country. Priority should be given to such issues. We are lucky to have those beautiful recreational trails and it is important that we encourage people to use them and ensure they are safe to use.

The Senator raised a larger point about Portumna Forest Park and consultation on Coillte's plans to have a type of tourist and leisure facility in the centre of the park. She said there is a lot of local concern around that proposal and made the relevant point that while there are toilets there, they have been closed for the past three years. We need to do better and improve facilities for the local people who like to use Portumna Forest Park and other parks around the country. The Senator was right to say that we need to have a debate in this House about the strategy for all of our forests and forest walks. I take great pleasure from forest walks in Kildare. We will look for the Minister to come to the House for a debate.

Senator Ahearn spoke about opening new world markets and the need to have direct flights. He is one of the lucky ones who got over to Expo 2025 in Tokyo. I believe it was an informative expo and busy delegation. I talked to Senator Fitzpatrick about it. I know that the members of two committees went at the same time. It is important work. It was important that new embassy opened during the summer. The Senator was right to say that we need to build and develop that relationship. We absolutely should look for new routes. We will bring that message forward and look for a debate with the Minister for Transport.

Senator Boyhan spoke about the excellent work of the Parliamentary Budget Office. He is correct. It is important that we have an independent body to conduct analysis. I have not had the change yet to visit the stand but I look forward to doing so. It is important. I know we will have a debate on the budget later but significant moneys have been given for electoral reform. That is important. There is funding for the local democracy task force. The Senator was right to say that we need a debate in this House on the issue and we will look for such a debate. We will also look for a briefing note on the specifics of the budget. We often see the headline item but do not know what is behind it so it is important that we get a briefing note. We will look for that and share it.

Senator Collins spoke about public transport in Limerick. In one case, there is a 52-seater bus with 70 to 80 people waiting to board, and there is not another bus for two hours. That is wrong and absolutely needs to be alleviated. We cannot leave people behind. In this case, that includes students and people who are working in the college. It is about capacity. I sometimes find that Local Link, which offers an excellent service, can step in and help, particularly when there is a small overflow. We will raise the matter with the Minister for Transport.

Senator Paul Daly spoke about the issue of avian flu. I can appreciate how I would feel if I was in the business. As the Senator put it, there is one just pay day, at Christmas. At this point, when it is just over two months away, these worries are concerning. We must all be vigilant and the Senator is right to raise awareness of it. We need to report if we see anything unusual in backyard flocks - my mother has hens - or if we see dead birds on the road or wherever else. We need to report those things and to stay vigilant. It is an issue of biosecurity.

Senator Scahill spoke about Storm Amy. He wanted to acknowledge the staff of the local authorities and the ESB, and rightly so. Those people worked for 24 hours to try to get everything back. I thank the Senator for acknowledging them. We join with him in that. He went on to note that over 72,000 young people are getting their junior certificate results today. We certainly wish them all well and hope they enjoy safe and happy celebrations tonight.

Senator Craughwell spoke about the Defence Forces and money available through the EU SAFE fund to bring the military up to speed. I cannot say why Ireland did not apply for those funds. We will seek a debate because we need to be alert to all issues relating to security, particularly in the sky. We are learning a little more about cybersecurity.

The Senator also spoke about the EU Presidency and the need for oversight of the security preparations. That is not something we should be going into in an open forum such as this. From a security point of view, there are going to be security operations that absolutely need to be kept private and secret. We all understand that. On the wider aspect, we should look for a debate.

Senator Flaherty raised an interesting point and was correct to raise it. From what I understand, these actions normally come about on the basis of knowledge that there is going to be a protest. Last year, we saw rough protests and situations where people, both Members and staff, were impacted and that was wrong. It was disconcerting to see not just yesterday but over recent days the amount of money that has been spent on barriers and barricades. The gardaí around Leinster House are always courteous and I express our thanks and gratitude to them. However, we have to ask whether it is a good use of resources. The Senator asked the pertinent question as to whether the Garda or the management of the House took the decision. I would imagine it was a joint decision of the two. He is right to raise the issue. We should ask for the issue to be raised at both the Business Committee and the commission. We will ask for that from here. We pride ourselves on Leinster House being a house for the people. They can come in and view what is going on. In olden days, when I was a young one who was interested in politics, I used to come to Leinster House on budget day. I thought it sad to see so few people here yesterday, no matter what that budget was going to include. It is a big part of the parliamentary process. We need to give access to people. TDs had access for only one guest and Senators had none. That needs to be reviewed and changed.

Senator Tully spoke about survivors of industrial schools. We all share concerns about their health and welfare. Senator Boyhan raised the issue last week. I understand there was some engagement with the Minister, Deputy McEntee. It is concerning that the hunger strike has been going on for quite a period now. It started on 21 September. We have to be very concerned for those who are there. I know it is about priority on the housing list and enhanced medical card supports. As an individual, I believe it is something we should be working on but, from the Seanad, we will support engagement to come to a collaborative decision to ensure that those

who are on hunger strike come off it because we are all concerned about them. We will look for the Minister to come to the House in that regard.

Senator Brady spoke about the farming community and the record prices for cattle. He spoke about a heifer that went for over €15,000. That is gobsmacking. That is a concern and he is right to flag the fact that farmers need to show caution. We cannot just throw money around. We have seen that happen in relation to property. Who is to say the same would not happen with livestock?

Senator Clonan spoke about the budget and disability supports. We will be having a discussion on the budget later on. I assume the Senator will speak about the matter at that time. I appreciate the anxiety and stress of family members. I also appreciate how a parent can be concerned about a sibling, particularly when there is only two in the family and the other sibling gets stressed and worried. Like the Senator, I know families in that situation. I totally understand it. While we will not get into a full discussion on the budget, I do want to acknowledge in a small way the significant expansion of funding for residential and respite care put in place yesterday. That is very important. When people with disabilities contact me, this is one of the biggest issues they raise. It is something I have brought up constantly. Day services are also to be expanded for those leaving school. Those two particular initiatives are really important. We need to keep going further but we are on the right track. We will certainly look for a debate on the matter.

Senator Maria Byrne highlighted three areas of the budget. One was supports for tillage farmers, whom we spoke about at length last week. The second was apprenticeships. The biggest issue we are dealing with in terms of apprenticeships is parity of esteem. Young people can earn as they learn and that is every bit as good as or, at times, even better than going straight into university. She also raised support for carers. It is great to see the income disregard rising to €1,000 for single people and €2,000 for couples. Over the lifetime of this Government, we will remove the means test entirely but the first steps are very good.

That is the end of my response to the Order of Business.

Order of Business agreed to.

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad

An Cathaoirleach: The issue of security was raised at the Seanad Committee on Parliamentary Privileges and Oversight. While people are entitled to protest outside the Parliament, it was asked that the permanent problem we have in relation to protests be addressed in a permanent manner because we have rolling security measures whereby security barriers are brought in and then taken away because there is no crowd and no protest and this represents an enormous cost to taxpayer. We have asked the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission to report back to the House and to make sure that this issue, which has been ongoing for a long time, is addressed in order that Members of the Oireachtas and members of the public who are visiting can come and go safely and that people who are protesting outside can also do so safely. There is too much traffic on the road outside and there is always the danger that someone is going to step off the footpath into the way of a cyclist or an oncoming bus. We have asked for that to be addressed.

We have also had input into the strategic plan being adopted this week on foot of suggestions from the Committee on Parliamentary Privileges and Oversight that a Members' feedback committee would be established to look at security, facilities and all other issues Members come across. The feedback committee would be a vehicle through which Members could raise those issues for them to be passed on to the commission to be addressed. I thank Members for their input in relation to the strategic plan. Their concerns are on track to be addressed, particularly those around safety and the use of taxpayers' money on days like yesterday.

I welcome a former Member, the former Senator Gerry Horkan, to Seanad Éireann. I thank him for coming in today.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 12.16 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 1.01 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 12.16 p.m. and resumed at 1.01 p.m.

Budget 2026 (Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation): Statements

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister of State to the House. You are most welcome to Seanad Éireann. The Minister of State will speak for ten minutes, group spokespersons for eight minutes and all other Senators for five minutes and the Minister of State will reply not later than 2.50 p.m. The statements will conclude by 3 p.m.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Emer Higgins): I thank the Cathaoirleach. I am pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to the debate on budget 2026, which was, of course, presented to the Dáil by the Ministers for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation and Finance yesterday.

Each year, my Department is presented with a finite budget and is tasked with making things better for the people of Ireland. I know this is a cause that we all share and are passionate about. Budget 2026 is fair and inclusive, and has a focus on strategic and long-term priorities while delivering better outcomes for everyone. It has been designed to protect and create employment, supporting and strengthening our growing economy. It provides for and encourages long-term sustainability and sustainable strategic investment in our country and its future.

A key focus of the budget was to support improvements in our public services that deliver for the people of Ireland. We can all see the pressures in public services all around us and the demands on housing, health and education. They are all increasing due to demographic changes and a growing population. We are living longer and families need different types of support. People expect inclusive, integrated and high-quality public services to deliver that. This budget will help to support ambitions in this area.

Budget 2026 will support a social welfare system that protects the most vulnerable people in our society, an education system that supports our students and fosters talent and a health service that improves patient outcomes and supports longevity. As well as improvements to public services, this budget, the first from our new Government, introduces targeted and

permanent measures that provide certainty for people, especially those in society who are most vulnerable, in the form of social protection.

As a Government, we are acutely aware of the challenges people face today. The €10 increase in weekly social protection payments will benefit pensioners, people with disabilities, carers, jobseekers and lone parents. Increases to the working family parent income threshold, the expansion of the back-to-school clothing and footwear payment to younger children and the extension of the fuel allowance scheme to everybody availing of the working family payment bring welcome relief for families around the country.

We have also announced a permanent fee reduction in the third level student contribution. The budget provides significant supports for the most vulnerable groups in our society and represents a step forward for people with disabilities and their families. Particularly welcome are significant increases to the carer's allowance income disregard and in the domiciliary care allowance payments to support Ireland's carers who work tirelessly to support loved ones.

To complement that, there is provision in the budget for new residential care placements and day service placements for those who need them. This, along with funding for assessments, home support and personal assistants, will bring welcome relief to those caring for people with disabilities and will support people to live independently in their own homes. These supports, along with additional SNAs and an increased number of teachers working specifically to support students with additional needs, will be welcomed by families around the country, as will the new acute hospital and community beds announced today.

Budget 2026 is a positive budget for our country and builds on the revised €275 billion national development plan announced in July. The Government is focused on investing in infrastructure, such as housing, schools, healthcare facilities, water, energy, public transport and our roads network, that is critical to our economy and essential to providing for our growing population. It connects communities, powers economies and ensures access to essential services. The allocations for infrastructure in budget 2026 will ensure that every corner of Ireland benefits from modern and efficient public assets.

This infrastructure is also essential to our efforts to tackle issues around housing delivery. Having a place to call our own is essential for well-being, providing shelter, stability, safety and certainty. Housing is one of the most challenging issues in our society. So many people, couples and families are struggling to find secure and affordable homes. The Government has prioritised housing delivery in this budget in order to provide more homes for our people.

Naturally, more housing requires more water, energy and public transport, as well as education and health facilities. In addition to supporting infrastructure, the budget supports the delivery of thousands of new build social homes and the second-hand acquisition programme. A new housing activation infrastructure fund will support the recently announced housing activation office. This significant investment in housing will benefit people, couples, families and young people for generations to come. We are also investing in sustainability. Retrofitting homes, supporting energy upgrades, enhancing public transport and investing in our greenways are all part of our commitment to tackling climate change and securing our shared future.

Budget 2026 has been delivered against a backdrop of trade and geopolitical uncertainty, but our economy continues to grow and has shown remarkable resilience despite these challenges. Investment in digitalisation will help us to upskill our young people with the skills they will

need in the workforce of not just today but tomorrow, supporting a strong digital economy. This budget has been developed to strengthen our economic resilience, build an adaptable enterprise sector and support local businesses which, along with the agrifood sector, are the cornerstone and lifeblood of communities across the country.

The pandemic brought home to many of us the place that artists, writers and athletes play in society and our hearts. Imagine going through that time without books, the media or music. Sport is also a key part of our incredible heritage and culture. Watching our athletes punch above their weight and deliver outstanding performances on a global stage is something we are all so proud to see. Allocations made in the area of culture, heritage and sport will continue to support the development of cultural and sporting initiatives and ensure we can continue to invest in our culture and heritage and in the artists, writers and athletes who inspire us and the tourism and cultural activities and initiatives that showcase Ireland to the world. I was delighted the basic income for the arts scheme has been so successful, as I am sure it will continue to be going forward.

As well as our culture and heritage, we can be very proud of Ireland's reputation as a peaceful, fair and welcoming country. Reflecting on our role in Europe and, indeed, our position globally, I am endlessly grateful to the men and women of our Defence Forces who work to safeguard Ireland's security, peacefulness and stability. Our allocation to the Defence Forces demonstrates our ongoing commitment to ensure that Ireland remains a safe and secure place to call home. Allocations to justice will support the recruitment of additional staff in our Prison Service, as well as trainee gardaí who work tirelessly to build stronger and safer communities across Ireland.

This budget sets out an inclusive and compelling vision of a thriving country where enterprise can flourish and people can feel valued. Its implementation will make an impact on the lives of all of those who are proud to call our nation home. It provides for long-term investment in Ireland's infrastructure and public services, building foundations for a strong shared future. It is important in these divisive times that we purposefully work collaboratively to create a fairer and better shared future for ourselves, our children and generations to come, not just investing in today but planning for the Ireland of tomorrow. With that in mind, I conclude my address and look forward to engaging with Senators.

Senator Cathal Byrne: I thank the Minister of State for joining us. On behalf of the Fine Gael Party, we support the proposed budget. I listened carefully yesterday to both Ministers, Deputies Donohoe and Chambers, when they outlined this budget and the proposals around it. When I consider the key priorities a budget should be measured against, I think of safeguarding the economy, supporting families, improving access to vital public services like education, health and disability services, prioritising those most in need and, most of all, delivering the key infrastructure necessary for the economy and the people of this country, including in the area of housing. This budget does exactly that. It is the first of five budgets under the new programme for Government and makes sure those key areas are prioritised.

I will speak about a number of the key measures included in this budget. There is a €2 billion package of social protection measures to deliver help with the cost of living including a €10 increase in pensions, carer's allowance, disability, illness and other social protection payments. This includes the carer's allowance means test disregard being increased from €375 for a single

person or €750 for a couple up to €1,000 and €2,000, respectively. This is an important measure that perhaps has not got the publicity it deserves. The Government is committed to abolishing the means test for the carer's allowance. This is an important step toward that over the next four budgets out of five in total. There will be an increase of 65 cent in the minimum wage to €14.15 per hour, the highest minimum wage ever and the 12th such increase under Fine Gael in government. I also think of housing, with new total capital funding for housing of €5.2 billion, in addition to the Land Development Agency and approved housing bodies, to deliver 25,000 new homes, public housing and a new starter home programme. If we want to get to grips with the housing issues we have, we must put in place a starter home programme that allows couples and individuals to buy their first home and get their foot on the property ladder. That is why it is so important to have schemes like the help-to buy-scheme which supports first-time buyers to get the taxes they paid over the previous four years back to count as a deposit towards their first home.

In rural Ireland, an area which is so important in my area of Wexford, farm tax reliefs, including the stamp duty young trained farmer relief, capital gains tax, stamp duty farm consolidation relief and an extension to the accelerated capital allowance for slurry storage, ensure sufficient measures are taken to reflect that we have an ageing group of farmers. We must support the next generation in taking up vital roles for farming in rural Ireland.

In justice, there will be an increase of €200 million in 2026 for a total spend of €6.2 billion, including €77 million to recruit 1,000 new gardaí and 200 new civilian staff to free up gardaí from behind desks to get out on the beat and on the front line. With an increasing population, we have to recruit more gardaí. This budget provides the necessary funding to support the recruitment processes in place.

There is a permanent €500 cut in college fees, reducing them to €2,500. Many families have asked me what are we doing about the student contribution fee. The Government has committed to a permanent cut, the first across the next four budgets, resulting in a permanent reduction for families accessing third level education. It is important that we support students and people who want to go to college. This is a permanent cut, not taking away from the temporary measures introduced during the cost-of-living crisis at the onset of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Backing business and protecting jobs, the hospitality VAT rate will be reduced to 9% to protect 191,000 jobs in small businesses from 1 July, 2026.

There is an increase in the total spend on disability services of 20%, funding them for an additional 90,000 people. I meet families affected by some of the inability to access services for their loved ones who have a disability. It is so important this investment is put in for next year for greater access to disability services.

There is also additional funding in support of the post office network. There is €18 million to make the basic arts programme permanent. There is a new capital funding programme for the arts and culture and existing capital funding programmes under the sports capital grant scheme, including an additional €5 million for TG4.

As this is the first of five budgets, there are measures I would like to see implemented. I look forward to continuing to raise them in this Chamber.

In preparation for this debate, I had a look at the budget measures and proposals of the Opposition parties. I saw in the Sinn Féin proposal, running to 50 pages, no mention of supporting jobs. Instead, there are 23 new tax increases and an attack on the foreign direct investment sector by removing employer PRSI share-based remuneration. If Sinn Féin were serious about supporting so many jobs in the foreign direct investment sector, it would not propose these measures. It also wants a reduction in pension tax relief for workers, making it hard for them to save for the future, having already voted against the auto-enrolment scheme specifically designed to help workers without an occupational pension to get one.

I looked at the Labour Party's pre-budget submission document, its alternative budget. I saw 33 tax increases and an increase in inheritance tax of 3% which I simply could not believe. Hard-working families passing on what they have earned to the next generation are penalised by the Labour Party's proposal for a 3% increase in inheritance tax. The party also proposes to scrap the help-to-buy scheme, making it harder for first-time buyers to gather a deposit. The alternative budget of the Social Democrats proposes 24 new taxes, attacks foreign direct investment by removing tax credits and penalises access to jobs by increasing employer PRSI.

I am happy to support this budget. This is the first of five. I do not support the proposals of the Opposition. It is important the House is made aware of them. There is plenty more work to be done but I commend this budget to the House.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I welcome the Minister of State. I thank her for her commitment to come to the House this afternoon. She is always welcome. I also thank her staff. We sometimes forget that behind all good Ministers and Departments are good staff who give technical support to the Minister of State and others in the formation of any budget. That is a key component of the process.

I acknowledge the publication of *The Budget in Brief: Your Guide to Budget 2026*. Talking about budgets, if we had the resources, it should be in every household. I took the liberty of sending the link to hundreds of people last night. It touches on issues. It does not cover all of them or drill down on many of the specifics but it gives heading you can chase up.

I welcome many aspects, and I want my contribution to be as positive as it can, but I also want to point out some concerns I have. I recognise the importance of the national development plan and the critical roll-out of infrastructure for housing, the economy, employment, sustainability and all of that. We can talk all we like about housing but we need to see the Government's Housing for All or some iteration of its housing policy. That continues to be pushed back and back. I know the Minister of State is not the Minister with responsibility so I do not expect her to reply, but it is about time we saw the new national housing policy or document that the Government intends to operate and roll out for its term in office.

I acknowledge the very significant work of the Parliamentary Budget Office, PBO. Those who had an opportunity to meet its staff today will have found the engagement very meaningful. They do an extraordinary body of work. One of the great things about a democratic parliament such as ours is that we have this independent validation, scrutiny and analysis of the finances of Government budgets. Yesterday the office completed work in a timely fashion, and I acknowledge that. The role and functions of the PBO and its objective are to advise the Oireachtas - not Ministers, not Departments but Oireachtas Members. That is important.

I wish to raise a number of issues with the Minister of State on the budget. I will not go into the detail. She is the Minister of State. She is in government. She knows the budget. The PBO, however, emphasises a number of issues. In chapter 6 of its analysis, it refers to the budgetary policy as "A Weak Evidence Base":

Informed policy-making involves the production of research and the accumulation of evidence to support decision-making. Politicians are required to weigh various considerations when determining what policies to pursue, it is therefore important that they be supported in this process ...

That is really important. At the end of the document, there are some key issues that raise concern. I will share them with the Minister of State. The document states: "Therefore, it is not possible to assess the degree to which these categories [in the budget] of 'Other' and 'key policy adjustments and expansion of services' comprise funding for new measures ...". It further states: "For example, if ELS is underestimated for a Department, it would mean that funding is insufficient to fund ... new measures ...".

It identifies some key issues in summary. This document is for the House. I will submit it to the parliamentary reporters later. It states of the lack of ELS estimates:

- It does not support an evidence-based policy approach which should be at the heart of policy analysis and development.
- It does not indicate the space available for new measures being undertaken. [This is our budget, the budget laid before the House.]
- It makes Budget scrutiny more difficult for members of ... the Oireachtas or the public in general.
- The lack of consistency in reporting ELS makes year on year analysis difficult.
- It does not enable medium- and long-term planning with on the trajectory of public expenditure and considerations around the sustainability of ... [our] public finances.

It continues:

The PBO reiterates its recommendations made in its Pre-Budget 2026, and now makes an additional recommendation of reintroducing ELS estimates.

The PBO further recommends:

- Reintroducing ELS estimates in Budget documentation to provide clarity on the available space for new measures.
- The publication of a comprehensive official methodology for estimating required increases in ELS components.
- The integration of such transparent evidence-based ELS estimates into the annual budget process.
- The consistent presentation of ELS estimates, with clear breakdowns of components in the Budget Expenditure Reports.

- Comparing these long-term expenditure projections with long-term revenue projections in order to assess the long-term fiscal sustainability of ... [our] Public Finances.

That analysis is there for everyone to see. I am concerned. We need to look at that and take that advice further because that is what the Parliamentary Budget Office is telling us. It is not me saying it.

The Disability Federation of Ireland, the Irish Wheelchair Association and others say there is a betrayal of disabled people in terms of the supports they were looking for. I share some of their concerns but accept there have been supports for them. I heard some commentary by the Minister, Paschal Donohoe. I do not want to come criticising all the time, but there is now a desire to set out a pathway over the next two to three years as to how we will address issues in relation to disability and set out issues relating to the carer's allowance and the means-testing. I know it is planned to do it over a period, but now is the time to set out the pathway for that so people understand what they might expect next year. I want to be positive about that. I recognise there is a concern. The Taoiseach when he was addressing the DFI said that the system is not delivering for disabled people and that the Government can and will do better. That is what the Taoiseach said at the national economic dialogue. I do not doubt that he is committed to that or doubt the Government's commitment, while I understand the difficulties in terms of the fiscal space. It is a matter of a pathway to that.

In relation to agriculture, the IFA submitted a very detailed 2026 submission along with two concerns. There is some serious concern about the residential zoned land tax. I know it has been pushed out for a year but I would like if we could be provided with a briefing note on that, not necessarily today, as to where we are on that tax and farmers who are actively using these lands for farming. That is important. I know that in other areas we want to catch lands that have been abandoned. If we could have a briefing memo on that to the House, that would be really important.

I finish with the positive endorsement of the Government's commitment to local government. Deputy John Cummins is the Minister of State with specific responsibility in this area. The funding is €801 million, an increase of €117 million. That has to be good, has to be positive and has to be welcomed. That money will feed into the equalisation payments, the LPT, supporting local government, IT, investment in that area, upskilling of staff, issues around An Bord Pleanála, funding, planning - all that. That is all very important. Supporting and encouraging new participants in local government and those who are elected to office is important. I thank them for their commitment. The Minister of State is on the record as saying he has ring-fenced money for the task force on local government. That has to be welcome, but I ask again if we could have a briefing note in the next week or so, if possible, on the exact detail of the money committed in this budget for the local government task force. It is an important body of work and I would like to know more details about the funding ring-fenced for that. I thank the Minister of State.

Senator Shane Curley: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit as ucht a bheith anseo. I will focus almost exclusively on the education side of the budget today. Before I do, there are three quick comments I want to make. First, I received hugely positive feedback from postmasters around the country last night and this morning on the measures in the budget to support our

rural post offices in remote, isolated, rural areas or in smaller villages and towns around Ireland. It is a hugely positive step and has been very much welcomed by the postmasters of Ireland.

An dara rud ná an méadú sa mhaoiniú atá ar fáil don Ghaeilge mar theanga. Tá sé sin thar a bheith dearfach. Tá go leor le déanamh againn maidir leis an teanga ach, ag an am céanna, tá mé an-sásta leis an méadú a chonaiceamar inné maidir leis an nGaeilge.

Third, as has been mentioned, the €117 million in additional funding for local government is hugely positive. It sends out the signal that if people want to be a county or city councillor in Ireland and want to get involved at local government level, like I was for almost six years, there is funding there to give them a meaningful role and to make sure they are in charge of a budget that really looks after local people in local communities around this country. I welcome that. We have a huge amount of work to do to give the relevant powers back to councillors at local area and to trust them with roles at local government level, but yesterday was a huge step in the right direction. It is a huge increase, and I really welcome it.

Going back to education, I will go through some of the highlights I found from yesterday's budget that I, as a former teacher, or someone who worked in the education sector for nearly 14 years in some capacity or other, really welcome. There are a lot. There is room for improvement and constructive follow-on work in the years to come, but for the next 12 months there is a huge amount that I welcome, particularly the 1,717 extra SNAs we have funded. That is hugely positive. I really welcome it. It is a step in the right direction. It does not fully solve the problem. Particularly, I would like to see more funding into the training and the on-site work experience that people in ECCE courses get when they are in college in order that they see the SNA role as something to move on to and to aspire to. There is work to do, but it is hugely welcome. I think the unions have welcomed it as well.

One of the stand-out measures in yesterday's budget - and we were all lobbied, I presume, by the INTO at different stages over the past few months - is the €50 increase in the capitation grant. It does not fully solve the problem. At €274 per pupil, it does not fully bridge the gap, but it is a massive step in the right direction. It is one of the biggest increases I have ever seen in a single year and it has to be welcomed. While the INTO always will do what is best for students and strive to make sure that that is at the optimum level, €274 has to be welcomed in some capacity, and there is positivity towards that. Again, I was lobbied at length by the TUI and ASTI. Both bodies nominated me for the Seanad. They pushed for the capitation grant. An increase of €20 is probably not enough but it is a step in the right direction. We have more to do.

The Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, bringing in €16 million extra funding for therapies on site in special schools is really important. When I was a teacher I saw the implications for a child when he or she was taken out of his or her normal routine and sent anything between 30 km and 50 km to the nearest centre to receive special needs therapies. Having therapies on site will be a game-changer for some of those people. It is really important that we roll out that service aggressively in the years to come and expand it into special needs classes at mainstream level. The measure is a really good step in the right direction.

The Minister of State mentioned inclusive public services. Yesterday, we saw 860 additional teachers in the special education setting. It is a huge step in the right direction and, again, hugely welcomed by the unions. I spoke to representatives of both unions last night and this

morning and they hugely welcomed the development. We must now have more inclusive options for students with special needs in mainstream education and I will give two examples that are a niche core issue right now. Some children with special needs can find it very hard to access the subjects of art and music at second level. We need more teachers for those subjects so that children with special needs can strive to be students in those classrooms and ensure there is no barrier ever for disabilities. We could work on that. Again, there will be another 860 additional teachers in special education settings. We cannot complain too much about that. It is a really good step in the right direction.

On higher education, the Minister, Deputy Lawless, put a really good stamp on yesterday's budget with a 17% reduction in apprenticeship contributions. That is a really positive step. It shows that the Minister is attuned to the issues we have with the shortage of apprentices and is trying to make this country more attractive for apprentices. As I have said *ad nauseam* both in this Chamber and when attending committees, there seems to have been an obsession in this country with attaining a level 8 degree. We need to ensure that apprenticeships are seen as just another normal thing to do or a really good thing to aspire to. We need really high quality craft apprenticeships and other apprenticeships all around the country. I attended the expo that took place in the RDS three weeks ago and it was an unbelievable day. It just shows the range of apprenticeships that are out there and that I was not even fully sure existed. There are so many apprenticeships and a 17% reduction in apprenticeship contributions is really positive.

On the €500 reduction in the student contribution fee, I heard the back and forth yesterday both in the media and in the Chamber that it is not a reduction but an increase. It is not. For the first time in years a Minister has said to parents that they have certainly next August that they do not face a potential fee or charge of €3,000 but rather a charge of €2,500, that we understand they are under pressure and that we are permanently reducing the stresses they face by €500. That, in my opinion, is hugely positive. Yes, the cost could be lowered more but parents have been crying out for certainty and now they have it, which I welcome.

Another example that the Government has listened and learned is the €1 million for student mental health. The Government understands that there is a huge need for investment in a broad range of areas that affect students in Ireland. Again, I really welcome the allocation.

The allocation of €3 million for disability supports at third level is a massive investment and is really positive. There is an awful lot we could do better and we will go into it at committee meetings and in this Chamber when we have the relevant Ministers in, but yesterday we got it right in a lot of cases. I really welcome an awful lot of those measures that I have just gone through. The Minister of State has done a really good job, along with the Minister, Deputy Chambers, and the Minister, Deputy Donohoe. I can stand over an awful lot of what was in the budget yesterday. There is a lot more to do but we have done an awful lot of good with yesterday's budget.

Senator Pauline Tully: I want to raise a number of issues concerning yesterday's budget and the first issue concerns childcare. We know we have more than 40,000 children in need of a childcare place now. I regularly have parents on the phone to me or they come into my office crying because they cannot find a childcare place, particularly for young babies and children up to the age of two, which means they cannot return to work. The situation affects people across the board. The Government has proposed that there will be extensions to schools and

community centres to address this. I really do not understand this proposal. How long will such work take? I ask because childcare places are urgently needed. We know of schools that require additional classrooms at the moment and they are being held up by the building section in the Department for months and maybe years. I am not sure about using community centres and the idea behind that. I can see the sense of combining schools with preschool education. There needs to be more collaboration and co-operation between those two sectors, but I do not feel the proposal will address what is a very urgent problem at the moment. I believe that expanding the building blocks scheme would have been much better for existing providers to allow them purchase existing buildings and renovate them. The scheme would also deal with the large degree of vacancy in many of towns, villages and communities.

On education, the programme for Government contains a commitment to reduce the pupil-teacher ratio. We have one of the highest pupil-teacher ratios in all of Europe yet this has not been addressed in this year's budget. There was talk about reducing the pupil-teacher ratio to 19:1. Many classrooms have more than 30 students which is not fair on teachers or students. It is particularly not fair on students who may have an additional need and are in mainstream and trying to keep up. It is increasingly difficult to do so in a large classroom setting. I know not all classes are the same and that class size depends on the number of students and their ages, but there needs to be an effort made across the board to reduce the ratio to benefit all of the school community.

On the school capitation grant, yes, there is a €50 increase for primary schools and a €20 increase for post-primary schools, but it is not sufficient and falls short of what is needed. There are increasing costs, years of underfunding in the sector, the cost-of-living package for schools is off the table and, increasingly, schools must go to the financial support services unit for assistance. Therefore, the budget allocation will not address the needs of schools and the chronic underfunding of schools.

I welcome having therapies provided in schools. That is the right way to go. I would love to have more detail on that and how quickly it will be rolled out because, again, that is an urgent need. We know that the CDNTs and the primary care sectors are not working at the moment because they do not have the staff to provide the services that children need to benefit in life and in school. Given children spend most of their day in the school setting, having therapies on site would be a really good idea. I have advocated for this for years, as the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, knows because we were on the disability committee together and we discussed this very often. Having therapies in school is the right way to go, but it is how quickly we can do that. Where are the therapists going to come from? They cannot be found to fill vacancies in the disabilities sector in the community. I will guarantee that people will perhaps prefer to work in a school environment than in those teams because, unfortunately, due to being understaffed, it makes those teams a very difficult place to work and many people are not opting to work in those. I want to see the proposal working.

We had statements on school transport last week and I know there is mention of increasing capacity by 100,000 by 2030. There was no increase this year and there is no increase for next year, by the looks of things. There were 173,000 students accommodated this year and 170,000 places were mentioned during the budget debate, so we are perhaps talking about a little less, but I presume the number is in or around the same, but there is no increased capacity. We really

need to see that increased capacity to facilitate students to get to school and get them into the good habit of using buses and public transport.

I would love to hear more details about the DEIS+ plan. Will applications for DEIS be reopened? There are many schools that do not have DEIS status and it is very hard to understand why because their neighbouring school does and it is the same area and same profile. Such schools would welcome another opportunity to apply for DEIS status.

On disability, all of the main disability organisations have expressed their disappointment with the budget. All of them advocated for a cost-of-disability payment. That has not been provided. A sum of €10 per week is not sufficient to address the significant needs. The price of groceries and energy continues to rise. There are no one-off payments this year. Ms Joan Carthy from the Irish Wheelchair Association has indicated that people will be on average over €1,600 worse off this year because of this budget, and that is very concerning. I know there has been an increase in funding for services, and that is long overdue. Again, I would like to see the detail on that and how much of that will address increasing costs and wage increases. Not all disabled people avail of services so the provision will not benefit everybody in the disability community. Again, the detail is important to realise how much the provision will have an impact on people. I welcome the permanent reduction of €500 in the student contribution fee, but it is still less than last year's reduction of €1,000. That is still going to impact students who are finding it very difficult to cope because student accommodation is chronic at this stage. How much investment is going into student-specific accommodation in universities including our technological universities, which are crying out for student accommodation. They are very willing to provide it, but they do not have the funding to do so. They need to get the ability to borrow to do so.

There has been a reduction in the budget for the drugs task force from €11.6 million to €8.7 million. That is extremely disappointing. The funding increased last year to €11.6 million from approximately €8 million and it is really disappointing to see it slashed. It is lower now than it was 20 years ago. Sinn Féin has committed to providing €21.7 million in its alternative budget. We need to address this problem. There are people with chronic drug problems who want support and help to get away from drugs. It is having an impact on society. We need to invest in people and communities.

Like the disability area, the breakdown of funding for health is a little bit unclear. I presume it will become clearer. A total of 220 beds for next year is half what is needed. We need to invest more in hospitals and the beds that are required.

There does not seem to be clear funding for a number of strategies. I hope I am wrong about that. There is a national strategy for cancer, cardiovascular disease and stroke, and rare diseases. It would save money in the long term if money was put into these strategies and if a lot more work was done to create awareness and put preventative measures in place because people would not end up in hospital and they would be able to get the care they need.

Again, no funding seems to have been provided for women's health and endometriosis. Perhaps it has been; I hope it has been. I would like to see much more investment in that area and also for children's spinal health.

My final point is on the reduction of €500 million in rural development funding. That is very disappointing. It will adversely affect rural areas.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Laura Harmon): I now call on Senator Cosgrove. I believe she is sharing time with Senator Noonan. They have four minutes each. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit. I thank her for providing her opening address. We all saw on "Prime Time" last night some of the real-life stories of some of the families impacted by this budget. Some are saying they are worse off.

Today, I will talk about the minimum wage and the failure of the Government to move to a living wage. The delay in replacing the national minimum wage with a living wage will cost the country's lowest paid workers €600 a year. People who are struggling as it is will be less well-off by €600. Yesterday, the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, confirmed that the minimum wage will increase by 65 cent in January, a rise of just under 5%, taking it from €13.50 to €14.65. This new rate will mean that over a 39-hour week, people's pay will go from €526 to €551.85, or an annual salary of €28,696.

Up to 200,000 people earn the minimum wage in Ireland, a group disproportionately made up of women, younger people and people with disabilities. Many of them work in the retail, hospitality and service industries. It is very hard for us to accept that minimum wage workers are being short-changed by up to €600 by the Government at a time when the labour market is thriving. It is great that the Government can brag about the fact that the labour market and the general economic environment have never been stronger. The National Youth Council of Ireland has criticised the lack of movement on the sub-minimum rates paid to younger people. I support that. The increase was also recommended by the Low Pay Commission.

I know the VAT cut to the hospitality sector has been widely criticised. As a party, we were one of the first ones to criticise it. The argument has always related to the amount of work provided by employers in small towns and villages. That is true, but we could have given targeted support to small cafés and restaurants by cutting commercial rates and introducing energy supports. That would be a lot better than giving a blanket reduction in the VAT rate to companies like Burger King and McDonald's, which definitely do not need it.

There are some very welcome elements regarding housing in the budget. As a party, we have been calling for years for the derelict sites levy to be collected by Revenue. That change is brilliant and long overdue. The Government is finally putting some teeth into the scheme.

I am delighted the living city initiative has been extended to my town, Sligo. That is really welcome. It will bring a lot of derelict properties back into use, which is absolutely fantastic. However, there was nothing in the budget for owners of defective homes. There was no change to the defective blocks scheme and there is still not 100% redress. If anyone takes a trip to Donegal, they will see the devastating crisis that exists there. It is extending to every other county as well.

I will speak briefly about childcare. During the election campaign, the Government parties were tripping over themselves to say there would be a big change in childcare. Senator Tully spoke about the building blocks scheme, which is a really good scheme but it has not been implemented or delivered. In my area, like every area across the country, people are crying out for it to be delivered but it has not been delivered. There are too many stumbling blocks in the

way. It is notoriously difficult to maintain. I do not know how anyone who wants to add an extension onto an existing business could do it. They would nearly need to employ consultants to be eligible for the grant.

A mark of a country is how it treats its most vulnerable. Very welcome steps have been taken to address the acute shortage of beds in the north west. There has been a commitment to opening two surgical hubs, in Letterkenny University Hospital and Sligo University Hospital. However, there is a lack of step-down facilities in the north west. It emerged last week that a patient who was medically discharged from Sligo University Hospital had been there for two years because there were no community services for him.

The Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, INMO, has hit out regarding the hospitality sector, saying the Government failed to heed the advice of the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council. It said 11,400 additional nurses could have been employed.

I have no doubt Senator Noonan will speak about the basic income for artists scheme. It is so welcome but there was a cut to the arts budget. Will there be a play-off whereby artists will get a basic income, on the one hand, and money will be taken from other arts organisations, on the other?

Senator Malcolm Noonan: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit. I reiterate the point made by my colleague about the cut in the VAT rate to 9%. I would question giving a handout to Starbucks when many of our small, independent businesses are in real trouble. A targeted scheme such as a rates rebate for smaller businesses would have been more effective.

I welcome the commitment to make the basic income scheme a permanent one. It was introduced by my colleague the then Minister, Catherine Martin.

I wish to speak briefly to the areas within my remit as my party's spokesperson for nature, heritage, agriculture and the marine. In particular, I want to focus on the non-commitment of the moneys that were supposed to be there for the nature fund. They seem to be gone. They disappeared from the national development plan announcement earlier this year and they are not in the budget. While there is additional money for the ACRES scheme, I cannot see money anywhere for the nature restoration fund. Where is the money to restore nature going to come from? Farmers are going to walk away from this process unless the money is there.

I welcome the general uplift in the nature budget. I would like to have a breakdown of the funding provided because there is some disparity between the Department's announcement of €256 million versus €196 million in the Vote in the budget pack.

The additional funding for the National Parks and Wildlife Service is welcome but we have to remember that this is an organisation that is now twice the size it was in 2020. It also has two new national parks, a lot more nature reserves and a lot of land that we have purchased in recent years. The NPWS has to implement a national nature restoration plan and make serious commitments on the protection of our habitats and species right across the country.

A seriously worsening water quality situation has been highlighted by the Lady's Island case and also the devastating fish kill in the Blackwater. Where is the extra money and funding to implement the water action plan?

Is there a funding commitment for the national biodiversity data centre. I do not see it there.

The Heritage Council has received a 3% uplift. That will seriously impact its ability to deliver on programmes and its very popular community grant schemes. The budgets for the built and archaeological heritage services and the national monuments services have both remained virtually static. The uplift there was very small, despite the huge increase in demand for services and traditional skills, as part of the community monuments fund and the various grant schemes the council administers.

Earlier this morning a number of us, including the Acting Chair, met with Jude Sherry and Frank O'Connor outside the gates of Leinster House. They were there to mark World Vacant Homes Day. There are enough houses in this country to meet quite a lot of the demand that is there, in public housing and housing generally. I welcome the moving of the collection of the residential zone land tax to Revenue. That was brought forward in a Bill the cross-party group brought here earlier this year. I welcome that and the living cities initiative but simply not enough is being done to tackle vacancy and dereliction. There is certainly not enough in the budget to meet the commitment to try to unlock the potential in the tens of thousands of vacant properties right across the country.

Senator Lynn Ruane: Before I make two points on the budget, I want to bookend my contribution with something to frame it and keep in mind. Earlier I read a document produced by the Parliamentary Budget Office's economic modelling and policy costing unit that looks at the impact of the budget, including the announced increases in current spending of €6.1 billion, capital spending of €2 billion and a tax package of €1.3 billion. It analyses how the changes to taxes and social welfare policy announced as part of budget 2026 will affect households and focuses on the distributional implications, namely, how the announced policies will affect low- and middle-income households.

I am going to highlight one of the most important and concerning paragraphs from that analysis. I caveat it by saying we can announce increases but sometimes we have to look at the policy intention or the bureaucratic barriers that come with some increases and may cause unintended consequences, which I will go into later when I speak specifically to the carer's allowance budget. The Parliamentary Budget Office document states:

Our key finding highlights that the full winding down of cost-of-living supports in Budget 2026 will significantly impact low-income households, equivalent to an average decrease in annual income of 4.4% for the poorest ten per cent of households and 3.9% for the next poorest ten per cent, while middle-income households see a decrease of 1.3% on average. Income losses among low-income households leads to a rise in income poverty rates ...

Effectively, the Parliamentary Budget Office is saying there is going to be a rise in poverty, based on its budget analysis. It states that poverty rates will rise "from 11.5% in 2024 to a forecast level of 13.2% in 2025 and 12.6% in 2026" and that "a rise in income poverty is evident for the elderly (those aged over 64), rising from 13.3% in 2024, to a forecast 19.0% in 2025 and 17.6% in 2026." Child poverty is also set to rise, according to its analysis, from 15.3% in 2024 to a forecast 16.1% in 2025 and 15.6% in 2026.

It is really concerning to read that level of analysis of the budget. Sometimes we can get caught up talking about increases and saying it is great that there will be an increase here or

there, but this analysis takes in the whole picture and is saying something very different. I wonder what that says about class and poverty analysis, as well as poverty impact assessments of budgets, or how budget decisions actually play out in real terms in real-life scenarios.

One real scenario relates to the carer's allowance budget proposal. The increase in the income disregard of €375 to €1,000 for a single person seems very positive, as does the increase of €750 to €2,000 for a couple, but we have to take account of the bureaucratic barriers that exist within the criteria for that. The regulation provides that carers can be in employment or attend education or training for a maximum of 18.5 hours. To avail of the increase, therefore, of up to €1,000 for a single person within the regulated 18.5 hours, those who will be eligible for such an increase are those who already fall into a bracket where they may have had the opportunity of getting a higher level education and did not take up lower paid and low-skilled, manual jobs. What we are actually seeing is the opposite of the desired effect on a single-parent household or someone who does not have the skills required to earn €54 an hour, according to our calculations.

The carer I spoke to in relation to this is not a position to earn €54 an hour for 18.5 hours' work. That is a policy question; it is not even a budgetary one. We need the Minister of State to go back to the Minister, Deputy Calleary, and say we need to remove the 18.5-hour cap. That measurement need not exist within the policy. Instead, the policy should be about the sum someone can earn, not the number of hours they can earn it within. If we remove the number of hours someone can earn it within, we will increase the opportunity for single-parent households to increase their workload to 24 or 25 hours a week. Another thing that affects these households is that it also includes voluntary work and education. If a single parent wants to engage in further education or gain a degree so that she can fall into that higher bracket of earning €54 per hour, she cannot do that while also working for 18.5 hours a week because her education will be counted in those 18.5 hours.

There is still time to be able to have that very serious discussion to see if we can remove that 18.5-hour cap before this budget comes into effect so that we do not end up widening the gap between carers. They are already such a disadvantaged and vulnerable group as a whole without us creating further gaps and barriers between them depending on their educational attainment or their capacity to earn a certain type of wage. I hope the Minister of State can bring that back to the appropriate Minister.

In my last few seconds, I want to home in on the DEIS+ band 1 piece. There is no detail on it. I hope some emerges over the next few weeks because it is very important that we see some detail on that. The differences between what is needed at primary and post primary within that DEIS plus band is, as the Minister of State knows, significant. Primary schools may be looking for different supports, such as occupational therapists and other types of support hours, while at post-primary level it is essential that DEIS+ include a deputy principal so that principals can actually be involved in those targeted responses. It is something that post-primary principals in those DEIS+ band 1 areas have specifically called for. Sometimes we put a figure on how many students a school has to have to be able to avail of something, but it needs to be seen as the need of the school. The schools in DEIS+ band 1 are already vulnerable. It should be based on need and not on the number of students in the school.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Laura Harmon): I welcome our guests in the Gallery. I see Deputy Gary Gannon is also there. They are all very welcome.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I thank the Minister of State for being here and giving us the opportunity to speak on yesterday's budget. I welcome and support it. A lot of good work has been done within it, starting with the carers. While I am absolutely not taking away from what Senator Ruane said, I think the Government had good intentions. A positive signal that we are going in the right direction is the increase in the income disregard from €625 to €1,000 for a single person and from €1,250 to €2,000 for a couple.

2 o'clock

That is really welcome. I totally understand the point about being on an RSS, CE or Tús scheme, that it has to be 20 hours. Someone will not qualify at 18.5 hours. I totally understand where the Senator is going on that and her contribution is very valid.

In the little time I have, I will focus on the OPW. I was absolutely delighted to see a 27% increase in its budget related to flooding. Coming from where I do in east Galway – and we do not need climate change all the time – back in 2016 we were nearly a constituency under water. The Minister of State, Deputy “Boxer” Moran, with the support of the two senior Ministers, has an increase of 27%. That increase will bring the budget up to about €130 million, which will mean more schemes can be brought onstream. When considering the number of schemes waiting to happen as well as the small minor works that the local authorities are trying to access, that funding is really welcome. Ring-fencing of carbon tax money of €558 million for the SEAI is very welcome. That is another measure to help with energy poverty. Hopefully the €3.5 billion for ESB Networks and Eirgrid will go some way to addressing our capital infrastructure piece that is badly required.

What has been achieved in social protection has been mentioned a few times. It was targeted and it is more sustainable and more permanent rather than the once-off measures. The increase in the weekly child support payment and the family working payment are not once-off. They are permanent, every week and it means families can plan. That was the Government's intention in putting this budget together.

I was a little surprised by Senator Tully's comment on capacity within childcare. I am surprised because I also read the Sinn Féin prebudget submission on childcare. Its capital piece was cut back from €345 million in last year's election budget to €200 million this year. When trying to build and add capacity, €200 million will not go very far. I welcome that the national childcare scheme has been expanded to cover another 35,000 children and there will be another 8,400 children in the ECCE programme. Additional funding is being set aside for that under the AIMS.

The Minister of State, Deputy Butler achieved an additional €26 million non-pay for mental health. I understand 300 whole-time equivalent posts have been allocated for mental health services. She has very clearly set out how she plans to spend and invest in it in her submission, placing crisis support nursing in all nine model 4 hospital emergency departments and establishing three new crisis resolution teams for areas with model 3 hospitals as well as Traveller mental health and suicide prevention initiatives. Drugs funding got an increase of

€11 million across a number of different strands. That is welcome but more needs to be invested in the drugs area.

In my last 40 seconds I will wear my cynical hat. It is wonderful how the Ministers work so hard to achieve budgets, and we do welcome them, but they are only as good as how they are operationalised. That is the sad reality of it. You are only as good as the team on the ground that will put it in. Unfortunately, in the disability sector, it takes far too long for the funding that has been secured to meet the families. If we want to be very open and transparent with everybody. We need to provide the timelines for when the money will drop. In disability, will it be in June? Will it be March? Will it be next September in childcare? People do not ask much but they like to know the truth. They like to know when it is happening, when it will be in their pocket and when they will feel the benefit. Timelines would be great. A step change is also required from some of the organisations delivering funding to the people on the front line.

Senator Maria Byrne: I welcome the Minister of State and I also welcome the budget announced yesterday. There was €5.2 billion for housing and 25,000 new homes. The €130 million for the housing adaption grant and €140 million for retrofitting of social housing are really welcome. On the expansion of the living cities initiative, it is something we have had in Limerick for some years and it has been a really positive scheme. I would love to see more people avail of it. There was a lot of red tape around it in terms of things like fire escapes and different things which are really important but we need to look at the red tape, which was curtailing people from using it. The VAT cut for residential apartments was described as elitist and a policy where we were looking after our friends but if we do not build apartments, people will not have housing. That is the fact. We need to do something to incentivise people to build them. On farm tax relief, there is €2.3 billion, including for TB eradication and tillage. Farm tax relief to young farmers is very positive because we need to encourage people to get involved.

The justice budget is €6.2 billion, an increase of €200 million. We will see 1,000 more gardaí which I hope will lead to more feet on the street. In the previous allocation we received ten gardaí and we received a further ten and that has increased. People are starting to comment on seeing gardaí on the streets, which is really important. The 200 additional civilian staff will also relieve gardaí of desk duties to get them out on the street. That is to be welcomed. There is also €90 million for overtime, which will help put gardaí on the street. There is €11.5 million for domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. We have ADAPT House and Thomond House, which do wonderful work, and there are many other place around the country that do similar. I really welcome the increase in money for them.

On childcare, there is €64 million for childcare places and an increase of 35,000 extra children. It is really to be welcomed but I agree with Senator Rabbitte. We would love to know when exactly it will start. I note the increase in medical and nursing training with 1,100 extra places. On the health budget, I welcome there will be 300 extra people for mental health services and the €8.9 million for cancer care. The number of people diagnosed with cancer is going up every year so the increase there is important. The increase in medical places at third level is really important too. As well as the doctors and nurses coming from other countries it is also good to have our own homegrown doctors. Many of them are walking into jobs when they qualify.

There are many more issues and I have only a limited time. I welcome the money for postmasters to keep many of our small rural post offices open. I welcome the extra 2,000 people who will be eligible for the basic income for the arts scheme. There is also investment in sports. They were talking about elite sports as well as football and about elite athletes. There is something that should also be looked at, which I have previously raised, namely the referees who are also elite sportspeople. They get no tax relief whereas those playing on the pitch do. All the referees were probably elite athletes at one stage too. It needs to be looked at. There is only a small handful of people who could be brought into this category and it would not have a huge impact on the budget.

I firmly support the 9% VAT rate cut. I know it has been said that we are supporting takeaway places but a lot of those places employ 3,000 and 4,000 people. That is nothing to be sneezed at. We cannot give it to one and not to the other. The 9% VAT rate has to be across the board for all businesses, especially small businesses. Many of those businesses are small.

Senator Joe Conway: I am of an age, unusually in the Chamber today, that I sat in a family huddle around the wireless and listened to the early broadcasts of the budget on Radio Éireann. It has been a spectator sport for me ever since those early days. I am always struck by how the budget is presented. It is sort of a spectator sport in many ways because proponents of the Government laud it and opponents of the Government execrate it. As in many things in life, the truth lies somewhere in between. That is how I view the budget presented yesterday. As somebody once said, it is a bit like Brighton Pier - it is good insofar as it goes but it is a very poor way of getting to France. There are many measures in the budget I am pleased with. I will enumerate some of them. Táim an-sásta leis an méid tacaíochta atá tugtha don Ghaeilge. Cuirim fáilte roimhe sin ach nílim iomlán sásta leis. Tá i bhfad níos mó gur féidir a dhéanamh ar an gcás sin.

I am pleased to see the increase in the capitation grant to primary schools. The Waterford city INTO branch secretary emailed me this morning and said it is a step in the right direction, whereas I look back at the funding for primary education when I was serving in the trenches and the support in capitation was almost at Third World levels. The capitation grant increase in the past 20 years has been significant. Yesterday's increase is significant but do not forget we are operating off a very low base with primary school education supported hugely by parental efforts, scrabbling and scratching around in the local pennies to try to make a fist of the service. It is good to see that increase. I am delighted to see the increase in Garda recruitment and additional recruitment in the Defence Forces but, and this is a significant "but", psychologists talk about the human propensity to self-delude. Governments are guilty of that, as is most of humanity. When talking about Garda and Defence Forces recruitment, the Government is self-deluding. That is not the crux of the problem. We can recruit but the problem is retention. Unless measures are taken to pay these people and support them in their work, retention will mean it is all saothar in aisce. It is labour in vain because the people in whom we will invest so much money in recruiting will be gone within a few years and we will be back in the same trench again.

On postmasters, I am delighted to see money is available to help out a quintessential part of the local infrastructure in rural Ireland, which is welcome. Tá an t-am ag scaradh uaim anois. In line with Senator Boyhan, I have reservations about how existing levels of service are reported and projected in the budget. It is back to the human ability to self-delude. It gives me

cause for concern about the budget that we do not seem to be able to conquer our delusion that our population is ageing rapidly and there are going to be significant demands on the budget. The projected existing levels of service have not really been addressed. There will be huge problems for budgets in the next ten years. Nobody is addressing the elephant in the room of our ageing population. I supported far more budgets in my 21 years in local government than I voted against. If I was to be asked to go through a division lobby in respect of this budget, I would probably pinch my nose and vote "Tá". All in all, some good work has been done but there is a heck of a lot more to do.

Senator Seán Kyne: I welcome the Minister of State and thank her for coming in to engage with us on the public expenditure side of the budget. Before I talk about some of the issues, I would like to put on record that the total spend is €109.3 billion. The projected source of that money for next year include: income tax, €38.8 billion; corporation tax, €34.06 billion; VAT, €23.6 billion; excise duties, €6.7 billion; stamp duties, €2 billion; capital gains taxes, €2.1 billion; and other taxes of €2.4 billion. That includes motor tax of €800 million, capital acquisitions tax of €900 million and customs duties of €600 million. It is not by accident that those moneys are projected to be made available. It is because of the hard work of the Irish people, first of all, the decisions of successive Governments, the entrepreneurial spirit of those who create jobs, start-ups and invest in this country, and the work of IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland, Údarás na Gaeltachta. The IDA has a reputation worldwide for going out, engaging, lobbying and bringing foreign direct investment to this country. We have been through tough times before. I was a Member of the other House between 2011 and 2020. In the first few years, we dealt with difficult budgets. We had votes on making cuts. It is great to listen to the Minister and others talking about all the money we are projecting to spend but we have to remember where we came from and the decisions that allow us to be here. I also acknowledge we do not know what the future holds. We make projections. This time last year, we probably did not think there would be a tariff war. We do not know what situations we will face. It is always important to have money set aside. The Future Ireland Fund and the Infrastructure, Climate and Nature Fund are necessary. By the end of next year, it is projected that there will be €28 billion in those funds and by the end of this Government's term, €40 billion. That is for threats that may happen in the future to allow for resilience.

A lot of positive measures were lobbied for. People mentioned education issues in relation to the capitation grant. The INTO has struggled on this for a long number of years and has raised this every year. I welcome the increase in capitation announced by the Ministers for Education and Youth and Finance yesterday. The record level of expenditure, in particular capital expenditure, on housing is absolutely necessary. I mentioned the VAT cuts yesterday so I will not mention them again today. As I have said often, every type of house and apartment is needed from private, cost-rental, social, affordable to approved housing bodies, downsizing, rightsizing and student accommodation. Every type is important to alleviate the situation we are in. I welcome the increase in the carer's allowance disregards. It was committed to by all parties, I think, before the previous election in manifestos. We gave a commitment over the lifetime of the Government. I welcome what has been done. The announcement on children's allowance is welcome. There is a focus on child poverty issues as well as the increase in home help hours and home supports for our elderly. The big issue is ensuring that we have people who can do that work. It is very valuable work. Additional gardaí, SNAs and commitments regarding the new DEIS+ programme are important. On childcare places, there has been a

focus in the past few years on cutting fees, which is welcome and important for those who have a place but it is of no benefit to those who do not. In some cases, children did have places but the providers pulled out of the schemes, meaning they were left with a situation where they had a place but were paying the higher fees. Increasing capacity, which is the focus of this budget in respect of childcare, is certainly welcome. It is important because we know there is a need. Listening to other people talk about reduced fees is of no benefit to those who cannot get a place. I welcome the commitments and wish the Minister, Deputy Foley, well in delivering on them.

Senator Joanne Collins: I welcome the Minister of State and thank her for giving up her time to be here.

In the past few weeks, Senators on this side of the House and across the floor have raised the lack of basic public transport services in our rural communities. I spoke on the Order of Business about the transport difficulties in rural Limerick caused by the lack of capacity and unsuitable times, but I could just as easily have been speaking about countless counties in Ireland. The story is the same everywhere: bus services do not exist and do not run when people need them, communities are cut off and young people have no choice but to leave or start driving. We are told that a record investment is being made but those investments are not being felt on the ground. Rural Ireland is being discriminated against. Young people are tired; they have had enough of promises that do not reach their towns and villages. Our small towns are at breaking point and our villages are hollowing out. We cannot keep young people in our communities. They want to stay, raise families and build their lives but how can they do so when there is no affordable housing, no reliable transport and no jobs close to home? For those who must commute into Limerick, Cork or further afield, the situation is becoming impossible, with rising costs, higher carbon taxes and still no viable public transport alternative. People are being punished for simply trying to get to work or college.

In the Limerick County constituency, we have a Government Minister and a Minister of State, yet on the ground the reality is that people feel abandoned and unheard. It is not just about economics anymore; it is about dignity and the right to live and work in your own community without having to choose between paying for fuel and paying for food. People across the island are at breaking point. They were at breaking point last week and they are even worse this week. Budget 2026 cannot just be about figures on a page; it has to be about fairness. It should have been about reconnecting with real Ireland. If this Government continues to turn its back on rural Ireland, it will break not just counties like Limerick but also the hearts of people who have built them. Last year in the budget, school transport accounted for 173,000 seats. This year, it accounts for 170,000 seats. We are losing out in the budget for school transport at a time when we are at breaking point with school transport in rural areas. That is putting more parents in cars. It is increasing diesel and petrol costs which people cannot seem to afford. These costs are getting higher and higher every time.

Senator Rabbitte spoke about our alternative budget and our election promises. Our election promises were based on five years; the alternative budget was based on one. In the year on which we based it, in order to bring the cost down to €10 per day we focused on crèches and childminders who are registered with Tusla. To get everyone into it would take more regulation because, as the Minister of State will know, not all childminders are regulated or registered

with Tusla. I wish to make it clear that the cost for 2027 would have been higher than the cost in this alternative budget.

I want to touch on reducing the cost of childcare, which is great. I completely agree that we need childcare places. It is great to see the Government putting that into the budget but where is it going to get the staff to provide these childcare places? In Limerick last year, 98% of graduates in the childcare programme went on to do an extra year to go into primary school teaching. In other words, 98% of people who were going to go into childcare left childcare before they ever started it. Pay and conditions need to be looked at.

The bottom line, from what I can see, is that budget 2026 was for landlords and developers. I can only imagine that all of those who stood up today and said they welcomed the budget, or welcomed it yesterday, must only have landlords and developers living in their constituencies.

Senator Martin Conway: I welcome the Minister of State to the House. I realise that budgets are a balancing act. You have to try to take all sorts of competing interests, scenarios and situations, some of which are complex and some of which are not so complex, and some of which have consequences and some of which have unintended consequences. You have to look at what the major issues of the day are. The number one issue is housing. The next most pressing issues, in my view, are healthcare and the cost of living.

Regarding housing, we have thousands upon thousands of apartments with planning permission but they are not being built. Something has to be done to ensure these apartments are built. Based on our history, I do not want any kind of incentive for developers but sometimes it is necessary. Nobody is going to build apartments unless they can make money out of them. We will wait and see but I am hopeful that this will kickstart the permissions granted to move to commencement stage. I hope that eventually, in three or four years, we will see the benefit of this budget measure coming through where people will have a roof over their head.

The 9% VAT rate has caused a bit of controversy. I remind people that the 9% rate was introduced back in 2011 or 2012. It kickstarted the hospitality industry in a significant way at that time. It was used again during and after Covid. It certainly kickstarted the hospitality industry at a time when we needed it. When I talk to the owners of small businesses, particularly little restaurants, cafés and coffee shops, they tell me they are finding it very difficult. This 9% VAT rate will assist them in some shape or form. It is a pity the minimum wage is going up in January but the 9% VAT rate is not coming in until July. I sincerely hope that in quarter 1 of next year, in particular, coffee shops and other small businesses will survive so they can drive on and benefit from the reduced VAT rate when it comes into effect in July.

I am happy that a significant contribution is to be made to Tourism Ireland and Fáilte Ireland to support their marketing budgets. Tourism is very important for many counties in this country, including County Clare, where I am from, and the other counties along the west coast. We have seen a number of initiatives that have been very successful but tourism is evolving. We have to constantly repackage and remarket in order for tourism to continue to thrive and for Ireland to continue to stay competitive and attractive to those who put a lot more thought and consideration into their holidays. Most of them are planning and doing it themselves, which brings me to another point I would like to make. There are some industries that rely on tourism, such as the car rental business. Many people in my constituency are employed either

directly or indirectly in the car rental business. An eye needs to be kept on those businesses to make sure they are facilitated to stay competitive and the Government is not doing anything to make them in any way uncompetitive. It is a known fact that people who rent a car and drive around spend more money in small shops, small pubs and small restaurants than those who hop on a bus tour in Dublin, come down to County Clare to have a look around and go to a designated place for their meal, and are then driven back. The people who come to fly into Shannon Airport, rent a car and spend the week travelling around Ireland are hugely beneficial to businesses in County Clare.

The balancing act of the budget has been a challenge but by and large, the right decisions have been made. I think we are moving to more of a German model where the budget is the culmination of weeks of debate as opposed to the beginning of the debate. In other words, the budget is the sum of all the various contributions that have been made. That is the European way that budgets are drafted and done. We need to keep moving towards that. A budget should not in any way be a surprise and there should be no surprises in it. It should be the summary and conclusion of months of work as opposed to an opening statement heading towards the Finance Act. I know that would be a significant change and it is something I would like to see happen in due course.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Before I call the Minister of State, I welcome to the Public Gallery: Marcos Perez Espinilla and Lourdes Fernandez Velasco, who are the guests of Alan Guidon; and Giacomo Amari and Noemi Quarenghi, who are the guests of Senator Martin Conway. They are all very welcome. I hope I got the pronunciation right. I hope they enjoy their visit to Leinster House. I call the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Emer Higgins): I thank the Leas-Chathaoirleach and welcome our guests. I am going to attempt to respond to all of the comments raised today. I say “attempt” because a huge variety of comments were made. I appreciate the time people have taken to dig deep into the detail of the budget and to raise both positive feedback and concerns.

Senator Cathal Byrne set the scene quite well when he spoke about the need to safeguard the economy, improve public services and deliver key infrastructure, including housing. Senator Kyne talked about the need to make sure we are backing all of that up with contingency funding to ensure our economy remains resilient.

Senator Boyhan commended The Budget in Brief, which I have and I am sure everybody has and is using a lot. If Senators will indulge me, I might just let people know, in case they are not aware of it, of a website run by our Department, [www.wheremyourmoneygoes.gov.ie], which outlines all of the decisions taken in yesterday's budget and puts them in infographics. It is a very good and interactive way for members of the public to see how tax that is collected in the State is invested, spent and allocated by the Government. This is run every year and exists for the whole year. This year, along with updating it with all of the new information from budget 2026, we are also running an online public consultation, asking people to engage with us and let us know what it is about the site they like or do not like, and what features there are. We would appreciate it if Members would help spread the word on that.

Senator Joe Conway spoke about listening to budgets on the wireless. I hope that we are in a very different economic landscape compared with then. We are now at full employment, with people living longer and healthier lives. I hope it is agreed that that is a good thing.

Many measures were welcomed, for example, the tillage scheme, the TB eradication scheme and the postmasters' network. The Senator mentioned that this was particularly welcome in rural areas, and I know postmasters in Dublin are happy with it too. There were also many comments about the basic income for artists and how welcome it is. It was an initiative by the former Minister, Catherine Martin, and I am pleased that it is being extended this year. Several speakers welcomed the cancer care strategy and the funding allocated to that, which is good to see.

Some concerns were raised. Senator Boyhan raised concerns in regard to medium and long-term planning in particular. The medium-term fiscal structural plan is going to be announced in the coming weeks and will set out the framework for the next five years, so there will be certainty in terms of medium-term fiscal planning. However, as Senator Kyne made the point, it does not give us the visibility to see things that are not on the horizon. For example, we would not have seen the tariffs this time last year, and that is, unfortunately, the reality of the economic conditions we live in now.

In case Members are not aware of it, IGEES is the Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service. It is a key initiative that supports evidence-informed policymaking across the Civil Service. It looks at things like performance indicators, equality and well-being. Members will find a lot of information on the budget there.

It was great to hear people talk about the investment in our economy in terms of the role of the IDA, Enterprise Ireland and Údarás na Gaeltachta, as well as the entrepreneurs, employers and workers who have got us to a point where we have such a good and strong economy. I take on board the point that we need to continue to invest in tourism, Fáilte Ireland and the spin-off trade. I hope Senator Martin Conway will agree that Fáilte Ireland and tourism were beneficiaries in this budget.

There were a number of comments in relation to housing, which is welcome because housing is one of the biggest challenges facing the Government. Record funding was invested in the housing budget this year. There was a question about the residential zoned land tax and asking for a note on it. I will certainly ask for that. My understanding is that active farmers now have the opportunity to apply to the local authority to dezone their land, and the local authorities have until June to make a decision on that. That is as it was last year, and it has been extended to this year. There was also a query regarding the local government task force and whether I could get further information on that. I will ask the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, for that.

Concerns were raised by Senator Noonan on heritage and biodiversity. I am pleased that we have €196 million for conservation and heritage. The National Parks and Wildlife Service is a beneficiary of that. We also have the €1 million that is earmarked for the national biodiversity plan, the nature restoration plan and the action plans behind them.

Flood alleviation was mentioned. That funding is very welcome in the constituency of Senator Rabbitte and many constituencies up and down the country. Many speakers referred to the expansion of the living city initiative, which is to be welcomed. Senator Maria Byrne

made the point that we need to look at it from a red tape perspective, and that is feedback I will certainly pass on. The defective blocks issue was raised. There is €293 million for housing remediation in this budget, which includes apartment defects, pyrite and defective concrete blocks.

With regard to education, there was a broad welcome for the capitation grant increase. In my own constituency, when I was speaking to principals last night, it was very welcomed. I think this money is very well invested in the people who take care of the children in our schools. The measure regarding therapists in schools was welcomed. One of the questions that Senator Tully asked was where those therapists will come from. I assure her that we have also funded additional college places. As part of this budget, there are 1,100 additional college places between medicine, healthcare and therapies, which is welcome.

There were many questions on DEIS+. There is €16.5 million allocated for it, and the Department of education is putting together the detailed information as to what that will look like. I know a committee was established and has been working on this over recent months. Regarding school transport, my understanding is that 170,000 children will avail of the school transport next year, and that is what is budgeted for.

From a national childcare scheme perspective, we now have an additional 35,000 children covered under that scheme. The issue of community centres was raised as a concern from a childcare perspective. In my own constituency, many community centres also offer ECCE and national childcare schemes, and that works well. It is also worth noting there was an increase of 8,400 in the AIMS childcare programme.

I agree that access to childcare is a huge issue. Earlier this week, I was pleased to open a new crèche in my constituency, the First Steps Academy at St. Edmunds, Lucan. We need to make sure more crèches are opening up, and that is the reality. As Senator Kyne said, it is brilliant that the Government has invested in order to reduce the cost of childcare in recent years, but it is access to childcare that is the biggest issue. We need to resolve that next before we go back to childcare costs.

From a disability perspective, there was a huge increase in the disability budget of, I think, 19%. Senator Rabbitte asked when that money will be felt in communities, which is a valid point. I will bring that back to the Minister. It is worth noting that part of that funding will include an extra 1,000 staff, which will bring the figure up to 23,500 in the workforce in that area. That is very welcome. I know the Senator did a lot of work in this area in her previous role.

From a health perspective, Senator Tully mentioned the 220 beds in hospitals. However, there are between 500 and 550 beds when we take hospitals and community services together, so it is worth looking at them holistically. There will also be an additional staff of 3,300, which is very welcome, as well as more nursing home beds.

From a defence perspective, retention is an issue. Moving to level of ambition 2 is part of dealing with that. From a sport perspective, the point on referees is good feedback. I will take that on board.

On the national minimum wage, the Government has accepted the unanimous report of the Low Pay Commission. The commission, which comprises our social partners, unanimously

recommended this increase to the minimum wage and we accepted that. As was mentioned, many of those on the minimum wage or low wages work in our hospitality sector. That is what that 9% is about. It is about protecting those jobs and supporting those people.

Senator Ruane mentioned a number of statistics that show that poverty rates are projected to increase this year in comparison to last year but they are then expected to reduce next year in comparison to this year. That is based on the income measures brought in through this budget. Page 15 of the expenditure report sets out the impact of the budget on household incomes. A key priority of this budget is to provide assistance and support to the most vulnerable. The chart on page 15 clearly shows that the measures announced in the budget will have the greatest impact on the households in income deciles 1 to 4. The analysis in the expenditure report also shows the impact of the measures on different household types. Lone-parent households and single people of retirement age will experience permanent income gains of between 1.9% and 4%. That analysis is available on page 16 of the expenditure report.

Many Members welcomed the change in the means test disregard for carer's allowance. That is very welcome. Senator Ruane raised a very interesting point regarding the 18.5 hour limit and asked whether it should be looked at in view of the changing thresholds. That is certainly something I will bring back to the Minister, Deputy Dara Calleary.

I hope that covers most of the responses. Every year, the Government is presented with complex choices as to how best manage our budget to deliver progress towards a more inclusive, resilient and prosperous Ireland. With that in mind, I was very happy to engage today. I will take this opportunity to thank the officials in the Department of Finance and my own Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, who worked tirelessly to put this budget together. Many of them worked all weekend and late into the night Monday or into early Tuesday morning.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I thank all Senators who contributed today.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 2.43 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 5.04 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 2.43 p.m. and resumed at 5.04 p.m.

Supports and Services for Patients with Head and Neck Cancers: Motion

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I move:

That Seanad Éireann:

acknowledges that:

- Ireland's current approach to pre-radiation oncology dental care and post-surgical dental rehabilitation is under-resourced, under-staffed and unsafe. Adequate pre-radiation and post-surgical dental services are essential components of cancer care;
- immediate investment and legislative action are necessary to ensure that patients with head and neck cancer (HNC) receive timely, equitable and safe treatment;

- HNC patients in Ireland face significant and avoidable risks due to inadequate pre- and post-radiation and post-surgery oncology dental services;
- the Dublin Dental University Hospital (DDUH) currently manages approximately 400 new patient referrals annually with only a single consultant-led service, and Cork University Dental School and Hospital manage approximately 160 patient referrals annually, with only a single specialist-led service;
- severe capacity constraints are leading to delays in radiotherapy, inadequate dental preparation and increased long-term debilitating risks such as osteoradionecrosis (decaying/dead jaw and facial bones) and radiation tooth decay (dental caries);
- HNC is affecting increasingly younger patients, who will live with the side effects of the disease and its treatment for the rest of their lives;
- this is a national issue, and as a result of the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV), the incidence of HNC is rising, currently involving a quarter of the current pre-radiation dental referrals; such cases are projected to increase by 66 per cent by 2045;
- current delays in dental treatments and post-surgical oral rehabilitation contribute directly to radiation treatment postponements, reducing survival rates from this cancer and compromised quality of life;

notes that:

- there is a geographical spread with 4 per cent of referrals from the Mid-West, South-West, West and North-West regions combined, 46 per cent from Dublin City and County and 50 per cent from the North-East, South-East and Midlands with associated substantial costs and travel time for patients and their carers to attend dental appointments in Dublin;
- there is at least a 9 per cent increased mortality rate associated with every 4-week delay in the commencement of definitive radiotherapy;
- 43 per cent of patients present without a regular dentist, further limiting post-treatment care, while 181 patients await post radiotherapy review – some for up to 14 months;
- the running costs of providing these services in the DDUH at current activity levels is €1.367 million annually, approximately €811,000 is funded by the HSE, leaving an additional funding requirement of €556,000;
- the absence of a national HNC dental pathway and critical workforce gaps in prosthodontics, oral surgery and dental hygiene compound this crisis;
- there is a strong connection between HPV and the presence of HNC, this underlies the importance of the HPV vaccine for young males and females;
- based on empirical evidence there is a need for treatment facilities in the West (Galway) and increased services in the South (Cork);
- currently, the necessity for patients to travel to Dublin for treatment significantly impacts families in relation to time and finances;

calls on the Minister for Health to:

- provide a commitment to ring-fencing funding of €1.367 million annually for pre-radiation oncology dental services in the DDUH, with adjustments in line with inflation and expansion of services;
 - provide full supports for regional dental oncology care centres in Cork and Galway;
 - introduce statutory recognition of pre-radiation and post-surgical rehabilitation dental services so that they will be formally integrated into cancer care pathways;
 - create permanent consultant posts in oral surgery and restorative dentistry for Cork and Galway centres;
 - outline guaranteed timelines so patients can be seen by dental services within 7 days of their cancer multidisciplinary team meeting;
 - implement a minimum 10-day healing period prior to the commencement of radiation therapy;
- operative and irradiated patients.

Senator Michael McDowell: I second the motion.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Murnane O'Connor. This is the first time I have addressed her since her elevation, on which I congratulate her. We are joined in the Distinguished Visitors Gallery by the chairman and the CEO of Dublin Dental University Hospital, along with staff involved in the treatment of head and neck cancer.

I speak on this matter not only as a legislator but as a parent. My daughter Rebecca's journey through head and neck cancer has been one of unimaginable strength and quiet suffering. It is her experience and that of so many others that compels me to speak today. Head and neck cancer is not just a clinical diagnosis; it is a life-altering reality that affects how a person speaks, eats, breathes and sees himself or herself in the mirror. I know this intimately as it hits close to home. Rebecca has lived it and still lives it every day. Her journey through Ireland's healthcare system has been marked by courage but also by struggle. We waited for scans, referrals and answers. In those long, uncertain days and years, we learned that time is not a luxury cancer patients can afford.

The national oral health policy was first published in 2019, yet six years on, its implementation plan remains at the draft stage and was released for initial consultation in the summer of 2025. While it is encouraging that head and neck cancers are recognised as a priority, the proposed care pathway will not be outlined until the end of 2026 and no national funding commitments have been disclosed. Critically, the designation of the advanced care centres is deferred to phase 3 of the implementation plan, which is scheduled for 2031 to 2032.

This timeline is unacceptable, as I am sure the Minister of State will agree. Head and neck cancer patients cannot afford to wait another decade for access to safe, timely and specialised care. Already, patients face long delays for pre-radiation treatment, often leading to avoidable post-operative trauma. The struggle to access dental specialists prior to the commencement of

radiotherapy can, as I said, lead to post-operative complications. Patients often begin radiotherapy without the dental care that is essential to their safety.

Approximately 400 new patients are referred each year to Dublin Dental University Hospital, which has only one consultant-led service. Similarly, Cork University Dental School and Hospital manages 160 patient referrals annually with only a single specialist-led service. This bottleneck is not just inefficient; it is dangerous. Every four-week delay in radiotherapy increases mortality by 9%. That is not just a statistic. It represents the life of a daughter, son, father or mother. It represents a person who is somebody's world. Behind every percentage point is a person whose chance of survival is slipping away because of systemic delays that are preventable. Timely access to treatment is not a luxury but a lifeline.

There is growing evidence that the human papillomavirus, HPV, is associated with head and neck cancers, and it is on the rise, particularly among younger individuals. This demographic shift is deeply concerning as these patients face lifelong consequences from both the disease and its treatment. This trend represents a significant national health issue, driven by the increased prevalence of HPV. Currently, HPV-related cases account for approximately 25% of pre-radiation dental referrals, with that figure projected to surge to 66% by 2025. Delays in pre-radiation dental oncology assessment and treatment are directly contributing to postponed initiation of radiation therapy. These setbacks not only reduce survival rates but also severely diminish patients' quality of life.

Severe capacity constraints are causing critical delays in radiotherapy, inadequate dental preparation and heightened long-term risks for patients, including osteoradionecrosis, which is the decay of facial bones, known as dead jaw, and radiation-induced dental caries. Alarming, 43% of patients present without a regular dentist and are severely limited in terms of access to essential post-treatment care. Currently, 181 patients are awaiting post-radiography review, with some delays extending up to 14 months. Young patients often have a better prognosis but face lifelong side effects. Many start radiotherapy without proper dental clearance, risking complications like osteoradionecrosis and radiation caries. Osteoradionecrosis, as my daughter Rebecca will tell you, is a painful incurable condition of the jawbone caused by radiation requiring complex ongoing care and repeated surgeries that severely strain patients' physical and emotional being. This condition hinders gentle rehabilitation, making implants or dentures difficult and severely impacts nutrition, speech, appearance and well-being. The hardest part is not the treatment, it is what follows – lost speech, altered appearance, altered speech and the fear of being forgotten in an overstretched system.

This motion urges statutory recognition of dental oncology care as part of cancer treatment, mandating timely access, adequate staffing, regional equity, structured rehabilitation and national oversight, so surviving cancer does not mean suffering in silence.

We seek an immediate €556,000 increase in the Dublin Dental University Hospital, raising its annual budget to €1.3 million. In addition, €4.2 million is required in national funding to expand dental oncology services across north Dublin, Cork and Galway. The sum of €4.2 million I speak of only covers staffing, excluding the vital infrastructure needed to meet the rising patient demand.

The national cancer control programme, the HSE Dublin and South-East have been key supporters of dental oncology, with multiple engagement over six years and vital backing for

initial head and neck cancer funding. Previously, Government support for head and neck cancer ended at abolition, with no national reconstruction provision, despite reconstruction being as essential as it is in breast cancer. Breast cancer reconstruction often focuses on restoring the form and femininity, rebuilding the chest to reflect identity and symmetry. In contrast, head and neck cancer reconstruction is a fight to reclaim function, speech, swallowing and facial recognition. While one journey is about reshaping the silhouette, the other is about rebuilding the very tools of human connection. Both are acts of survival, but each tells a different story of resilience. However, as dental oncology services take place in primary care, no national funding mechanism is in place to support these patients on a countrywide basis.

I raised the funding issue in a Commencement matter in February 2024. I revealed that the national oral health office cut the budget by €500,000. This was done without consulting key stakeholders like the Dublin Dental University Hospital, the HSE or the national cancer control programme. Ireland's current approach to dental oncology care is critically underfunded, under-resourced and unsafe. It is failing to meet the needs of patients, many of whom face delayed, inequitable and inadequate treatment during some of the most vulnerable moments of their lives.

This Private Members' motion seeks that the Minister would enshrine in law the provision of comprehensive dental oncology services as a core component of cancer care. Legislative action and immediate investment are essential to ensure timely, safe and equitable treatment for all patients, aligning Ireland with best practice international standards and preventing avoidable harm.

I ask this House to support the motion, not just for my daughter Rebecca, but for every patient who deserves better. Let us act now with compassion and conviction to build a system that truly cares. The system is the cause of its own behaviour to a large extent. Rebecca was diagnosed with cancer of the tongue at just 19. No one prepares for what comes after. The follow-up is not a single moment; it is a relentless series of appointments, fillings, procedures, and every imaginable effort to save her teeth, but despite it all, by the age of 30 she had lost them. It was not just the surgeries; it was heartbreaking to watch her fight to preserve not only her smile but her jaw, which was threatened by osteoradionecrosis. Through it all, her dentist stood beside her, just as devastated, just as determined. They were not just treating her, they were fighting to save her.

The Dublin Dental University Hospital has been a lifeline for us. They have never sugar-coated the truth, but they have always stood with us – with me, Rebecca and my wife Helen. My wife Helen and Rebecca took the brunt of it. I was privileged insofar as I could walk away every day and work and leave it behind me. I feel like we are a team – the Craughwells and the Dublin Dental University Hospital – united on a mission to save every bit of Rebecca's smile and her beauty. The staff who are sitting here today will never truly know how deeply my family appreciate them and their support. It is nearly 30 years since we first met the people in the hospital and they have been our lifeline.

When it comes to head and neck cancer care across Europe, the contrast between countries is striking. Sweden stands out as a leader. Patients there begin treatment within weeks of diagnosis. Survival rates are among the highest in Europe and access to cutting-edge therapies is swift and widespread. Ireland, while making great progress still faces challenges. Treatment delays are more common and access to innovative medicine is slower. Our survival rates,

though improving, remain below Sweden's benchmark. These gaps are not just numbers, they represent lives. They represent outcomes and the urgency for reform. If we aspire to match the best, we must invest in faster assessment and treatment, better infrastructure and policies that prioritise timely access to care, because every patient deserves the best chance, not just the best intentions. I thank the Minister of State for taking the time to come here today. I look forward to her response.

Senator Michael McDowell: I have great pleasure in seconding Senator Craughwell's motion. He has spoken very eloquently and movingly about the personal aspects of this particular issue, which is raised in the notice of motion. I just want to say a few things. I am very grateful to him that he used the time of the Independent group of Senators to put this issue before the House. In large measure, it is something that is not spoken about. The HPV vaccination programme has been rolled out among school pupils, which is a very good thing, but it should be effectively brought to the attention of nearly everybody under the age of 30 that the vaccine is available, especially in the migrant world in which we now live, there are people who do not go to secondary school and who will not be dealt with in that way.

The second point I wish to raise relates to funding. I appreciate that everybody wants more money, but this money is extremely well spent. The figure in the motion that is of the greatest importance is that there is a 9% increased mortality rate associated with every four weeks that radiation treatment is postponed for oropharyngeal cancers. That is a clear indication that speed is of the essence and that properly established, funded units, staffed with expert personnel are provided to deal with this issue. That is essential. Our dental system is deficient, and many dentists both in the university hospitals and in private and State practice are struggling to give Ireland the kind of dental service it needs. At this end, however, the mortality rates and suffering rates that go with oropharyngeal cancer are very significant. There are things we can do on a prophylactic basis to warn and vaccinate people and get them to go to dentists so that these things are noticed in a timely manner. Anything the Government can do in relation to the HSE to concentrate resources and bring to the public's attention the real dangers of not dealing with symptoms and conditions that are indicative of oropharyngeal cancer should be done. It will save lives, improve the life experience of people who are afflicted with oropharyngeal cancer, improve their families' sense of well-being and bring about a fairer and more equitable health system. Excellence should be pursued. It is not enough to do what we are doing at the moment, which amounts to limited resources for a condition or set of conditions that will respond to increased resources and increased personnel.

I take pleasure in seconding the motion.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Dee Ryan): I thank the Senator very much. Before I call the Minister of State to respond, I welcome Deputy Tony McCormack to the Visitors Gallery with his guests. I thank them for joining us for this very serious motion on the topic of supports and services for patients with head and neck cancers.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): I thank Senator Craughwell very much. I welcome his daughter here today. Since I became Minister of State with responsibility for health, cancer has come up so much. So many families are affected by cancer. It is not only the Senator's daughter but he, his wife and all of them

together who are affected. As he said, they are a unit working within the hospital. I want to say well done. It was very emotional today. It is great to see the Senator's daughter here. As Senator McDowell said, timing is of the essence, and it is important. Senator Craughwell spoke about the €500,000 that has been cut. He can be assured that I will definitely convey that message to the Department. Officials from the Department are here taking notes and, as he knows, I am representing the Minister, Jennifer Carroll MacNeill, who cannot be here today. He can be assured that I will go back and highlight the issues.

I am delighted to take this debate on behalf of the Minister. We will not be opposing the motion. That is important. All of us working together is going to be really important now. I thank the Senator for tabling the motion and giving us the opportunity to discuss oncology-related dental services and head and neck cancer. This is an opportunity to listen to and acknowledge the very real challenges faced today, to set out some of the progress made to date and to inform the Seanad of the ongoing work in both the critical prevention side and the necessary improvements nationally for head and neck cancer services. Central to this is the need for the development of a clear patient journey for head and neck cancer patients. The delivery of a national head and neck cancer oral health pathway is a priority under the national oral health policy and will be included in phase 1 of the implementation plan, which is expected to be published shortly. I will try to find out more on that for the Senator. It is important to know when it will be published. I will make sure the Department comes back to him on this.

The HSE national cancer control programme, NCCP, is responsible for implementing and overseeing cancer services in Ireland. The NCCP is progressing the development of a pathway for head and neck cancer patients. The NCCP, the dental hospitals and Department of Health and HSE stakeholders, that is, the national oral health office, the access and integration team and regional services including the integrated health area, IHA, manager, for Dublin Dental University Hospital under the service level agreement, are collaborating to improve head and neck cancer services nationally, including better oncology-related dental services. This group aims to define the optimal dental oncology pathway and is actively progressing this work. The group is meeting again this month to continue its efforts to improve head and neck cancer dental services nationwide.

Head and neck cancers encompass a broad variety of anatomical sites, including the oral cavity. Over the past few years, the incidence of head and neck cancer has increased in Ireland. Demographic changes may be causing a growing number of younger people to be affected by the disease. The NCCP has indicated that this trend could be due to the increasing prevalence of HPV, about which both Senators have spoken. Primary prevention of cancer associated with HPV infection can be achieved through vaccination. The HPV vaccine has been provided to secondary school children to help prevent HPV. One of the Senators said it is important that we highlight the necessity of this and look at the information and awareness and get that into schools and to parents. That is also something we also really need to look at. One of the programme for Government commitments is to extend the HPV vaccination to anyone under 25 who may have missed it. As an initial step, the Minister for Health has committed to the introduction of a school-based HPV catch-up programme. This will be put in place in 2026. It will provide students who have previously been offered a HPV vaccine another opportunity to receive it. From our point of view, we need to better explain the dangers and how important it is to get this vaccine. We definitely need to look at that.

The Government is committed to the continued implementation of the national cancer strategy. To date, more than €105 million has been allocated to cancer control under the strategy. This includes funding to support and expand population-based cancer screening programmes. It also includes funding to bring new treatments to Ireland and supports for community organisations supporting the growing number of people living with and beyond cancer. Additionally, capital investment of more than €140 million has been made, which has delivered new lab facilities, day wards and new radiation oncology facilities. Since 2020, the Health Research Board has awarded €43.7 million in cancer research funding. This includes €21.6 million for clinical trials infrastructure.

Today, over 220,000 people are living after receiving a cancer diagnosis, up from 150,000 in 2017. That is a 32% increase. This includes nearly 5,800 head and neck cancer survivors. The national cancer registry of Ireland reports an average of 786 head and neck cancer patients each year and this is projected to increase by 66% in the next 20 years to reach over 1,000 cases by 2045. Some of this increase arises from our growing and ageing population, improvements in our diagnostic services and the growing awareness of cancer among our population, which leads to more people seeking help.

Patients are also presenting younger. The median age of diagnosis is falling and there is a shift in demographics resulting in a growing number of younger people being affected by the disease. While this trend may be attributed to the increasing prevalence of HPV, we know for certain that these patients will be living with the after-effects of cancer and cancer treatment for longer. Using data from the national cancer registry, we also see differences in outcomes across different cancer types, socioeconomic status and geographical areas. Cancer incidence is higher and survival rates lower among the most disadvantaged quintile in Ireland. This inequity also applies to head and neck cancers. One of our key priorities is to promote equity in cancer care, ensuring patients receive high-quality care regardless of where they live, which hospital they attend or the doctors they see.

We also know the dominant cause of mucosal head and neck cancers is nicotine inhalation. While smoking prevalence has come down from 27% in 2004, 18% of our population still smoke today. We know restrictions in this area can have positive long-term effects. As fewer people take up smoking, we are keen to build on our progress and are working to bring two important pieces of legislation into effect this year. This legislation will bring important changes to the licensing, sales and distribution of tobacco and nicotine-inhaling products, particularly to those under the age of 21.

Turning specifically to oncology-related dental services, the Government allocates more than €230 million towards the provision of oral healthcare every year. This shows our commitment to delivering oral healthcare services. There have been additional investments to oncology-related dental services due to the increasing demands of the service provided by Dublin Dental University Hospital, DDUH. This has resulted in increased funding being provided to DDUH since 2023. The HSE initially provided €311,000, which increased to €578,000 by the end of 2023. This excludes education funding of €189,000.

In 2024, over €900,000 was allocated to continue the development of head and neck cancer services for the treatment of patients. This funding is available to the HSE which engages with dental hospitals to ensure the use of the funding meets the needs of the patients. The Minister

for Health wants to do much more to improve oncology-related dental services and work is ongoing with the HSE to improve these services.

There have been some recent developments in oncology-related dental services I would like to highlight today. Since March 2022, out-of-pocket expenditure for patients attending DDUH for head and neck cancer-related care has stopped. The appointment of a consultant for medically compromised patients, treating head and neck cancer, to DDUH in April 2023, and a dental consultant in St. James's Hospital in September 2023 has helped support the provision of reconstructive care to patients following head and neck cancer.

To enable the development of the patient care pathway for individuals with head and neck cancer, the NCCP team has been working with the Department of Health on issues of oncology-related dental services. To enable the development of these services for patients with head and neck cancer, the appropriate staffing and skill mix will need to be outlined which will require a clinically led focus that responds to patients' clinical needs.

In respect of dental services and supports more generally, a range of measures have been put in place since 2022 within the dental treatment service scheme for adult medical card holders. This introduced, and then reintroduced, elements of preventative care. The fees paid to contractors for most treatment items also increased by 40% to 60%. Those who have a medical card and are aged 16 and over can access a range of treatments under the DTSS free of charge for head and neck cancer patients. They are eligible for several dental treatments under the DTSS.

The dental hospitals provide a pathway for individuals to access dental treatments, but dental treatments can also be availed of through dentists who operate the DTSS. However, I acknowledge there are challenges with this scheme at present. Some of these challenges will be addressed through the implementation of the national oral health policy, *Smile agus Sláinte*. This policy aims to radically transform our current oral healthcare service, recognising we need an entirely new approach to oral healthcare to meet the needs of our population into the future. The policy provides a framework to transform oral healthcare services in Ireland, where prevention and promotion are an integral part of all service provision. *Smile agus Sláinte* is informed by and aligned with other relevant Government and health policies, including the primary healthcare approach, *Sláintecare*, our overall framework for better health in Ireland and a healthy Ireland. The implementation of the national oral health policy is a programme for Government commitment to support the focused and structured implementation of the policy. The Department of Health and the HSE are currently finalising an implementation plan for the first phase of the roll-out. This phase of implementation includes the development of a national head and neck cancer oral health pathway.

I assure Senators and thank them again. I have another meeting but the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, will be coming in shortly. I thank the House. We will continue the ongoing work being delivered by the Department to address the current challenges faced with head and neck cancer nationally. We are grateful to Senator Craughwell for tabling this motion. While the ongoing investments being made are important, ultimately, the development of an optimal dental oncology pathway will better enable the provision of care to those patients with head and neck cancers.

I can only say I will go back and speak to the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, who apologises that she cannot be here. The seriousness of this is such that time is of the essence. With cancer patients, everything is about timing and how quickly you can access services and get your treatment. On an emotional point, I thank Senator Craughwell and say to his daughter and everyone who is here to support her and who gives her the services that I wish them well. As I said, we will not be going against this motion; we will be supporting it.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Dee Ryan): I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Murnane O'Connor. Before I call the next speaker, I welcome Deputy David Maxwell and his guests to the Visitors Gallery. They are very welcome.

Senator Teresa Costello: I welcome this important motion on supporting services for patients with head and neck cancers and commend Senator Craughwell on bringing it forward and sharing his family's own personal experience. There is nothing more powerful than lived experience. I also thank Senator McDowell for sending out the briefing document, which is very graphic and informative but is something we needed to see. I appreciate that also.

Fianna Fáil welcomes this discussion as it is an issue that affects patients and families across the country. It is one that demands continued focus, investment and reform. Each year in Ireland, more than 760 people are diagnosed with a cancer of the mouth, head or neck. These cancers encompass a broad range of anatomical sites and can have devastating effects on speech, swallow, appearance and quality of life, as the Senator referenced.

Traditionally, head and neck cancers were most commonly in men over the age of 55 but we are now seeing a clear demographic shift. The gap between men and women has narrowed to just 2:1 and the number of younger people affected is increasing. Over the next 25 years, incidences are projected to rise by 30%. This change is due, in part, to the increasing prevalence of HPV which is now recognised as a key factor in many head and neck cancers. Addressing this means continuing our dual approach of primary prevention through vaccination and secondary prevention through screening.

The HPV vaccine has been available to girls since 2010 and to boys since 2019. Under the programme for Government, there is a clear commitment to extend the Laura Brennan HPV catch-up vaccination programme to everyone under the age of 25 who may have missed it. As part of this, the Minister for Health has introduced a schools-based HPV catch-up programme, ensuring students who previously declined or missed the vaccine have another opportunity to receive it. These are vital public health measures that will save lives in the years ahead. I encourage people to avail of it. I had no hesitation whatsoever to ensure my son availed of it and I genuinely worry about the drop in the uptake of it in recent times. I always remember Laura Brennan in that because the work she did was phenomenal.

At the same time, we should ensure those already living with or recovering from head and neck cancer receive the best possible care and support. These patients often face complex oral and dental issues because of their cancer or its treatment. I know from personal experience the effect chemo alone has on dental health. During my chemo, my tooth fell out with no warning. It was so traumatic for me so I cannot begin to imagine the trauma faced by a person dealing with a head or neck cancer diagnosis.

The Government is fully committed to improving oncology-related dental services. The HSE, through the national cancer control programme, has established a working group to define the optimal dental oncology pathway. The NCCP has been engaging with dental representatives at St. James's Hospital, Beaumont Hospital and the Dublin Dental University Hospital to strengthen this pathway. Significant progress has been made in recent years. Since March 2022, out-of-pocket costs for patients attending the Dublin Dental University Hospital for neck and cancer care have been eliminated.

Funding to the Dublin Dental University Hospital has increased substantially from €311,000 in 2023 to €579,000 by year end, excluding education funding of €189,000. A further €594,000 has been provided by the Department of Health to support supplementary dental treatments for cancer patients. In 2024, more than €900,000 was allocated nationally to advance these services and ensure patients can access the care they need.

There have also been key staffing appointments to strengthen the system, including a consultant in medically compromised patients at the Dublin Dental University Hospital and a consultant in maxillofacial prosthodontics and oral rehabilitation at St. James's. These posts are essential to building a multidisciplinary model of care.

The Department of Health and the NCCP continue to meet on this issue, with the next follow-up scheduled for 21 October demonstrating ongoing engagement and commitment to resolving system challenges and expanding regional care capacity.

Looking ahead, the HSE is considering the inclusion of oral health networks of care within its new regional structures. This is a crucial step, as oral and dental health cannot be treated in isolation; it must be embedded within our broader cancer and community healthcare frameworks.

The Government's wider oral health reform agenda is being driven through Smile agus Sláinte, the national oral health policy, which represents a major reconfiguration of oral health services. The policy is a programme-for-Government commitment and is aligned with the World Health Organization's global oral health action plan.

Developing a clear, consistent patient journey for people with head and neck cancers spanning prevention, diagnosis, treatment, rehabilitation and survivorship will be central to improving outcomes. This requires not only investment, but also co-ordination, skilled staff and clinically led pathways that place patients at the centre of care.

This motion rightly draws attention to the gaps that still exist, particularly around access to dental oncology services, rehabilitation supports and post-treatment care. These are issues that the Government acknowledges and is actively addressing. Progress has been made but there is more to do.

I reiterate that Fianna Fáil welcome's this motion and supports the continued expansion and reform of services for patients with head and neck cancers. The measures under way, whether through enhanced funding, workforce expansion, HPV vaccination or the implementation of Smile agus Sláinte, represent meaningful progress. Ultimately, our focus must remain on ensuring that every patient receives timely, comprehensive and compassionate care from diagnosis to recovery. That is the standard we must continue to work towards. I thank Senator Craughwell for his contribution today.

Senator Maria Byrne: I thank the Minister of State for coming today to discuss this all-important motion. I compliment Senator Craughwell and the Independent Senators, but also Senator Craughwell's daughter, Rebecca, whom I welcome, and the consultants and staff from the Dublin Dental University Hospital. It shows how concerned they are about it that there are so many people here today.

On behalf of the Fine Gael, I thank the Minister of State for coming here. As the man says, "I know there is a lot done and a lot more to do." Certainly, his commitment and the commitment of the Government not to oppose the motion is important.

I thank Ms Samantha Long who, on behalf of the Independent Senators, sent the briefing note. I was just reading it. I am not sure whether the Minister of State has seen it. In fact, the majority of people who are diagnosed live on the east coast of Ireland but on the west coast, there are low numbers of people being diagnosed. One would have to question whether there is something there that needs to be researched and whether there is something that causes this. Certainly, the HPV vaccine has been highlighted. It is important that a message go out from here that it is important for people to take up the vaccine when they are being offered it. When people go through the trauma, it is not only affects those who are diagnosed, but also their family and friends as well. It is brave of Senator Craughwell to highlight this issue because his family have been through it themselves. As Senator Costello said, there is nothing better than the lived experience. That is what is shining through here today.

While there has been a lot of investment in it in the past and the Minister of State spoke about what will happen into the future and the campaign, Smile agus Sláinte, that has been initiated, it is important that we support the people who are going through this process in every way. There is the shock of being diagnosed. When Senator Costello referred to the fact that her tooth fell out, we can only imagine what people with throat and neck cancer experience. I have two friends who were diagnosed with something similar. One lost their voice box. The other had to get implants and get different things done, along with reconstruction. While, to this day, you possibly would not notice it other than up close, the person always knows that they had to have the surgery. It is brave of anybody who comes forward to speak about their personal stories.

As a government, it is great that we are not opposing this. I welcome every support that can be put in for the patients but also the people that are offering the service and the different surgeries and expertise, because I read in the report that there is only one surgeon looking after people in this way but there are 780 people a year presenting themselves. We need to look at ways of expanding the service and how we can roll out the programme to support people, but to support the staff who are working in this situation as well. Those staff need every support, from financial support to maybe resources and equipment. I am sure there are different ways that the Department can look at supporting it.

Overall, I am in favour of this. I thank Rebecca and everybody else for their bravery in coming forward to highlight this. All the resources need to be put in place as soon as possible. One message that should go out is that the HPV vaccine is so important to young children. People became maybe lax about or did not believe in vaccines, but when they see the proof that this could help with the situation. All it can do is defer or maybe help with it, but we need to encourage as many people as possible to take these services when they are being offered them.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Dee Ryan): Before calling the next speaker, I welcome Deputy Paul McAuliffe and his guests, Maurice and Wendy Thibault, to the Gallery. We are having a discussion on a Private Members' motion regarding supports and services for patients with head and neck cancers. I call Senator Collins.

Senator Joanne Collins: I welcome the Minister of State. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. I thank my colleagues in the Independent Group for tabling this important motion forward, and especially Senator Craughwell for his heartfelt and to the point graphic, but needed, speech. It is great to hear the lived experience. I also welcome all those in the Gallery.

The motion highlights what too many patients and family already know, which is that cancer services in the State are in crisis. The focus today is on head and neck cancers, in particular, the lack of pre-radiation dental oncology and rehabilitation supports, but, in truth, these are symptoms of a much deeper systemic failure to deliver timely, equitable and safe cancer care right across the board.

The national cancer strategy was launched with ambition in 2017, yet eight years on it has only been properly funded for two of those years. Of the 23 objectives it set out, one has been achieved. We have a workforce crisis in cancer care. Radiation therapists, radiographers and oncologists are stretched to breaking point. Up to 70 of the 240 radiation therapy posts nationally are vacant. Life-saving equipment sits idle while professionals burn out or emigrate because of low pay and poor progression. These shortages are not felt evenly. The postcode lottery in cancer care remains stark. Patients in the west, south and north west are still travelling hundreds of kilometres for diagnosis or treatment. Centralisation has a place for specialist services, but it cannot become an excuse for the permanent neglect of regional capacity.

The human cost of this neglect is devastating. For every four-week delay in starting treatment, the risk of death increases by 9%. These are not abstract numbers. They represent people who could have a better chance - mothers, fathers, sons, daughters - but whose lives are being cut short because our system is moving too slowly. This is happening at a time when public patients are being outsourced for private treatment, which is a far greater cost to the taxpayer. That is not efficiency; it is failure and we are paying twice for it.

Sinn Féin fully supports the motion, but we also need to state clearly that the issue raised here today is not confined to dental oncology. It cuts across the entire cancer system from screening and diagnostics to surgery and radiotherapy and recovery. We need a cancer service that is comprehensive, equitable and properly funded. We need to end the recruitment embargoes that are paralysing care. We need multiannual funding and planning so that services can recruit, train and retain the staff they so badly need. We need to invest in regional capacity so that no patient is left behind because of where they live.

This is about dignity. Delays in treatment or rehabilitation are not statistics; they are life and death for patients and their families. The Government must stop treating cancer services as an annual budget line and start treating them as a national priority. Sinn Féin will continue to press for a fully funded, regionally balanced and patient-centred cancer strategy, one that delivers for every community and not just those within the M50.

Senator Tom Clonan: I welcome everybody from the Dublin Dental University Hospital to the Chamber, in particular Rebecca. It was lovely to meet her. I am working with her dad who has taught me everything I know, or at least some of the things I know.

I am delighted to hear the Government is not going to oppose the motion. Frankly, it is something that one could not oppose. It is a categorical and ethical imperative to support the work our colleagues are doing in the Dublin Dental University Hospital. This is a rare occasion when we see people from the front line in the House. Regarding all of the failures in our health service, it is not Bernard Gloster, Robert Watt from the Department or the Minister's officials who will be held to account. Rather, it will be individuals by way of the Irish Medical Council or litigation. Staff are on the front line and are living every day in the workplace the shortcomings that have been set out here.

Senator Craughwell is using his voice as a legislator, Senator and father. I have a son who has a neuromuscular disease which is progressive and is also losing his voice. I am aware of the lack of a proper treatment pathway for those conditions. It is fragmented. Notwithstanding the best efforts of the wonderful team in St. Vincent's, it was suggested to us that we would have to do the voice banking for him due to a lack of proper physiotherapy support and would have to find funding. His 17-year-old brother would have to look at old family videos and see whether he could harvest audio of his voice. This is completely unacceptable in a developed European Union country.

I take on board what is set out. I thank Senator Craughwell for drafting the motion. The motion refers to a recurring theme across the health service. A proper national head and neck cancer pathway, in particular for oral cancers, with all of the associated workforce required to support it, and proper dental oncology care are required. The Minister has heard the statistics. Some 400 patients per annum present with oral cancers and the profile is younger and younger. For lack of a proper integrated service, the outcomes and prognoses can be quite stark. There is a 9% increase in mortality for every four-week period of delay.

What surprises and shocks me is that the amount of funding being sought is €1.3 million. There is already funding of €900,000, to which the Minister referred in the response. The difference between that and €1.3 million is, not to be facile or trite, less than the price of a bike shed. Such funding would have a significant impact.

The Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, cannot be here but the officials are present. This is a matter that should be dealt with now. The experts are in the room and the Minister has been told about the situation. When the Minister found out about this and what she did about it are the main questions. This is not a big ask; we are talking about €400,000 or €500,000. That should be done within the week, or certainly within the month. I cannot think of a reason that could not happen. The figure is extraordinary.

There is a medical health professional in our family who also operates in a system that is inadequately resourced and funded, with all of the workforce challenges involved. The people who carry out this service experience recurring moral distress and cumulative moral injury due to seeing suboptimal outcomes for want of the simple interventions that their higher specialist training and expertise indicates should be there.

Not only do we need to look after the patients; we need to look after our teams. That is one of the reasons we cannot retain people and so many of our wonderful therapists and medical

professionals are in New Zealand, Canada and Australia. It is because they look after them. We are talking about funding of €400,000 or €500,000.

I will commit to checking in with the team from the Dublin Dental University Hospital and Senator Craughwell in six months' time. If there has been no progress, as a member of the Joint Committee on Health I will ensure we will add it to the work schedule and get the Secretary General of the Department, the Minister and the HSE in to answer these questions.

I am proud to see Senator Craughwell use his voice for his daughter's voice. We might add our voices to that in this House to advocate for the very simple and modest request set out in the Private Members' motion. Of all of the Private Members' motions we have had in the House over the past three years, this one will stay in my memory. As our Sinn Féin colleague said, it was heartfelt. I appreciate the support we are getting from our Government colleagues across the floor.

Senator Joe Conway: A short week ago, I knew very little about this topic. By chance, my daughter and I met Senator Craughwell in the coffee dock, of all places. He told me he was bringing this Private Members' motion to the floor of the House today. Like any habitué of this House, I got to work on doing a little bit of self-enlightenment on the topic. I was absolutely amazed by the complexity of the condition and the harrowing effects it has on those who suffer. I want to applaud Senator Craughwell for bringing this to the attention not just of the House but of the nation. It is a first for me to see such a fantastic team tog out to support the Senator in the Gallery.

6 o'clock

These things are all greatly appreciated by us and I am sure by him and Rebecca. In our idealistic days of youth many of us in or outside this House would have read a book by John Kennedy called *Profiles in Courage*. We are seeing a great profile in courage here with Rebecca and Senator Craughwell.

We have been talking about the human papillomavirus and I am going to add to this as an educator. There is an old Irish expression which says an té nach gcuirfidh greim, cuirfidh sé dhá ghreim. It roughly translates as an ounce of preparatory work will reap a pound of reward. In education, particularly in the primary schools, it is then that the seeds of good health and health education are sown. We seem to have taken our foot off the gas in relation to health education, the importance of minding our bodies and looking after healthy lifestyles. This includes promoting healthy living environments, as well as aversions to alcohol and tobacco. These are fundamental messages to give children as they grow up. They can save a lot of trauma in the after times. Equally, we talked a lot about the HPV vaccination and what seems to be an fall-off in the uptake of it. This is very regrettable but it seems to be a trend all over the world. There is a growing scepticism to the whole idea of vaccinations. It is a very worrying trend that is probably generated by that awful thing called social media and influencers. It is a message to Government that, as educators and members of Government looking after the welfare of our people, we should be redoubling our efforts to zero in on the importance of vaccinations and health education.

Following on from what Senator Clonan was saying, mar fhocal scoir, now that the Minister of State is here, we are inundated this week because it is budget week. We are coming down

with figures falling around our ears. The figures the Minister of State revealed to us relating to the modest amount of money Dublin Dental University Hospital is asking for seem quite paltry to me as a layman. I do not think it is beyond the wit of humanity to bridge the gap. The people down there are quite a team. They deserve to be equipped and financed to engage with problems such as this. My dear late mother used to say: never ever boil your cabbage twice when you are talking. I am not going to repeat the things that others have said. I applaud Senator Craughwell, thank Dublin Dental University Hospital and all our colleagues, Government, Independent and Opposition. There is a great turnout and a great show of solidarity for this case. Well done, Rebecca.

Senator Martin Conway: I thank Senator Craughwell for putting down this motion. As the fella says, when you talk with personal experience, you talk with passion and power. I have spoken to Senator Craughwell many times and I welcome Rebecca here today. I have spoken to him many times over the years about the challenges his family and Rebecca have faced in dealing with this issue. As somebody with a lived experience of a disability, I know what it is like to talk because you are talking with the knowledge, experience, heartache and hope. One always have hope. I commend the Senator and his family on what they have done and on bringing this here because it is going to get results. I have no doubt about that.

I listened to what the Minister of State said and Senator Craughwell's presentation. I agree with Senator Clonan that, if there has not been movement in the right direction in six months' time by the professionals sitting here, we will have to address it in some other way. I have no doubt that the Minister of State will make sure that this happens. She is here and is listening. Having worked with her over the years, I know what she is like and know her determination. I am very hopeful. It is not a lot of money when we are looking at the €25.7 billion health budget that was announced yesterday, but it is critical. The money involved is critical because it will make a difference.

I appeal to families and parents to make sure their children and young adults avail of the HPV vaccine. I have worked on the whole issue of HPV awareness over the past number of years. I salute the late Laura Brennan and her parents who have kept the campaign going. When the Government announced it was extending the vaccine programme, I remember how proud and delighted Laura's parents were that her legacy lived on. It is always important to keep reminding people of the importance of the vaccine. I continue to salute the Brennan family in the work they do. I am sure everyone here would join me in encouraging families to have the conversation, but more importantly, take the vaccine because it works and it saves an awful lot going forward.

I am glad the Government is not opposing Senator Craughwell's motion. When I read it, I assumed it would not but I am glad it did not because it is the right thing to do. The one great thing about this Chamber, and I say this to our visitors, is that when something is the right thing to do, in most cases we come together. We speak in unison and with one voice. When we do that, it can be very powerful. When we do not divide when it is the right thing to do, we can be a very influential and powerful Chamber. That is why the people voted to retain us: to do this type of thing, to support colleagues who have lived experience and make very sensible, pragmatic and necessary proposals. That is what is happening here. I am glad that this Chamber at least will come together behind our friend and colleague Gerard and his family on this very personal mission to deliver and achieve so as future generations will benefit. I am

glad it is happening. I hope the united voice of this Chamber that has gone out loud and clear this evening is picked up on and influences, informs and supports the Government in doing what it needs to do to make sure the desired outcome is achieved.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I welcome the Minister of State and officials from the Department of Health. I particularly welcome our guests in the Distinguished Visitors Gallery and, of course, Rebecca. It is so great to see her and looking so well. I thank Gerard and Helen for sharing their and Rebecca's story. I do not think Senator Craughwell would have ventured in here without Rebecca's blessing. I know Rebecca, having had the opportunity to talk to her in the past. Rebecca, Helen and Gerard's story is remarkable. When he tells their story in here, it is a very powerful testimony and shines a light on a particular issue.

I also thank the people from the Dublin Dental University Hospital. It is not too often that so many distinguished, capable and able experts come to the Distinguished Visitors Gallery to bear witness to the debate in this House with regard to that. I will not be a cynic, but I am here long enough to know that many motions are debated but they tend to go on a shelf and we hear no more about them. I particularly welcome the proposal by Senator Clonan, who is also a member of the Independent group. I might say that all of us now on this side of the House are members of the Seanad Independent group. I am proud to lead that group and I am proud of its achievements. We keep our focus on being advocates. We are politicians, but we are also advocates. We advocate for particular issues, and we unite and work together to highlight and shine a light in particular areas.

I also take this opportunity to thank Senator Craughwell's staff. I know how committed they are to the Senator and to the causes he champions. That is important. The level of input that has been made in the preparation of this motion has come from their office. It has also come from Rebecca's lived experience, of course. I acknowledge that it has also come from Senator McDowell and Samantha, and their office, with the preparation of briefing documents and bringing people on board. It is very important, as the Minister of State has said, that the Government is not opposing it. Why would the Government oppose it? How could the Government oppose it, quite frankly? I thank the Minister of State for reading a difficult and long official response - no doubt it came from the Department - that clearly had the approval of the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, which would be the right thing anyway. I thank the Minister of State for taking us through all of that.

I also make an ask of the Members of this House, of all sides, who have parliamentary party meetings. It so happens that some Senators will have a parliamentary party meeting tonight. I have no doubt there will be other things exercising their minds tonight. However, I ask them to keep this issue live. I ask them to bring it to their party leaders, to the Taoiseach and to the Cabinet members they work and network with. They respect the Members. The Members respect them. They are in government. We will of course engage with Government Ministers, who engage with us all the time. Those who look in on us from outside sometimes forget that this is a political establishment. We collaborate well together. We work well together. It is incumbent on all 60 Members of Seanad Éireann, on all sides of the House, to use our contacts with Government Ministers to progress this. As Senator Clonan said, it is important to keep the focus with the Joint Committee on Health. That is important. It is also important to prepare, and to ask Government and Opposition TDs to prepare, parliamentary questions to highlight the issue.

Let us not go out of here feeling pleased that we have articulated something we all know about, because everyone in this room is convinced. We need to get out of here and we need to convince other people. We need to convince the policy makers. We need to convince the people who hold the strings in terms of recruitment, resources and funding. That is important. There are many aspects to cancer and many demands on cancer services, but today we are focusing on head, neck and throat cancer, and all of the issues around that. That is really important, and that speciality is a focus of our debate here.

I again thank Senator Craughwell for sharing what is a family story and a lived family experience. I thank Rebecca, who has allowed her story and journey to be shared with us. It makes it so much easier to communicate when you are talking to the person, exchanging with the person and sharing their concerns. She is brave and courageous, but she is a champion. Tonight we are having this debate basically on foot of her experience, and that of the professionals accompanying and supporting her tonight. It is a great privilege for them and for us in this House that they are present. They have made a difference to this debate for many of us who have been here a long time. When people who are directly involved in the issues we are debating come to sit among us in the Upper House of the Oireachtas, it is special and meaningful. No doubt we will have an opportunity to chat afterwards. I thank everyone involved.

Senator Tom Clonan: Hear, hear.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I thank the officials. I thank the Minister of State. I know there are many demands, but I know her to be a decent person. I know her to be a champion of cancer and health rights in particular. I think we are all on the one page, but let us not go asleep or tap ourselves on the back and think it is all done. Today is the beginning. Let us keep soldiering on until we get what we seek to achieve for everyone affected by this illness.

Senator Tom Clonan: Well said.

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call Senator Craughwell, as the proposer, to wrap up the debate, I welcome to the Visitors Gallery Jane, Michelle and Dave Taylor, along with Bernice Rocca and Brian Killalea. They are welcome to Seanad Éireann, as are all our guests in the Distinguished Visitors Gallery. I thank them for being here for this important debate.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I know the Minister of State has a meeting to go to and deferred that to be here. I thank her for that. Somewhere in Ireland today, tomorrow or next week a family will get the same message we got. I remember Rebecca was 19 at the time and her maxillofacial surgeon did not want to tell her what the diagnosis was after the biopsy. He rang me. I went home to Helen, my wife, and said we had to go to see the surgeon. We knew the news was bad. When Rebecca heard us whispering, she came in and said, "I am over 18, and whatever news I have to get, I will get it myself." I know her surgeon will tell you she is a feisty woman when she decides to take things on. We went and got the diagnosis. We brought her to St. James's Hospital for surgery. On the morning we brought her into the theatre, the surgeon advised my wife and me to speak to her now, because she might never speak again. I cannot tell you the impact that had. She came out of surgery totally unrecognisable because of

the nature of the surgery. I would do the late evenings and my wife would do the days. Helen would be with her all day every day and woe betide anybody who would not look after her. I remember sitting one night in the hospital feeling desperately sorry for myself and the next thing I heard this croaky voice saying, "What's your problem; I'm the one who had the surgery." I looked up and there was my beautiful daughter, and she gave me stick that night. We have heard about mortality rates, but this was 26 years ago. I thank the people sitting in the Gallery, who were beside her at every turn. Today somebody referred to me as being brave, but I can tell the House that during the recovery period from the surgery I ran out the door while Rebecca and her mother absolutely went head on because she had to have liquidated food while she was recovering. I could not take it. Rebecca was resistant, but Helen was determined that she would eat. Between the two of them she travelled the recovery route.

Today we are here about the recovery and restoration, and restoring somebody as much as you possibly can. We are talking about approximately €556,000 today. It is loose change in the back pocket of the Department of Health, or of the HSE. On Monday morning, the chairman and CEO of the dental hospital, who are here, can get a telephone call from the HSE saying that it has just signed a cheque for €556,000 and that it will work with them from now on to ensure funding is adequate. The €4.2 million is being sought in order to cut down on travel. Most of us who are here have family members who know what it is like to suffer from cancer and the treatment thereof. The treatment is sometimes worse than the goddamn condition. Expecting people to travel from the west of Ireland to Dublin, and from the south of Ireland to Dublin, for treatment is not on. We must find the €4.2 million urgently. I have seen the people in Dublin Dental University Hospital. I have seen Rebecca's surgeon. I would name them but it is inappropriate to name people in the House. I would get ticked off over that. I can say that these people work on a shoestring. They commit themselves morning, noon and night to their patients. Twice in the past three years, my beautiful daughter has been in intensive care, totally unconscious, and we did not whether she would survive because of difficulties swallowing, which is part of oral cancer. She is still here. When she is recovering in intensive care and we go in to visit and ask how she is, she tells us she is planning a holiday in Lanzarote. That is the way it goes. I thank her employers, Allied Irish Banks, for standing with her, looking after her and keeping her on the staff over the years.

Most of all, I thank the people in the Gallery, who are there all the time, every time. An allocation of €556,000 next Monday morning is not a big ask. As Senator Clonan said, if that money is not given, we will be back looking for it in six, seven, eight or nine months. It is not huge money. I thank the Minister of State for staying longer and the Cathaoirleach for being generous in giving time to wrap up the debate. I thank the people in the Gallery so much for being here. Their presence shows massive solidarity with the team responsible for the treatment of head and neck cancers at Dublin Dental University Hospital. The chairman, chief executive officer and all the senior staff are here. I am humbled by their attendance.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank the Senators who put forward the motion, all Members who contributed to the debate and the guests in the Distinguished Visitors Gallery for their attendance. I thank Senator Craughwell for sharing his family's lived experience and the Minister of State and her staff for coming to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

An Cathaoirleach: When is it proposed to sit again?

Senator Maria Byrne: Tomorrow morning at 9.30.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar athló ar 6.21 p.m. go dtí 9.30 a.m., Déardaoin, an 9 Deireadh Fómhair 2025.

The Seanad adjourned at 6.21 p.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Thursday, 9 October 2025.