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DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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SEANAD ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 21 Deireadh Fómhair 2025

Tuesday, 21 October 2025

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach i gceannas ar 2.30 p.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 Nicole Ryan - the need for the Minister for Transport to make a statement on funding for the improvement of train services and fare access for students travelling from north Cork to Cork city.

Senator Pauline Tully - the need for the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment to make a statement on making the Retrofit Ready pilot programme permanent and extending it nationwide.

Senator Alison Comyn - the need for the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to make a statement on the process of formally recognising Drogheda as a city.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick - the need for the Minister of State with responsibility for the Office of Public Works to provide an update on the 1916 commemorative centre at the national monument 14-17 Moore Street, Dublin 1.

Senator Linda Nelson Murray - the need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on funding and support for the Irish Blood Transfusion Service.

Senator Mike Kennelly - the need for the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht to make a statement on the provision of additional funding for the local improvement scheme.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove - the need for the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade to make a statement on the content of the occupied territories Bill.

Senator Robbie Gallagher - the need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on when spinal muscular atrophy and severe combined immunodeficiency will be included in the heel prick test.

The matters raised by the Senators are suitable for discussion and I have selected Senators Nicole Ryan, Pauline Tully, Alison Comyn, Mary Fitzpatrick, Linda Nelson Murray and Mike Kennelly and they will be taken now. The other Senators may give notice on another day of the matters that they wish to raise.

Nithe i dtosach suíonna - Commencement Matters

Rail Network

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer.

Senator Nicole Ryan: I thank the Minister of State for being here today. This matter concerns the lack of Leap card access for journeys starting from Banteer and Millstreet to Cork city, and the absence of an early train from Banteer, which is an issue that forces students to make impossible choices every week.

A woman in my constituency reached out to let me know that her daughter travels to college in Cork every day. She works part time and studies full time. Like so many others, she is doing her best to make it work. Because Leap card fares only apply from Mallow to Cork and not from Banteer and Millstreet, her daily journey costs considerably more. For young students, the difference does add up. Over a week, that is money that could have been put towards groceries, potential rent or even just a small bit of breathing room. It is not fair that two students sitting side by side on the same train pay two completely different fares simply because one lives a few stops further into rural Ireland.

This is not just about the cost; it is about opportunity and fairness. Many of these students live in Banteer, Millstreet, Kanturk and the surrounding areas simply because they cannot find or afford accommodation in the city. The accommodation crisis has pushed them home, not by choice but by necessity. When we are talking about regional development and sustainable transport, this is what really matters. These young people are trying to do the right thing. They have made it to college despite every obstacle, like rising rents, housing shortages and limited public transport, yet they are being penalised because they live outside the commuter belt.

To make matters worse, the early morning service from Banteer to Cork city does not run on Mondays. There is a train at 7 a.m. on every other weekday that allows students to reach UCC, or Munster Technological University, MTU, for 9 a.m. lectures. On Mondays, however, the first train is not until 8.25 a.m., which is far too late for morning classes. What happens? Students then have to make other arrangements. Some travel to Mallow by car just to catch the early train, adding extra expense and time to already long days. Others simply miss out on their Monday lectures. It is a small scheduling gap but it has big impacts for these students. Rural students are doing everything right and they are constantly reminded their communities do not count in the same way. Whether it is transport, broadband, housing or healthcare, there is always an extra cost, an extra hurdle and the extra things they just do not qualify for.

All we are asking for is a bit of fairness. Can the Minister of State please extend Leap card access or provide fare parity to include journeys from Banteer and Millstreet to Cork city to ensure students are not penalised because of where they live? If there are technical or infrastructure barriers, could the Minister of State please outline a clear and immediate plan to address them and provide an interim fare solution in the meantime? Can the Monday morning gap in the timetable also be addressed to ensure there are services from Banteer that allow students to reach Cork city before 9 a.m.?

This is about giving rural students a fair start and saying where you are from should not determine the opportunities you can access or how much you have to pay for them. Today, therefore, I am asking that the Leap card be extended to Banteer and Millstreet and for the Minister of State to try to restore the early Monday morning service. These students have already overcome so much and they deserve the very best. Just for us to make their journeys to education a little bit easier should not have to cost the world.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Jerry Buttimer): I thank Senator Ryan for raising this important topic, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister, Deputy O'Brien. I clarify at the start that the Minister for Transport has responsibility for policy and overall funding in public transport but neither the Minister nor his officials are involved in the day-to-day operation of public transport services. The statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public transport passenger services nationally rests with the National Transport Authority. The NTA works with the public transport operators that deliver the services and have responsibility for day-to-day operational matters. The NTA also has responsibility for the regulation of fares charged to passengers in respect of public transport services provided under public service obligation, PSO, contracts.

That said, I reassure the Senator that the Government is strongly committed to providing all citizens with reliable and realistic sustainable mobility options, and public transport plays a key role in the delivery of this goal. To support this objective in the budget just announced, the Department secured €940 million in funding for PSO and Transport for Ireland, TFI, Local Link services, providing a significant 43% uplift, which is an increase from €658.442 million last year, the allocation of further supports for subsidised bus and rail services across Ireland as well as maintaining targeted fare initiatives such as the recently introduced free travel for all children up to the age of nine and the young adult card as part of the NTA's national fare strategy.

On the Senator's specific query regarding the need to extend Leap card fare access to students, I clarify that, as Members will know, there are currently two Leap card options available that offer 50% discounted travel for young people and students. The young adult card is available to all young adults aged 19 to 25 and the student Leap card is available to full-time students aged 16 to 18 and to those aged 26 and over. To qualify, students must be in full-time education and training for at least 16 hours per week. Any student who meets the eligibility criteria, supported by a valid student ID indicating full-time status and-or a letter from an institution, will be issued a student Leap card. The NTA encourages all customers to use the TFI Leap card to ensure they receive the best possible value on fares. Leap card users can save up to 30% compared with paying with cash, making it a more cost-effective option for regular travel.

In relation to train services, Senator Ryan and the Members will know we have invested significantly in recent years in our national rail network, particularly in Cork, to create a more efficient, safe and better service for the people of Ireland. The opening of a new through platform at Cork Kent Station last April represented a landmark day in the delivery of the Cork area commuter rail programme. This platform will facilitate Cork commuter trains to travel through Kent Station from Mallow to Midleton or Cobh without requiring passengers to change services, which will support a better rail service.

A public consultation on phase 2 of the programme, which includes the delivery of eight new stations, provides upgrades to existing stations, including Mallow, and provides for the electrification of the new Cork commuter rail system, concluded in July. Phase 2 works will be advanced following the completion of phase 1 and subject to funding and relevant approvals.

The improvements in frequency provided by the Cork area commuter rail programme will also benefit passengers travelling from stations on the Tralee line, including Banteer and Millstreet, who can interchange at Mallow station and travel onwards to Cork Kent Station. The development of infrastructure from the Cork area commuter rail programme will increase capacity and frequency from Mallow to Cork. As fleet becomes available, this will provide opportunities for service expansion on the network, which is subject to agreement with the NTA.

The new DART+ fleet will add significant capacity in the greater Dublin area, and will be then redeployed elsewhere on the network, based on demand and infrastructure capacity.

I have two questions for the Senator. Can she quantify the number of students who are discommoded, in terms of this Commencement matter, and cannot travel from Banteer or Millstreet to Cork city on a Monday morning? The Senator mentioned that students cannot arrive on time for their classes in the morning. What is the earliest train the students can take to travel to Kent Station? I ask because there is a good bus system between UCC and Kent Station. I would like the Senator to quantify the number of students who are discommoded so I can go the NTA on her behalf.

Senator Nicole Ryan: I would have to conduct a survey because I do not know how many students are affected. It was just one constituent and one mother who came to me about the matter.

Banteer has no bus service at all. The earliest train from Banteer to Cork Kent Station on a Monday morning is at 8.25 a.m., which means that students cannot make their 9 a.m. class because the train only arrives at Cork Kent Station just after 9 o'clock.

On the ministerial response, I know the rail service is not entirely the brief of the Minister of State but what we saying to students right now is that they cannot use their Leap card because that option does not extend to Banteer or Millstreet. Young students and people who have a Leap card cannot use their card to pay for travel between Millstreet and Cork Kent or Banteer and Cork Kent. They can only use their Leap card from Mallow. Essentially we are saying people cannot use their Leap card and, equally, there is no improvement to the service that only leaves Banteer at 8.25 a.m.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I will take up the remarks made by the Senator. I think she will agree with me that the Government has invested €940 million in the PSO and Local Link services for next year and that demonstrates the commitment of the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, and I, along with the Department of Transport, to a sustainable, equitable and accessible public transport network for all, irrespective of where people are from. The Government and the Department of Transport are fully committed to investing in public transport services for the improvement of our transport network, not just countrywide but also in Cork, while also maintaining the financial sustainability of the system in the long term.

The programme for Government is very much committed to rolling out contactless payment, and to keeping fares affordable and equitable. As I said, in the case of Cork that new through platform at Cork Kent Station represents a landmark change in the delivery of the Cork area commuter rail programme. It will also allow for greater frequency. This platform is the first element of the Cork area commuter rail programme. It will also have other effects in terms of Glounthaune, Midleton, etc.

I will raise the situation in Banteer with the NTA and Irish Rail. I am not familiar with the situation and if the Senator conducts a survey on the matter, I would be happy to convey the information on her behalf. Again, I thank the Senator for raising the matter this afternoon.

Energy Conservation

Senator Pauline Tully: Over two years ago a pilot programme called Retrofit Ready was launched. It covered the counties of Cavan, Monaghan, Sligo and Leitrim. The aim of the initiative was to bridge the knowledge gap among homeowners and communities who want to retrofit their homes. Two community retrofit champions were appointed, namely, Owen McConnon for Cavan and Monaghan and Luke Tarmey for Sligo and Leitrim. They became the faces of the project. They built up trust with communities and individuals to work with them through community events and one-to-one clinics providing information on retrofitting homes. They were seen as honest brokers because they were not selling or endorsing anything; they were just providing a service to make sure that people understood what was available. Older people in particular often were not aware of the programme and did not want to navigate these quite complex projects or applications for different projects and grants.

They organised a number of meet the builder events where they invited local contractors and suppliers to come to a community setting, set up their stalls and engage with the public to advise them about what was available, the costs and timelines and even the tradespeople who could deliver the works. Word of mouth spread, lots of people engaged and it was a successful project. Many people they met there were not aware that if you were in receipt of the fuel allowance, that meant you could apply for the warmer homes scheme. Some people did not even know that they qualified for the fuel allowance in the first place and by qualifying for that, they were able to access the warmer homes scheme but also the SEAI grants and everything that was available. They pointed out that while the warmer homes scheme is great, the waiting list is still quite long at a year and a half. It is something that we should look to invest in because there are a lot of older, colder houses out there and especially with the cost of energy rising on a continual basis, people would be willing to retrofit their homes. However, sometimes they are a bit worried about the process, how to fill out the application forms, who to engage with, etc., and this provided a great service to people there. I am conscious that we face significant penalties from the EU if we do not meet our climate targets in the next few years. If we could invest that money instead in schemes like this to get more people involved in retrofitting their homes, it would benefit us in the long run.

Hugh Wallace, the television personality and architect, attended the concluding conference of this scheme and he endorsed it and felt it was a worthwhile scheme. He had been involved in projects retrofitting of his own house, and he was in houses that are built of stone that we still cannot provide proper insulation for. There are lots of learnings to come from this project. Is there a plan to review this pilot project and roll it out on a permanent basis, not only in the four counties involved but across the nation because it would be worthwhile?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: With the Acting Chairperson's permission, as there is a vote in the Dáil, I will give the Senator an abbreviated answer. She makes a good point. There is merit in what she is proposing about an extension. She will get a copy of the prepared reply as well.

Since 2019, over €1.5 billion has been provided to homeowners for 228,350 home energy upgrades. As the Senator knows, the retrofit programme is a community-led home retrofit project funded by the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, on whose behalf I am taking this matter. It has been awarded almost €500,000 since it commenced in October 2022.

Retrofit Ready serves four counties, Monaghan, Sligo, Cavan and Leitrim, and is developing a community retrofit service which is allowing homeowners to navigate access to retrofit grant schemes. The point the Senator made is that there is a waiting time and we must make it easier for homeowners to be able to avail of this grant and the schemes. Many of us are conscious of the piece around retrofit champions, which the Senator referenced in her contribution, and fuel poverty and agreed to have awareness campaigns around that.

I will certainly convey to the Minister and the Department the Senator's concerns about the need to extend the scheme nationwide. Targets have been set at a national level in the climate action plan regarding the installation of heat pumps. Equally, there is a road to travel. We must ensure that, collaboratively and collectively, we make houses warmer, more comfortable and, as the Senator said, less expensive to heat given the rising costs.

I will bring the Senator's points back to the Minister. They are well made and are increasingly relevant today given the need for us as a Government but also as a society to adapt for climate change and to retrofit more houses.

Planning Issues

Senator Alison Comyn: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach agus an Aire Stáit. I thank the Minister of State for coming in to listen to this today.

As someone born and raised in Drogheda, I speak not only as a Senator here today but as a proud daughter of a place that has outgrown the soubriquet of Ireland's largest town and now needs to be made Ireland's next city. For far too long Drogheda has been spoken about as though it were still a provincial town on the edge of Dublin. That really does not reflect reality. It has a population in excess of 50,000, but combined with its natural hinterland in east Meath we are talking about a population of about 80,000. Drogheda is already larger than the city of Waterford and is close to overtaking Galway and Limerick within a decade based on current growth trends, yet it still does not have city status or a single local authority.

In 2014, during the Fine Gael-Labour Party coalition, Drogheda lost its borough council and, with it, meaningful local decision-making. That was a turning point. From that moment on, Drogheda began to grow rapidly but its ability to plan and manage that growth was taken away. We now find ourselves governed by two local authorities, Louth County Council and Meath County Council, from two distant towns. That division is failing the people I represent where I live. We are falling between the two proverbial stools because we have two councils and two development plans, but one urban population with no unified strategy. It is entirely unsustainable. The consequences are felt every day by people living there, by businesses and by workers. Parents cannot find school places for their children, not only at secondary school level but also increasingly at primary level. The young couples who are buying the many houses that we are building in new estates expect basic public transport, but buses are overcrowded and the rail service is beyond capacity. A second railway station, on the north side of the town, is now imperative. Workers commuting from Drogheda face daily gridlock on local roads that were never designed for the scale of development that we are now seeing in our town, which is soon to be a city. GP practices are full, waiting lists are growing, and sports clubs and community groups are squeezed to breaking point because facilities have not kept pace with population growth.

This is what happens when an area grows like a city but is governed like a small town. Despite this, Drogheda has not given up. In recent months, we have seen real progress. Millions of euro have been secured for town centre regeneration. The living city initiative has finally been extended to Drogheda to unlock the vital investment we need and to restore life into our heritage buildings, which I hope the Minister of State will see next month. The port access northern cross route is opening new potential for expansion and jobs on the north side. This is the vision in Drogheda. There is ambition and there is real momentum but we cannot deliver long-term progress while trapped in the wrong governance structure. If we are serious about balanced regional development, we must recognise that Drogheda's role is the future of this country. We stand on the Dublin-Belfast economic corridor, which is the most strategically important growth axis on this island. If Ireland is to develop sustainably, it needs strong cities beyond Dublin and Drogheda is poised to be one of those.

City status is not about prestige; it is about planning, proper investment and accountability. It needs a single authority with responsibility for housing, infrastructure, transport, education, planning and economic development. This means fair funding, including access to urban regeneration funding for schemes like the West Gate vision we have coming down the road. It means a governance model that matches the scale of the population it serves. Therefore, I am proposing that the Government establish a Drogheda city status task force to produce a road map to full city status within 12 months. It must be cross-departmental, must engage with both local authorities and must be driven by facts, not political hesitation. It is time to give Ireland's largest town the status, structure and support it needs. It is time to make Drogheda the country's next city.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan): I thank the Senator for the way she articulated the case for Drogheda to become a city. Clearly it is her home town - or city - and she is very proud of it. This came across incredibly well. She is proud of the progress that it has made but she has also identified some challenges which she sees city status as a key way of overcoming. I will outline the Department's position and rationale, as well as some opportunities for future discussions.

Project Ireland 2040 is the overarching planning and investment framework for the social, economic and cultural development of Ireland. The national planning framework, NPF, together with the 2021 national development plan, NDP, combine to form Project Ireland 2040. The NPF sets out a vision and strategy for the spatial development of Ireland to 2040. It recognises the strategic importance of Drogheda. It aims to support its development and its economic potential as part of the Dublin-Belfast corridor, which the Senator referenced, and, in particular, as part of the core Drogheda-Dundalk-Newry network. This strategy targets significant growth into the regional growth centres, including Drogheda, to enable them to act as regional drivers. The revised NPF was approved by Government and the Oireachtas in April 2025. This concluded the revision process and allows the revised NPF to take effect in the planning system. The NPF aims for a roughly 50:50 distribution of growth between the eastern and midland region, and the southern, northern and western regions combined, with 75% of the growth to take place outside of Dublin and its suburbs. The revised NPF retains the strategy approach to Drogheda in relation to its role as a regional driver. Drogheda's role is also reflected at a regional level in the regional, spatial and economic strategy for the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly area.

Local authority areas are specified in primary legislation. The Local Government Act 2001 currently provides for three cities, namely Cork, Dublin and Galway, and for each of these cities to have a city council. If an additional city council were to be established, it would have significant implications for the county in which the area concerned is situated, particularly around loss of functions of the relevant county council. Creation of a Drogheda city local authority would have a major impact on County Louth, leaving the county council with much reduced territorial jurisdiction, population and resources. This would be further complicated by the fact that the area being proposed for Drogheda to qualify as a city includes part of County Meath. For a city council to be established, provision will have to be made for this and other consequential matters in the relevant legislation. At the moment, there are no plans for legislation in this regard.

We need to be clear what exactly the Senator is looking for. I can see the complications in terms of a separate local authority for Drogheda and how it impacts County Louth and that local authority. I have seen a similar situation happen in County Cork where the city boundary expanded, and it had a detrimental impact on the county. However, there is precedence where city and county councils are merged, like in Limerick and Waterford. It is important that we learn from the experience there. Is it the local authority element of the city recognition that the Senator is looking for or is it the potential to give status to Drogheda, similar to Kilkenny city, which also has city status, but to keep working within Louth council local authority? There is potential for discussion on the future of Drogheda, and we might develop that further.

Senator Alison Comyn: I thank the Minister of State for that response, even if it is not exactly the one I was looking for. At the same time this is a wider discussion that needs to be had. We know that it will take legislation and the Minister of State mentioned some of the precedents with Limerick City and County Council and Cork City Council, and Dublin County Council being divided into the three local authorities of Fingal, South Dublin and Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown. There are examples. We are not looking for a precedent to be set, but at the same time we have a huge and burgeoning demographic. We are looking at 7,500 new houses, which brings 25,000 in new population to this area, and we do not have our own local governance. We are being governed from north of the county and from Navan, which is far away from east Meath and south Louth. We need to look, as the Minister of State mentioned, at a wider discussion of how this will be looked at going forward. The current situation cannot stand, and I noticed in the programme for Government that we are keen to get local government back on our books and maybe look at a borough council, town council, town manager or city manager for Drogheda.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: The Senator is right that the establishment of a local authority is primary legislation. However, the recognition of somewhere as a city is different. That has been done through charters and by different methods over the centuries. To back up the Senator's point, the CSO will define a city as having a population over 50,000. Drogheda ticks that box. Kilkenny only has a population of 27,000. My view is that there is definitely merit in the recognition of a city. I think the separate local authority creates far more complications. A local democracy task force is being established by the Minister, Deputy Browne. I assume that will look at things like bringing back town councils. The Senator correctly alluded to the fact that town councils were done away with. In my view that was a retrograde step for many of our towns, including my own town of Clonakilty. I assume the task force will look at that. Perhaps, Drogheda's status as a city could also be looked at in that process. It is certainly something I will bring to the senior Minister.

3 o'clock

Acting Chairperson (Senator Imelda Goldsboro): I welcome guests of Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh and members of the Straide Women's Group. I also welcome guests of former Deputy John Paul Phelan and of Deputy Matt Carthy. We hope they enjoy their visit.

National Monuments

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: I thank the Minister of State for coming to the Seanad today to respond to my Commencement Matter on the national monument at 14-17 Moore Street. The Minister of State may not be aware of this but I am growing very, very old in this job. I spent all of the previous Oireachtas asking his predecessors for updates on the national monument at 14-17 Moore Street and, before I spent those years in here doing that, I spent many years, or rather decades, pursuing local authorities, governments and the State generally to protect, restore and create at that national monument site a 1916 commemorative museum. The buildings at 14-17 Moore Street are the final meeting places of the leaders of the 1916 Rising. It was in No. 16 Moore Street that the decision was taken to make an unconditional surrender. Pádraig Pearse made that decision with his comrades in the rooms upstairs on Moore Street. The Minister of State has been there and I thank him because very early in his ministry, he took an interest and came down to inspect the buildings there. I want to acknowledge and congratulate those who have worked on those buildings. Conservation and archaeological work is painstaking. To us on the outside, it seems to progress at a glacial pace and we find that frustrating.

I grew up in that part of the city and, for me, Moore Street was always a very vibrant street. In fact, it was probably the most vibrant trading street in the city and so it genuinely breaks my heart to have witnessed the deterioration of commerce on the street over the last 20 years. It has now reached the point where, apart from Paddy Buckley, Stephen Troy and the few women traders who are left, the street has more or less died. Most of the street is actually in private ownership. The State designated 14-17 Moore Street as a national monument back in 2007. In 2015, after all of our campaigning, the State acquired 14-17 Moore Street from the private owners, which was a great step forward. It did so with the very clear intention to turn it into a 1916 commemorative museum. Since that time, Dublin City Council, the OPW, the Department of heritage and many others have been involved in, first of all, stabilising the buildings. They are fragile, 18th century, mid-terrace, three-storey residential units above shops. Various entities have stabilised, protected and conserved the buildings and carried out archaeological work on them. They found more than 4,000 artefacts on the site, according to the Department's website.

I know from being down there in the shells of the buildings, even as they are, that the history that will come to life when we have a 1916 commemorative centre is going to be incredible. It is going to be world class. I absolutely believe that because the concept that is being proposed by the State and the Department is one which is of an incredibly high value. It is one that will absolutely articulate the values of our State and of those who fought for our independence and freedom. I hope the Minister of State can update the Seanad on the progress that has been made to complete phase one, the conservation works and the protections, and most importantly on phase 2. I hope he can stand up and give us an indication of when works will commence and when we are likely to see a commemorative museum open.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran): I thank the Senator for raising this important matter concerning the future of the national monument at 14-17 Moore Street. These buildings are among the most significant surviving locations associated with the Easter Rising and are central to the State's ongoing commitment to commemorating and preserving our shared history.

As the Senator will be aware, the Government decided to accept the recommendations of the Moore Street advisory group and instructed the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the Office of Public Works to advance a project to conserve the national monument at 14-17 Moore Street and to open it as a visitor site commemorating the events of Easter Week 1916.

Since that Government decision, significant work has been undertaken to advance the project. A design team was appointed to lead the development of detailed proposals for the conservation of 14-17 Moore Street. The design has now progressed to a point where the major conservation and design decisions have been settled. An application for ministerial consent under the National Monuments Acts 1930 has recently been lodged and is currently under consideration. In parallel, interpretive designers have advanced the permanent exhibition to detailed design stage.

There is no statutory decision timeframe for ministerial consent beyond a specific two-week consultation period with the National Museum of Ireland. For programming purposes, the OPW has assumed a decision period of approximately eight weeks. At this point, it is not possible to give definitive start and completion dates for the full programme of works prior to the approval of ministerial consent and the completion of procurement. However, the Moore

Street project remains a Government priority, and subject to these statutory and procurement processes, it is anticipated that on-site progress will be made in 2026.

The OPW and the Department Housing, Local Government and Heritage continue to work closely to progress the project in line with Government direction and statutory requirements. Interim protective measures remain in place to protect the historic fabric while the necessary design, consent and procurement processes are completed.

The conservation and presentation of 14-17 Moore Street represent a major national heritage project. It will honour those who took part in the Rising and create a meaningful and enduring visitor experience of national and international importance. The Government remains fully committed to this project, and I thank the Senator for her ongoing engagement and support as we move closer to the delivery of this important commemorative centre.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: I welcome the news that a design team has been appointed and that major conservation design concepts have been developed. I really welcome the fact that this work is taking place in parallel with the application for ministerial consent. In his further reply, I would appreciate if the Minister of State could clarify if it is the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage who is required to give the consent for the works to the national monument. It is really welcome to hear it that we can anticipate that works will commence in 2026. We have been a long time waiting. I believe that the painstaking work has been incredibly valuable and will lead to a richer and more powerful exhibition when the work is actually completed.

I again thank the Minister of State for the update. He needs to keep the pressure on. We have waited a long time and we really want to see this realised not just for Moore Street and the relatives of the 1916 Rising. This is a national monument of national and international importance. The actions that those heroes took in 1916 sparked a trajectory for our Republic that we still enjoy today. Our independence, democracy and freedom came from that spot and it is really important that it is appropriately commemorated.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: I could not agree with the Senator more and it is the Minister who has only just gone out the door. While it has taken so long to get to where we are, we have moved a long way. As the Senator said at the outset, many different bodies and agencies have been involved to get to where we are. I have shown huge commitment to this project as has the Taoiseach. We visited the site to look at it at first-hand. The work being done at 14-17 Moore Street is phenomenal. It is painstaking and slow work that takes an awful lot of time, but next year when we get contractors on site, we will see it progress much faster. I remember Moore Street as it was when I first learned to drive a car. We still do nearly all of our shopping on Moore Street and to see it change so much, when I returned there only recently, frightens me in a sense. This project will enhance that whole part of the city and do an awful lot for tourism and the people of Dublin. While it is important for the whole country, it is particularly so for the people of Dublin who cherish this area, as do I and as does everybody in the House. We will work together going forward. I assure the Senator that, with my commitment as Minister of State for the Office of Public Works and that of my colleagues, we will fully progress the scheme.

Irish Blood Transfusion Service

Senator Linda Nelson Murray: It is my first time speaking to the Minister of State and I am delighted. I thank her for coming in to discuss the critical issue of blood donations.

Last week the Irish Blood Transfusion Service said it needed an extra 12,000 blood donations as most blood groups have fallen to under three days of stock. Without the selfless act of a person donating blood, the Irish health system will come to a halt. As the Minister of State knows, blood only lasts 35 days and supply is almost always dynamic. It became so critical last week that the Irish Blood Transfusion Service almost went into amber alert. That would mean that elective surgeries would not continue. I spoke to the Irish Blood Transfusion Service and, after last week's appeal, up to yesterday afternoon, it had 5.8 days' supply, but it aims to hold seven days. What it really needs is more new donors. Only 3% of the population donate blood, which I could not believe when I actually looked at the statistic. A total of 8% of those donors are O negative. The service needs younger, repeat donors, donors of African heritage and other ethnicities to ensure the national blood supply remains safe and sustainable. With all of this in mind, now is the time to appeal to younger donors, ensure there are clinics in every county, educate people on the importance of donation and perhaps allow employees time off to donate blood.

The average donor age in Ireland is age 46 years even though we can give blood from the age of 18. The maximum age is 65, but as we are all living longer lives, should this not be extended? When I did some research on this last week and, in fact, this morning, I saw that, although supplies were critical, we had no blood transfusion clinics in ten counties last week nor are there any in those counties for the last two weeks of October. When I had another look today, 15 counties out of 26 have no blood donation clinic for the last 11 days of October, including my own county of Meath. We are at a critical juncture and, in fact, five counties, among them Westmeath, Longford, Leitrim and Laois, have no clinics planned for November either. Are we investing enough or is it a manpower issue preventing us from running more clinics?

Similarly, education is key. Why are there not more donors? Why are we in a critical time? How can we reach underrepresented communities? We need to ensure materials are available in every language and that we appeal to religious groups and immigrant support centres. We need to educate people on the importance of blood donation and what they can do for their communities.

Blood is used in more than 70 hospitals across Ireland. Every week hundreds of patients in Ireland rely on blood transfusions for surgeries, cancer treatment and emergency care. Blood is also needed for women who have with complications while giving birth. The IBTS needs around 3,000 donations every week just to meet the demand in hospitals across the country.

I urge employers to perhaps allow employees time off to donate blood. They would need only two hours per year. The average time it takes to donate blood is only two hours. As I said, blood is used in 70 hospitals across Ireland. Every week hundreds of patients in Ireland rely on it. It is estimated that one in four people will require a blood transfusion at some stage in their lives, with 67% of all blood used to help support cancer patients. Every single day in Ireland, somebody’s life depends on the generosity of a blood donor.

The Irish Blood Transfusion Service has said it would welcome the Department of Health's support in continuing to promote blood donation awareness and in every way that enables it to meet its objectives. What can the Department do to help the Irish Blood Transfusion Service? Have we increased our investment in it? Can we increase our investment in how the message of the urgency of blood donation is communicated?

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): I thank the Senator for raising this important issue, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill. I have taken all of her concerns on board and I will definitely come back at the end on what she has brought up.

The Irish Blood Transfusion Service is a non-commercial State agency responsible for collecting, processing, testing and distributing blood and blood products in Ireland. It relies completely on the generosity of voluntary non-remunerated donors to provide sufficient donations to ensure a consistent supply of blood. The IBTS is funded by charging hospitals for the products and testing services it provides to support patient care. The product pricing is informed by an activity-based cost recovery model. As part of the annual IBTS budget process, prices for blood and blood products are agreed and approved annually by the Minister for Health. The IBTS anticipates an income of approximately €86 million for 2025, with total projected costs for 2025 of €86 million, which results in a balanced budget. The IBTS is adequately funded and has not sought an increase in price since 2023. The current blood appeal is not related to funding.

The IBTS endeavours to maintain five to seven days' stock of each blood group. To ensure this, the IBTS remains in constant communication with hospitals in relation to blood stock levels. The IBTS has robust emergency blood management plans and business continuity plans to manage the national blood stocks in times of blood shortages. Since 2019 Ireland has seen an increase in demand for red cells. Specifically, this demand reflects an increase in the number of patients in Ireland undergoing lifesaving treatments, including urgent surgery, chemotherapy, stem cell transplantation and red cell exchange transfusion, including additional blood requirements to support increased weekend patient treatment activity. In 2024 the IBTS issued the highest number of blood donation units to Irish hospitals in over a decade, at just under 128,500 units, and this exceptionally high demand has further increased during 2025. The IBTS operates within an establishment ceiling of 567 whole time equivalents. This includes 27 additional posts to support the increases in IBTS service delivery that were sanctioned in December 2024 by the Department of Health.

If the national blood supply falls below a certain level a number of steps are taken. The Senator mentioned the pre-amber alert, whereby the IBTS writes to hospitals regarding restricting issues of blood and asking hospitals to reduce their stock holding. This allows the IBTS to more effectively allocate the national supply of blood. The Minister for Health will be alerted if the alert status changes to amber. An amber alert means that elective surgeries requiring donor blood support are cancelled and hospitals are advised to reduce blood usage under the national transfusion advisory group red cell and platelet shortage plans. The IBTS has never issued an amber alert and every effort is made to ensure this continues.

On 15 October, the IBTS issued an appeal for immediate public and donor support to collect more than 12,000 blood donations over the next four weeks to help boost the national blood supply, as current supplies are under three days across most blood groups. This is an issue and I acknowledge the Senator's concerns about this. The IBTS has robust blood shortage mitigations, which include optimising attendance at clinics, increased media and social media, additional targeted text messaging of donors, running multiple additional clinics and having longer opening hours. To support increased collections in response to the appeal, additional Sunday clinics were offered on Sunday 19 October at D'Olier Street in Dublin, St. Finbarr's Hospital in Cork, Dunboyne in Meath, and Waterford city. These additional Sunday clinics collected an additional 0.7 day's supply overall. I will come back to the Senator with the rest of the reply.

Senator Linda Nelson Murray: The Minister of State said that the IBTS has not looked for extra funding since 2023. There is still a problem in the sense that we went to a critically low level last week. I raised this last week and I ended up doing an interview on the radio and issuing a press release. Since then three people signed up, including some colleagues. That was just because of me coming out and talking about it.

We definitely need to look at the age. Why is the average age 46 if people can donate from the age of 18? Should we look at increasing the age limit above 65? We need to educate people on how one donation can save up to three lives; it is key. We need to have more clinics. Right now, 15 counties do not have clinics for the next 15 days, yet we are critically low on blood. Something is not adding up.

I will give examples of the type of text messages I received after donating blood:

> Linda, thank you for donating blood in Trim. Donations made have helped patients throughout the country.

Another one said:

> Linda, thank you for donating blood. Your donation has just been issued to Tallaght hospital.

Another said:

> Thank you for donating blood. It has been issued to Clonmel.

I always believe that giving a present is much nicer than receiving one. There is nothing better than giving blood and getting a message like those that lets you know you have impacted on someone's life and perhaps saved them.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I totally agree with the Senator. The increase in demand is driven in part by the success of the recent investment in expanding the surgical and health system capacity by delivering better access to care for people. To ensure this demand is met, donor attendance figures are up by 10,283 in the year to date. This is an increase of 8.9% on target. There has been an increase. With the increase in donor recruitment drives, some 11,291 first-time donors were recruited in 2023. This number rose to 11,351 in 2024. I will bring up the Senator's concerns. I also want to express my gratitude to all blood donors who turn up, roll up their sleeves and help us maintain the blood supply, particularly following the IBTS's appeal.

I encourage anyone who is able to donate. They can register their interest at *giveblood.ie* where they will also find clinic allocations, opening hours and all the other details. The IBTS's number is 1800 731137. I will raise the Senator's concerns about the average age of donors being 46 and the number of counties without an upcoming clinic. It definitely something we need to look into.

I assure the Senator that her issues will go back to the Minister for Health. It is such an important service that saves lives. I thank her for raising such a serious issue.

Road Projects

Senator Mike Kennelly: I welcome the Minister to the Seanad. It is my first time speaking to him on a Commencement matter. I raise the issue of funding for local improvement schemes, LIS. The LIS, as it is commonly known in all local authorities, is essential for maintaining private roads that serve multiple homes, farms and rural businesses. These roads are often the only access routes for families and communities. Their upkeep is vital for everyone's safety, connectivity and rural development.

Across the country, county councils are working hard to meet the growing demand under the LIS programme but the funding available falls short of what is needed. For example, 580 roads are currently on the waiting list for repair in County Kerry. The Kerry County Council, in accordance with its actual capacity, which means what it can achieve, requested €5 million to address this backlog but received just €2.2 million, less than half of what was sought. To its credit, the council expects to complete up to 38 roads in the current year, which is very welcome. However, the scale of the backlog remains very significant and many communities will continue to wait, despite having met the criteria and being willing to contribute their share. In reality, the roads have gone beyond repair in many cases, and waiting for years ultimately has a telling effect.

Kerry has the largest number of local roads in the country under the LIS, and that is one victory in Kerry we are not happy with. Let me put the matter into perspective. When the scheme opened in 2018, 804 applications came in, of which 737 were added to the priority list for completion. Kerry County Council has 580 roads remaining, with 137 done since the scheme began. At this rate, the last road on the list will not be completed for 15 years, and as a result some of the people in the affected communities will not live to see the works on their roads completed.

Kerry County Council has indicated in recent application requests to the Department that an additional €5 million per annum is what is realistically needed to complete the roads projects on target in a calendar year. I urge the Minister to support me and the residents on the roads with extra funding of €5 million per annum for Kerry. This will have to be addressed across the country in addition to Kerry.

We got €2.2 million in Kerry County Council. If that were increased – allowing for a doubling of the number of roads completed in a year, which will be 38 this year – we would start to eat into the backlog.

We need to put plans in place to review the whole current funding model for the LIS nationally. Can consideration be given to counties with particularly high demand, such as

Kerry, the county I represent? Might additional resources be available to help councils to clear these backlogs more effectively? It is hard to digest a waiting period of 15 years. I appreciate the Department’s ongoing support for rural communities and rural development and the Minister's role in this regard, but today I urge that additional funding be put aside for the LIS, not just for Kerry, where I am proud to be from, but also for the rest of the country.

Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Dara Calleary): I thank Senator Kennelly for raising this issue. As he knows, the LIS is a programme for improvement works on small private or non-public roads in rural areas that are not normally maintained by local authorities. The scheme is funded by my Department but administered through the local authorities. It is important to note that the focus of the scheme is supporting the continued improvement of non-public rural roads and laneways that would not normally be regularly maintained by local authorities. As we both agree, these roads are vital pieces of infrastructure for rural residents. The scheme was reintroduced in 2017, and since then the Government has allocated almost €184 million allocated to local authorities.

The programme for Government commits to the provision of additional funding for the LIS. Last August, I was delighted to be able to provide an additional round of funding to local authorities for 2025. It was almost double the previous allocation committed. It saw the 2025 budget increase to €30 million. As the Senator has said, Kerry County Council was given €1.2 million in additional funding, bringing the total funding for Kerry in 2025 to over €2.2 million. The council has confirmed that it is utilising this funding to make good approximately 38 roads in the county this year.

Since 2017, Kerry has been allocated some €11.6 million in LIS funding. I am committed to ensuring the scheme continues to be well funded in the coming years. As part of budget 2026, my Department has received €17 million in LIS funding for the scheme next year. This represents an increase on the base funding announced in recent years.

While my Department provides funding for the scheme, it is administered by local authorities. They are responsible for managing the waiting lists and scheme applications and for determining the eligibility of roads. My officials are engaging closely with Kerry County Council.

While in previous years, a small number of local authorities, not including Kerry, did not spend their full allocations and returned the money, I have insisted to colleagues in local government that this must not happen again. To try to limit this happening and to maximise works completed, my Department officials are engaging with each local authority to understand where full spending may not occur and the potential to redistribute funds to local authorities that will be in a position to utilise them.

I assure the Senator his suggestion in relation to that is something I will keep very much alive. This is a very important scheme. I have made it a priority in the Department since my appointment in January. The officials in the Department know this is a priority for me. The money we were able to allocate in August was money that resulted in savings from other schemes within the Department. I was determined to ensure this money would be invested in the LIS. I continue to keep the scheme under review and to support the counties that spend the money efficiently and on time and do not return LIS funds to the Department.

Senator Mike Kennelly: I thank the Minister. That is fantastic. His last few words were that it is under review and that local authorities should spend it efficiently. When we see 580 roads on the local improvement list in Kerry, it is very unfortunate and disappointing that some authorities are not even taking up their allocation. I propose that if moneys are not taken up this year as well, that funding should be extended to other counties like Kerry to catch up on the backlog. I would like the Minister to do his best to keep it under review. If we can locate more funding going forward, it would be very welcome indeed.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Absolutely. I assure the Senator of my commitment to the LIS. I am engaging with officials on it. There are disparities in the funding per km across local authorities and I want to get a national standard on that. If we get a national standard, that will result in more roads being done in the counties that are delivering. I am also looking at the level of expenditure. Sometimes we gold-plate roads, as it were, when that is not necessary. We need to give a workable surface that people can travel on; we do not need gold-plating. If we can come to an agreement on the standard that is safe and efficient but not gold-plated, we will cover an awful lot more roads and give people a lot more access to their homes, farms and property.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 3.33 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 4.02 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 3.33 p.m. and resumed at 4.02 p.m.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

Senator Seán Kyne: The Order of Business is No. 1, motion regarding the appointment of members to the Seanad Select Committee on EU Scrutiny and Transparency, to be taken on the conclusion of the Order of Business without debate; No. 2, motion regarding the proposed approval by Seanad Éireann of the Planning and Development (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) Regulations 2025, back from committee, to be taken on the conclusion of No. 1, without debate; No. 3, statements on higher education, to be taken at 5 p.m. and to conclude at 6.30 p.m., if not previously concluded, with the time allocated to the opening remarks of the Minister not to exceed ten minutes, group spokespersons not to exceed eight minutes each, all other Senators not to exceed five minutes each, time may be shared, and the Minister to be given not less than ten minutes to reply to the debate; No. 53(2) Private Members' business, motion regarding the cost of childcare, to be taken at 6.30 p.m., with the time allocated to this debate not to exceed two hours; and No. 4, Housing Finance Agency (Amendment) Bill 2025 - Second Stage, to be taken on the conclusion of No. 53(2) and to conclude after two and a half hours, if not previously concluded, with the time allocated to the opening remarks of the Minister not to exceed ten minutes, group spokespersons not to exceed ten minutes each, all other Senators not to exceed five minutes each, time may be shared, and the Minister to be given not less than ten minutes to reply to the debate.

Visit of Czech Delegation

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call the next speaker, I welcome my friend, the ambassador from the Czech Republic, Pavel Vošalík. He is most welcome to Seanad Éireann today. In October of each year, the Czech Republic celebrates its independence day. It was in 1918 that an independent Czechoslovakia was declared in Prague. As we all know, many countries got their independence on foot of the end of the First World War. Ireland, curiously enough, was the only country of a winning power to gain any level of independence after the First World War. The Czechoslovakian republic was one of those who became an independent state as a result and in 1929 established a consulate here in Dublin. With the communist takeover following the Second World War, relations between Ireland and Czechoslovakia changed somewhat but we were delighted to see the re-establishment of an embassy here in 1993, and the Irish Republic established an embassy in Prague two years later.

We share a common interest in the European Union. We thank the Czech Republic for its support for Ireland during the Brexit negotiations. Even though they feel like a lifetime ago now, we are still working our way through them. We will work closely together during our Presidency of the European Union next year. In this week of presidential elections, we are delighted to have a statue of a former President of the Czech Republic, Václav Havel, in Leinster House. Ireland and the United States share the distinction of having a statue of the President of the Czech Republic in their legislative assemblies. This October, on behalf of the Seanad and the people of Ireland, we wish the ambassador a happy independence day. I thank him for being here in Seanad Éireann today.

An tOrd Gnó (Atógáil) - Order of Business (Resumed)

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I thank the Leader for being here today. I am going to raise an issue relating to an event that both he and I attended recently in Galway at Croí House. We met with Dr. Niamh Hannon and members of the Croí House about the future of cardiovascular health in Ireland. It was a very informative session that we attended. Among those present were some as young as 22 years of age who have had a stroke. Family members were also there and we heard about the impact on people's lives when somebody has a heart attack or stroke. Clinicians were also present.

What people might not be aware of is that there are 7,500 strokes every year in Ireland and 6,500 heart attacks. Out of that, the minimum stay in hospital for any one of those people is five days. The cost for five days for the 7,500 stroke patients is €35 million. If they spend a full week in hospital, the cost is €52 million.

The emergency department in Galway has one to two admissions a day that are related to either heart or stroke. The Croí foundation spoke of the need to create a national plan to promote cardiovascular health and reduce the burden of cardiovascular disease, with a major focus on prevention. A national strategy needs to be in place by 2025, with a review and evaluation taking place.

It was amazing to learn also that at the moment in Ireland, 30,000 people are living with the consequences of stroke and 90,000 people are living with the consequences of a heart attack. All those people need access to primary care for physiotherapy, occupational therapy or speech and language therapy - proper rehabilitation to get back to the full functionality they previously had.

There is no doubt there is a need for a strategy and joined-up thinking on it, but there is also a need for a conversation as to where we are going. Given that we are spending more than €104 million between the two diseases, awareness, prevention and education have a role to play. That is the case in particular for the signs and symptoms for heart attacks in women. I was not aware of all of these. Aside from a heaviness or tightness in the chest, there is fatigue - which we always put down to work - indigestion, shortness of breath, pain in the back, nausea, light-headedness, discomfort in the neck or jaw and sweating. It is not always just a pain in one's chest.

Senator Gareth Scahill: In a totally unrelated way, I too want to raise the work of Croí here today. I was not at the information session Senator Rabbitte attended last week, but on Friday last I was involved in the first Croí 5 km run-walk held outside Galway as a fundraiser. The organisation's major fundraiser, which supported all the amazing work Senator Rabbitte spoke about, took place last Friday night in Salthill. We ran the first one to be held outside of Galway in County Roscommon and it was the first such event to be held there. As Senator Rabbitte said, Croí's mission is to prevent heart disease and strokes, save lives and empower and support families, communities and future generations to take control of their health and well-being.

I highlight this particular event because events like these do not just happen overnight. Generally, someone has an idea. Some family member, neighbour or friend has experienced the support, help and assistance of an organisation such as Croí. I acknowledge the volunteers in County Roscommon, and in Castlerea specifically, who arranged this event last Friday night at 8 p.m. Susan Gaynor, Yvonne Ryan, Breege Callahan, Nial Tully and I formed the initial committee. I also wish to highlight that the transition year students of Castlerea Community School came on board. In organising a night-time event, they got involved in organising something they did not know much about, including health and safety, promotion and fund-raising. They took ownership of it, engaged and delivered what everyone who attended last Friday night agreed was a safe, engaging and very enjoyable evening. We are already talking about making this an annual event to support everything Senator Rabbitte just said about the delivery from Croí.

Senator Nelson Murray spoke earlier about the shortage of blood stocks in Ireland now and called for a debate on this matter. Effectively, the Senator was calling for more education on this matter. We need the very same discussion in relation to Croí and the work the organisation does to prevent heart disease and strokes. It would be very useful if a debate in this regard could be facilitated.

Senator Tom Clonan: I raise the difference between political ambition and political entitlement. It has come very much to the fore during this presidential campaign. Ambition is when you are not happy with the state of affairs and the *status quo* and not happy with your role and status in life. To change that situation, though, you put the work in. We have seen two candidates who have put considerable work in over the past number of weeks. It is a bruising contest. Entitlement, then, is when someone is not happy with the *status quo*, but it is everyone else's fault. During this presidential election campaign, unfortunately, we have seen a growing number of voices and a clamour for those who feel that somehow they should be entitled to be on the ballot without having actually done the work. Those voices, with their growing anger, discontent and disrespect for our democratic processes, are now asking us to spoil the vote. I find that reprehensible and unacceptable. I will tell the House why.

Today, I hosted a group of disabled citizens in Buswells Hotel who are advocating for their role and status in society. Some of them have to be lifted out of bed in the morning, hoisted, toileted and dressed, yet they got in here to make their point in a respectful manner. In The Helix in DCU last week, we had dozens of disabled citizens and carers. Despite the enormous challenges they face, they came in to participate in our democratic process. Now, I do not agree with many of the positions put forward by some of the candidates but I respect each and every one of them and I wish them well in this contest. I noticed last night on Virgin Media how tired Heather Humphreys looked and I have seen over the last couple of weeks how tired Deputy Catherine Connolly is. There is a cohort of would-be candidates here, though, who did not put in the footwork and did not canvass sufficiently to get their signatures. We all know, every single one of us, including the Cathaoirleach and the Leader, that the calculus of numbers is harsh. If you do not have the numbers then you do not get to sit on this seat. You do not get to represent the people who put us here. There is a growing authoritarian and coercive voice in Irish society, which transplants onto the right, that is demanding that we subvert our democratic processes and that is demanding that we spoil the vote. After this presidential election, whatever the outcome, I would like to see a debate in this Chamber about the language and the vocabulary that we need to mobilise to protect these Houses and our democratic processes.

Senator Shane Curley: I want to raise the issue of vital funding to support Team Ireland in the World Butchers' Challenge, a global stage where butchers showcase excellence, creativity and community spirit. It is a thrilling three-hour competition where butchers push the boundaries of craft and innovation. The competition fosters international collaboration, business opportunities and elevates the butcher profession.

The Associated Craft Butchers of Ireland, ACBI, craft butchery apprenticeship, which was established in 2016 is a QQI level 5 two-year programme. It is 86% on-the-job training and 14% classroom training, which is a really good blend that brings real-life experience to the fore. The apprenticeship is helping reverse the decline in the butcher education and skills situation in this country. By way of background, the number of butcher shops has declined by 65% over 30 years and only about 500 independent shops remain, which is a concerning statistic.

The Irish team that competes in the butchers' challenge championship trains most weekends in James Murphy's butcher shop in Carlow completely for free. He has offered them the venue completely for free to allow them to train. They urgently need a venue in the midlands but costs are prohibitive. It cannot be a situation that someone from north-west Donegal travels to Carlow every weekend to train if they get picked for the Ireland team, and that is a logistical challenge we need to discuss.

For context, the Irish team operates on roughly a sixth of the average budget of other nations. Germany invests €250,000 in its team, Australia the equivalent of €300,000, and France €1 million. Ireland is stuck on a budget of €45,000 on an annual basis. Therefore, I urge the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment to, one, provide the funding for the rental of venues or support host shops with electricity credits or something to that effect, and two, recognise the value these butchers bring to Ireland's reputation around the world and to our economy, and to invest more heavily in the competition itself for the participants.

As an infamous Waterford butcher said, the small corner shop is the heart of the Irish community, so let us support our butchers who are the fabric of Irish life and give Team Ireland the backing they deserve to shine on the world stage.

Senator Evanne Ní Chuilinn: I take this opportunity to congratulate Pico Lopes, who is originally from Crumlin. He plays centre back for Shamrock Rovers in the League of Ireland, has played in the League of Ireland for a long number of years and, due to his father's patronage, is now playing for Cape Verde and will go to the World Cup, which we learned last week. It is an amazing opportunity. He is quoted in the *Dublin Gazette* today as saying he is the luckiest man in the world. He is; he is very lucky, but he also became a father on Friday afternoon. At 4.30 p.m. his partner, Leah O'Shaughnessy, who is a teacher in Tallaght, went in for a routine check and ended up having a little baby boy called Diego Lopes, so I congratulate the Lopes family.

I realised on my walk down to the local park run, which I do every Saturday, that I know Pico's mother very well but I did not know that Pico was her son. I was very embarrassed that I had not made that connection. Judy Lopes is a secretary in the Loreto junior school in Crumlin and she does great work. I stood on the picket line with her very recently and still did not know she was Pico's mother. Judy was looking forward on Saturday to getting little baby Diego back for Sunday dinner, so I hope that they did. I congratulate Crumlin's Pico Lopes, wish him the very best of luck at the World Cup, and, of course, welcome baby Diego to the family.

Senator Sharon Keogan: I rise with a heavy heart to address two tragedies that have taken place in our nation over the past week. A young man fled war in Ukraine and, within four days, was murdered with unspeakable brutality in Ireland. A girl ran away from a Tusla centre and is, allegedly, raped. What do these two tragedies have in common? They were entirely preventable. They highlight two areas in which our nation has failed totally, utterly and objectively: migration and child safety. What is utterly condemning is that this Government has now received years of warning in both of these areas. For years, I have been trying to raise the issue of children who go missing from Tusla and, for years, communities have raised their fears about the presence of IPA centres in communities such as Citywest, where the rape took place. The response has been silence and denial. Let us look at Tusla's own statement. First off, it declines to mention how long the victim was missing from care. Second, it points out that the poor girl in question had significant behavioural issues, as if that would be any excuse for what has happened to her. How dare they.

We seem to have no idea how many children are missing from Tusla care nor how long they have been missing. Likewise, we seem to have no idea who we are letting into this country and how long they are staying and where. When a real refugee from a warzone comes to our country, we put them in a room to be stabbed 100 times, and if they try to run away to the streets, they are raped.

We now live in a nation where children are not safe under Tusla care and they are not safe outside of it either. Any government with any sense of decency would resign en masse of such outrages but I will not hold my breath in this Chamber for that to happen.

Senator Alison Comyn: If you will indulge me, I will use my time to pay tribute to a member of the Fianna Fáil family in County Louth who we lost in recent weeks. It was only at the end of September that I paid tribute to the late Kevin Geraghty, a real stalwart of Fianna Fáil in Collon in County Louth, and yet only two short weeks later, his family lost his beloved wife, Maura. They were a coalition for 62 years. She was in her 85th year. It is a great loss, unfortunately, to the Geraghty family. They had their own little cumann; they had seven children. Between the two of them, they raised some fine Fianna Fáil members.

Maura was also a strong member of the local community. She did not only make the sandwiches. I am told that she could have been a TD if she had put her mind to it but she was busy with seven children, and now many grandchildren. She also took time to be the secretary of the local tennis club, and also president of the ICA, so she really was part of the fabric of Collon and life in County Louth.

I offer my deepest condolences to Ciaran, Orla, Aileen, Dara, Fergal, Oisín and Dónal. Maura and Kevin will both be greatly missed. I hope both their gentle souls rest in peace.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: Before the month is out, I want to acknowledge and thank everybody who has been involved with the National Breast Cancer Research Institute in funding raising for breast cancer research in the month of October. Many of us have supported their efforts right around the country. It is incredibly important work that they do. Cancer research is incredibly important. It supports greater survivability, early detection, greater research, reduction in the side effects of the treatments and overall contributes to better health outcomes. I encourage everybody to continue to support them, not only in October but throughout the year, because breast cancer is still the most common cancer among women worldwide. One in seven women will be diagnosed with breast cancer in her lifetime. Survival rates have increased because research has improved. Where research and effort are put into health outcomes, it yields results for women and their families. I commend everybody who is involved in that work, thank everybody who has supported their work and fundraising efforts and ask everybody to continue to do that after the month has elapsed.

Senator Chris Andrews: As a Shamrock Rovers supporter, I support Senator Ní Chuilinn's congratulations to Pico Lopes. Let us hope he does the league and cup double this year and adds to his great year qualifying for the World Cup.

The Government is going to miss its social and affordable housing targets this year. There is too much red tape holding back councils and approved housing bodies. This is why house prices, rents and homelessness keep rising. Three and a half thousand new homes are due to be built - it could be 3,800 new homes - on the Irish Glass Bottle site over the next ten years and only 300 of those will be public homes. It was recently announced that 57 public homes will be acquired by Dublin City Council in the first phase of the development of the Irish Glass Bottle site. Of course, this is very welcome for the 57 people who will secure a new home on that site. However, the Ringsend and Pearse Street communities deserve better and they deserve more than a meagre 300 units out of the 3,800 new homes planned for the Irish Glass Bottle site. There is a drastic shortage of public and affordable housing in the Ringsend and Pearse Street areas. Too often developers are allowed to undermine and circumvent their Part V obligations in order to further line their pockets, with the State failing to fight for the best interests of working class communities. Residents in Ringsend and Irishtown have fought for the last decade to ensure this site will include public and affordable housing and it is important that the local community not be ignored and sidelined. The Irish Glass Bottle site has the potential to completely change the character of the area and it is vital that this development proceed in a way that adds to the community rather than replaces or displaces it. There is a real concern that development of facilities and services will not match the increase in population. Cambridge Football Club is experiencing that issue. It is already struggling to find enough space to cater for the ever-increasing number of young boys and girls playing football. Dublin City Council is unable to support them with resources. The council needs to plan ahead for the increased number of children that will be in the expanded community and the Government needs to support the council in doing this and support clubs like Cambridge.

The long delay of the delivery of the Luas is another huge concern. The Irish Glass Bottle site is only accessible off the Sean Moore Road, one road, and that is already like a car park for hours each morning and evening. Residents in the new houses take their lives in their hands trying to exit their estate because of the poor planning on this road. The delivery of the Luas is really important. It was promised and then withdrawn. It is really important to new and existing residents of Ringsend and the Irish Glass Bottle site. People across Dublin, particularly the south inner city, have been deprived of access to adequate housing for generations. This offers a real opportunity and the Government is not taking it.

Senator Tom Clonan: Well said.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: Yesterday marked the 18th anniversary of the murder of 21-year-old Paul Quinn near Oram in County Monaghan. This young man from Cullyhanna in County Armagh was murdered after being lured to a shed by a number of men. He suffered a horrible, violent death and the perpetrators showed no mercy. Up to ten individuals were involved in beating him with iron and nail-studded bars for upwards of 30 minutes. He was a 21-year-old lad and they broke every single bone in his body. His mother Breege, father Stephen and the extended Quinn family are appealing for information and begging for answers. Breege Quinn has said there is “no justice, no convictions, no accountability” and that “the silence is unbearable.”

In the course of the investigation, 23 people have been arrested, including 14 people by the Garda and nine by the PSNI. The Garda and the PSNI are continuing their investigations. However, Breege Quinn and the Quinn family know there are people in the community who have information and have not yet come forward. Yesterday, the Quinn family renewed that appeal for anybody with information to please come forward and pass that information on to Castleblayney Garda station or any Garda station or to the confidential Garda telephone line, 1800 666 111. I echo the appeal from the Quinn family and the Garda for anyone with any information, no matter how small or insignificant they may feel it is, to please come forward.

Senator Dee Ryan: I raise the issue of policing in Limerick city centre. Just this morning, I spoke to a number of prominent retailers who had a meeting last night with our chief superintendent, Derek Smart, on this issue. We have seen a growth in instances of antisocial behaviour, which we believe is putting people off coming into the city centre and supporting local businesses, and a huge increase in the amount of theft happening in stores across the city centre. While An Garda Síochána is co-operating well with the business owners, we really need more support. I acknowledge the announcement yesterday by the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, that there have been over 11,000 applications to join An Garda Síochána this year. It is welcome news. The Minister introduced a second application process this year, which is an example of his commitment to increasing the numbers of gardaí available in our communities to help our citizens to feel safe. In the meantime, while we are waiting for Garda numbers to increase, we should be enjoying the benefits of an excellent initiative that began in 2023 when community engagement vans were put into use across the country. I have had positive feedback on them from retailers and business owners in Limerick. However, as I understand it, there is just one community engagement van available to cover counties Tipperary and Limerick. I invite the Minister to the House to discuss the success of these initiatives across the country, and to ask specifically if we can have one permanently based in Limerick city.

Senator Joe Conway: I join the Cathaoirleach in welcoming the ambassador from the Czech Republic. I was in his lovely country on one occasion in 1999. It was a bittersweet occasion for me because while I was there, on 2 July 1999, we lost a Dauphin helicopter in the sand dunes in Tramore, County Waterford, with the loss of the four Air Corps members on board. That gives me an easy segue into what I want to talk about. That helicopter was based in Waterford Airport, which has had a difficult existence for the past 40 years. Not many people know that Waterford Airport was the airport from where the first Ryanair flight took off, but the success pattern of Ryanair and Waterford Airport could not be more of a contrast. However, I am glad to tell the House that yesterday afternoon the members of Waterford City and County Council voted, almost unanimously, to conjoin with an American private enterprise consortium to develop the airport fully to accommodate big jet planes to land there. They hope to have the project finished by 2027. I commend the councillors because there was a certain amount of opposition to giving away some sections of land. They really put their courage to the sticking place yesterday and I commend them on that. We will not be here on Saturday, but we should congratulate the international airport in Knock on a successful first 40 years. As it progresses towards its 1 millionth passenger the naysayers, like the naysayers in Waterford, have been confounded. It is a great success story and I hope the same will follow for Waterford as well.

An Cathaoirleach: I hope you have a Monsignor Horan there as well.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: Before Ireland joined the EU, emigration was a defining part of the Irish identity. Over 10 million Irish people, more than the current population of Ireland, have left this island since 1800, driven by famine, poverty and lack of opportunity. Irish emigrants have flooded into Britain, America, Australia and beyond. They were not always welcome. Irish people were once thrown out of pubs, denied jobs and mocked with signs like, "No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs." That particularly applied in Britain. Irish emigrants were stereotyped as violent and lazy. In America they were treated as second-class citizens for decades. Yet today some in Ireland are quick to blame immigrants for housing shortages, job competition or cultural change. It is a bitter irony that a nation built on emigration now turns its back on migration. EU integration brought prosperity, but it also brought amnesia. We forget what it felt like to be outsiders, to be judged and to be blamed. Ireland must remember the wind that once blew against us now blows towards us and how we treat others in that wind defines who we are. Chickens do not soar by blaming the wind. Blame does not lift you; it keeps you grounded. Why do some in Ireland seem so quick to chase the wind blowing from Britain and America? Is it loyalty, habit or just the comfort of familiar gusts? Have they not learned by now that real sovereignty is not found in borrowing breezes but in learning to read the sky and fly your own course. The takeaway for today is that if you want to fly, stop blaming the wind and start building wings.

We hear today about an assault on a ten-year-old girl. Despite thousands of rape reports annually, there is no public breakdown by nationality of perpetrators. Why is this data missing? Who benefits from the silence? Transparency is not optional; it is the foundation of justice. Data drives policy and, without clear statistics on rape incidence by nationality, Ireland risks politicising speculation and public mistrust. Survivors deserve better. Citizens deserve facts. Let us push for reasonable transparency. A total of 6,683 women reported being raped in the past ten years. It is time to have a breakdown by nationality and stop always blaming those who are immigrants to our country.

Senator Aubrey McCarthy: I also welcome ambassador Pavel Vošalík to the House. He is a marvellous representative of his country and it is wonderful to have him here.

As the winter comes in and the nights get darker, I am seriously uneasy and frustrated regarding the worsening homelessness situation in our country. The most recent figures released by the Department of housing are not just numbers on a spreadsheet. I am involved with the homeless services on Pearse Street and we see individuals every night of the week there. Over 16,000 of our fellow citizens are now on the emergency homeless list and 5,100 of them are children. We have crossed that awful threshold of 5,000 homeless children for the first time. To me, these are not statistics because I know the families. Imagine there are entire classrooms of children without a place to call home.

In the past year alone the number of people in emergency accommodation has increased by 13%. Behind those figures are nearly 2,400 families, about 2,000 young adults and around 252 people of pension age. People who once paid rent, raised families and contributed all the way in their communities are now finding themselves in emergency accommodation and basically living in limbo. As the winter comes in and it gets colder, we are meeting people who are in quiet despair. They are not faceless figures in a report. They are our neighbours, daughters and people in our communities. As Focus Ireland and the Simon Community have said, housing is not just about bricks and mortar. We need wraparound services, supported housing and mental health care and those in addiction need extra supports. Otherwise, we are simply moving people from one crisis to another.

I ask that emergency measures be introduced. In the Lighthouse, for example, every time there is a storm or snow, we have to roll out new initiatives. I am saying let us plan ahead for those initiatives. It is not about politics but about compassion. It is time for the half measures to be addressed.

Senator Martin Conway: I call on the Leader to organise a debate on people with disabilities being active, particularly in sport. We have a very proud tradition in this country and a very proud Special Olympics team which does fantastic work in representing us abroad. Equally, our Paralympians do fantastic work representing us abroad and have had many achievements for which I commend them. There are thousands of people with disabilities who do not fall into either category, however. They deserve support to be active. I commend the various sports governing bodies that have programmes that enable people with physical disabilities to be active within their sports. I commend Active Disability Ireland on the work it does with the various Government bodies to promote active physical activity for people with disabilities. However, much more can be done. A number of years ago I pointed out that part of the criteria for the sports capital grant funding should be a declaration and an explanation as to how the facilities are encouraging and promoting people with disabilities and creating access for people with disabilities to their facilities. I am not sure that has happened to the degree that one would have hoped. Therefore we need to do a stress test on the sports capital grants programme to see what more can be done in a positive way to make sure that the over 10% of our population with a disability can be as active as they physically should be and that State is providing support to them in the same way as it is providing support to other people involved in sport. It would be very welcome to have an overall debate with the Minister for sport on what is being done to make sport accessible.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: Last week a 17-year-old Ukrainian boy was stabbed to death in an apartment run by a private contractor on behalf of Tusla. This apartment housed four teenage boys. Two of these boys, alongside a female care worker, desperately tried to intervene.

An Cathaoirleach: I will allow the Senator extra time. I know many Members have raised issues of ongoing investigations that will lead to criminal procedures. I want the Senator to be very careful that she does not prejudice any criminal case against anybody by saying anything that would make that criminal case unprosecutable. I want her to be careful when using language. She is entitled to use any language she wants but she must be conscious.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: I understand that. Anything I have to say is in the public domain.

An Cathaoirleach: I am aware it is in the public domain. However, the Senator has a right to say things here that are not allowed to be said in the public domain and do not get put in the newspapers. What she might say here can be put in the newspapers regardless of any rules in relation to other people. I just want her to be aware of it. All Senators are aware of the Standing Orders. I just want the Senator to be careful.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: Last week a 17-year-old Ukrainian boy was stabbed to death in an apartment run by a private contractor on behalf of Tusla. This apartment housed four teenage boys. Two of these boys, alongside a female care worker, desperately tried to intervene in this horrific attack. I cannot begin to imagine the grief felt by his family. Their child lost his life when he was supposed to be safe in the care of our State.

Yesterday the news broke of a young girl only ten years old who was allegedly raped by a man who had no legal right to remain in this State, a man who had been here for six years as an asylum seeker before being served with a deportation order earlier this year. This child was also in the care of Tusla. In a statement put out yesterday evening, Tusla described how the girl absconded from its care while on a trip in the city centre. To see language such as "absconded" used in regard to a ten-year-old girl is shocking as though she were somehow responsible for the abuse inflicted on her. It is 101 victim blaming. The girl was entrusted to the care of the State and was failed both by Tusla and by the Government's disastrous migration policy. My heart aches for her and her family.

Since 2021, 121 children under the care of Tusla have been referred to the Garda because of child sexual abuse. This is a systemic issue, yet nothing is being done. The issue has been raised tirelessly by Aontú and Deputy Peadar Tóibín. The Government continues to outsource the care of vulnerable children to private for-profit companies, many of which are not regulated. The State is continually failing children. What will it take for the Government to realise we are at breaking point? There needs to be a serious investigation into Tusla as well as reform of the State agency. Vulnerable children deserve the highest standards of care and safety and not to be placed in unregulated for-profit accommodation.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I warmly welcome the ambassador of the Czech Republic, a beautiful country I have visited many times. He is very welcome to the Upper House of our Parliament. I wish to use my time to give thanks and pay a brief tribute to the Clerk of Dáil Éireann. Why do I say Dáil Éireann when I mean Seanad Éireann? Mr. Peter Finnegan formally departs us today. He is a man of immense record, integrity, hard work and commitment. While we will see him around, and it is for Peter to do his own farewells, announcement and speech, I have worked very closely with him in the audit committee of the Oireachtas and other committees here, and I know of his wealth and breadth of experience, integrity and guidance to both Houses. Why I say it in this House is because it is last day for Peter but also he is the Secretary General of the Oireachtas. What an onerous responsibility that is. Members know there is much public commentary about the inner workings of these Houses. It is Peter who heads that up with the commission. I take this opportunity to wish him well. Members will have a lot opportunities themselves. It is important we put it on the record. We have already paid great tribute to Mr. Martin Groves, our former clerk, and I hope there will be confirmation of the clerks in both Houses shortly. I know Peter well. He has done an amazing job. He is here day and night. He is fully committed to the institution and, more importantly, the reputation of this Parliament. He has served us with absolute distinction, way beyond what most Secretaries General would do, and that is not to take away from Secretaries General. I wish Peter and his family every success and say "Many thanks". We would be lost without him. There are always new people coming and I know that he will share his breadth of knowledge and experience with the people who follow him. To Peter and his family, I wish them well and know I join with Members in wishing him well and a happy retirement. I have no doubt he will have more time to do the things he loves to do. Well done to Peter.

An Cathaoirleach: We join the Senator in wishing Peter a long, happy and successful retirement. Anois, an Seanadóir Duffy.

Senator Mark Duffy: I welcome to the House the ambassador of the Czech Republic and share in the warm wishes to Peter Finnegan as on his retirement as Clerk of the Dáil. I use this opportunity to highlight the positivity of sport for communities, young people in particular. On my travels here today, I met with the Ballina Town under-17 girls team who had returned to Ireland having competed in Barcelona, where they finished third place in their tournament. The sense of joy from parents, players and coaches at the achievement and experience that has given those young children cannot be overstated. I compliment the coach of the team, Jack Gilmartin. The whole community rallied around this team with a fundraiser that benefited every other club and sporting organisation in town. It is a great example of a model that brings so much joy to a community. I highlight the team this afternoon and wish them well in their celebrations back home this evening. I wish I could join them.

I also highlight Master Harry Thompson, a six-time black belt in mixed martial arts, who has done incredible work for the sport in my local community and, indeed, nationally, working with kids and young people in schools and Foróige groups, and working with people who are disadvantaged and who have challenges, both physically and mentally. He has made a remarkable contribution to the sport. I acknowledge on the record of the House his achievements and his contribution to the local community and nationally.

Senator Seán Kyne: I thank all the Senators for their contributions this afternoon, starting with Senator Rabbitte and Senator Scahill, who both raised the issue of Croí, and we know the valuable work it does in support of those who suffer from a heart condition, whether that be stroke, heart failure or heart attack. Both Senators are right that there is a need for greater awareness of the differences between a heart attack and heart failure and of the signs of stroke and what can be done. They mentioned a range of possible symptoms, such as fatigue, indigestion, pain, nausea and sweating. We probably all say we have those from time to time, but in many cases they are signs that people can be suffering from heart disease, and if there are concerns, we encourage people to get a check-up and to get seen by their GP. Croí does great work in rolling out awareness and checking, be it at marts or football games. It is very valuable screening work. Senator Scahill also raised this and spoke about the volunteers, the fundraising and the 5 km walk in Roscommon. Of course, there is one in Salthill as well. It is a worthy issue for discussion and perhaps we will have some sort of motion on the issues of heart health and stroke.

Senator Clonan raised the issue of the presidential election and expressed concern about the spoil the vote campaign. He rightly said there are people with disabilities who go to great effort to get up and get out and make themselves available to lobby and advocate, while other people will choose to spoil their votes in this election. He has railed against this and I certainly hope there is a good turnout for the election on Friday. Of course there are three candidates on the ballot paper. There may be opportunities in the future to speak about the franchise and the methodologies of getting on the ballot paper. Perhaps we can have too few candidates but I also suggest we can have too many candidates in presidential elections such as this.

Senator Curley spoke about the World Butchers' Challenge and the importance of craft butchery apprenticeships. He called for additional funding. Perhaps he can table a Commencement debate on this as it is quite specific. I am not sure whether it is for the Department of further and higher education or the Department of agriculture. Certainly it would be a worthy Commencement debate.

Senators Ní Chuilinn and Andrews commended Pico Lopes and wished him well playing for Cape Verde in the World Cup. They also wished the Lopes family and baby Diego well. I certainly acknowledge all of this.

Senators Keogan and Sarah O'Reilly raised the tragic case of a young girl who was raped. The Minister for children, Norma Foley, has tasked the national review panel, which examines serious incidents involving children in care, with carrying out an investigation. She said it is a very worrying case but she is limited in what she can say due to the Garda investigation. There was also the case of the Ukrainian man. These investigations are ongoing and our thoughts and sympathies are with all of their families on what are tragic circumstances.

Senator Comyn paid tribute to Maura Geraghty from Collon in County Louth and her children and grandchildren. May she rest in peace.

Senator Fitzpatrick raised the importance of breast cancer research and the continued need to fundraise and support it. It is a very worthy cause. A number of charities are involved in raising funds. Professor Michael Kerin and the team at the Lambe institute in Galway do tremendous work on advocacy and research. It is very important.

Senator Andrews raised the issue of social and affordable housing targets, and the development of the Irish Glass Bottle site which has been going on for some time. I do not have an update on it but perhaps I will direct Senator Andrews to table a Commencement debate as it might be the way to get the most up-to-date information. I think he knows what is going on there anyway and I certainly hope the site can be maximised and that there is mixed development, a sense of community and facilities provided for the locality.

Senator Gallagher spoke about the trauma of Breege and Stephen Quinn on the 18th anniversary of the murder of Paul Quinn. I have read and listened to Breege in particular in the past. It is a very harrowing case. If there was any case where justice needs to be done, and those involved in the heinous act brought to justice, it is this.

Senator Dee Ryan spoke about policing in Limerick city and called for a debate with the Minister. I will certainly request this. As she knows, policing numbers are a matter for the Garda Commissioner. I certainly welcome the increase in the number of those in training, the two intakes per year, and the changes made in the time of the former Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee, to the Garda entry and retirement ages. I certainly think this has made a difference in terms of the numbers applying.

Senator Joe Conway raised the issue of Waterford Airport and spoke about the difficult period it has endured. He spoke about a new partnership, as agreed by members of Waterford City and County Council, and I hope this bears fruit and that Waterford Airport has a bright future in terms of connectivity.

Senator Craughwell raised the history of emigration from Ireland to the US, UK, Australia and elsewhere. As I have said plenty of times, I have ten aunts and uncles in Boston, as well as uncles and aunts in New York, Los Angeles, Perth, Manchester and London. I am only one person. That is a huge diaspora around the world and it is evident of what has gone on throughout our history. He also raised the attitudes to people coming into this country. There are grave concerns in relation to how people are being treated. It has to be said that others have different opinions on that as well.

Senator McCarthy raised the issue of homelessness. He quite rightly said that the homeless figures are not faceless; they are human beings, including children. He called for emergency measures. I will again request a debate on homelessness.

Senator Martin Conway raised the issue of people with disabilities, particularly those involved in sport. He called for a debate and wants changes, particularly in relation to the sports capital grants. The Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, and the Minister, Deputy Foley will be in on the first week we are back after the break to discuss the disability strategy. The Senator may have an opportunity to raise it then. That is an all-of-government strategy encompassing different Departments. There might be an opportunity to raise the issue at that juncture.

Senator Boyhan paid tribute to Peter Finnegan and so say all of us. As a former Government Chief Whip, I worked with Peter in the other House. As well as being an absolute gentleman, he is a thorough and dedicated public servant. I wish him well in his retirement, which I suggest is at a young age. I expect he has other things in mind.

Senator Duffy paid tribute to a number of clubs and individuals in Ballina. I hope he gets down to join some of the celebrations towards the end of the week. All those involved in sport in the town of Ballina, be it judo or any other, do their community proud. I wish all involved in Ballina good for the week ahead.

Order of Business agreed to.

Appointment of Members to the Seanad Select Committee on EU Scrutiny and Transparency: Motion

Senator Seán Kyne: I move:

> That, in pursuance of Standing Order No. 111A of the Standing Orders relative to Public Business, the following members be appointed to the Seanad Select Committee on EU Scrutiny and Transparency:
>
> Senators Garret Ahearn, Victor Boyhan, Pat Casey, Alice-Mary Higgins, Garret Kelleher, Eileen Lynch, Michael McDowell, Conor Murphy, Malcolm Noonan, Anne Rabbitte.

Question put and agreed to.

Planning and Development (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) Regulations 2025: Motion

Senator Seán Kyne: I move:

> That Seanad Éireann approves the following Regulations in draft:
>
> Planning and Development (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) Regulations 2025,
>
> a copy of which has been laid in draft form before Seanad Éireann on 7th October, 2025.

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 4.58 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 5.02 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 4.58 p.m. and resumed at 5.02 p.m.

Higher Education: Statements

Acting Chairperson (Senator Victor Boyhan): I welcome the Minister. We are here to have statements and a debate on higher education with the lead Minister in this area of responsibility and expertise. He will have ten minutes to make an introductory opening statement and group spokespersons who have indicated - I have a list of them in front of me - have eight minutes. All other Senators have five minutes. The Minister will then be called on to reply not later than 6.20 p.m., but it may be earlier. Statements will conclude at 6.30 p.m. That is the running order. I invite the Minister to make his opening statement.

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy James Lawless): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chathaoirleach agus na Seanadóirí. It is good to be here with them today. I see the same familiar faces of the spokespersons I know in the area. It is good to engage with them all both formally today and informally as we all work together in the course of the term. I thank them for their interest in the topic. I am grateful for the chance to speak about the priorities that reflect our commitment to inclusion, affordability and excellence within the further and higher education system.

The story of my Department began five years ago when An Taoiseach, Deputy Micheál Martin, created it. It was in the Fianna Fáil manifesto coming up to the general election of that year. It is something I was proud to advocate for before I was ever a spokesperson or Minister for it. It was always envisaged as being a driver of access and education but also of the economy, enterprise and the centre of our economic development. As well as being an education Ministry, which it patently is, I also see it as an economic Ministry, leading Ireland's response to global disruption. We are all well aware of the disruption and the challenges, trade winds and everything else that are coming towards us hard and fast. We are leading the response to that disruption through talent, science, skills and education. I am working on delivering sustainable reforms that expand and maximise access and opportunity, enhance quality and support world-class research.

I will begin by talking us through budget 2026, where I have done my very best to match available resources to the best possible return for the sector and to maximise the opportunities available. Let me start with one of the most pressing issues for students and families, the cost of education. Despite ongoing monetary pressures, affecting various cost-of-living measures, etc., that were available in previous years but were not available this year, which made the job of Ministers across the board more challenging, I was still delighted to be able to take a major step forward by securing a ring-fenced fund of €53 million to permanently reduce the student contribution fee by €500, which brings real relief and certainty to over 108,000 students next year. That is in fact the first permanent reduction in 30 years. Of course, I am aware that some students received higher subventions last year and in the previous year, but they were temporary, uncosted and unsustainable one-off measures that were not there on a year-to-year basis. They were not part of the baseline. I have spoken to many students and their families who told me that caused understandable anxiety and uncertainty and gave rise to questions every summer about what would happen next year. I can tell them what is going to happen next year, namely, that those fees have been reduced by €500 for good. I may well bring fees down further as the overall budgetary picture allows me to, but they are going in one direction, which is down, and that is there to stay.

I am also looking at the student grant scheme. It is so important that as well as working on fees we also work on targeted measures to give the most help to those who need it most. In addition to strengthening the student grant scheme, the SUSI income threshold has been raised to €120,000, the highest level in the scheme's history, allowing thousands more families to qualify for support. To put it in context, Oireachtas Members, certainly if they are the single earner in a single-income household, would now qualify for SUSI supports. It is not unreasonable to say that is a high threshold, the highest it has ever been. Everyone at or below it will now see some form of support. Up to 30,000 students living further from home, more than 30 km from their place of study, will benefit from the non-adjacent grant categories and will receive additional maintenance grant support. I have increased maintenance grants across the four base levels - a special rate and the three non-adjacent bands. That means true inclusion and access.

I have also widened the pathways for students with disabilities. I increased the fund for students with disabilities by €3 million, comprising an additional €1 million in higher education and €2 million in further education. Through PATH 4, 195 students with intellectual disabilities are now enrolled across 11 higher education institutions, which is a milestone in building an inclusive system. The disabilities demonstration project, which was launched this year, is a pilot scheme to study, engage and consult in order to understand what is the best policy framework for flexible, appropriate, responsive supports for students with disabilities to help them transition into education, further and higher education and beyond that into employment. That is very much a reflection of our commitment to equity, inclusion and our obligations under the UN conventions and other human rights instruments. Those reforms build on a series of actions across the board, some of which I have outlined. We are also removing fees in further education to expand eligibility and increasing maintenance rates. Funds for disability are up. Mental health supports are up and fees are down. That is very much the direction of travel that I want to continue.

We are all well aware of the challenges of student accommodation in terms of affordable rents and supports for that and also viability in terms of challenging the sector to do more, provide more and incentivising investment in it. Accommodation remains one of the most significant challenges facing students. My Department is working on a student accommodation strategy, which I expect to conclude by the end of the year. It will increase supply, improve viability and address affordability while again giving the most help to those who need it the most and focusing support on a socioeconomic basis to give people in disadvantage additional help over and beyond what might be done on a universal basis.

A VAT reduction from 13.5% to 9% on the sale of apartments is included in the Finance Bill. I am engaging on an ongoing basis with the Minister for Finance to ensure that is maximised to incentivise the delivery of student accommodation. There are an additional 15,000 beds with planning permission in the system that have not yet progressed. This measure, among others, may be the incentive that is needed to kickstart that development. I mentioned already that I have also increased the maintenance grants for the first four base grant cohorts, the special rate and the non-adjacent band 1, 2 and 3 rates, for students living 30 km or more from their place of study. This benefits 30,000 students, who will get additional support of between €200 and €460 per student. This is to reflect the fact that students who are non-adjacent, 30 km or more away from their college, obviously have greater expenses in terms of travel and accommodation. These supports are to recognise this situation and give these students that little bit of additional support. The rent tax credit has also been extended to 2028. I hope this will also be of some assistance.

We are beginning to see some of the projects coming good. Maynooth University's new 116 beds have now come on stream. I was delighted to be there myself recently to open Teach Uí Bhuachalla. I also turned the sod at University College Dublin, UCD, for an additional 493 new beds. Those units are now under construction. I was happy to sanction €67 million to go towards that project. We have also published the design guide to support the delivery of student accommodation, optimise construction and development and to come up with a standardised set of architectural blueprints so design providers, HEIs, developers and people in the sector are guided. These are reflected in section 28 guidelines to local authorities. This means a set of templates is available to those providing accommodation that optimises the number of beds while providing appropriate leisure and other support amenities. I continue to engage with the Minister for housing, Deputy James Browne, on the rent pressure zone, RPZ, review to ensure students are protected and afforded the maximum protection under the new rules that will come into effect next year.

Turning to pathways into education, I heard several people raise the issue of the Central Applications Office, CAO, system, the leaving certificate model and the points race. I met representatives of a number of student unions before the budget. I also meet them on an ongoing basis. I had a number of consultations with them to understand their challenges and requests. One of the issues that comes up is the CAO system. The issue crystallises around this aspect, but it is really about what happens with the leaving certificate examinations, the results and the points. It is about what the pathways into third level are and whether we should have wider access points and wider subject choices, with specialisation deferred until later in the system. There is a question of whether it should become more of a graduate school option and if we should have more graduate entry into some courses, as we have already, and if we should widen this approach. Things like tertiary degrees are also very innovative. I am initiating work around this reform, the entry points and how this process works. I think this will be beneficial, as will the consultation as it goes on.

I am focusing heavily on research and innovation. I am working on a new research infrastructure fund that will support research and innovation in our universities, across our HEIs and in collaboration with industry, using best practice on a global stage to harness the innovation and talent we have strongly in this country. The apprenticeship system has the highest budget ever this year. An additional €79 million was allocated in budget 2026, bringing the total up to €410 million, which is double what the funding was only five years ago. Registrations continue to increase for apprentices. It is an outstanding path to follow for young people so inclined.

I have much more to say, but I will leave it there for now. I look forward to listening to comments from colleagues.

Senator Dee Ryan: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire. Gabhaim buíochas leis as teacht chun an Tí seo le labhairt agus éisteacht lenár dtuairimí inniu. Fianna Fáil welcomes these statements and this opportunity to contribute to the discussion on further and higher education, research, innovation and science. As the Minister rightly asserted, for us in Fianna Fáil, this area has always been central to our national story along with the belief that education is a great equaliser, the foundation of opportunity and the driver of progress.

Expanding access to education has long been a cornerstone of our vision for Ireland, from the introduction of free secondary education by my fellow Limerick person, Donogh O'Malley, to the expansion of our university system and, more recently, as the Minister referred to, to the establishment of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. This is because as a party we know the value of education. We understand the critical importance of skills development and research and this is why we felt the sector needed its own focus and leadership and a seat at the Cabinet table to ensure it was given the prominence it merits.

We can see the fruits of this ongoing focus on education over the decades through the ever-increasing rates of higher education attainment. In fact, Ireland leads the way in education, outperforming the EU27 average in third level attainment across all age groups. In all but one age group, we are outperforming the EU27 average by 20 percentage points. I will give one example. Last year, the CSO revealed that 66% of all persons aged 30 to 34 had third level qualifications. This is an increase from the equivalent figure of 39% in 2004. This is significant progress by any measure and it did not happen by chance. It is the result of decades of focus, sustained investment and strong policy direction. It is a reflection of the belief we hold dear in Fianna Fáil and, indeed, more broadly in Irish society, that learning should never be a privilege for the few but a right for all.

Building on the focus for higher education and research that led to the establishment of the Department, the programme for Government sets very clear and ambitious targets for the Minister. These include closing the core funding gap that exists by unlocking the National Training Fund and he has made progress this week on this goal. Another target is to develop the framework for borrowing for technological universities and develop a pathway for these institutions to access capital funding for initiatives, including student accommodation. This is dear in my area with the importance of the Technological University of the Shannon, TUS, in Limerick and the important contribution it has made to our regional economy over the past decade and more. Other targets include: providing more training places nationally; continuing to reduce the student contribution fee in a sustainable way over the lifetime of the Government; increasing maintenance grants and reforming SUSI; increasing supports for PhD students to encourage emerging researchers; working with industry and educational institutions to provide more short and microcredential qualifications; and funding graduate research programmes to support economic development and growth.

As the Minister rightly said in his opening comments, his Department is leading the response to global disruption. While much is owed to foreign direct investment, the work of IDA Ireland and the policy direction set by successive Governments over the past number of decades, much credit is owed to those decisions made in the recovery of our economy in the past decade. We must now ensure that the next chapter of our country's economic history is written by indigenous companies and businesses. We must support them to scale up to be more innovative and to succeed in their efforts to trade into Europe and beyond. The Minister's Department and skills are at the forefront in ensuring that vision is recognised.

I take this opportunity to welcome what the Minister has delivered in budget 2026. It is the most significant package of permanent supports for further and higher education in a generation. The measures the Minister announced bear mentioning again. There will be a €500 permanent reduction in the student contribution fee, the first since free fees introduced in 1995. The SUSI income threshold will increase to €120,000, the highest ever, extending support to thousands more families. There will be a rise in the SUSI non-adjacent rate by between €204 and €430 from September 2026, which will support students who have to travel or rent to attend college. There will also be an increase in the SUSI postgraduate grant to €4,500 and an increase in the research and development tax credit from 30% to 35%.

This all underscores the determination of the Minister and the Department to keep Ireland, and regions like mine of Limerick and the mid-west, at the forefront of global innovation. It supports collaboration between academia and enterprise and strengthens our reputation as a destination for high-value investment. These are meaningful changes that ease pressure on families, while opening doors for those who might otherwise have been locked out of education. From a mid-west perspective, I broadly welcome the expansion of healthcare places. There are more than 1,100 new spots across medicine, nursing and social care and a 27% increase that will help to meet the growing demand for skilled professionals nationwide.

I also particularly welcome the record €79 million investment in apprenticeships announced in the budget. This is more than double the 2020 level. Apprenticeships are no longer confined to traditional trades and now span technology, cybersecurity, green energy, manufacturing and healthcare. At the Joint Committee on Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, we heard a great deal during recent meetings from employers, workers and student representatives on this topic. These contributions have reflected what is going well and advocated for changes and improvements these groups would like to see being made. We look forward to reflecting all this back to the Minister in the coming months.

As the Minister correctly highlighted, however, accommodation is one of the most pressing issues for him during his term. We cannot speak about access to education without speaking about access to accommodation. For too many students and families, finding and affording a place to live has become one of the biggest barriers to accessing further or higher education. I thank the Minister for visiting the University of Limerick again two weeks ago. I believe it was the Minister's third visit to Limerick since he has taken office and we greatly appreciate his commitment and engagement to the sector in Limerick and the mid-west. The Minister will remember that on the occasion of the opening of that impressive students' union centre, the Minister and I were briefed that this is now also home to a breakfast club that the students' union has established to support students who are travelling from great distances on a daily basis. They are commuting to attend university in Limerick because they cannot find accommodation nearby. Due to traffic and bus connections they are often arriving on campus between 7 a.m. and 9 a.m. before anything else opens. The students' union at UL has provided a daily breakfast club supporting over 100 students. It is important. I know the Minister was as struck by that as I was and it is important that we acknowledge this reality clearly and honestly. It is difficult, it is expensive and the shortage of accommodations is impacting students' choices about where to take up courses and study.

I will finish by commending the Minister on the commitment he has shown to addressing this issue. I know he is working closely with the Minister, Deputy Browne, on it and I look forward to the publication of his comprehensive student accommodation strategy later this year.

Senator Joe Conway: I join with the Acting Chairperson and with the previous speaker in welcoming the Minister, Deputy Lawless, to the House. I have only met the Minister once before but on hundreds of occasions I had the pleasure of working with his mother Mary in a couple of educational sectors. During the recess I hope the Minister finds the time to pass on my very best wishes to her. She was always a joy to work with.

Deputy James Lawless: I will of course.

Senator Joe Conway: Back in 2014, Waterford County Council and Waterford City Council amalgamated. At the first meeting of that amalgamated council in July 2014, I put a question to the then chief executive, Michael Walsh. I asked him if he could tell the council how many apprentices there were in the new amalgamated council. He said he regretted to tell us that the number was zero. I thought it was a shocking indictment of a local authority at the time. Obviously, things have changed, with a lot of fosterage and good governance by the Minister, Deputy Lawless, and his predecessors. The number of apprentices that we have under the Minister's aegis would be close to five figures, perhaps 9,000. It shows a remarkable adjustment in national planning that we have gone from the situation where we had very little apprenticeship in the Cinderella of the economy where the whole thrust with young people was to get to universities and to become lawyers and doctors and brain surgeons. Of course, a lot of this has borne out the problems we have in providing housing for our ever-increasing population, which is at record figures now. It is on that subject of apprenticeships and the Minister's work that I want to give a little time to the successes and the challenges.

If the Minister will permit, I will look at my notes and I will need my specs for this overview of the apprenticeship model in Ireland. I am just going to have a little scoot through it. The apprenticeship model, as we all know, follows an earn-while-you-learn model, which combines on-the-job training with an employer and off-the-job training in an educational training centre for a duration of two to four years depending on the programme. The eligibility is open to school leavers, career changers and mature learners. Typically, these are employed by an approved employer before starting. When I began to research this, it really surprised me that the qualifications can go anywhere from the level 5 to the level 10 award, which is extraordinary vision in the scheme. There are now nearly 80 programmes that I could assess. These courses enjoy the support of the traditional trades such as electrical, plumbing, carpentry, and motor mechanics but there are also newer sectors, which Senator Ryan averted to, such as finance, accounting technician, insurance practitioner, ICT, cybersecurity, software development, engineering, manufacturing and industrial electrical engineering, hospitality and food, commis chef, butcher, healthcare and social services. The list is quite exhaustive. All the while, the apprentices are paid by their employer. The rates vary by sector and the year of training. Reasonably generous employer grants are available to encourage uptake. Apprenticeship bursaries exist for underrepresented groups and particularly for women in a male-dominated section of the trades. There are no tuition fees for most of the programmes.

According to Arcon Recruitment and SOLAS, the most sought-after trades include electrical and plumbing. A couple years ago, I was mayor down in Waterford. When you are a mayor, you are wheeled out to officiate and do all the presentation things. I was brought along to the South East Technological University and I had the great pleasure of presenting the degrees to the apprenticeship class. I would have to say that it was one of the most memorable occasions of my time there. I was talking to them all and the vast majority of them were going to be, as they said to me, a "sparky". They were all going off into the electrical trade. People who are building houses are telling us about the difficulty in recruitment and they will still say that sparkies are hard to come by.

Looking at the downside, however, it is not all good news and bravado from me, I am afraid. The apprenticeship system in 2025 faces three major shortfalls that I can see, namely, persistent backlogs, underfunding to a certain extent, and uneven access especially in construction and in the rural areas of the country. As of mid-2025, over 9,000 apprentices are waiting to qualify, particularly in the craft and construction trades. Delays stem from limited capacity in training centres and especially for off-the-job phases, which are essential for qualification and certification. Some education and training boards have deferred courses by up to a year despite record enrolments. The impact of this is that the bottleneck slows down the entry into the workforce and exacerbates labour shortages, notably in housing and infrastructure, and it can discourage new applicants. Then there is the question of funding shortfalls and resource constraints. Unions like SIPTU and Unite report that the system is underfunded and overstretched, with insufficient investment in facilities and staff. That is their take on it. Despite a 34% increase in registrations from 2019 to 2024, funding has not kept pace with demands because smaller ETBs struggle to maintain programme quality. Some employers are reluctant to participate due to the lack of financial incentives.

I can see that my time is flitting away and I just want to address the uneven access and regional disparities. Apprenticeship opportunities are concentrated in urban centres, leaving rural areas like parts of Waterford and particularly west Waterford with fewer options. Smaller local authorities such as ours and employers often lack the capacity or awareness to engage with apprenticeship schemes. There is also the inevitable gender imbalance, with women underrepresented in many high-demand trades. This undermines Ireland's goals for balanced regional development, which we talk about a lot in this Chamber, and inclusive workforce planning under the national planning framework. The suggested remedies I am giving as the humble Senator here are ring-fencing the funding for smaller ETBs and rural employers, expanding the training centre capacity especially in construction and ICT and streamlining the qualification pathways to reduce delays and bottlenecks. I hope that my cúpla focail will have added somewhat to the quantum of knowledge and understanding on the targeted outreach and bursaries that will improve geographical equity and gender equality.

Senator Mike Kennelly: I welcome the Minister to the floor of the Seanad. I welcome his statements. Indeed, the Fine Gael Party group in the Seanad welcomes the measures announced in budget 2026 that will, obviously, directly support learners across Ireland. I warmly welcome the permanent reduction in student fees and the expansion of SUSI grant limits. There are a lot of pluses in the Minister's statement and I welcome every one of them, particularly the permanent reduction and SUSI limits. These are important steps that will reduce financial barriers and enable both young people and mature students to complete their studies. The permanent fee reduction signals a long-term commitment to affordability in higher education. Expanding the SUSI grant eligibility and increasing grant levels are a recognition of the reality of modern student life and will improve retention and completion rates.

It is important to be clear about what remains unaddressed. Many student representative organisations and institutions sought a €1,000 reduction in annual student charges, but that specific reduction was not passed on in the budget. The absence of the €1,000 relief that was requested represents a meaningful shortfall for students and their families, especially for those who do not qualify for the enhanced SUSI supports. While the Government's measures are necessary and welcomed, under the programme for Government, the Government committed to making higher education more accessible and reducing the financial burden of fees. That commitment set a direction of travel towards further reduction and, ultimately, the abolition of student fees. While budget 2026 moves us forward in that regard, we need clarity and a credible timetable to meet the programme's promises. I am calling for a clear five-year commitment for all students and families who require certainty to plan their futures. I ask that we convert the positive steps in budget 2026 into a clear timebound commitment that aligns with the programme for Government. I specifically call on us to commit to a published plan to abolish student fees within five years, which will include interim targets for annual reductions and a transparent funding model to achieve that outcome. Budget 2026 is a meaningful step in the right direction. Students deserve more than goodwill, however. They need a credible, funded route map to assist with fees. I welcome the Minister's leadership to make that plan real and honour the programme for Government commitment to abolish student fees within five years.

Earlier this year, I raised serious concerns with the Minister’s office with regard to rumours that were being highlighted to my office by a number of students concerning the SOLAS apprenticeship schemes. We know the success of the apprenticeship schemes run across the country. They are unbelievable. Sparkies are hard to come by. My son is on an electrical engineering apprenticeship at the moment, so I understand and have the life learning skills of having a student going through this course.

I note and compliment the Minister and his officials on their correspondence acknowledging the 2025 funding pressures and the actions taken to avert disruption. Disruption would have happened otherwise. I wish to inform the House that, in the Minister's correspondence, he confirmed that the Department engaged with SOLAS and the ETBs and identified a funding pressure in the apprenticeship budget for 2025. The Minister directed SOLAS to work with Department officials to develop a sustainable solution to minimise disruption to existing apprentices. Craft apprenticeship demand has risen substantially, which everyone knows, welcomes and is delighted with. Registration increased by 35% since 2019, from 5,271 in 2019 to 7,113 in 2024. There has been a rise in total craft apprenticeships from 16,000 in 2019 to 25,000 at the end of 2024. These are significant challenges that the Minister's Department and officials are facing. The Minister prioritised resources to meet those funding pressures. He engaged with the SOLAS board and instructed officials to work with the SOLAS executive to avoid cancellations. SOLAS was directed to work urgently with the ETBs to complete rescheduling for the remainder of the year. ETBs completed rescheduling on a rolling basis. On 11 August, SOLAS finalised the funding allocation for apprenticeships with the ETBs, enabling delivery for the remainder of the year without cuts to wider further education and training funding. The Government's investment in 2024 and 2025 helped unblock the previous backlog in phase 2 and allowed more apprentices to progress through phase 2 and phase 4, reinforcing the commitment to the national apprenticeship action plan 2021-2025. That is fantastic work. I thank the Minister for confirming the immediate measures taken to stabilise the 2025 provision.

To ensure confidence in the apprenticeship system beyond this, I request clarification from the Minister on the following points. What specific provisions have been made to ensure adequate and sustainable funding for apprenticeships from 2026 onwards? Has the Department developed a multiyear funding model that reflects projected growth in apprenticeship numbers? Will future apprenticeship allocations be ring-fenced to protect delivery from broader budgetary pressures within further education and training?

I acknowledge the decisive steps taken to protect apprenticeships and apprentices in 2025 and the collaborative work between the Department, SOLAS and our ETBs. Apprenticeships are not temporary measures; they are a core part of Ireland's skills architecture and economic future. I ask the Minister to provide the requested clarifications and publish the funding roadmaps so employers, training providers and learners can play with certainty. I look forward to working with the Minister in this term and into the next couple of years. I thank him for his work so far.

Senator Pauline Tully: Our young people are among the most highly qualified in all of the EU. We have the highest number when it comes to young people between the ages of 25 and 34. That is something to be commended. Unfortunately, our system is not without its challenges. I will address a number of the issues. First, with regard to fees, we have free fees in name only. It is a student contribution charge. It was introduced a number of years ago at €3,000. While it is being permanently reduced to €2,500, for parents who had children in third level last year and the year before, they only had to pay €2,000. For them, it is an increase of €500. It is unfortunate that it could not have been left at €2,000 for another year. Is it the intention going forward to continue to reduce that charge until it is fully abolished? That is something we need to plan for.

As has already been identified, student accommodation is one of the biggest issues facing students at present. We hear all of the stories of the long commutes that students have to make because they cannot get accommodation at an affordable rate close to their colleges. Many of them rely on public transport, which is often not very reliable. Others are paying quite high costs for rent, which results in them having to work part time along with studying. In fact, although working part time, they often work quite long hours which means that their studies suffer. They may end up failing exams or even dropping out because of burnout. We hear of other students sleeping in their cars or sofa surfing in their friends’ apartments. It is just not good enough. It is not enhancing the experience of third level students.

Even with purpose-built student accommodation, the rates students pay can be up to €1,000 per month. Those rates are often charged for 12 months, even though they do not need the accommodation for 12 months. They may only need it for eight or nine months, but they have to pay it because of the shortage of availability of accommodation. The current shortfall is identified as being between 25,000 and 30,000 places. It is predicted that figure could rise to 68,000 by 2035. That is substantial and needs to be addressed.

UCD is probably the college with the greatest amount of accommodation, but it is also probably the most expensive. The UCD village, which was completed in 2021, has three tiers, which were initially called the silver, gold and platinum tiers. The rates charged for each tier increased to a spec that they did not need to be. The tiers have since been renamed to tiers 1, 2 and 3, but the costs attached are still quite substantial. The Minister referenced the investment of €67 million in phase 2 of the village, which is obviously welcome. A concern was raised with me that the cost seems to be substantial, however. It is approaching €250,000 per bedroom on university-owned land. To me, that is extortionate. Charges will end up being high again to try to make up for that cost. I am not sure why the cost is so high. With the tendering process, the contractors are coming in but I think we need to standardise the accommodation. It does not need to be a high spec. We should just make it substantial and appropriate, but something that is suitable for students and good quality without being too expensive. A lot of the student-specific accommodation is provided by private investors. A lot of them are investment funds. They are getting generous tax breaks. They are building to quite an unnecessarily high spec and, therefore, it costs a lot to the end user.

The other issue is the disparity in the borrowing framework for technological universities. Traditional universities can borrow money, often through the European Investment Bank, to build on-campus residences but technological universities cannot. This has been acknowledged for years. The 2018 Technological Universities Act foresaw a borrowing mechanism. In 2021, the Government announced a clear decision to allow it but there is no mechanism in place as yet. The Minister is aware of this. He has been working with the TUs so perhaps he could give us an update on where that is at. Some of the TUs are ready to go if this was put in place. They have their plans in place. They are ready to go to planning, practically. Now, it would still take a couple of years for the construction to be completed but at least there would be an end in sight and they would be able to provide accommodation. Only one technological university has some accommodation at present. The rest of them do not.

In relation to North-South mobility and co-operation, it is good to see that there has been an increase but it is something that we need to look at and increase further. Within the shared island unit, there is the North-South research programme. I would like to see that enhanced and its remit widened to maybe look at education at third level on an all-island basis. There is a disparity between the different assessment structures, such as the A-levels as compared with the leaving certificate. They are quite different. The entry levels for university for people from the South going North and *vice versa* need to be worked out in order that it is fair to all of the students. I definitely would like to see more North-South co-operation between our universities and colleges.

On the Irish language, the Minister mentioned, as outlined in the 20-year strategy for the Irish language, that 20% of recruits to the public sector must be competent in the Irish language by 2030. That is only around the corner and we are not near it at present. Only 1% of our third level students receive education through the medium of Irish. Many of our students have had their education to date through Irish, in primary school and post-primary school, and it is extremely difficult for them to then have to try and start learning through English. We need to increase the range and uptake of Irish-medium courses at third level. We need to train students across academic disciplines and third level institutions to be competent to work in Irish, both to meet the educational skill needs of our Gaeltacht communities and our Irish speakers everywhere but also because within the EU our language is a recognised language and because of the 20% public service recruitment target, which is only around the corner. We could learn a lot from the Welsh model because 20 years ago, only 3% of their students were learning through Welsh - my figures could be slightly wrong but they are around that - but now it is 20%. They have done that in the space of 20 years or maybe less. We need to look at something on the same level. Also, third level students have indicated that they would like to see something done in Ireland similar to what was done in Wales, namely, is free language courses within the college, not necessarily to do their course through learn Irish but to learn to speak Irish because there is an uptick in interest in the language at present and we should capitalise on that.

On apprenticeships, I note the Minister stated there is a reduction in the fee. I would like to see that fee reduced until it is finally abolished. Many of our apprentices are working for very small money. They are getting way less than the minimum wage. I heard about a case recently where a young lad - he was in his early 20s because he had done something else after he left school and then went into an electrical apprenticeship - was getting €7 an hour when he started. It might have increased in his second year to €8. I know that when he is qualified, he probably can charge what he likes because there is such a shortage but it is difficult to attract people, especially older people who might have a family or other commitments, into doing apprenticeships if the wages are so low.

On the further and higher education committee, we are looking in depth at apprenticeships. We are all pretty familiar with traditional craft apprenticeships but there is then an uptick in the number of business-led consortia apprenticeships. I welcome the fact the national apprenticeship office is looking at an integrated model for the two but concerns have been expressed that it looks like it is going down the road of the consortium model rather than the traditional craft model. In Britain, they went down that road and ended up having to abandon it. They are going back to the craft model because a lot of students pulled out of that given that they ended up being used as cheap labour and students were not getting the appropriate training that they needed.

Senator Laura Harmon: I wish to share time with Senator Cosgrove.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Nicole Ryan): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Laura Harmon: I welcome the Minister. It is welcome to have this discussion in the House this evening.

I want to start with a positive story. There was an article in *The Echo* today about a woman called Annette Donoghue from Cork and she has gone to college at the age of 81 to study Irish heritage and culture in Cork College of Further Education and Training. That was a powerful story and demonstrated the power of lifelong learning, which has to be intrinsic in our education system. People now do not usually have the one career for their whole lives. They often go back and retrain or decide they want to do something different maybe every decade. This is how we live now and our colleges and universities need to reflect on that.

In relation to funding for higher education, I believe the Minister has a huge opportunity to explore how the sector is funded as a whole and to ensure that we can act on the Cassells report and that we have a proper publicly funded model of higher education because we know now that a qualification, be it in further or higher education, is the same as a leaving certificate may have been in the 1980s or early 1990s. It is almost the expectation now that that is the standard educational attainment for a lot of people. Of course, apprenticeships are included as part of that as well in terms of people's choice.

We have the potential for a Niamh Bhreatnach moment. The late, great Niamh Bhreatnach, former Minister for Education, abolished student fees in the nineties. That paved the way for our economic development, and Celtic tiger years as well, in terms of education and global investment in this country. I believe the Minister has this opportunity now, during his tenure, to abolish student fees again. It was disappointing to see that there was not a commitment to permanently reduce the student fee by €1,000 in this budget. I hope the Minister will commit to decreasing it during the lifetime of this Government, as set out in the programme for Government. I was out last night knocking on some doors in Blackrock in Cork city and I was talked to a family. They were saying how they are deeply affected by the cost of living. They are paying €2,000 in childcare and the extra €500 now in fees. For them, the squeezed middle, they are really feeling this. It is being felt by people as an increase, as opposed to a decrease, on last year.

In relation to housing, I welcome the fact there will be a new student accommodation strategy. It absolutely needs to be delivered on by the end of the year. The sooner we can implement it, the better. Technological universities want to be able to borrow funding. They want to be able to acquire their own accommodation. There are 106,000 students attending technological universities and there is only 0.4% of available on-campus accommodation for those. We had the president of Munster Technological University, Professor Maggie Cusack, in front of the Oireachtas further and higher education committee recently and she said that she believes that housing is the biggest barrier to accessing education in this country. That is a pretty stark statement as to where we are at with housing. There needs to be more joined-up thinking between the Department and that of the Minister, Deputy Browne, in terms of housing. There need to be proper protections for students who are living in digs as well. The rent-a-room relief scheme is obviously welcome but it cannot be just plugging the gap in terms of the availability of accommodation. More purpose-build student accommodation needs to be built in this country. I have introduced legislation to clamp down on predators who advertise rooms in exchange for sex. We know that 5% of international students either have been directly offered or have seen these advertisements. It is welcome that the Deputy Lawless's colleague the Minister for Justice is including that in an upcoming Bill. We absolutely need to make sure that that is outlawed and that they feel the full weight of the law.

Student poverty is real. According to a University College Cork students' union survey, 28% of students said that they have gone to class hungry. I welcome the fact the Minister is looking at the thresholds and that he has made progress there. That is going in the right direction in relation to grants. I know that is at the forefront of the Minister's priorities. On the sector itself, I know the Irish Federation of University Teachers has identified through a survey that 36% of those working in universities say they are in precarious employment. Only 8% of them said they had written contracts. Only 15% of researchers said they were on permanent contracts and 60% said they had unmanageable workloads. This affects the student experience as well as the staff experience. They would say in their own words that higher education is chronically and structurally underfunded. We know that public spending has decreased by 40% in relation to income since the financial crisis years. How will we plug that core funding gap? When will that be done?

I think there was a missed opportunity to abolish the apprentice fee. I know my colleague, Senator Cosgrove, will speak about that.

For every euro spent on further and higher education, there is a return for our economy overall.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire. I will talk briefly about apprenticeships. The Minister said in his opening address that it is great to see much more investment in apprenticeships and further education and training, in particular. I worked for a time in Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim Education and Training Board, MSLETB, in a training centre so I can see the level of support that students are getting.

My first Bill as a Senator relates to the inclusion of apprenticeships under the minimum wage. The Minister said in his opening address that there has been an uptake of 75% in apprenticeships since 2020. There has also been a drop-out rate of 20% in the past three years. A lot of this is due to on-the-job training. People are simply not able to afford to live.

Someone addressed the committee for further education and training recently. His name was Ben Friel. I heard him on the radio speaking about some of the difficulties that he is facing in having to pay for tools. He said it is especially difficult for apprentices, who have to pay for tools and take into account the cost of accommodation and the cost of living. In a wealthy country at the moment, someone starting off, being paid a wage, trying to live away from home, trying to include travel costs and having to buy their own tools while earning €7.76 per hour is not acceptable. I do not know how anyone is supposed to live. Many people are taking on a second job. I would love support when I bring forward the Bill in December. I hope it will get cross-party support. It is not a huge ask that apprenticeships are included, at the very least, in the national minimum wage. I would love to see us move to the living wage, but at this stage I hope we move to the national minimum wage.

I add my support to an ability to borrow for the technical universities. I know there is a shortage of accommodation in the Atlantic Technological University, ATU, in Sligo, as there is across the country. That institution has worked closely with Sligo County Council and has secured a site. All it needs is the money.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I welcome the Minister to the House and look forward to engaging with him. I know he will bring a lot of thought to one of the most exciting briefs we have.

I am going to go into a couple of issues. I will start with a piece the Minister knows, which is that higher education plays a crucial role in shaping not just the careers of the individuals who move through it and the economy, but also the society. It is one of the ways we engage. It is the space for the ideas we need for the future, which will be challenging and where we will face hugely difficult global questions, as well as national questions. Ireland can and should be playing a key role in that regard.

One of the important things in terms of getting the best from higher education is investment. The Minister will be aware how far behind our European peers we lag in that regard. We must also ensure that we have the diversity we need in higher education and that those in higher education have the security to be able to do the work and to think about challenging and creative ideas. Many years ago, I launched a report called Living with Uncertainty. It looked to some of the key areas in precarious work, right across Irish society. This was approximately eight years ago. I was surprised that higher education emerged as one of the main areas of precarity. Since then, I have learned an awful lot more. The Minister will be aware that, back in 2023, the Seanad unanimously passed a motion that I put forward calling on the Government to engage specifically with the Higher Education Authority, universities, higher education institutions, trade unions and other organisations to look at regulations around the use of fixed-term and part-time contracts and contacts of indefinite duration, and to consider legislation to ensure that those employed to teach earn a living wage and there is minimal use of the hourly contract approach. The statistics from the Irish Federation of University Teachers show that 36% of workers consider themselves precariously employed. Of those who are on these short-term, nine-month contracts, 61% are not getting paid for the periods between terms. They are kind of disappearing out of the system and not getting that continuity. Another 31% work on an if-and-when basis.

When you are in that level of insecurity, it does not just stop you making plans for your life or make it impossible for you to get a mortgage or make it hard event to rent, it also means that you are not secure enough to do long-form or frontier thinking, which forms the building blocks of new ideas. Innovation is often framed as something that lands as quick ideas with start-ups. Innovation often comes from years and years of expanding what we understand, which creates the space for what new things might be possible. Building relationships in research is much harder when people are going year to year on contracts. It also affects diversity. Those who do not have the safety net of family or other money, those who are coming from diverse backgrounds and those who have children, particularly women, are more likely to leave higher education and go elsewhere. We lose wonderful people. This is an appeal to the Minister to address these areas, which should have been addressed, frankly, when the HEA Bill and the research Bill went through, but can still be and should be addressed.

I will move to some other areas of that role and make another appeal. I will discuss public-public partnerships. I met the former Minister of State, Mary Mitchell O'Connor. There are all these rules around public-private partnerships. I once submitted a parliamentary question asking about public-public partnerships and was asked if I meant public-private partnerships. For public-private partnerships, there are memorandums of understanding, MOUs, and all of this discussion. Public-public partnerships are crucial, especially when we look to things such as climate change and consider what we have seen in, for example, south-south exchanges. A delegation from South Africa, including the higher education minister, was here last week. There is huge scope for collective work with public investment. If the Covid-19 pandemic taught us anything, it was the crucial role of public research, and so much research is funded publicly, being available for public benefit and for the public good. The partnerships we can have across the world, not just within the European Union, are crucial in that regard.

I will talk about partnerships within the European Union. I have long been a champion of Horizon funding. There were many positive things within it, including the drive for gender equality. The Athena SWAN programme came from Horizon. However, I am very concerned that, as the successor to Horizon is being negotiated, there needs to be a strong voice for the ethical in that conversation. We know that, in July, the European Commission proposed suspending Israel from the Horizon programme due to the increasing humanitarian disaster but it failed to reach a majority at that time. Israel has been one of the largest beneficiaries of

Horizon research funding. A total €1.3 billion came from the EU Horizon research programme 2014 to 2020 and a further €1.1 billion has come since 2021. Some of that funding has gone, for example, to the Israeli Ministry of Defense. A sum of €2.7 million was given to Israel Aerospace Industries, a major defence, intelligence and weapons systems manufacturer that advertises combat-proven technology.

6 o'clock

It is advertising weaponry and technologies of war that have been used in Gaza in breach of international law and basic humanitarian decency.

Consultations for the next round of Horizon Europe funding are ongoing. The consultation began in September and the deadline for inputs is February 2026. I urge the Minister to be a strong voice on this issue. We need the majority in relation to suspension from the existing programme, but the negotiating of the new programme must start from a presumption that we do not enter that programme in a context where we cannot be sure of how the research into these technologies will be used. Will it be used to further our collective humanity, by addressing issues like climate and others, or will it be used to inflict misery on our fellow humans? It is still possible to suspend for the 2028 to 2034 period and it is possible to shape the next Horizon Europe programme in a way that is really effective.

My final point is one I promised I would mention. I was very happy to be at the launch today of the global citizenship education report from the Irish Development Education Association, IDEA. The Minister will be aware that there is huge potential for global citizen education in higher education, not simply for those who study international affairs but in terms of global citizenship as a perspective right across many disciplines from the sciences through to the arts. Supporting that kind of connected, joined-up thinking from those in higher education is a real opportunity. IDEA's report includes a list of ideas from youth work focus to research funding and educating higher education policymakers. I know the Minister will look with interest at the report and its strategic plan. Crucially, this is an area whereby we can help to create the ideas people for the future. This applies not just in higher education but also in further education. Those who come back from life experience to re-enter education need to acquire skills but they do not necessarily come just to be trained for specific jobs. They come in with life experience, which can be absolutely transformative for particular disciplines.

Senator Paul Daly: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire. I apologise that I missed his opening statement as I had to attend another meeting. Most of the points I wanted to raise have been mentioned by other speakers. It goes to show there is a common theme and the Minister is very much aware at this stage of the key focus for people. It is hard to believe the Ministry is a mere five years old. When we consider the concerns and issues raised by colleagues and the size of the Minister's workload, on which I compliment him, it is hard to believe his Department did not exist five years ago. It is even harder to believe that when it was established five years ago, the commentary was that we were only creating jobs for the boys with another Ministry. Sometimes, we must try to see the woods from the trees. This is such an important sector that I do not know how we got so far without having a dedicated Minister.

We are covering a lot to do with apprenticeships at the higher education committee at the moment. Therefore, there is no point in my duplicating that discussion here today.

I compliment the Minister on the €500 reduction in third level fees. There was a muddying of the waters as to the permanent nature of that reduction. It is not a temporary measure; that €500 cost is gone for good and it is the beginning of much more to come. Fair play him. He got a hard time over it but he stood tall. He came out the other side and is on the right road now. I compliment him on that and on the extension of the income thresholds for the SUSI grant. The commentary is about the squeezed middle and the people who got nothing in the budget. However, that extension is worth a lot to many families, perhaps not this year but, if they have a leaving certificate student in the family, they will gain from it next year. I am not here to clap the Minister on the back but it is important to acknowledge he is going in the right direction. Of course, there is a lot more to be done.

This really will sound like I am here to clap him on the back but I also welcome his initiative on the National Training Fund by way of the National Training Fund (Amendment) Bill 2025. For too long, that money was just left to accumulate. The Minister has taken the initiative and has plans for it. The Bill is currently on Committee Stage in the Dáil. When it comes to this House, we will not be found wanting in engaging with it. It is vital that the Bill is brought over the line and that the Minister gets his hands on the money and can start investing it. It must be invested in infrastructure within the higher education system. My colleague Senator Dee Ryan and I met with representatives of the universities on these issues. Technology and science have evolved so fast that third level institutions are left with laboratories and technical facilities that are outdated. There must be a massive input into the infrastructure. Before even discussing building student accommodation or new premises, there is a lot of infrastructure that needs upgrading. Artificial intelligence will play a massive role in education as we go forward. A massive capital investment is needed in the technology that will be required by the entire sector. I welcome that the Minister is freeing up the NTF. I hope it will be put to the very best uses to maximise the resources it can provide.

I have previously mentioned something that is a bit of a bugbear of mine. We talk about accommodation, transport costs and fees. The Minister needs to pull heads together to look at timetabling. I know families who are to the pin of their collar paying for four years of accommodation and fees. When the timetable comes out in October, their son or daughter has something like one lecture on a Monday, two on a Tuesday, none on a Wednesday, one on a Thursday and four on a Friday. There are four-year courses that are being dragged out to take four years. That is for the financial gain of the institution and it is the families paying for it. Let us consider the saving to a family if a student could do a four-year course in three years. That is a 25% saving on accommodation, transport and fees. It is quite doable.

That point was hammered home for me at the weekend when I read about a lecturer giving one lecture a week and being paid €175,000. I recognise that institutions may be contractually tied into an arrangement for previous employment but reading that hammered home the issue. The Minister needs to put a group together to examine this matter. It is so frustrating for parents to pay out for accommodation for their son or daughter 100 miles away, whether in Limerick, Galway or wherever, only to telephone their child and hear he or she had only one lecture that day. It is costing parents a fortune to have their child going to one lecture, then going into town and visiting the library. This situation can be changed. The duration of many courses could be reduced by 25%. If that were to happen, it would be a massive game-changer when it comes to the affordability of third level for the families involved.

Senator Gareth Scahill: I welcome the Minister once again to the Chamber. Like the previous speaker, I will not spend my time clapping him on the back but nor will I kick him. If he is a success in his Ministry, we will all benefit. That is how we must look at it. Budget 2026 shows that he listened to what people were saying and he delivered where he could deliver. As Senator Dee Ryan said, he put a mechanism in place in respect of student fees that will enable sustainable delivery. I hope he will answer what other speakers asked about giving a clear path as to where that will go.

As I said, the Minister listened. I welcome the funding for medicine and nursing education, which will deliver 1,100 additional places, or an increase of 25%. That increase is much-needed in our economy at the moment. I noted the provision for 20 additional dentistry places this year. I especially welcome that because it was one of the first issues I raised in this Chamber back in February. There is a shortage in capacity for people with medical cards to access dentists. I hope the Minister will continue on that path. I welcome that he has listened to people in respect of these measures. Earlier this year, Senator Boyhan and I tabled a joint Commencement matter on the lack of dental hygienists. There are only 20 places available in Ireland for dental hygienist trainees. There is huge demand for their services. Trained hygienists are travelling abroad and not coming back. An expansion in training places will alleviate pressure on dentists. The dentists being trained now will be able to be targeted in the services they can deliver for people in our constituencies. Dental hygienist training is a big sector and I hope the Minister will look at it next.

The next area is apprenticeships. The National Survey of Apprentices 2024-2025 stated there were 28,434 apprentices in 2024. Budget 2026 has allocated additional funds of €79 million, enabling an additional 12,500 apprenticeships by 2030. That is once again an example of the Minister listening to what has been said in this House, in the Lower House and on the ground and delivering on that. I mentioned after budget 2026 that it allocated €130 million to house adaptation grants for older people. It allocated €140 million for retrofitting social homes. As we know, both of these grants take time to process and complete. That is mainly down to the lack of skilled tradespeople on the ground able to do that particular work. In the Generation Apprenticeship progress report 2024 and plans for 2025, statistics show huge progress in apprenticeships and the availability of them. However, I note that capacity in carpentry and joinery places is only increasing by 8%. Places in plastering, which is a key skill in retrofitting and insulation, are only increasing by 3%. Permanent places are only increasing by 13% for the new heating systems. I looked a few moments ago and industrial insulation is down 25%. Wind turbine maintenance technicians are down by 71%. There is a capacity issue and demand out there. I welcome the sectors mentioned here where there is potential for apprenticeships moving forward. The Minister sent a letter to me on 2 May 2025. He should not worry because this is not bad. He stated, "Solas and my Department will continue to work with GRETB to support ongoing consideration of current and future FET provision for the Roscommon and wider region to ensure that appropriately scaled infrastructure is in place to meet the needs of learners." Senator Joe Conway mentioned regional balance and delivering apprenticeships where they are needed most. I welcome the opportunity for the Minister to meet with the GRETB, me and any other representatives interested to see if we can agree on a plan that might deliver much-needed apprenticeships in places like Roscommon, one of the few counties without such a centre. It is regional balance, and it would help the costs for people doing the study. I also highlight that the important thing with apprenticeships is the opportunity. The difference between apprenticeships and a third level course is the opportunity to earn while you learn. That is the real thing we need to push.

Senator Aubrey McCarthy: I thank the Minister for being here. It is good to have him, and he is welcome. We have talked about higher education. I want to talk about the human aspect of it and lives that have been transformed, challenged and shaped through higher education in our country. I believe our universities are more than lecture halls and libraries. They are places where ambition meets access and where the next generation of Irish citizens is formed. I was elected by the graduates of Trinity College, which itself is a cornerstone of intellectual life and a symbol of what can be achieved when education is allowed to flourish. Trinity has produced leaders in science, business and politics. Last week, I was there with the Minister to launch the strategic review. I was sitting in the exam hall. He was an undergraduate, then a postgraduate and now is a Minister in the hall where he was no doubt nervous doing his exams in the first place. It shows the potential of what entities and institutions like Trinity College can do. It has an outreach programme called the Trinity Access Programme, with which I am familiar through my homeless work. It has a commitment to inclusion and works not only to diversify the student body, but it opens doors for younger people in education. No matter what their background or bank balance is, their lives can change. That is the kind of Ireland we need to focus on, where a child from a disadvantaged community has the same equality and chance to succeed as a child of privilege. I know education remains one of the biggest divides in our society.

I will give an example of two guys the Minister met. They arrived at my homeless work in the Lighthouse a number of years ago looking for help. They had no education. They had no level of education. We got them into a college in Dublin to do a level 5. Unfortunately, they were living rough, so they were studying in McDonald's and they both failed the level 5. They had to repeat the whole year. I asked their permission to ring their lecturer, and they allowed me. I rang the lecturer and told her these people were living in adverse circumstances. I asked if it was possible for them to be allowed to repeat the module rather than the full year. I knew that if they were repeating the year we would have lost them. She said that if they cannot stand the heat they should not be in the kitchen. I went onto LinkedIn and found Dr. Joe Collins in South East Technological University and told him the story. I said that these guys could kick the ball out of the park if given the opportunity. He put a challenge to me and said he would back their education and give them a chance if I could try to get them accommodation. I did my part, and we got them accommodation. The two guys went and did their degree. They did their Masters degrees, they did a second Masters degree and were awarded an academic excellence award by the previous Minister for Education. It showed me that opportunity in education can transform lives. One of those guys recently bought a house. Nobody can afford houses anymore, but this guy did. It showed that education has transformed his life. That is the power of education and belief. It is also the power of the other supports necessary.

My colleagues mentioned rent for students and supported grants. It is impossible to get accommodation as a worker, never mind as a student. We are pricing people out of education, not through education alone, but through the likes of supported housing initiatives. Even if you look at the Funding the Future report it highlights a serious shortfall in core funding for our institutions. We need to look at that, but we need to look at supporting the individuals. That is the true measure of where education can make a difference in lives changed and not just in numbers published. At the Trinity event the provost spoke about the huge shortfall in its own funding. In order for institutions to be supported to take in students from disadvantaged backgrounds we need to focus on that. We have amazing institutions in Ireland like UCG, UL or DCU and all the way along. They should be places where young people like those I have mentioned should not only dream of education, but where they can take advantage of it.

I am confident the Minister has a vision, and I am confident he will bring it to pass. Education is one of the greatest equalisers and we need the barriers for people who have been in generations of poverty to be lifted. We need to make sure it continues, and I thank the Minister for his support of what we are doing in the homeless community.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Nicole Ryan): Before moving to our final speaker, I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Collins, and his guest to the Seanad. They are welcome.

Senator Martin Conway: I thank the Minister. I can call him Minister now. The last time he was in this Chamber, I referred to him as Minister even though he was Chair of a committee. He might remember it because I did not recognise him. I always knew he would be a Minister, so I congratulate him. As he knows, I advocate a lot for people with disabilities. As somebody with a disability I benefited enormously from the opportunity to go to college in a time when you had to really work hard because very few with disabilities, and certainly very few with vision impairments, got to go to college or university. That situation has sadly not changed dramatically. While the technologies and so on have improved, unfortunately the numbers per head of population of visually impaired and blind people getting to university are not getting to the level they should. I was delighted to be part of launching a bursary and I have run fundraisers to fund a separate bursary run by Vision Ireland to fund so many students per year. I think it is a grant of €1,500 per year as a grant towards Saturday work because many of them cannot get Saturday work. If they did, it would compromise their ability to study and pass their exams. I would like to see some sort of task force put in place to look at people with sensory disabilities and why the numbers of deaf people, blind people and people with disabilities in further education are not improving. Our universities are accessible. They are wheelchair accessible and the lifts, libraries and so on are accessible but, sadly, we are not seeing the numbers going to college that we should be seeing. The HEAR programme is very welcome.

I am conscious that I have very little time. There is an awful lot more I would like to say but we need to look at paid graduate placement programmes for people with disabilities to prove to industry, business and so on that, once they get the opportunity, they are very capable of doing the job. I wish the Minister well. I really believe he is going to be a transformative Minister for further and higher education. I wish him the best of luck.

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy James Lawless): I thank all of the Senators very much. I had a prepared speech but I am going to set it aside because it would be far more useful to reply to the contributions made in the course of the debate and to engage with the different points that were made. There was a lot of commonality in the contributions, which makes that easier.

I thank Senator Dee Ryan for the reminder that Donogh O'Malley was from Limerick. I have no doubt that the Senator will also go on to great things in the fields of education and politics.

Donogh O'Malley led the way, followed by Lemass and Whitaker. That was the beginning of the construction of the knowledge economy we so rightly prize today. Senator Ryan also made a number of points regarding the National Training Fund, as did many other speakers. Senator Paul Daly met with the IUA and other stakeholders and the point was reaffirmed that it is imperative to invest in infrastructure and to implement Funding the Future, the Government response to the Cassells report. I am doing that through the National Training Fund. A Bill in that regard passed Second Stage in the Dáil just last week and will now move swiftly to Committee Stage. I expect it will make its way here in the near future. That is very important and it is something we are very much working on.

I will pass Senator Joe Conway's regards on to my mother. She was my original educator and also worked in education for many years. It is good to hear that she and the Senator have that friendship. With regard to apprentices in the councils, I heard the story the Senator told regarding Waterford City and County Council. He was rightly shocked that there were no apprentices at the time he inquired. We have an action plan for apprenticeships in the public sector. We should lead by example. If we are going to encourage and call upon private companies to hire apprentices, we need to be doing the same. We have an action plan as to how to do that, which I brought to Cabinet just recently. It is growing and we are getting there but we have a long way to go. There are a number of apprentices in my own Department, including a digital marketing apprentice. As the Senator rightly said, there are now many different types of apprenticeships across many fields that might not even have been considered many years ago. That is certainly coming through. The Senator also referred to underfunding in respect of the backlog at phases 2 and 4 of apprenticeships. That is being addressed. I have worked that through. Clearing that backlog did require additional funding but it is now progressing.

Senator Kennelly welcomed the permanent reduction in fees. I thank him for that. It is certainly very positive. It is permanent and is now constant in the baseline forevermore. A number of Senators asked about where we go next. As I said in a recent press conference, there is no limit to my ambition but there is a limit to my resources. I will make a general comment across the board. We have heard various calls, all of which I agree with. We must honour the pay deals that have been negotiated. We are also talking about Funding the Future, research and innovation funding, student accommodation, increasing grants and thresholds, disabilities and mental health. These are all things I have addressed in this budget. I will go as far as I can on the fees each year but there is a significant cost to doing that. This year, when I had less than €300 million in new money, €110 million would have been expended on a €1,000 reduction. What should have I cancelled? Would it have been the mental health measures, which cost €1 million? Would it have been the changes to the thresholds, the targeted maintenance grants, the pay deal, Funding the Future or student accommodation? There are choices. Every choice has an opportunity cost associated with it.

This budget was the first of what I hope to be a five-year term. I will work to expand on these measures every year and to make college more affordable but I firmly believe this should be done through a combination of measures. We need targeted interventions such as the maintenance grants, raising the thresholds and increasing funding for students with disabilities as well as universal measures such as fees cuts. I say these are universal but really they affect middle- and higher-income families because lower-income families do not pay fees at all because they are covered by SUSI. That is particularly true now, when the threshold is up to

€120,000. Some families that would have paid €2,000 last year will get paid €2,000 because the thresholds have gone up. A family with an income of €119,000 will have the €500 permanent cut that is there for everybody but they will also have the new €500 fee grant because the threshold is €120,000. This year, that family is paying €2,000, which is the same as they did last year. They are getting there in a different way. There is a different sum to get there.

I would like to do a number of other things, some of which we discussed in this House last year. Earlier in the year, Senator Dee Ryan brought up larger families where there are multiple siblings in college at one time. There is a number of other things I am working on and trying to pilot but some of them take time to process. It takes time to design the policy intervention and get it through. In short, there is a number of things I would like to do around student supports next year, the year after and for as long as I continue to serve. I welcome the engagement from this House and from the Members because it is in these exchanges that we come up with ideas.

A few colleagues mentioned the abolition of fees. That is not in the programme for Government. The programme for Government, which is my bible and guides everything I do, talks about a continued reduction, which I have started this year. That does not mean we will not get there. I cannot look forward to the next five years because we do not know what the fiscal situation will be. We do not know what kind of shocks or black swans will arise. We had three black swans in the last five years. Nobody could have predicted that. In the last Government, the Minister, Deputy Foley, brought in free schoolbooks and free school meals. They were not in the programme for Government so, just because it is not there, it does not mean it cannot be done. The yardstick I work to is the programme for Government, which commits to a continued reduction. It also commits to continuing to increase targeted measures such as those I have spoken about, SUSI grants, the thresholds and so forth. Among the other points Senator Kennelly made, he raised SOLAS and apprenticeships. I have addressed that backlog and secured additional funding to clear it.

To respond to Senator Tully, I mentioned fees. We talked about the ambition in that regard a minute ago, although the fiscal reality is that we can only do so much. Every euro we spend on one thing is a euro we cannot spend on something else. On student accommodation, as the Senator rightly said, we do not need bells and whistles and frills in every single student accommodation development. We need to make them more affordable. I completely agree. In June, I published the student design guide. That provides a template. It is based on architectural consultation. It is on a par with Oxbridge, the Ivy League in the United States and the Nordic universities. It is no way a yellow-label solution. It is a practical solution that seeks to optimise the number of bed spaces and things like shared lounge spaces and common areas. The output is high-quality but there is a standardised design, which should make it more efficient for developers, builders and architects to get to work and maximise the number of beds available. That is very important. In addition, 30% of those beds are ring-fenced for SUSI recipients. That is important for equity.

A number of people mentioned the borrowing framework. I am working on that. To be honest, there is a challenge around that because, under legislation and the statutory framework, a traditional university can borrow off its own balance sheet but, because of how the legislation is structured, technological universities borrow on the State books, which brings EU state aid rules into play. Various different qualifications go with that. Approval is needed from the

Departments of Finance and public expenditure. Other checks and balances get loaded onto that. It is more difficult. It is something I am acutely aware of. I have probably met all of the presidents of the TUs. I am working with my colleagues, the Ministers for Finance and public expenditure, to advance a proposal. I hope to see progress on that very soon, by the end of the year. It is not simple, however. I ask the Members to bear with me on that and to be conscious of the issues.

On the Irish language, I attended BIPA on Monday last week and met some Welsh colleagues who talked about the work they had done on the Welsh language. It is a good model to follow and it is something I will be engaging on with the committee on the Irish language.

On North-South interactions, just yesterday the Minister in the Northern Ireland Executive, Caoimhe Archibald, and I jointly launched the first all-island apprenticeship with Accounting Technicians Ireland. I was proud to be able to do that. It is a 32-county model. The learning outcomes, curriculums and examination process are synchronised across the whole island. I hope to do a lot more of that. That is the first of many. We also fund a number of research projects through the shared island initiative on an all-island basis.

Senator Harmon spoke about Funding the Future. I reiterate my commitment to that. The National Training Fund legislation has now gone through Second Stage in the Dáil. That is coming through. I have also commissioned research on the impacts of different student support interventions. It is very useful to get that feedback, whether on fees, grants, more innovative measures.

Under apprenticeships, Senator Cosgrove spoke to the cost of equipment. In this year's budget, I have allocated a relatively small amount of money, €500,000, for a pilot around equipment placement for students or apprentices who have to purchase a lab coat, a tool or an instrument or who have to spend a week in the Gaeltacht. There are all sorts of things people have to do. There is a small amount of money there for a pilot scheme to look at the needs students have, the different expenses that arise and whether there is an equitable way we can provide funding to those who need it most. That is something I am very mindful of. I have also commissioned a piece of research on the impact of different interventions so that we can understand as many levers that we can more around the cost of education, what levers are the most appropriate and what will deliver which results.

On the sex for rent Bill. I am familiar with that and the work of the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan. When I was chair of the committee, we did a piece of work on that. It is important that this is tackled.

Senator Cosgrove spoke to the apprenticeship piece and the borrowing framework.

I know Senator Alice Mary Higgins is gone now, but I listened to her with interest. I met the South African Minister Manamela and his delegation. I had them in my office at the time. I also met his counterpart, the Minister for innovation, when I was in South Africa for G20 recently. It was a very good interaction. Senator Higgins made a good point about needing space and time to think innovation through in terms of research. It comes dropping slowly. The point was well made. I note the points made about Horizon as well.

I thank Senator Paul Daly for his comments and support. There were some hairy moments. In any Department, there always will be. I do my very best to deliver the best package with the resources available to me, which, unfortunately, are finite. The NTF Bill is going through, as are the apprenticeships. He made a really good point about timetabling. We talk about utilisation of facilities. If we have labs, ETB buildings and apprenticeship schools, they are sitting idle for half the day or for one of the days. My own daughter recently graduated. There is often one class on a Friday for an hour. Students may be commuting 90 minutes each way to get up and down for that one-hour class. Students may be juggling a part-time job as well, not to mention going to the library and all the other things such as having a social life. It is a real issue and I am going to commission a piece of work into the utilisation to see if we can do better.

Senator Scahill talked about the 1,100 additional places and dentistry, and he is right. I was very pleased last week to be able to visit RCSI and I have funded it for 35 additional places in dentistry. It uses a particular model there where the trainee dentist gets going on week two or week three on actual dummies and mannequins, unlike traditional models where it is all book learning for year one or two and then going to year three. It is a different way of delivering it. It is a very modern school there. I was delighted to be able to fund that and support it in that. We need to continue that across other fields. I would be happy to visit GRETB with the Senator. I was in Mervue at the start of the summer. I know the Minister of State, Deputy Harkin, has been down as well. I would be happy to take up that invitation at some stage.

Senator McCarthy is gone, but I am very familiar with his work. I visited a school in the Trinity access programme just last week for maths week. The school is in challenged circumstances in the Pearse Street area. I met some of the students and talked about maths and maths week. We did some kind of maths magic, which is a fun way to engage their minds in it. I recognise Senator McCarthy's work. He mentioned the Bobinac twins. I know them both. I met them at the Senator's various functions locally, but they are a really great example of how education can lift all and really elevate. They are wonderful young men doing really great work.

I thank Senator Martin Conway for his contribution. I have increased the fund for students with disabilities by €3 million this year. I am delighted to be able to do that. There is different additional funding that goes with the rest of it. I often think of David Blunkett, who was a Labour Party Secretary of State in the UK. He travelled by train to Westminster from his constituency of Sheffield every week. What was really remarkable was that he went on to be Home Secretary and a number of things. He was visually impaired.

Senator Martin Conway: I had him in here one time. He is a great guy.

Deputy James Lawless: That is fantastic. I would have loved to have met him. He is sort of an icon. What was really fascinating about him was his battle on the council in Sheffield in the seventies and eighties. When he got to be Home Secretary he had a certain level of support. It was even more remarkable that he was able to cut through the feuding and challenges we all have coming through local government. He is a remarkable man and has a remarkable story. I always think of people like him when I am making these assessments. I was very pleased to be able to allocate additional moneys into those funds. Of course, there was an additional €1 million for mental health in the budget as well.

To reiterate and as was said, education has the potential to be transformative. My vision is of an economic driver and an equal enabler to enable equality of access and opportunity and, through that, drive the economy. I thank Senators for the opportunity for the debate and for staying for it. It is useful to have the interaction. I know they do it in here, but I ask them to please continue to approach me with ideas, thoughts, suggestions and critiques when they need to. My door is always open.

Cost of Childcare: Motion

Acting Chairperson (Senator Shane Curley): Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire, an Teachta Foley.

Senator Pauline Tully: I move:

That Seanad Éireann:

condemns:

- Budget 2026, which breaks the pre-election promises of the Government parties to deliver childcare to parents for €200 a month;

acknowledges:

- the high costs of childcare that continue to exist with some parents paying over €1,000 per month;
- that access to high quality early learning and care is fundamental to children’s wellbeing and development;
- the vital role played by Early Years Educators in delivering quality care and learning experiences;
- that quality provision depends on a skilled, supported, and fairly remunerated workforce;
- the challenges that exist in the Early Years Sector, including for parents trying to afford and access childcare places and for educators when it comes to pay and terms and conditions;
- the thousands of children on waiting lists for childcare places;
- the serious deficiencies in capacity in our childcare sector;
- the Early Years Educators who have been underpaid and undervalued by successive Governments;

calls on Government to reconsider its Budget 2026 provisions and make the investment necessary to:

- deliver childcare to parents for €10 per day;

- ensure improved terms and conditions for childcare staff to address the retention and recruitment crisis and expand the capacity of the sector.

Senator Nicole Ryan: I second the motion.

Senator Pauline Tully: I am sharing time my Senator Ryan. Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire. I thank her for making sure she was here. I know we delayed it for a week so that she could. I appreciate that she is here for the motion. It is a short motion with a number of asks. I want to deal with the first one on the cost of childcare. Many families are still paying very high costs. As a result of those high costs, some are choosing not to return to work because it is not worth their while. That primarily affects women - not always, but primarily. I hear of families still paying, depending on where they are in the country, up to €1,500 a month. I think the average is €800, which is still high. It is like a second mortgage. High costs are a barrier to formal childcare. They are a barrier to female labour market participation. They see an increase in child poverty.

Last year, prior to the alternative budget, we in Sinn Féin announced that we would advocate for €10 per child per day in childcare. This is something that was taken up by Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil. That is to be welcomed. I know it was something in election manifestos of all the main parties. However, there were no reductions in this budget toward the cost of childcare. It is something I thought would have started in this budget at least and continued over the next two years to reduce the cost. It is more challenging for families who are on a lower income to access childcare when the costs are significant. While I will acknowledge there have been subsidies and reductions, it does not actually benefit all of the families.

Some countries, like Norway and Finland in particular, have led the way where they have a publicly led childcare system. That has seen costs to parents fall dramatically. It is something that we should be looking at in this country as well. I note that there are a number of private operators that are not in core funding. Therefore, the families accessing those services are not benefiting from the reductions that they get through the national childcare scheme and core funding. What are the barriers or what can we do to ensure that all private operators are brought on board? Some were in core funding and left it. Some of that is to do with the bureaucracy involved or the fact fees were frozen while they were still quite low. Some parents choose to have their children minded by a childminder. While they cannot access core funding, a lot of them are not accessing the national childcare scheme. I think there are fewer than 150 registered nationally. We need to examine why that is and how we can bring more childminders on board so we can reduce fees.

Throughout last year's general election campaign the then Taoiseach, Deputy Harris made continual references to a public childcare model being a key priority of Fine Gael were it to be returned to government. The programme for Government seems to have stepped away from this and instead commits the Government to "...undertake a broad consultation and publish a detailed Action Plan to build an affordable, high-quality, accessible early childhood education ... system ..." and add State-led capacity where needed. I do not think that consultation has started. Maybe the Minister could update us on that because I am not aware of anything having begun and it needs to begin as soon as possible. I urge the Government to examine the public model and investigate it. I am not saying it is a simple case of rolling something out as there are different models in other countries that could be looked at for ideas. If we have a public model of childcare that includes early education and after-school care, it will deliver affordability for parents and families and will give sustainability to providers, but it will also give quality for children and staff.

On our early educators, as of their latest wage increase, they are on €15 per hour. The national minimum wage is due to rise in January to €14.50. That means our early educators, some of whom have level 7 and level 8 degrees, are only receiving 75 cent per hour above the national minimum wage. We need to look at better pay for them. Many of them are leaving the sector - and that is one of the issues with capacity that I will deal with further later – but they are leaving and going into teaching or into schools as SNAs. We need highly-qualified personnel within our childcare model to ensure we deliver the quality our children need.

A public model of childcare will guarantee access, quality and affordability in every community. I want to ensure every child gets fairness in our childcare model regardless of their parents' income or address. We want to see every child accessing high-quality early childhood education and care. It is achievable. As I referenced, other countries are doing it and we need to look at that and ensure we are delivering it here as well. We have a public healthcare system. It might not always work as we want it to work, but it is there and it works pretty well in most cases. We also have a public education system and that works really well, so we need to model early childhood education on that. It will mean long-term planning as it is not going to happen overnight. We need to look at capital planning for areas where there is need. We need to integrate better with our schools, our communities and our local authorities. We also need to embed Irish-medium provision as a core element within early childhood education. We should ensure there is outdoor play and inclusivity in all of them as standard and recognise early years as part of our public education continuum. If we invest in childcare, we are investing in children, in equality and in the future economy. Every euro spent on quality early education will return multiple times in social and economic benefits in the years to come.

I mentioned capacity and there are issues with that. In some cases, it is a shortage of physical space and in others, it is a shortage of staff. The building blocks scheme is a good one but it is for existing providers to extend their premises or buy or construct new buildings. Could this not be extended to new providers in the system and to include existing buildings? We have a huge level of vacancy, especially in our towns and villages. What better place to put our childcare facilities than embedded in a village or a town? These buildings have been constructed. Some of them are not in bad condition and could easily and very quickly be turned around to be suitable for the provision of early education. It would be a much faster solution. In the budget there was talk about extending schools and community centres, but the Minister was previously Minister for Education and she knows there are schools waiting for additional classrooms that are urgently needed, yet they are left waiting years for those to progress through the building section of the Department. We need classrooms for children with additional needs who cannot be educated locally because those classrooms and that space is not available. I cannot see how that is going to address the capacity issues that currently exist.

Senator Kyne submitted an amendment to the motion. Part of it "acknowledges that there continues to be evidence of some families having difficulty finding appropriate places at a cost that is affordable". We have 40,000 children on waiting lists. How can the Senator say it is only some families? It is a huge waiting list. I have referenced the cost. Nothing was done in the budget about the cost for families. Nothing was done in the budget about pay for educators.

We need those issues tackled, as well as the capacity issue, to ensure every child has an opportunity to avail of early childhood education and that parents are able to work after maternity leave and are not coming into my office in tears because they cannot go back to work and must stay at home and look after the children because they cannot find suitable childcare.

Senator Nicole Ryan: I support this motion, which is not just welcome but urgently needed. Across the constituency of Cork North-West, from Millstreet to Macroom and Charleville to Ballyvourney, I hear stories from parents and providers alike. Families are under pressure. Parents are going out to work to pay for childcare. In many cases, their monthly fees are higher than their mortgage. For a young mother in Kanturk or father in Newmarket that means going to work not to get ahead or save for the future, but simply to keep their place in the crèche. That is the reality of what is happening. Spaces are scarce everywhere but in rural Ireland it is even worse. Mothers who have only just found out they are pregnant are putting their unborn children on waiting lists, hoping and praying that by the time the maternity leave ends a space might open up. That level of anxiety and planning years in advance is not normal, healthy or fair. Families are trapped in a system that simply does not work. While there are stay-at-home fathers, it is mostly women, as always, who pay the highest price. Too many are being forced to step back or step away from their careers entirely because it does not make financial sense to work when all their earnings go straight to paying childcare fees. This motion is welcome because it faces the truth head-on. It recognises the current model is broken and is failing families, educators and children alike. What is needed is not another glossy press release but real structural change, like investment in a public model that delivers €10 per day childcare, fair pay for early educators and capacity where families actually live.

Senator Kyne's amendment is quite extraordinary. It reads like the Government is patting itself on the back while parents are barely hanging on. It speaks of unprecedented growth in funding, major achievements, award-winning models and pathways set out in the programme for Government. It speaks not once to the lived experience of families struggling right now. Government Senators can quote all the percentages and policy frameworks they like but none of that will change the fact parents are paying well over €1,000 per month for a service they can hardly find. None of it helps a mother who is driving 40 minutes each way because every crèche close to her home is full. None of it helps the early years educator earning less than a supermarket cashier, despite holding a degree and caring for our most precious little ones. Senator Kyne's amendment might make for a nice Department briefing but it completely ignores what is happening on the ground. It is detached and frankly insulting to those who live with this crisis every day. We are not here to congratulate the Government on how well it thinks it is doing, we are here to tell the truth about how far short it is falling. If things were working as well as the amendment suggests, we would not have parents in tears at kitchen tables wondering how they will pay next month's bill.

Childcare should be a public service and not a private burden. It should enable parents, especially mothers, to participate fully in work and not push them out of it. It should give every child the best start in life and not just those of parents who can afford the fees. The motion is about fairness, equality and the future of our communities. Families are not asking for luxuries, they are asking for the basics of an affordable place, a qualified educator and a bit of stability. The truth is they are still waiting. Instead of patting ourselves on the back we need to get on with the work. We need to build a public model of early years education that treats childcare as essential infrastructure which does not force parents to choose between a career and their children, and finally delivers on all of the promises that have been awaited far too long.

Senator Margaret Murphy O'Mahony: I move amendment No. 2:

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

"welcomes the significant prioritisation by the Government of measures designed to:

- reduce out-of-pocket costs of early learning and childcare for families;

- better align the supply of State-subsidised early learning and childcare with demand; and

- increase the pay and improve the working conditions of early years educators and school-age childcare practitioners, as well as develop career pathways and promote careers in the sector, in line with Nurturing Skills, the Workforce Plan (2021-2028);

acknowledges the unprecedented growth in State funding in the sector, which has increased by 161 per cent since 2020, with the Budget 2026 allocation to be €1.48 billion;

acknowledges and welcomes the major achievements of the funding model recommended in the Partnership for Public Good to deliver increased investment accompanied by increased public management, in particular:

- the continued implementation of the National Childcare Scheme, with approximately 35,000 additional children or 286,000 children in total set to benefit from subsidies in 2026, including children in childminding settings;

- the continuation of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme that will benefit more than 105,000 children in 2026 – which enjoys uptakes rates in excess of 96 per cent and has removed barriers to accessing pre-school education, with data from a recent review showing that more than 40 per cent of families would not have been able to send their child to pre-school without this programme;

- the award-winning Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), that will support up to 9,000 children with a disability to access the ECCE programme in 2026, with AIM now expanded beyond the ECCE programme, where ECCE children are benefitting from AIM support outside the ECCE programme hours – both in term and out, and AIM capitation increasing by 10 per cent to bring rates into line with new rates of pay for early years educators under the updated Employment Regulation Orders;

- Equal Start – the funding model and set of universal and targeted measures to support access to, and participation in, early learning and childcare for children and their families who experience disadvantage, with the number of settings designated as priority settings in receipt of targeted supports to rise from 787 to 820 in 2026;

- Core Funding – with the allocation of €393 million in year 4 of the scheme (September 2025-August 2026) set to rise by at least 11 per cent in year 5 (September 2026-August 2027) to at least €437 million - to support a range of important priorities, including:

- accessibility for families through funding for growth in the sector at 4.2 per cent;

- affordability to support services to sustainably maintain fee management conditions, including new maximum fee caps benefitting parents facing the highest fees across the country;

- quality through support with the costs of the new Employment Regulation Orders that commenced on 13 October through which approximately 67 per cent of staff working in the sector will see an increase in pay;

acknowledges and welcomes the major progress in implementation of the National Action Plan for Childminding (2021-2028), with the commencement of Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) (Childminding Services) Regulations 2024 and relevant sections of the Child Care (Amendment) Act 2024 making it possible for childminders to start applying to Tusla to go through the registration process, and once registered by Tusla, to apply to take part in the National Childcare Scheme;

acknowledges and welcomes the latest data from a range of sources that shows capacity in the early learning and childcare sector is increasing in terms of the number of places and hours of provision that services are offering, the number of places opening and the number of staff in the early learning and childcare workforce, with:

- data from the Early Years Sector Profile Survey showing that, between 2021/22 and 2023/24, the estimated number of enrolments in services rose by 19 per cent from 197,185 to 234,597;

- data from Tusla on service closures and new service registrations showing a net increase of 226 in the overall number of services in 2024 and a six-year low in the number of service closures;

- data from the Early Years Sector Profile Survey showing that, between 2021/22 and 2022/23, the estimated number of staff in the early learning and childcare workforce rose by 8 per cent from 34,357 to 37,060.

Seanad Éireann also:

acknowledges that there continues to be evidence of some families having difficulty finding appropriate places at a cost that is affordable and that despite progress in recent years, owing to intervention by the State, the workforce in the sector remains a low-paid one;

acknowledges and welcomes the development of a Forward Planning and Delivery Unit, with important work underway in that Unit to develop a forward planning model and explore options to introduce public provision to operate alongside private and community providers where there are shortfalls in capacity, supported by €36 million in capital funding in 2026, which will enable for the first time the acquisition of buildings by the Department of Children, Disability and Equality to begin an element of State-led early learning and childcare.

Seanad Éireann welcomes:

- the commitment by Government to a reduction in fees paid by parents to €200 per month over its lifetime;

- the Budget 2026 announcement of new maximum fee caps in 2026 that will reduce costs for families paying the highest fees across the country as a key step towards that €200 per month target;

- enhancements in Year 5 of the scheme to improve pay for educators and school age childcare practitioners with implementation of new Employment Regulation Orders;

- the work underway to develop an Action Plan to '*build an affordable, high-quality, accessible early education and care system with State-led facilities adding capacity*', with the Action Plan to be published in two phases, with the second phase to follow after undertaking a broad public consultation, in line with the commitment in the Programme for Government. The Action Plan will set out plans to achieve Programme for Government commitments, including the commitment to reduce maximum monthly fees to €200 over the lifetime of the Government.

While noting that further developments and investment are required, Seanad Éireann recognises that there are many positive and progressive elements to the current early learning and childcare sector and acknowledges the pathway for improving access, affordability and quality is set out in the new Programme for Government."

Senator Garret Ahearn: I second the amendment.

Senator Margaret Murphy O'Mahony: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire chun an tSeanaid. Tá mé an-bhuíoch di as a bheith anseo anocht. I am honoured to speak today on a matter that touches the heart of every community in Ireland, which is early learning and childcare. Fianna Fáil welcomes this debate and our commitment is clear. It is to make Ireland a great place to raise a family, where every child is given an equal start in life and equal opportunities throughout their journey. We all know the early years of a child's life are the most formative. They shape not only the child's future but the future of our society. This is why investing in early learning and childcare is not just a policy decision, it is a moral imperative.

Since 2020 we have doubled State investment in childcare. This is not only a statistic, it is a transformation. Families now pay 36% less for early learning and childcare than they did in 2022. This is real relief for parents and real support for providers. It means more children can access quality care and more parents can return to work or education with peace of mind, if they wish to do so. In budget 2026 we have allocated €1.48 billion to the sector. This funding will support an additional 35,000 children under the national childcare scheme, bringing the total to more than 286,000. This is a 14% increase. This is proof of our commitment to access, affordability and quality.

We know that investment alone is not enough. Pay and conditions in the sector have long been a challenge. This is why we warmly welcome the adoption of the new employment regulation orders. These will raise minimum hourly wages for early years educators and school age childcare practitioners, some by as much as €2 per hour. Approximately 67% of staff will see their wages increase. This is not only about fairness, it is about recognising the vital role these professionals play in shaping our children's futures.

Let me pause here to acknowledge the educators, the people who every morning greet our children, nurture their curiosity and help them to grow socially and emotionally. They are not just workers, they are builders of our futures and they deserve to be valued, respected and fairly compensated.

We are also expanding support for children with disabilities through the award-winning access and inclusion model, AIM. In 2026 up to 9,000 children will benefit, with AIM now extending beyond the ECCE hours. This will ensure that every child, regardless of ability, can participate meaningfully in early education. Inclusion is not luxury; it is a necessity. Our equal start programme is another pillar of progress. It targets disadvantage with universal and tailored supports, including nutrition programmes, language development and inclusion training. In 2026 the number of priority settings receiving targeted supports will rise to 820. This means more Traveller and Roma children, more children with language delays and more families facing hardship will be supported in a meaningful way.

We are not stopping there. The Government is developing a forward planning and delivery unit to explore public provision alongside private and community providers. With €36 million in capital funding we will begin acquiring buildings for State-led childcare, which is an historic step forward. This will allow us to respond to gaps in provision and ensure that no child is left behind due to geography or affordability. We remain focused on affordability. Our goal is to reduce fees to €200 per month. Budget 2026 introduces new maximum fee caps to help families facing the highest costs. This is a key step forward towards the target. For many families this could mean the difference between struggling and thriving. We also continue to support the early childhood care and education programme, which benefits more than 105,000 children annually. Uptake rates exceed 96% and data shows that more than 40% of families would not have been able to send their child to a preschool without it. This is the power of public investment.

While challenges do remain, the pathway is clear. We are building a system that is affordable, high quality and accessible. We are investing in our children. We are supporting our educators and we are strengthening our communities. Let us continue this journey together with ambition, compassion and determination. When we invest in our children, we invest in the future of Ireland.

Senator Garret Ahearn: I welcome the Minister to the Chamber and I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. About six years ago if I were told I had to stand up to talk about childcare, I would not have had a clue what I was talking about. Now that I have two boys who are five and three I feel like I am an expert on childcare, the cost of childcare and, particularly, the thing I learned very quickly, childcare providers. The two providers I know very well are the Play and Learn creche in Clonmel and the Busy Bees after-school service in Grange. The staff are educators and teachers and they are not just minders. My perception six or seven years ago was that a child is just put in and minded, they play away, hopefully they are safe and then they come home and all is good but they learn so much it is phenomenal.

My youngest son Daniel has just started the ECCE and the education he is receiving before he starts primary school is phenomenal. When we speak about funding childcare and places we also need to recognise in the long term that the people who work in childcare are, in my view, teachers. They are no different from primary school teachers or secondary school teachers. From my experience with my two boys, the staff provide an education. I genuinely think my boys are geniuses and it has nothing to do with what I have done as a parent. I give the childcare staff all the credit for it.

On a serious point, today's discussion is welcome. It is very good and important to recognise there are real challenges for people. There are real challenges in terms of costs, particularly here in the capital city. There are certainly challenges in terms of places. The second person you need to tell that a child is due in nine months' time is the owner of a childcare service. What I have realised in the past six years, and what I have certainly noticed, is that the cost has dramatically reduced. When we speak about costs Senator Tully is right that there are people in the country who are spending an awful lot of money, up to €1,500, on childcare. This is a startling amount but it is not the vast majority of people in the country. The fees people pay now have dramatically reduced compared with four or five years ago. To take my example, if I had my two children now, childcare per month would cost less than half of €1,500 and this is the same for anyone in Tipperary. Four or five years ago the cost would have been over €1,000. It has reduced dramatically but this is not to take away from the fact there are problems with the cost and certainly problems in terms of access.

7 o'clock

One of the big changes I have noticed in rural Ireland, and I presume Senator Nicole Ryan has noticed this as well, is that a number of primary schools have taken on after-school care. This has made a dramatic difference for parents because when their children can attend school and avail of after-school care in the same school, they can stay at work until 5 o'clock. My wife and I could not do it. Either my wife or I would have to collect our child at 2.30 p.m., which just is not possible if you have a full day's work. The increase in after-school care has made a big difference.

There have been significant cost reductions over the last four or five years. Although there has not been a reduction this year, there has been an increase in funding of about €125 million. One of the main aspects of that increase in funding is that it allows for the building of new facilities. When we build new facilities, we reduce the cost and open up access. There is a long-term ambition to reach a cost of €200 a month, which hopefully can be done within the lifetime of this Government. If we do not have enough childcare places, however, parents cannot find providers to which to send their children and there is no point in having a maximum of €200 a month.

This is an important debate. If we are going to talk about childcare, we must recognise that a lot has been done in the last five or six years. Although a number of people are still struggling, an awful lot of people have seen the benefit over the last four or five years of the measures that have been taken by the Department in reducing costs, opening up access, setting up schemes that support people from disadvantaged areas and children with additional needs, and providing funding to educate those who want to work in this sector. All of these things will have a knock-on impact. As a Senator said at the start, a number of people who have worked in this sector, having been educated and trained to do so, have decided to leave because financially it is not viable for them to remain. I know the Minister has an action plan and I am interested in hearing its timeline. We need to have an action plan in place to ensure these teachers can see a long-term future and career in this sector. From my perspective, the work they do is phenomenal and that needs to be recognised by the State.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Shane Curley): Anois, an Seanadóir Joe Conway.

Senator Sharon Keogan: We wish to share time and I would like to speak first.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Shane Curley): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Sharon Keogan: I rise today in support of this motion not because I agree with the proposers on everything - far from it - but because on this issue they are right. Budget 2026 has failed Irish families. It has failed mothers and fathers who are working every hour they can just to afford the privilege of placing their children in the care they need so that they can work in the first place. It has failed our children, who deserve nurturing and support, not waiting lists. It has failed to deliver on the promise made by the Government to make childcare available at a cost of €200 a month. That promise now lies in tatters.

Let us be clear. Some families pay over €1,000 a month for childcare. This is not a support system; it is a penalty for having children. In a country that claims to value the family, it is a disgrace. We are told that Ireland is one of the wealthiest nations in Europe. If that is true, how is it that Poland, a country with a lower GDP *per capita*, has this week passed legislation to eliminate income tax for families with two or more children? Why is it that Hungary, with far fewer resources, offers generous maternity benefits, housing benefits and tax exemptions for families who choose to raise children? Yet we have the gall to turn to the world and present ourselves as a modern economic success story. Given that hard-working parents in Ireland fret over each new pregnancy, thinking of how they will manage with new mouths to feed, it is a joke that we call ourselves a developed First World nation. The nations I have mentioned understand that raising a family is not a lifestyle choice. It is the foundation of society and they legislate accordingly. Ireland, by contrast, short-changes parents by bypassing affordability and access while pouring billions of euro into unnecessary programmes such as a bloated NGO sector and an IPAS system which has been described by *The Irish Times* as the wild west of money making. We are told that budget 2026 allocates €1.48 billion to early learning and childcare, but what good is that if the average parent still pays nearly €800 a month out of pocket?

Although Sinn Féin, which proposed this motion, is right to call out the Government's failure, I remind it and this House that Sinn Féin supported the 2024 referendums that endangered the constitutional definition of "family". I hope this motion signals a change of heart in Sinn Féin because you cannot claim to be pro-family while undermining the very foundation of what "family" means in the Constitution.

This motion calls for childcare at a cost of €10 a day, which is a reasonable and achievable goal. It calls for better pay and conditions for early years educators, which is long overdue. It calls for the rethinking of budget 2026, which is essential. I would go further by calling for a more ambitious model not just of childcare but also of support to the family. Such a model would include a stronger programme of public support and services, a tax cut for families, loans to parent families, and greater subsidies for all the essentials that families need. For such a model we need a total overhaul of our mindset, as politicians and as a nation. We need to put children, not budget margins, first. We need a mindset that recognises that supporting families is not a cost but an investment in our future. Let us not pretend that this budget is progressive.

It is not. It is a betrayal of promises that were made and it is a failure of vision. I will not stand by while Irish families are forced to choose between work and children, between rent and crèche fees, and between survival and dignity.

Senator Joe Conway: I compliment our Sinn Féin colleagues in giving some oxygen to this much-pressed issue of childcare. A lot of the comments to date in this debate have been on the macro question. I have consulted my own resource team, notably my son and daughter-in-law and their 11-month-old daughter. We came up with some micro suggestions. I will instance the first problem that they identified. Parents currently face severe uncertainty and stress due to the scarcity of early childcare places. It is self-evident. Many of them have to apply to dozens of providers and often receive confirmation only weeks before the care is needed. This makes it nearly impossible for families to plan return-to-work dates or manage financial and logistical arrangements. The suggested reforms are as follows: first, to introduce a national childcare placement system or centralised waiting list database to increase transparency around availability; second, to require providers to confirm or release places at least three months in advance of the start date; and third, to provide regional and capacity planning and forecasting to enable the Government to proactively expand places in areas where shortages are most acute.

Another reform that is needed involves identifying and guaranteeing continuity of funding and protection from sudden provider withdrawal. The problem is that when providers withdraw from the State's core funding scheme, parents are suddenly faced with large fee increases or must move their children, often mid-year, causing disruption and financial hardship. The suggested reforms in this respect that the Conway family came up with are as follows: to legislate to have a minimum funding stability period - of three years, for example - for any provider participating in the ECCE or core funding schemes; to require advance notice of at least six months be provided to parents and the Department before any provider can exit the scheme; to guarantee that families retain their subsidised rate for the duration of their child's placement, even if the provider later withdraws; and to create a continuity fund to protect parents from unexpected fee spikes caused by provider exits.

I am afraid I am out of time but I suspect that the Minister will hear more from me on this issue. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a bheith ag éisteacht liom.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Shane Curley): Ceapaim go bhfuil an tAire ag iarraidh teacht isteach.

Minister for Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Norma Foley): Gabhaim buíochas as an am agus as an deis labhairt leis an Teach. I am very appreciative of the time and opportunity to speak to Senators here today. I welcome this timely motion tabled by Senators Tully and Ryan of Sinn Féin, and the amendment tabled by Senators Harmon, Cosgrove, Stephenson and Noonan, as an opportunity to debate the important issue of early learning and childcare. I acknowledge and appreciate, as Senator Tully referenced, the manner in which the Seanad has accommodated my presence here. I want to record that. As already outlined, there is an amendment tabled to the motion.

The Opposition motion refers to: "Budget 2026, which breaks the pre-election promises of the Government parties to deliver childcare to parents for €200 a month". I do not accept this.

Budget 2026 is just the first of five budgets that this Government will deliver, and the outcome of this budget is allowing us to take important steps towards that €200 per month target over the lifetime of the Government. I want to be clear that this is what is actually in the programme for Government. I know this because I was involved in putting it together. We were very clear in the programme that it is a commitment to be delivered over the lifetime of the Government.

The Opposition amendment calls for active steps to establish a public model of childcare. Let me be clear: the programme for Government already commits us to delivering increased investment accompanied by increased public management through the funding model recommended in the Partnership for the Public Good expert group report. Furthermore, 2026 will see for the first time ever the acquisition of buildings to provide the infrastructure for State-led early learning and childcare delivery. I know this was very much part of the Labour Party amendment.

Having said all that, I absolutely acknowledge the challenges in the early learning and childcare sector. The cost of early learning and childcare is high for many parents, particularly those who use long hours or have more than one child using services. The supply of early learning and childcare remains uneven for certain cohorts of children, for certain types of provision and in some areas. Despite the progress made with a recent employment regulation order, ERO, to improve pay and conditions for early years educators, the level of pay in the sector does not reflect the value of the work that they do. This Government is confident, however, that the commitments we have made in the programme for Government will address these challenges over the lifetime of this Government. This includes parents paying no more than €200 per month for early learning and childcare, and early learning educators and school-age childcare practitioners being paid at a level that reflects the importance of their work. There will be State-led services operating alongside private and community services, as well as a newly regulated cohort of childminders.

In 2026, current expenditure for early learning and childcare will increase to €1.48 billion, representing a year-on-year increase of 9%, or €125 million. This additional funding will deliver real and meaningful change to the lives of thousands of children and their families as well as to early years educators, school-age childcare practitioners and providers. Indeed, all our indicators for next year point to progress. A total of 105,250 children will be supported to access free preschool education under the ECCE programme next year. We know from a recent review of this programme that 40% of families would not be able to send their child to preschool without this free programme.

Some 286,000 children will benefit from their statutory entitlement to the national childcare scheme subsidies to offset the cost of early learning and childcare next year, including a growing number of children that use childminding settings. This represents a year-on-year increase of 14%, with 35,000 additional children to benefit from the scheme next year. Importantly, the number of children accessing this scheme through a sponsorship arrangement is expected to rise by 3,500 next year. These children face considerable adversity in their young lives and access to early learning and childcare serves to improve their life chances, which is important.

Approximately, 8,400 preschool children with a disability or additional learning need will benefit from the highest level of support provided through the access and inclusion model. This is an increase from 7,900 preschool children who availed of the model in the previous year. In addition, the numbers benefiting from this support outside the ECCE programme, both in term and out of term, will also rise.

Equal Start is the programme of supports for preschool children at risk of educational disadvantage. We will also see an increase in the number of services designated for targeted supports under the programme and an increase in the numbers of children benefiting from these targeted supports. This year, 787 services serving 35,000 children have a priority designation under Equal Start. Next year, we estimate 820 services serving 37,000 children will have this designation. Targeted supports for these services include: funding for additional staff hours; access to the early talk boost programme, which tackles language delay; and access to the new Bia Blasta preschool nutrition programme that provides free daily lunches for preschool children. In addition to this, the Department of Social Protection will extend the back to school clothing and footwear allowance to preschool children from age two next year as part of budget 2026. This welcome development is supporting the delivery of a key Equal Start action to deliver practical needs' funding to support children’s full participation in early learning and childcare.

Next year, the allocation for core funding will rise by 15%, with the allocation for year five of this scheme set to reach at least €437 million. On top of this, the Government will make available additional funding next year for further improvements to staff pay in the sector, as was done this year. That ERO is important. This significant level of funding will support a range of key Government priorities next year and into year five of the core funding scheme, which runs from September 2026 to August 2027. It will allow us to continue to support growth in the sector, which we estimate will be 4.2% in year five of the scheme. It will allow us to continue to support providers with the cost of the ERO that commenced earlier this month, through which 67% of staff working in the sector have seen an increase in their pay. It will allow us to support providers to sustainably maintain the fee management conditions that are attached to core funding. Specifically, throughout 2026 and into year five of the core funding scheme, fees will remain at 2021 levels for the majority of providers who participate in core funding. This is enormously significant in controlling costs for parents and families, particularly in the context of general inflation across the economy since 2021. I cannot think of any other services where we can say fees have been frozen at 2021 rates. There will be further adjustments to the current maximum fee caps in September 2026, driving down the highest fees charged across the country and benefiting thousands of hard-pressed parents. Further details of the new, lower maximum fee caps will be announced in the coming months. A combination of fee management conditions under core funding and subsidies through the national childcare scheme has the potential to dramatically improve affordability for parents. We have seen how the consumer price Index for childcare fell by more than 36% at a time when all other household costs across the economy were rising. We have seen through international league tables how Ireland has quickly moved from being among the highest for out-of-pocket early learning and childcare costs for low-income households across the OECD to being at the OECD average for two-parent households on low income and below the OECD average for single-parent households on low income. We anticipate further affordability improvements for families next year arising from budget 2026. As of today, 4,503, or 92.2%, of services are participating in the core funding scheme. This is the highest number of services in the scheme since it first began. With more services than ever in contract for core funding, committing to work in partnership with the Government to deliver early learning and childcare for the public good, we will continue to maximise the impact Government investment is having in this sector.

A significant package of capital investment has been secured through the revised national development plan over the next five years. The details of this full investment package will be published in the coming months. As part of budget 2026, however, I announced that capital expenditure for early learning and childcare will rise to €36 million. This represents a year-on-year increase of 20%, or €6 million, on the previous year. This will allow the Government to accelerate its work to ensure the supply of early learning and childcare meets demand, again building on recent progress in this area. In 2026, as I have said, we will see for the first time ever the acquisition of buildings to provide the infrastructure for State-led early learning and childcare delivery. State ownership of early learning and childcare facilities is a very substantial and significant shift in the policy direction that the Department has pursued heretofore. It offers the potential for much greater scope to influence the nature and volume of provision available and to ensure better alignment with estimated demand, with public provision operating alongside the established private and community elements of the sector, as well as childminders.

A forward planning model has been developed by my officials to map the location of different types of early learning and childcare provision against child population data. This will allow us to identify areas of need, forecast demand, and target areas for the delivery of public supply, where required. Alongside this, I will also open a further building blocks scheme in 2026 to allow for extensions to existing premises to support services to offer additional full-day places. This follows on from the successful building blocks scheme in 2025 that is currently operating and will deliver up to 1,500 new places for one to three-year-olds.

As committed to in the programme for Government, my Department is developing an action plan to build an affordable, high-quality, and accessible early learning and childcare system. The action plan will take the full lifetime of the Government to implement. However, the issues it addresses will affect children and families, early years educators and school-age childcare practitioners as well as providers here and now. That is why the action plan will involve a phased approach. Phase 1 of the action plan will be published in the coming months and will include short-term measures we will take using existing policy tools. Phase 2 will set out medium-term actions and will be published after completion of the broad consultation process the programme for Government commits to. Details of the broad consultation process will be announced in the coming weeks. I know this is of interest to the House.

In opposing the motion and amendment and in putting forward a countermotion, the Government's objective is not to claim that there are no challenges in the sector but rather to demonstrate that the Government has set out a pathway to address these challenges so we can deliver a world-class early learning and childcare system. I believe the funding secured in budget 2026, complemented by phase 1 of the action plan we are now developing, will allow us to take the first steps on this pathway.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Shane Curley): I welcome the guests of the Ceann Comhairle in the Gallery. It is great to have them in this evening. I call Senator Cosgrove.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: We will split the time.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Shane Curley): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: I welcome the Sinn Féin motion and I thank the party for bringing it forward. We all know very well the concerns about the cost of childcare and, as a parent of three children, I know they are very real. Childcare is an expensive business, and it should be. After all, we have highly qualified professional staff caring for our children, who are the most precious members of our society. This is not a service that can be delivered on the cheap and yet the system has been designed to deliver just that, a quality system on the cheap. It is delivered in the community sector through voluntary committees responsible for implementing increasingly complex and confusing schemes. In the private sector, it is done through the unpaid labour of small independent providers.

While the large corporate chains are making vast profits, small providers continue to struggle to make funding streams work for them. It is not like this crisis in childcare happened overnight. It has been like a runaway train for successive Fianna Fáil- and Fine Gael-led governments. The implementation of the third employment regulation order for the early years sector has steadily increased the basic pay per hour from €13 in 2022 to €15 this September. This was hard fought for and hard won. It was won by trade unions and workers on the ground. During this same period, the minimum wage has risen from €10.50 to €13.50 today and it will be increasing to €14.50 in January 2026. Obviously, I completely welcome the increase in the minimum wage, but how will a basic difference of 85 cent per hour attract people to choose a career in a highly rewarding but challenging sector? The reality is that there remains a recruitment and retention crisis in the sector and the crisis is deepening.

The prebudget submission from SIPTU identified a 25% turnover rate. High turnover rates-----

Acting Chairperson (Senator Shane Curley): Gabh mo leithscéal, tá an Dáil ag vótáil.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: That is fine.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Shane Curley): We will suspend the House for the duration of the vote until the Minister returns.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 7.24 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 7.50 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 7.24 p.m. and resumed at 7.50 p.m.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: Low pay is cited by 86% of early years educators as being the main reason for leaving the sector. Experienced early years educators, managers and even providers continue to leave the sector. Many choose to become special needs assistants, where the starting salary is €16.83 per hour - €1.30 above the base rate for an early years educator and €2.68 above the minimum wage. On the other hand, qualified national school teachers receive €44.67 per hour, almost three times the hourly rate of an early years educator. Is it any wonder that the early years sector loses a huge number of graduates to the primary education sector every year? Low wages continue to mean that there is a shortage of staff. We know that a shortage of staff results in a shortage of child places, especially in the baby and toddler rooms, where the staff-to-child ratio is much higher.

A shortage of child places means, as in the rest of the economy, that when demand outstrips supply, those providing these services can increase their price. Access to core funding, the ECCE, the NCS and other schemes work for many providers, but they are not working for others. It does suit some providers, particularly big chains, to leave core funding and increase fees to parents. Small providers do not have the resources to address pay and conditions on their own. Families do not have the capacity to pay the fees which would be required to address pay and conditions. The only body which has the capacity to make the investment required to make our early years sector fit for the future is the State. I am glad that there is going to be a commitment to moving toward this. Unfortunately, the budget left a lot of people disappointed because of the overpromising coming up to the election.

An additional cost that my colleagues in Sligo, particularly in the community sector, are concerned about is the cost of auto-enrolment. Like them, I fully welcome the introduction of auto-enrolment. Everyone is in favour of pensions, but how will this be paid for? The cost for a large community setting that I am involved with has been estimated to be €10,000 to €12,000. We are wondering how this will be paid. Is finance going to be made available for community sector providers and all independent early years providers? It is time to start to treat the early years sector as a serious and integral part of the education system, which is a public good.

Senator Laura Harmon: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire. It is a really important and timely debate that we are having on childcare. I welcome and support the Sinn Féin motion.

It is really hard for people working in the sector to stay in the sector. My friend and colleague, Councillor Ciara O'Connor, who works in Cork city, left the profession that she deeply loves because she could not afford to work in it any more in terms of the pay and conditions. She hopes one day that she can go back to it again, but at the minute, like many of her colleagues, she did not find it a viable profession, even though she is extremely qualified. They need to be treated and valued the same as other educators in the State. It is often those working in early years settings who pick up if children might have additional needs or if there is something going on at home that needs to be alerted. They are often at the coal face and front line of a child's development. We know the years from zero to five are so impactful for how the rest of someone's life will pan out. It is really disappointing that the pre-election promises of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil to cap childcare costs at €200 per month have not been fulfilled. We need to work toward this reduction in costs for parents.

Just last night, I was speaking to a family who are paying €2,000 for childcare. It is more than their mortgage. I know from other parents that it is affecting how they plan for their families; for example, whether they can afford to have another child. We know a lot of providers are questioning whether they can afford to stay in the sector. We need to move towards a public model of childcare where waiting lists are minimal, where the service is of a high quality, where workers' pay and conditions are fair, and where it is sustainable for providers.

Senator Joanne Collins: I am here tonight not just as a Senator but also as a mother and as chairperson of a community-run crèche. I have seen from all sides what is happening here. We have heard a lot of talk about investment in education, which is absolutely welcomed. The budget announcement of 1,700 new special needs assistants is welcome, but with such promises comes deep concern. According to the Department, 38% of the SNA workforce holds an early years qualification. Expanding the SNA workforce without addressing the conditions of the early years sector risks drawing more qualified educators out of the childcare sector and into schools, a move that is only going to worsen critical staffing shortages.

Our early years and school-age care system is in crisis. It is not working for parents, for the providers or for the women who make up the vast majority of the workforce. Ireland has the highest level of private childcare provision in the OECD. It is a system that puts profit above public good, and a system that will never meet the needs of a changing society. Parents are paying the equivalent of a second mortgage, yet they face long waiting lists and uncertainty. In too many homes, mothers are being forced out of the workforce simply because childcare is unaffordable or unavailable. Sinn Féin has been clear all along that affordable and accessible childcare must not be thrown on the scrapheap of broken election promises.

We are committed to the public model of childcare, one that puts children, families and educators at its heart. When we listen to those working on the ground, we hear about a system that is creaking under pressure. A community childcare manager in my own area put it very plainly: the national childcare scheme penalises parents for using fewer hours. Funding is allocated based on attendance, not on booking. That means parents pay the same fees even if their child attends less. If they use fewer hours, they actually lose their subsidy. One parent saw her weekly bill increase by over €50 simply by collecting her children early. The system effectively forces children to stay in the service for longer so that parents can afford to pay the fees. Meanwhile, the ECCE funding, the foundation of early education, has not increased since 2018. Core funding, which was introduced later to cover rising costs, was never meant to replace ECCE increases, yet here we are seven years later. Providers are trying to cover 2025 costs with 2018 rates. The AIMS programme, which supports inclusion for children with additional needs, promises extra hours for families, but services cannot staff those hours. The result is frustration for parents and burnout for staff.

Services were given just ten days' notice before the implementation of the new ERO rates. They could not even apply for the additional funding until the day those rates took effect. No graduate funding was provided. As one manager said, we cannot compete because the reality is that qualified early years graduates are choosing not to enter this sector at all. It is far too easy for graduates to pivot into teaching or take SNA roles as those roles offer better pay, shorter hours and 14 weeks off a year. Even if we reach pay parity, early years educators will never have those additional benefits. We are losing them faster than we can recruit them or replace them.

The Government talks about creating new places through the building blocks scheme. When we have 40,000 children under the age of three on waiting lists, those places barely make a dent. The real question I would have on those places is how they are going to be staffed. Providers across the country are saying the same thing. They have space to expand and they have waiting lists stretching past 100 children, but they simply cannot find the staff. Services are closing, especially baby rooms for children under the age of 12 months - we have seen this a lot - because they cannot keep them staffed.

Early Childhood Ireland said it very clearly when it stated the 2026 budget missed an opportunity. Yes, €125 million was added, but it falls short of what is needed to bring the system to what it truly needs to be for the children, the families and the educators. We need meaningful reform, not piecemeal schemes and press releases. We need a public childcare model that is properly funded, properly staffed and accessible to every family; urban and rural, rich and poor. We need to stop talking about childcare places as if they exist in isolation from the people who actually make them possible: the educators, overwhelmingly women, who deserve decent pay, respect and stability. This is not just an economic issue; it is a matter of gender equality, of community survival and of giving every child in Ireland the best possible start in life. Childcare cannot be another broken promise; it must be the foundation of a fairer, more equal Ireland.

8 o'clock

I have to say I completely reject the amendment put forward by the other side of the House. It is crazy to stand up and say how brilliant the Government is. It is giving extra money, but it is not looking at the fundamental side of it. It can throw as much money as it wants at this situation, but until it has the staff to take up those positions, and unless it looks after the staff it will not be able to make more places.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Shane Curley): Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit. Deputy Buttimer is no stranger to Seanad Éireann.

Senator Patricia Stephenson: In the most recent general election Fine Gael promised to cap childcare costs at €200 per month per child, and it would do that within 100 days of the new Government. It also promised to create 30,000 new early learning places. It was a commitment made in a manifesto that I am sure was widely read by parents across the country. I can only imagine that now, two weeks after the budget, those parents must be feeling deeply disappointed and let down. Fianna Fáil made similar pledges of a €200 cap and measures to improve price transparency. These were not musings. They were not wishful thinking. They were explicit commitments made to voters. For families really struggling and banking on this reprieve from the huge outgoings they have on top of the already skyrocketing cost of living, this is a major blow. Despite commitments in manifestos, what we have instead are muddled, half-implemented caps, rising costs and many parents feeling shut out of affordable care. The media over the past two weeks have highlighted stories of childcare providers pulling out of schemes, of costs rising despite promises and of growing frustration among families who are worse off than they were this time last year. It is clear the childcare sector as it stands is not fit for purpose, and I have no hopes that the Government's small interventions will make a massive change to that. Over 50 providers have already pulled out of the schemes. Some of them have now increased their fees by up to €360 per month, according to a recent article in *The Journal.* In fact, the whole article makes for incredibly grim reading.

Parents are faced with no choice but to pay up or leave their jobs because childcare is simply unaffordable. To put it briefly, it is a complete mess. I said in this Chamber before that we have instances of mothers - I have spoken to them - making decisions about whether to return to work who are forced to stay home to look after their kids. That is complete hypocrisy when we talk about women's empowerment and gender equality. Ireland has some of the highest childcare costs in Europe. The Government has its head in the sand when it comes to a lot of these issues. It is not a new issue either. This comes up time and again. We all hear from, and know, parents with no access to childcare who are facing crippling costs.

I will also touch on the issue of childcare workers. Senator Cosgrove has spoken substantially on this. We have childcare workers in the system who are highly trained, committed and doing an essential job. As we know, early childhood education is crucial and childcare workers are key. They are key in fostering development and in caring for our children, thus facilitating parents' ability to work in addition to that. Their pay, despite all of this, remains low in the context of their skill and the responsibility their roles demand. I acknowledge they recently got a modest pay increase. However, conditions in many facilities are precarious, with low wages, high turnover, long hours and inadequate support. We should be doing everything we can to keep childcare workers in the sector, but that is not what is happening. In fact, the challenges we have with SNA recruitment means we are seeing childcare workers being pulled out of the childcare system.

Meanwhile for parents we have childcare costs, which continue to take up an enormous share of income. For many, the cost of childcare is equivalent to paying rent or servicing part of a mortgage. Parents are often forced to choose between returning to work and staying at home, or between accepting often low-paid part-time work or absorbing unsustainable childcare bills. We need a radical reset of this sector. We need to bring it into the public sector. The Social Democrats believe that is the only sustainable way forward. I have tabled an amendment which calls for a public model of childcare which is universal, publicly funded and properly staffed with decent wages and, critically, is integrated into our education system. I know when the Minister was giving her statement she touched on the moves to integrate childcare into the existing education system. That needs to be prioritised. It is common sense. We need a public model of childcare that guarantees a place for every child, and which caps costs and genuinely treats early years professionals as the skilled educators they are. I stress that while this might sound utopian, it is common sense. It is about equity and economic pragmatism. While we rely on outsourcing this to sometimes incredible private sector providers, we will never meet the needs in the childcare sector, and we will be letting families and children down.

An Cathaoirleach: Anois, we have the proposer of the motion, Senator Tully.

Senator Pauline Tully: First, I thank the Minister and Minister of State for their attendance, and everybody else who contributed to this debate. Our motion called for two things. The first concerned the cost and the other was to do with capacity within the system. Many people have made the point that the costs have reduced significantly. They have reduced for some, but not for all. There are still parents paying huge fees. Senator Harmon spoke about somebody paying €2,000. It is outrageous that any parent would have to do that. As it is, they are being forced to decide if they should give up work or studies or whatever it is, because they cannot afford to pay it. We need a system where all of the fees are capped, as was promised in the election last year when the Government said it would introduce €200 per month childcare fees. It has let a lot of people down as it now seems that will be over the course of the Government's term. That is not what the original promise was.

On capacity, there are two issues. One is to do with actual physical space. We are talking about new builds or extensions. They all take time. We need to be able to acquire vacant property now and have it restored. However, that is no good without the staff. Everybody has highly commended the early years educators, and I add to that. They are wonderful but they are not paid sufficiently for the job they do, and they are leaving in droves because of the cost of living. They cannot afford to live in the job they love and are qualified to do. They are leaving and taking up other positions. We need to treat this seriously and we need to treat it urgently. I recently heard of a couple who came over from India to take up paid positions. They came on work visas for highly qualified positions. They were settled here and starting work. They went to look for childcare and could not access it. They said they moved here from India to take up positions but they have no childcare. It was ridiculous.

Parents constantly say they find it difficult to find a place for a baby under one year of age, or even under two. We need to seriously look at extending parental leave. If you take paternity leave, maternity leave and parental leave together, it is not much short of a year. Why not extend it so at least the whole year is covered between the two parents so they can take the full year to care for the child at home and not lose money or wages?

My children attended a community creche when they were young. We do not have enough community creches. They are wonderful and operate as part of the social enterprise model. They are not based on profit. They are providing a service. Many of our private operators are only interested in profit and we need to get away from that model. We need our public model of childcare. For too long, childcare in Ireland has been treated as a private market issue rather than a public good, and that needs to change. I am disappointed with the amendment put forward by the Government and we will not be accepting it.

Amendment put:

The Seanad divided: Tá, 22; Níl, 11.	
Tá	Níl
Ahearn, Garret.	Andrews, Chris.
Blaney, Niall.	Collins, Joanne.
Brady, Paraic.	Cosgrove, Nessa.
Casey, Pat.	Harmon, Laura.
Crowe, Ollie.	Keogan, Sharon.
Curley, Shane.	Mullen, Rónán.
Daly, Paul.	Noonan, Malcolm.
Duffy, Mark.	O'Reilly, Sarah.
Fitzpatrick, Mary.	Ryan, Nicole.
Flaherty, Joe.	Stephenson, Patricia.
Gallagher, Robbie.	Tully, Pauline.
Goldsboro, Imelda.	
Kelleher, Garret.	
Kennelly, Mike.	
Lynch, Eileen.	
Murphy, P. J.	
Murphy O'Mahony, Margaret.	
Ní Chuilinn, Evanne.	
Rabbitte, Anne.	
Ryan, Dee.	
Scahill, Gareth.	
Wilson, Diarmuid.	

Tellers: Tá, Senators Garret Ahearn and Paul Daly; Níl, Senators Pauline Tully and Nicole Ryan.

Amendment declared carried.

An Cathaoirleach: We had one Senator who voted twice. The Senator shall remain nameless. The vote has been corrected.

Question put: “That the motion, as amended, be agreed to.”

The Seanad divided: Tá, 22; Níl, 11.	
Tá	Níl
Ahearn, Garret.	Andrews, Chris.
Blaney, Niall.	Collins, Joanne.
Brady, Paraic.	Cosgrove, Nessa.
Casey, Pat.	Harmon, Laura.
Crowe, Ollie.	Keogan, Sharon.
Curley, Shane.	Mullen, Rónán.
Daly, Paul.	Noonan, Malcolm.
Duffy, Mark.	O'Reilly, Sarah.
Fitzpatrick, Mary.	Ryan, Nicole.
Flaherty, Joe.	Stephenson, Patricia.
Gallagher, Robbie.	Tully, Pauline.
Goldsboro, Imelda.	
Kelleher, Garret.	
Kennelly, Mike.	
Kyne, Seán.	
Murphy, P. J.	
Murphy O'Mahony, Margaret.	
Ní Chuilinn, Evanne.	
Rabbitte, Anne.	
Ryan, Dee.	
Scahill, Gareth.	
Wilson, Diarmuid.	

Tellers: Tá, Senators Garret Ahearn and Paul Daly; Níl, Senators Pauline Tully and Nicole Ryan.

Question declared carried.

Housing Finance Agency (Amendment) Bill 2025: Second Stage

Question proposed: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

Acting Chairperson (Senator Pat Casey): The debate will proceed in the normal manner. The Minister of State will have ten minutes, group spokespeople will have ten minutes and all other Senators will have five minutes.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan): I thank the Chair. It is an absolute pleasure to be here to introduce this legislation, the Housing Finance Agency (Amendment) Bill 2025. All Stages of this Bill were passed last week in the Dáil. Its purpose is to amend section 10 of the Housing Finance Agency Acts 1981 to 2024. The amendment, through section 1, will increase the statutory borrowing limit, SBL, of the Housing Finance Agency, HFA, from €12 billion to €13.5 billion. Section 2 sets out the Short Title, collective citation and construction.

The mission of the HFA is to facilitate the delivery of social and affordable housing in Ireland and to advance funds to local authorities, approved housing bodies, AHBs, and higher education institutes, HEIs, for this purpose. Since its establishment in 1981 with a borrowing limit of €200 million, the HFA's statutory borrowing limit has increased six times, reflecting the ever-increasing demand on funding for social and affordable housing and highlighting the Government's support and commitment in its pursuit of meeting the country's housing demands.

The HFA is the main lender to the AHB sector, a sector that provides almost half of all new social and cost-rental homes. The agency continues to interact with local authorities on their financing needs and also has regular engagement with the HEIs and technological universities to support initiatives and funding requirements that aim to increase the supply of student housing. This diligent work by the HFA team clearly shows tangible results and creates a hugely positive impact on the lives of thousands of people across the country.

The Government can also point to strong actions and results, with budget 2026 clearly reinforcing its commitment to boosting housing supply. The total Exchequer funding being made available in the budget for the delivery of housing programmes is €7.21 billion, comprising €5.19 billion in capital funding and €2.02 billion in current funding. An increased capital allocation, of €2.9 billion, has been provided to support local authorities and AHBs in the delivery of 10,200 newly built social homes. Additionally, €1.2 billion has been committed to the affordable-purchase and cost-rental schemes, which deliver long-term, secure housing below market rates for thousands of individuals and families. This will support the delivery of 7,500 affordable-purchase and cost-rental homes in 2026.

Looking to 2030 and beyond, this Government will set out a clear pathway for housing supports and delivery. We now have the main body of the national development plan and the national planning framework in place. The publication of the new housing plan is imminent, and this will underpin the role that will be required on the part of the HFA to support the delivery of housing targets.

The Bill before the House today is important and its progress will enable the HFA to continue to meet its increasing lending requirements during this transitionary period, which will result in the delivery of more social and cost-rental homes over the coming months. The HFA has advised that, based on its recent projections, the current €12 billion statutory borrowing limit will be reached at its 6 November credit committee, at which point no additional lending can be approved. This is as a consequence of the Government's approval of additional funding for social and cost-rental housing in July this year, following which the HFA's flow of borrowing applications increased. It is imperative that the current borrowing limit is increased without delay.

On 17 September the Government approved an increase to the statutory borrowing limit of the Housing Finance Agency from €12 billion to €13.5 billion, priority drafting of the Bill and seeking a waiver of pre-legislative scrutiny of the proposed Bill given the urgency associated with the proposal. On 23 September the Government subsequently approved the publication of the Housing Finance Agency (Amendment) Bill 2025 and authorised the Minister, Deputy Browne, to arrange for the presentation of the Bill to Dáil Éireann and to have it circulated to Deputies at the earliest opportunity. Officials in the Department met with the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage on Monday, 6 October and following this engagement a pre-legislative scrutiny waiver was granted.

As the role of the HFA continues to be vital in supporting the Government's ambitious housing delivery plans to 2030 and beyond, it should be noted that the proposed statutory borrowing limit increase from €12 billion to €13.5 billion should be seen as an interim measure. The increase to €13.5 billion at this time will provide sufficient headroom for the HFA to continue lending until mid-2026 and will enable the delivery of over 5,000 new social and cost-rental homes in the coming years. By mid-2026, the HFA will have had the time to consider the relevant aspects of the national development plan and the new national housing plan, enabling it to develop its new corporate plan. The new corporate plan will include informed forecasts for its future borrowing requirements, factoring in delivery partner and scheme-specific funding requirements over the period of the national housing plan.

There are thousands of people who, because of the financing made available by the HFA, will have a safe and secure roof over their heads, living in supportive mixed tenure communities or modern student accommodation. By increasing the statutory borrowing limit at this time, the HFA can continue to lend to support the delivery of more social and cost-rental homes throughout the country without interruption. Should the Bill pass through these Houses, it is anticipated that it will be signed into law by the end of this month, in advance of the HFA's 6 November credit committee, thereby ensuring the continued smooth lending capacity of the Housing Finance Agency. I look forward to the contributions from Senators in discussing and debating this Bill today and I commend the Bill to the House.

Senator Joe Flaherty: I commend the Minister of State on a very detailed overview of what we have this evening. The significance of the Bill speaks to the enormity of the challenge we have in housing at present. It remains the foremost challenge for us as a country and as a society. It also speaks volumes in terms of the Government's commitment to addressing the issue. I commend the Minister, Ministers of State, staff and officials in the Department on the efficiency and speed at which they have moved on this critical legislation.

The HFA is still very much in its infancy but it is already proving itself to be a very important arm in the delivery of housing throughout the country. While its full advantages and impact are only being felt in large cities and large urban areas, we cannot underestimate the huge role it has played in the delivery of social and cost-rental houses and student accommodation throughout the country. The latest reports show just over 25,000 social homes are at various stages of design and construction. This includes 11,500 social homes on site at the end of March 2025, with an additional 13,953 homes at design and tender stages. In quarter 1 of this year alone, 50 new construction schemes, or 875 houses, were added to the pipeline.

The quarter 2 report on social housing activity was published yesterday. The scale and extent of development across the country were very impressive. We have to pay tribute also to the people working in local authorities who are driving many of these projects and are the catalysts for the momentum and growth we need to see in the housing market. I also commend the many small developers in particular who have reached out to the agency, have been able to secure funding where this had been difficult, and have been able to get their projects up and running.

The Bill is very important and timely and it is critical we get it through the House. The numbers involved are surely eye-watering. We are increasing the HFA's statutory borrowing limit from €12 billion to €13.5 billion. The upshot is that if we did not take this initiative, it would simply run out of the opportunity to give any more funding after 6 November. As the Minister of State rightly said, this safeguards funding for the agency right through until the middle of next year. It is very important.

As eye-watering as the figures are, I will use the rest of my time to bug the ear of the Minister of State on an issue that arose today at the meeting of the housing committee where we were dealing with vacancy. The figures involved are not quite as significant as what we are looking at here but it was disappointing that while officials from the Department came to discuss vacancy, none of them were working in the area of vacancy. This is no disrespect to the officials who did come to the meeting. I wanted to highlight in particular the case of Longford County Council which, a number of years ago, was a laggard on vacancy. It was the worst performing local authority in terms of its vacancy rate, which was at 7%, primarily caused by a lot of socioeconomic issues in the county and there were a lot of cultural aspects. There were many estates that basically had been let go derelict in large parts, with five or six houses together.

The local authority got its act together and, between 2020 and 2024, it brought 250 houses back into stock. As Members of the House know, the going rate for a local authority bringing a house back into stock is €11,000, even though the Croí Cónaithe grant is €50,000 or up to €70,000 if the property is derelict. To make a long story short, Longford County Council has spent in the order of €11 million to bring 250 houses back into stock. This is an average of approximately €40,000 per house. Anybody who can deliver 250 B2 standard houses at €40,000 a pop is giving pretty good value in my book. Unfortunately, the upshot is the local authority is out of pocket to the tune of €8 million. It is a huge encumbrance on its balance sheet and is restricting further growth and development throughout the community and enterprise in Longford.

I was hopeful and enthused that somebody from the Department might have been at the committee meeting to address this particular issue. I hope the Minister of State can take my concerns and disappointment that the issue has not been addressed over the past four years. It is a critical issue for Longford. Everybody in the local authority and the Department of housing realises the single biggest challenge we face in this country is housing and the delivery of housing. It is on everybody's mind, whether you are a grandparent, a parent or someone finishing college. The first and immediate thought and concern for most people is housing. This is a big issue for us in Longford and I hope the Minister of State can take it up with the Minister, Deputy Browne, as I will do. I ask the Minister of State to relay my disappointment about the committee meeting today and my disappointment that this issue has been allowed to fester for so long. We need to get it addressed.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Pat Casey): Senator Murphy is sharing time with Senator Kelleher. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator P. J. Murphy: I thank the Minister of State for the detailed and concise way he has laid out the Bill to us. As Fine Gael spokesperson on housing in the Seanad, I must say I am fully supportive of the Bill. Currently, a cap of €12 billion on borrowing is applicable to the Housing Finance Agency. What we have here is a proposal to increase this by €1.5 billion to €13.5 billion. If we do not make this increase imminently, it is envisaged that the agency's statutory borrowing limit will be reached by the first week of November. This funding source provides advance funds to local authorities and approved housing bodies for the delivery of housing for the people in our society who are most in need of housing. Critically, this funding source also provides essential funding to the higher education sector for the development of student accommodation. Higher education institutions currently require 50% in grant funding in order to make the development of student accommodation viable. We all know that the provision of student accommodation is the quickest, most effective and efficient way to take pressure off the private home rental market in our university cities. However, technological universities cannot currently borrow from this source for student accommodation due to their specific borrowing frameworks. I urge the Minister of State to ensure that this anomaly is rectified as a matter of urgency.

It is important to note that the HFA is a self-financing body and the cost of this increase is not being met by the Exchequer. On behalf of the Fine Gael group, I express my support for this Bill.

Senator Garret Kelleher: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit, an Teachta O'Sullivan, agus gabhaim buíochas leis as teacht isteach inniu. Tugaim mo tacaíocht don leasú tábhachtach atá os ár gcomhair anocht. As the Minister of State outlined in his opening remarks, what we are doing here is legislating for an increase in the statutory borrowing limit. If we do so, it will be the seventh occasion on which this has been done since 1981. My colleague, Senator Murphy, has already outlined the urgency behind this, given the potential shortfall that could arise in early November. In that context, it is the right and prudent thing to do to ensure the increased provision of social, affordable and cost-rental housing across the country. I agree with Senator Murphy on the importance of addressing the anomaly of the non-inclusion of the technological universities in the provision to ensure the viability of the development of student accommodation. On the whole, I am very supportive of this and thank the Minister of State for his time and for clearly outlining what is being put before us today. I am very happy to support the Bill.

Senator Joanne Collins: I welcome the Minister of State to the House. The Bill is fairly straightforward and I thank the Department for the helpful briefing note that was provided to everybody. The financing of houses, social housing in particular, via the local authorities and the funding of approved housing bodies, AHBs, is most definitely of huge importance. There is a dire need for people on housing lists to be homed more quickly, for people who are working to be able to get a mortgage before they are too old to qualify for one and for more affordable rental units to be available for younger workers and families before we end up losing thousands more to emigration. As of June 2024, 103,080 people who were born in Ireland were living in

Australia. For the first time since the 19th century that figure has exceeded 100,000. Emigrants are telling us before they go that they are leaving because of the housing crisis. They just cannot afford to live here.

The biggest problem for many young workers is that the Government's vision for affordable housing is not actually affordable. Rents in many cost-rental developments still exclude those who earn too much to qualify for social housing but not enough to afford to rent in the private sector. They are excluded from the cost-rental market because rents are too high and they fail the affordability test. A sense of urgency on the part of the Government to tackle the housing crisis just seems to be missing. While we have seen more housing delivered in recent years, the housing disaster still continues because the Government is lacking in ambition. The problem lies with the targets, which are too low. The Government can keep throwing money at the problem - and Sinn Féin completely agrees with increasing the borrowing limit, as set out in the Bill - but unless the Government increases its targets, it is going to keep failing. Of the 10,000 new-build social homes that were promised for this year, just 1,804 were completed in the first six months. Of the 2,350 cost-rental homes to be delivered this year by the local authorities, approved housing bodies and the Land Development Agency, only 640 were built in the first six months, and of the 2,100 affordable purchase homes that are targeted for delivery this year, only 358 were completed by June 2025. I know June is only halfway through the year and while those numbers do tend to increase in the second half of the year, it does seem like we are going to miss the targets again this year. People have been screaming for years that there is too much red tape, duplication and delay in the process of delivering social and affordable homes through the local authorities and approved housing bodies.

The Government can keep throwing money at the problem but it must also look at the infrastructure underpinning housing. I am blue in the face talking about County Limerick and Newcastle West, where we have a water treatment plant that cannot take any more houses on board until 2031. That is six more years of no housing in the only tier 2 county town in County Limerick. We must look at this in the round but, as it stands, Sinn Féin agrees with increasing the budget on this. That said, the Government will have to look at all sides of this problem. Affordable houses are not currently affordable, the infrastructure needed to build more houses is not in place and the targets need to be increased.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: I thank the Minister of State for bringing this legislation to the House. I also thank the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage for taking the sensible approach of waiving pre-legislative scrutiny to allow this Bill to progress quickly so that funding for housing can be increased to over €13 billion, which is critically important. This Government has made housing a top priority, as did the previous Government. While we can all quote statistics, one statistic that is really important is that, since Fianna Fáil took over in 2020, in partnership and coalition with Fine Gael, more than 140,000 new homes have been built and tens of thousands of vacant and derelict properties have been brought back into use. There might be 120,000 people in Australia claiming Irish heritage but there are more than 30 million in the US making the same claim. I am someone who had to leave this country when we were economically depressed and on our knees, but our country has come a long way since then.

I commend everybody who is working in the construction sector, doing all they can to renovate, regenerate and build new homes for all of our citizens. It is critically important, and for my party it is a top priority. This funding will enable local authorities and AHBs to directly deliver critically needed social and affordable homes to ensure that people can have access to a home. I also commend Dublin City Council for passing three new policy initiatives this week, and it will, in turn, avail of this funding. One such initiative involves the development in Glasnevin, in my own constituency, of over 8,000 new homes at Ballyboggin. The council also has plans to turn vacant, city-centre properties on North Frederick Street and Abbey Street into affordable cost-rental homes for key workers. I commend the Minister of State and departmental officials on bringing forward this legislation and I hope we can pass it swiftly this evening.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan): I thank all of the Senators who contributed to the debate this evening. It is great to see that there is widespread support for the legislation here, as there was in the Dáil, and for good reason. There is a general acknowledgement of the need for local authorities and approved housing bodies to get access to this extra finance in order to ramp up supply and deliver much-needed homes.

Some very valid points were made during the course of the debate. Senator Flaherty referred to vacancy, an issue that is very close to his heart. Longford County Council has certainly shown that it can get bang for its buck and that is something I will bring back to the Minister, Deputy Browne, in the context of making extra funding available. I thank Senators Murphy and Kelleher for highlighting what appears to be an anomaly with regard to the exclusion of the technological universities. However, I am assured that this issue is being looked at and a feasibility study will be carried out to determine whether the technological universities can be brought into the fold. If they were so allowed, I can imagine the great work they would do in terms of delivering student accommodation on the ground.

I appreciate the support expressed by Senator Collins from her side of the House for this legislation. In terms of housing solutions, as I have always said and as I repeated in the Dáil recently, we will take on board any ideas in the context of formulating the new housing plan, which is imminent. We know that people are leaving our shores. The Senator alluded to the numbers in Australia and I am sure that housing affordability is contributing to that.

9 o'clock

However, it should be acknowledged that people are returning in quite significant numbers, certainly those of my generation and those who are a little younger. I cannot speak of being younger anymore but I do see younger people coming back. That has to be acknowledged because it implies Ireland is seen as an exciting and really good place to live and, in particular, raise a family.

In fairness to Senator Fitzpatrick, her contribution to housing policy has been immense over recent years. She knows it back to front and inside out. It is worth reminding people about the number of houses that have been delivered and the acceleration of housing delivery in recent times. This legislation will help in that regard.

As outlined in my opening remarks, the singular purpose of the Bill is to increase the HFA statutory borrowing limit from €12 billion to €13.5 billion. By doing so, AHBs, local authorities and higher education institutions will continue to be supported by the HFA in its work to deliver more housing. The HFA has a proven body of expertise and an established record of accomplishment in raising and providing long-term competitive rate finance for housing purposes in a cost-effective manner, built up over 20 years. This Bill will enable the agency to continue to meet its increasing lending requirements.

The Government remains fully committed to delivering more homes across the various tenures to truly meet the scale of housing demand. Since I came into office, I have noted many of the suggestions made by Senators on how we can accelerate housing supply, provide more homes for people, ensure people have security of tenure and make significant dents in homelessness figures. While work on the new national housing plan nears completion, we will continue to progress critical reforms that will make a difference. Following the publication of the new national housing plan, the HFA will assess its long-term strategy and statutory borrowing limit requirements while at the same time evolving its own capacity and ability to meet the growing demand for its services in a well-managed way.

As mentioned in my opening statement, budget 2026 reinforces the Government's commitment to boosting housing supply, with total Exchequer funding of over €7.21 billion being made available for the delivery of housing programmes. The targeted delivery in 2026 builds on the very significant progress already achieved in the delivery of social, affordable and cost-rental homes, and this has made a huge difference to the lives of individuals and families through providing good-quality homes and contributing to sustainable communities across the country. Having secured the increased level of investment will support the achievement of our programme for Government commitments and offer confidence in meeting our ambitious targets.

The Bill before the House is important. It will enable the HFA to continue to meet its increasing lending requirements in this transitional period, thereby supporting continued momentum in the delivery of more social and cost-rental homes at a time when they are required more than ever. As the role of the HFA evolves in supporting the Government's ambitious housing delivery plans for the period to 2030, its new corporate plan will outline its future statutory borrowing limit requirements and set out how the organisation must evolve its capacity and ability to meet this demand in a well-managed way. The Bill ensures the continued operation of the HFA, a body that will continue to make a tangible difference to the lives of tens of thousands of people by providing good-quality homes and sustainable communities across the country.

I have listened carefully and with genuine interest to the contributions made by Senators during this Second Stage discussion. I thank them for those contributions and their support in general for the Bill. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Pat Casey): When is it proposed to take Committee Stage?

Senator P. J. Murphy: Tomorrow.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Pat Casey): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Committee Stage ordered for Wednesday, 22 October 2025.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Pat Casey): When is it proposed to sit again?

Senator P. J. Murphy: Tomorrow at 10.30 a.m.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar athló ar 9.04 p.m. go dtí 10.30 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 22 Deireadh Fómhair 2025.

The Seanad adjourned at 9.04 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 22 October 2025.