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DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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SEANAD ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 30 Meán Fómhair 2026

Wednesday, 30 September 2026

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach i gceannas ar 10.30 a.m.

Machnamh agus Paidir.

Prayer and Reflection.

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad

An Cathaoirleach: I know that Members will join with me in extending our sympathies to Treasa Carroll who has worked for over 40 years in Leinster House, and who gave great service and is well liked by all her colleagues and Members over those four decades. Her husband, Seamus, who was an usher here and a service officer prior to that, died suddenly yesterday from a stroke. We extend our deepest sympathies to her and all the family and friends, and all of the colleagues in Leinster House who served with Seamus over the years. He was a gentleman who could never do enough for people. We offer our deepest sympathies to the family of Seamus Carroll on his sad and sudden passing. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam dílis.

I have received notice from the following Senators that they propose to raise the following matters on the commencement of the Seanad:

Senator Teresa Costello - The need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the practical and psychological supports available to family members seeking assistance for a person who is experiencing persistent psychosis, in particular when the person does not recognise the need for or declines to engage with treatment.

Senator Malcolm Noonan - The need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the introduction of a scheme to fund free maintenance and reliever therapy inhalers for 12- to 17-year-old asthma sufferers.

Senator Robbie Gallagher - The need for the Minister for Transport to make a statement on the provision of additional funding for roads in the Cavan and Monaghan area.

Senator Eileen Lynch - The need for the Minister for Transport to make a statement on future funding allocations for road safety initiatives, in particular for improvement works for the N22 junctions between Macroom and Ballincollig and the works for the Castlemore junction on the N22 junction between Macroom and Ballincollig.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove - The need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the provision of adequate respite services so that all family carers can receive regular and appropriate respite free of charge at point of use.

Senator Mike Kennelly - The need for the Minister for Transport to make a statement on the provision of emergency funding for the N69 from Tarbert to Listowel and the Kilflynn area in County Kerry.

The matters raised by the Senators are suitable for discussion and I have selected Senators Costello, Noonan, Gallagher and Lynch, and they will be taken now. The other Senators may give notice on another day of the matters that they wish to raise.

I welcome the Minister of State to the House and I wish her a belated happy birthday. She is most welcome to Seanad Éireann.

Nithe i dtosach suíonna - Commencement Matters

Mental Health Services

Senator Teresa Costello: I thank the Minister of State for being here and a very happy belated birthday to her.

I am raising this matter because I am really concerned about families and advocates when a loved one is experiencing severe and persistent psychosis and they seek help, particularly where that person has little or no insight into how unwell they are and they are refusing to engage with mental health services. Families experience an awful time when they can see someone they love becoming increasingly isolated, distressed and unable to manage ordinary day-to-day life. They can see a person who is unwell and whose judgment and understanding of his or her own condition is seriously affected, yet they cannot persuade the person to accept treatment. In many cases, the family just become carers with no training and no respite, and they really do not know where to turn.

My concern in particular is what happens when somebody is so unwell that they are really not functioning, when a person cannot adequately look after themselves or sustain ordinary everyday life and is deteriorating, and who may be putting their own health and safety at risk but do not meet the threshold for an involuntary admission. I recognise the importance of autonomy, dignity and the rights of people experiencing mental illness but what happens when severe psychosis itself has profoundly affected a person's insight and their ability to recognise that they desperately need help? Risk to oneself should not just mean an immediate threat of self harm. Serious neglect, the inability to care for themselves and a continuing deterioration in a person's mental and physical well-being has devastating consequences. At what point does the State intervene? Where do families and advocates go after repeat attempts to get someone to voluntarily engage have failed? Can their concerns be formally considered by a person's GP or community mental health team, even where confidentiality prevents information being shared back with the family? When should an authorised officer or the provisions of the Mental Health Act be considered? I am concerned about what can happen when we fail to intervene early enough.

There are people with serious mental illness coming into contact with the criminal justice system when what they really need is intensive psychiatric treatment and rehabilitation. A family may spend months or years asking for help but intervention may only happen when a crisis occurs, the Garda has become involved, the person appears before the courts, or ultimately enters the prison system. I do not believe prison can become a substitute for appropriate mental health care. I am not suggesting that mental illness excuses criminal behaviour or that public safety should be disregarded but where a severe psychosis is driving a person's deterioration of behaviour then an effective pathway into appropriate treatment really matters. We need to recognise that for some people with severe and enduring psychosis a short intervention at the point of crisis is just not enough. They may require intensive sustained treatment and rehabilitation for a considerable period of time to stabilise their condition.

I just cannot shake the feeling of those families and their helplessness. Living for years with a family member who has severe psychosis has such a huge impact, emotionally and financially.

They are exhausted. They have anxiety. There is a huge amount of disruption to their employment and their home. I have seen people reach breaking point in these circumstances. I am just looking for a clear pathway. What should a family do when someone they love is severely psychotic with little or no insight into their illness and unable to function properly? What intervention is available before that person reaches crisis point? What long-term treatment and rehabilitation options exist for those with severe and enduring psychosis? What practical and psychological support is available to their families even when the persons themselves will not engage?

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): At the outset, I would like to be associated with the comments in relation to the loss of one of our ushers, Seamus Carroll from Tipperary. I have been in this House for ten years and have to say, he was an absolute gentleman. I wish to express my condolences to his family and all his colleagues across the House. It is a very tough day on everyone.

I thank Senator Costello for the opportunity to address the House today on an issue that is of profound importance to many individuals and families across Ireland. As Minister of State with responsibility for mental health, I want to acknowledge the distress, uncertainty and isolation that can be experienced by families when a loved one is living with persistent psychosis, particularly where that person does not recognise their illness or is reluctant to engage with treatment. These situations can be incredibly challenging, not only for the individual concerned but also for those who care about them and want to help. Every year in Ireland, an estimated 1,500 people develop a psychotic disorder for the very first time.

Psychosis is a serious but treatable condition and we know that early intervention and timely access to specialist supports can be life-changing for individuals, families and communities. In a lot of cases, although it is not something the Senator mentioned, there are a lot of linkages with addiction issues as well where a person has psychosis. We know, for example, from a recent report I received that 33% of all new psychotic cases are linked to cannabis. Where family members have serious concerns about the mental health of a loved one, they should seek professional advice and support. This may involve contacting the person's treating community mental health team, where one is involved, engaging with a GP or seeking guidance through

primary care services. These professionals can advise on the most appropriate care pathway and the supports available. As the House will be aware, the Mental Health Act 2026 was enacted in May of this year. I acknowledge again Senator Costello's significant contribution through the passage of this legislation and especially this subject we are talking about now.

One point I want to reiterate is that involuntary admission remains available where the legal criteria are met and where it is necessary to ensure a person receives appropriate care and treatment. The legal criteria have to be met in cases like this, however. The Act seeks to balance a person's rights and autonomy with the need to provide treatment and protection where there are serious concerns about mental health. It is also important to recognise that the families themselves need support. The HSE provides a range of family-oriented interventions, including behavioural family therapy through early intervention in psychosis services, recovery education programmes, family peer support, where available, education initiatives and access to wider statutory, community and voluntary sector supports. These approaches recognise the vital role families can play in a person's recovery.

I also want to acknowledge the valuable work of Shine, which supports people experiencing mental illness and their families every day, specifically in relation to psychosis, while promoting social inclusion and reducing stigma across our communities. This month, Shine has been to the fore in relation to the green ribbon campaign. Supporting people experiencing psychosis in their own communities has been a priority for me throughout my time in office. That is why I have placed a strong focus on strengthening specialist mental health services, including the national clinical programme for early intervention in psychosis, EIP. Since 2021, I have allocated more than €3 million in development funding for early intervention in psychosis services.

Funding is now in place for ten early intervention in psychosis teams nationally, with five adult teams and one child and adolescent mental health services, CAMHS, team currently operational. Two additional teams are under development and recruitment alongside the Ballyfermot EIP team that I was proud to launch recently. During my visit to the Ballyfermot Primary Care Centre, I also met with the home-based treatment team comprising community mental health nurses who provide treatment and medication in people's homes, helping individuals to live well within their communities while reducing the need for hospital admission. Under budget 2026, I secured funding for a further early intervention in psychosis team in the midlands, continuing the expansion of specialist services and improving geographical coverage.

I will come back on the next piece.

Senator Teresa Costello: I thank the Minister of State for her response. I apologise for omitting the linkage between substance abuse and psychosis because that is very prevalent. What I was focusing on was that when people refuse help, they do not understand that they are as ill as they are. What is the clear pathway when they quite obviously need involuntary admission? I am so concerned that there are vulnerable people who are not getting the necessary help they need because they do not even realise they are sick enough. The families' lived experience should be heard because they are only doing it because they are trying to help somebody they love.

Deputy Mary Butler: The Senator is right. As she knows, every case is extremely complex. Families are at breaking point trying to deal with this on a daily basis, whereas we know recovery is possible. We know early intervention in psychosis, if people can get the support of an early intervention in psychosis team, makes all the difference, but some people find it hard to accept that and accept the support and care that can be offered. I think that is the issue the Senator is trying to raise.

Involuntary detention is very clear. We debated it here for a long time. We are still working off the 2001 Act whereby the involuntary detention of any person will be determined by the consultant psychiatrist and the multidisciplinary team, who will make that decision. An application can be made but people still have to meet the threshold. We are seeing the benefits of the investment through the early intervention and psychosis programme. In 2025 alone, 478 people received specialist EIP care and more than 31,000 appointments were delivered. Importantly, over 500 family members also received dedicated supports, reflecting the programme's recognition that families are central to recovery and well-being. I commend the work that Shine does every day because it works specifically with families who have a loved one experiencing psychosis.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Alison Comyn): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit. She is welcome to the House. She always makes herself available when it is the very serious issue of mental health. I also wish her a belated happy birthday.

We will move on to our next Commencement matter. I call Senator Noonan.

Health Strategies

Senator Malcolm Noonan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit agus guím breithlá sona di. Tá ceann de na rátaí asma is airde ar domhan againn in Éirinn. Is é an galar scamhóige ainsealach is coitianta in Éirinn í. Is féidir an cuid is mó de na básanna a bhaineann le hasma a chosc trí chúram agus bainistíocht níos fearr. There are currently 450,000 people living with asthma here. One in ten of those are children. Some 86,048 patients with asthma were enrolled with the chronic disease management programme, CDMP, as of 2023 and in the same year, 81 people died from the disease.

We have a terrible record here in Ireland in managing the condition. We have the second highest mortality rate among the EU 27, with women twice as likely to die from the disease. It is a story of work days missed, school days missed, over 4,000 inpatient hospital admissions and avoidable hospital admissions. If the Minister of State wants to consider it in economic terms because sometimes that is what the civil servants understand best, asthma cost Irish society over €1.2 billion in 2022. It does not have to be this way.

Asthma care has evolved significantly over recent years but such enhanced care requires investment. It requires investment in severe asthma care, establishing and maintaining a severe asthma registry, employing qualified advanced nurse practitioners, improving access to diagnosis, addressing environmental issues affecting asthma sufferers, such as damp homes and urban air pollution, and investing in something potentially transformative for young people, that is, maintenance and reliever therapy, MART, inhalers.

What are MART inhalers? MART is an inhaled corticosteroid, ICS, formoterol maintenance and reliever therapy combination inhaler and is considered the gold standard for people with asthma aged 12 and over and for children aged six to 11 whose asthma remains uncontrolled. MART uses a single ICS formoterol combination inhaler for both daily maintenance and symptom relief. This approach ensures that anti-inflammatory treatment is delivered whenever symptoms occur, while also simplifying treatment regimens. Clinical evidence consistently demonstrates that MART reduces the frequency and severity of asthma attacks, improves overall asthma control and is more effective than the short-acting beta-agonist, SABA, or blue inhaler with which we are all familiar.

Adherence to preventative treatment in Ireland remains low and cost is most certainly a factor. Many patients continue to rely on reliever inhalers to manage symptoms rather than addressing the underlying inflammation that drives asthma. Children and young people, in particular, are over-reliant on the blue inhaler and this is leading to poor management of the condition. The Asthma Society of Ireland estimates that rolling out free MART inhalers to 12- to 17-year-olds would represent a cost of €12.1 million. The Minister of State can imagine what that outlay would do for hospital admissions from asthma attacks and what it would do to reassure patients and parents and give young people with asthma a better quality of life by being able to participate fully in sports and other activities.

This age cohort is a critical one for asthma care in the population more generally, as management shifts from parent to patient and where sticking to a treatment path often declines. Being young is about being young, and often the routine is abandoned. This is borne out through research conducted by the Irish Council of General Practitioners. Many young people rely on the blue inhaler in the pocket to manage symptoms, yet poor asthma control can have a long-term impact on lung development, reduce lung function, remodel airways, and increase the risk of respiratory infections and weight problems.

The Asthma Society of Ireland is calling on the Government to provide funding as part of budget 2027 for free access to inhaled corticosteroid, ICS, formoterol inhalers, which are prescribed as maintenance and reliever therapy, MART, with a proposed phased introduction beginning with young people aged 12 to 17. This will be an important first step towards improving access to an evidence-based treatment and addressing significant inequalities that can arise from the cost of asthma medication.

Therefore, I ask that the Minister of State give consideration to whether funding for MART could be included in budget 2027 and whether she will commit to introducing subsidised access to the MART inhaler for young people aged 12 to 17 as the first phase of a wider approach. I also ask what assessment the Department has done of the potential benefits of increased access to MART, including the potential to reduce asthma-exacerbated emergency department attendances, hospitalisation, and over-reliance on short-acting reliever inhalers. The Asthma Society has made this a key ask in its pre-budget submission for 2027. Budget 2027 provides an opportunity for the Government to take a meaningful step towards improving asthma outcomes in Ireland.

I would welcome the Minister of State's response.

Deputy Mary Butler: I thank Senator Noonan for the opportunity to address the Seanad on this issue. He has made a very compelling case. I am taking this Commencement matter on behalf of the Minister for Health, Jennifer Carroll MacNeill.

The State acknowledges the importance of access to new and innovative medicines for patients and is acutely aware of the challenges that patients diagnosed with asthma face. By way of background, MART inhalers are combination medicines that combine a steroid with formoterol, a long-acting bronchodilator medicine. This has an important benefit for patients in the form of a reduced need to carry separate maintenance and reliever inhalers.

Affordable access to medicines is a priority for the Government. There are a range of health supports available for patients with asthma under the general medical services, GMS, scheme and the drugs payment scheme, DPS, that reduce the cost of asthma medicines, including MART combination inhalers.

The HSE has statutory responsibility for medicine pricing and reimbursement decisions under the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013. The HSE has added a number of MART inhalers to the reimbursement list for eligible patients in Ireland, recognising the value offered by these medicines and supporting patient access. Medicines on the reimbursement list for medical card holders are available free from a pharmacist on payment of the statutory prescription charge, while under the drugs payment scheme, no individual or family pays more than €80 each month towards the cost of approved prescribed medicines.

In addition, individuals may also be able to claim tax relief on their medicinal expenditure at the standard rate of 20%, further increasing affordability. Eligibility for the drug payment scheme and medical card is determined in the context of the broader eligibility framework rather than by individual condition. There has been a significant shift in the quality and delivery of asthma care in recent years, with more patients being provided with care in the community and at an earlier stage.

The HSE's chronic disease management programme provides free, twice-yearly reviews with a GP and practice nurse for medical card or GP visit card holders diagnosed with asthma. This includes personalised care plans to manage daily medications and address symptom management and flare-ups. Research into the chronic disease management programme has shown that over 90% of patients with chronic diseases such as asthma are now successfully managing their conditions in community settings.

The State continues to invest in making asthma medicines affordable for patients with: over €100 million in expenditure per annum within the community; new and innovative treatments continuously being added to the reimbursement list, and a suite of measures in the new framework agreements on the supply and pricing of medicines to strengthen affordability and availability across the coming years.

The Senator made a very important point about subsidised access. The health budget this year is €27 billion, €4 billion of which will be spent on drugs. A massive amount of the budget is being spent on drugs, and that is only going in one direction. Consideration of any future changes to the eligibility for medicines will be made in the context of current healthcare priorities and the budget available. The Minister and other Ministers of State are currently in negotiations in relation to the budget. However, I will certainly bring the points Senator Noonan has made very clearly to the Minister. I do not think there is a family in Ireland that is

not familiar with the blue inhaler. For young people, it can be a most distressing time for them, especially when they get a diagnosis.

I thank the Senator Noonan for raising this matter.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: I thank the Minister of State for her answer. I take on board the points she made as well as how there are supports in place. I reiterate the point that making this universally available for 12-to-17-year-olds could be transformative in terms of asthma care. It is an age cohort where their care for themselves maybe falls down a little bit, so having the MART inhaler available could be a really significant transformation. I understand the pressures that Department is under in terms of the drugs budget.

I want to thank the Asthma Society of Ireland for its engagement with me on this. We had a fantastic World Lung Day event last week. It was really interesting to see the range of work going on in terms of lung diseases in Ireland. Separately, the Asthma Society faces significant challenges in terms of the support for national organisations funding, as they were unsuccessful this year. I ask that the Minister of State engage with Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, in relation to that. The society is a vital organisation. Back in the day, my mother used to fund-raise for it at church gate collections. There is a different funding model now, but it is a vital organisation and cog in the wheel in terms of asthma care. I ask the Minister of State to engage with her counterpart.

Deputy Mary Butler: I have noted the Senator's comments. I also want to acknowledge the work that the Asthma Society of Ireland does. It is very supportive of families, especially families dealing with young children that are trying to grapple with the situation when they find out their child may be asthmatic.

As the House knows, affordable access to medicines remains a priority for the Government. Ireland is among the highest spenders on health across the EU and has the third highest rate of state coverage of pharmaceutical expenditure in Europe. Supported by €158 million of funding in budgets 2021 to 2025, the State delivered access to 250 new medicines. Budget 2026 allocated an additional €217 million for investment in medicines, including €30 million in funding for new medicines. This has, as of September, delivered access to 40 new medicines in the current year, which is most welcome. The year 1 cost of a new drug comes from the allocation for new medicines, but it should be noted that once these medicines are approved for reimbursement, the full cost of providing them can reach multiples of this initial cost as their uptake increases.

I assure the House that the Minister for Health appreciates the importance of ensuring that patients with asthma have access to the latest treatments. Senator Noonan specifically mentioned young people aged 12 to 17. The Minister has received a pre-budget submission from the Asthma Society of Ireland, which is under consideration in the context of preparations for budget 2027. The Minister and the wider Government remain committed to improving care for patients living with asthma, including severe asthma. I will certainly bring back the points that Senator Noonan raised because they are very important to a huge amount of people who live with asthma.

Road Network

Senator Robbie Gallagher: Cuirim fáilte mhór roimh an Aire Stáit chuig an Teach seo ar maidin. I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Ardagh, for taking time out of her busy schedule to be here. I appreciate that the topic of roads funding is not her area of expertise. Nevertheless, I appreciate her presence here and I have no doubt that she and I will be talking to the lead Minister about this very important issue.

The issue is the crisis in the condition of local roads in counties Monaghan and Cavan and, indeed, in many other parts of the country. In rural Ireland where we come from, the local road is essential to us to get about our daily business.

We do not have a train service or a Luas. We totally depend on the road network to get us from A to B, whether that is taking the children to school in the morning, going to work or travelling on the road for social purposes. The local road is the only show in town. Unfortunately, the condition of the local roads has been deteriorating for a long number of years, not helped in any measure by the inclement weather conditions with global warming that we are experiencing at the moment.

To give some substance and a platform to what I am about to explain to the Minister of State, a survey has been done nationally about the condition of the local roads, the findings of which are quite stark. In actual fact, the roads are graded based on condition on a chart from one to ten. One to four is classified as being "very poor" and five to six is "not great". It goes up as far as ten, which would be classified as "excellent". Unfortunately, Monaghan and Cavan have in excess of 400 km of road in the one-to-four bracket. It highlights that we have a serious problem in that the funding currently being received from central government is no way enough or adequate to address the problem. This is compounded by the fact that inflation on materials used in road construction has also experienced staggering increases in the last number of years. In the last five years, the cumulative percentage of inflation on materials amounts to something like 38.4% over that period. The increase in roads funding year on year for the previous five years amounts to 24.3%. Even though we are getting increases in road funding, we are actually getting less work done because we are getting less money.

There is a serious problem there and one that needs to be addressed. I have raised this issue on a number of occasions. The councillors in Monaghan and Cavan have raised this issue. The Government needs to act. It has become so serious now that if we do not act, we are getting to a point that some home helps are refusing to attend to their clients because the roads are nearly impassable. It is that serious and needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. I have spoken to the Minister. I raised it last night within our own parliamentary party with the Taoiseach and the Minister for public expenditure, Deputy Chambers, that we have got to a critical point and need additional funding. We need to make sure that we get increased funding specifically to give local authorities the flexibility to be able to tackle this chronic problem in Monaghan and Cavan, as well as many other counties throughout the length and breadth of the country.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Catherine Ardagh): I thank Senator Gallagher for raising this issue. I note he has raised it on many platforms, not just this good House. I also note his advocacy for our local roads, but especially how important it is for those living in rural parts of our country who do not have

access to regular buses or light trams. I thank him for tabling this Commencement matter. I am taking it on behalf of the Minister for Transport. I will bring back any arguments the Senator has to him.

Local authorities are responsible, by statute, for the maintenance and improvement of the regional and local roads present in their respective areas of responsibility. Any work undertaken on these roads is funded by the resources of the local authority concerned and, where eligible, this is supplemented by the Department of Transport's regional and local roads grant programme. The initial selection and prioritisation of work to be funded is a matter for local authorities. The regional and local roads grant programme is primarily targeted at the maintenance and renewal of our existing roads network, with the remainder invested in new roads, new bridges and road realignments. The funds available through this programme have been steadily increasing in recent years. For 2026, €718 million was made available, which will facilitate an increase of €26 million for road protection and renewal throughout Ireland. I note the Deputy's comments, however, in relation to material inflation and cost inflation.

The grant programme operated by the Department is focused on specific policy objectives. Restoration maintenance grants look to pavement sealing to protect the road surface from water damage. Restoration improvement grants look to road strengthening to lengthen the life of road pavements. The discretionary grants available allow for a range of activities, including pothole repair, edge strengthening, renewal of signs and lines and winter maintenance. These three grant programmes account for most of the funding available. The basis for determining the allocations for each local authority, under this grant programme, is related to the total number of kilometres of regional and local roads within their areas of responsibility. This is held as being the most equitable method of distribution. The current rate of inflation, level of population, or availability of other means of transport are not factors that are taken into consideration, but they probably should be.

For 2026, allocations were notified to local authorities on 17 February. Cavan and Monaghan County Councils were allocated over €19 million and over €17 million, respectively, with most of this funding directed towards protection and renewal. In addition to this, in 2024 and 2025, both Cavan and Monaghan County Councils received funding for several pilot projects relating to road materials and the Department is appreciative of the assistance provided in the delivery of onsite works under the reclaimed asphalt pavement project. It should be noted that Exchequer funding for regional and local roads is intended to supplement realistic contributions from local authorities' own resources. As the statutory road authorities for their areas, it is open to local authorities to prioritise own-resource investment towards regional and local roads.

In addition to the funding provided under the regional and local roads grant programme, national roads were also provided funding. For 2026, Cavan and Monaghan County Councils were allocated €5.8 million and €10.1 million, respectively. This funding supports the maintenance and improvement and the progression of new roads projects. Owing to the damage caused by Storm Chandra earlier this year, while Cavan County Council did not seek any additional exceptional funding, Monaghan County Council was allocated €900,000. The difficulty in delivering road programmes within existing budgets is understood, as is the additional difficulty due to the variability in the market and the cost. While there may be existing provisions within existing contracts that can be utilised, ultimately it is a matter for

local authorities to prioritise work and determine what can best be achieved with their existing budgets.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: I thank the Minister of State for her response. I made the point in relation to the funding that both counties have received - €19 million and €17 million, respectively. Unfortunately, that has been totally eroded with the inflationary costs of materials. We are actually in a deficit before we even start. It has come to a point now where the Government is going to have to give flexibility to local authorities to be able to direct funds from other areas to roads funding because it is that serious. It is hugely frustrating. It is mental torture for people to have to travel through roads that are nearly impassable because they are damaging vehicles and all in the process. Until the Minister of State actually walks the walk, it is difficult to explain how totally frustrating and annoying that is. People who are paying their taxes are driving through roads that are not fit or passable. It has come to a point where it is a crisis situation and it needs a crisis response. I am hoping the Government will listen to my plea this morning.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: I appreciate the Senator's comments. I will make sure to bring these back to the Minister for Transport. I assure the Senator and the House that the Government is fully committed to the protection and renewal of our road network. Our vast interconnected road network is essential in connecting people, businesses and communities, so we must continue to protect it. As such, the Department of Transport allocates significant funding towards regional and local road maintenance and improvement each year. For those grant types, the focus is on road strengthening and sealing and the allocation of funding is based on the length of roads in local authorities, the objective being to allocate funding to eligible local authorities on a just basis, keeping protection and renewal of the road network to the fore. The Department believes this methodology is both fair and transparent and ensures that local authorities with the highest quantum of roads receive the highest level of available funding. This best ensures the greatest amount of our roads receive funding for continued maintenance and improvement.

Furthermore, the Department works closely with all local authorities throughout the year, and at year end reviews any additional expenditure that may have been incurred by the local authorities under the regional local grant schemes. Where possible, the Department apports funds to this additional expenditure. All funding under the regional and local roads grant programme was allocated in February 2026. Both Cavan and Monaghan County Councils received a significant amount under the available protection and renewal grants. Through this €718 million investment in the regional and local road grant programme this year, the Minister for Transport ensures the Government's continuing commitment to the restoration and maintenance of our road infrastructure. I thank the Senator for the opportunity to discuss this matter on behalf of the Minister for Transport.

Road Safety

Senator Eileen Lynch: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit as ucht a bheith anseo linn inniu. I am looking for an up-to-date position on road safety improvements along the N22 between Macroom and Ballincollig in County Cork, particularly at the Castlemore junction. First, I

acknowledge that we have seen significant work on the N22 over the last few years. We have seen the delivery of the Macroom bypass, which has made a massive difference to Macroom town and the environs.

It was a very positive step. The town and community had been promised it since the 1970s, so it was great to finally see it delivered three years ago. We now need to address the remaining section of the N22 between Macroom and Ovens and Ballincollig. This is an extremely busy national road. It is the main gateway from Cork into Kerry and crosses the county bounds. It is vital that we improve this infrastructure.

For very many years, there have been continuing concerns among residents and commuters about the high level of accidents on this road. The commuters who use the road to get to work, and the residents who live along it, are only too aware of how difficult it is to get out onto it. It is quite incredible, but there are around 25 major junctions between Macroom and Ballincollig and, unfortunately, there have been a massive number of collisions at those junctions over the years.

The Castlemore junction, as I have highlighted, is one of the junction that requires particular attention. The Castlemore junction is where the R585 meets the N22 and has already been identified as a high collision location. There are approximately 9,500 vehicles using this section of road every day. That is a very substantial volume of traffic. The proposed solution is to replace the existing priority junction with a roundabout, which would address in particular the difficulties associated with vehicles turning right from Castlemore towards Cork. While this is a necessary intervention, where exactly does this project now stand? Previous information indicated that the scheme was at the early development stage and I understand that it may have gone as far as design stage, but we are still being told that the project may not be delivered until 2029. I ask the Minister of State to confirm whether that is still the anticipated delivery date. If, unfortunately, it is, what kinds of interim safety measure are we looking at, given the safety concerns and volume of traffic at this junction?

The Macroom bypass has shown what can be achieved when we put in this level of investment. It also highlights the need to address the remaining sections of the route. As I understand it, no work has been done to advance the necessary works at this section of the road from Macroom to Ovens, which is the last remaining national road within County Cork that does not have an upgrade plan or some plan in place for its redevelopment. That is an incredible situation considering the volume of traffic and lets down the progress that has been made. The bypass provides a very high-quality road as far as Macroom and there is a high-quality road on the way back into the city but the rural part, from Macroom to Ovens, has been completely neglected.

I am a realist and know that such a major project cannot be delivered overnight but communities need certainty and safety is of great concern, given the amount of collisions we have seen. There was a death on this road three years ago and as a result, interim safety measures were installed. I do not want to be here speaking again when somebody else dies and saying that we spoke about this already but the urgency to deal with it was not taken on board.

I ask the Minister of State for a clear update today on the overall road safety programme and, particularly, on Castlemore junction.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: I thank Senator Lynch for tabling this matter. The matter of infrastructure investment to support road safety, as well as quality of life for people who rely on the N22, is important to the Department. The Minister for Transport has responsibility for overall policy and Exchequer funding in relation to the national roads programme. Once funding arrangements have been put in place with Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, under the Roads Acts, and in line with the national development plan, NDP, the planning, design, improvement and upgrading of individual national roads is a matter for TII, in conjunction with the local authorities concerned. TII ultimately delivers the national roads programme in line with Project Ireland 2040, the national planning framework and the NDP.

It is important to point out that a number of major national roads projects have already been delivered under the current national development plan. This includes a significant upgrade to the N22, namely, the Ballyvourney to Macroom project, which opened in 2023, as well as the Dunkettle interchange upgrade. The Senator has commented on how successful they have been.

Approximately €659 million of Exchequer capital funds were provided for national roads through TII to local authorities in 2026. This is used for the construction of major new roads projects as well as the protection and renewal of the existing network. Of this, almost €138.66 million was allocated to Cork County Council.

A major priority of the national development plan, in line with the Department's investment hierarchy, is to maintain the quality and safety of the existing national roads network. This includes funding for minor improvement projects, safety schemes such as junction upgrades and road realignment, and pavement renewal.

There has been significant investment in the N22 in County Cork in recent years. This year alone has seen €3.5 million allocated to pavement schemes alone on the N22 in Cork.

Regarding the N22 Castlemore junction scheme, Cork County Council is in the process of procuring technical advisers to progress the design of a new roundabout at the Castlemore junction. It is expected that this appointment will be completed and design commenced in 2026. With regard to timelines, and while I know that the Senator hopes to hear some clear information today, it is difficult to say at this point because the land acquisition process is likely to influence delivery.

On other safety interventions on the N22 in County Cork, a right turn lane was introduced last year at the Kilcondy junction. Also, traffic calming and safety measures are under way at Srelane, with expected completion in October.

The allocations provided are in the allocations booklet published by TII and available on its website. TII will continue to work closely with Cork County Council to identify critical areas for intervention on the N22 as well as other national routes in Cork, subject to available funding.

I hope that this message is of some assistance to the Senator.

Senator Eileen Lynch: I thank the Minister of State for outlining that message and taking my question. I do not for one second want to take away from the massive volume of investment and work that has been done on this road. The delivery of the bypass between Ballyvourney

and Macroom was a massive achievement. It had been discussed in the area since the 1970s and it was delivered in 2023. The bypass is working well. I appreciate that a lot of money is invested in roads in County Cork and I acknowledge that the county has one of the largest road networks in the country, so it merits the money that we get.

In terms of when the Castlemore project will be expedited, we still do not really have a delivery date, even though technical advisers are being procured. All of this takes an incredible amount of time and is incredibly frustrating for anybody, either a public representative or a member of the public.

I note that €3.5 million has been allocated for pavement schemes. These works are going well and there is no doubt that they are beneficial but I wonder sometimes if the wrong things are being prioritised when it comes to roads funding. I would argue that interim safety measures on this road are more vital than footpaths at the moment. I understand that there are different funding phases and money cannot be moved from one scheme to another but I urge the Minister of State to convey the importance of this project to the Minister. I do not want to be standing here in a few months or a year's time and have to say that there has been a fatal collision on this road as a result of a lack of safety measures.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: In line with the national development plan and Government policy, the Minister for Transport has allocated national roads funding in a manner that seeks to achieve the following outcomes: the protection and renewal of the existing national roads network; progressing major projects in or near construction; and progressing major projects that are preconstruction but well advanced in the development pipeline.

It is important to note that, in 2026, approximately €138.66 million in capital Exchequer funding was allocated for the national road network in County Cork. This funds the protection and renewal of the existing roads network and includes new national road projects. This is in keeping with the programme for Government, which commits to enhancing connectivity across urban and rural areas through investing in diverse transport options, including roads, and to investing in all road projects in the current national development plan.

As part of the programme for Government, there is a commitment to increase funding for new roads as part of the national development plan's review and maintenance of existing roads. The national development plan review's sectoral investment plan for transport was published by the Government on 26 November. The sectoral investment plan sets out capital ceilings for transport to 2030 and received increased investment in transport infrastructure as compared to the first half of the decade.

The Senator asked for an up-to-date position on road safety improvement works at the N22 junctions between Macroom and Ballincollig, including the works at the Castlemore junction. She also asked for the expected delivery time. I will pass on her message to the Minister and I appreciate the Senator raising it today.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 11.19 a.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 11.31 a.m.

Sitting suspended at 11.19 a.m. and resumed at 11.31 a.m.

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad

An Cathaoirleach: Before I ask the Acting Leader to outline the Order of Business, I welcome those from Sacred Heart School in Tullamore, County Offaly. They are most welcome to Seanad Éireann. They are guests of Deputy Tony McCormack. I thank them for being here today.

I also welcome the Cypriot ambassador. The Independence Day of Cyprus commemorates the independence of the Republic of Cyprus from British rule. The ambassador is most welcome to Seanad Éireann. Independence was achieved on 16 August 1960 under the London and Zurich agreements 1959. Since 1979, the Independence Day of Cyprus has been celebrated as a national holiday in Cyprus, marked by events across the country, including a parade in Nicosia, an address by the President of Cyprus and festivals commemorating communities coming together. Despite the geographical distance between our two nations, we share a strong bond rooted in the histories of our island nations struggling to achieve their independence from British rule and forging of our paths as independent nations. We also share the distinction of being the only two partitioned islands in the world. Our friendship goes back to the establishment of diplomatic relations back in 1985 and the support for each other in the European Union. Twenty five years ago, we established an embassy in Nicosia. Cyprus was also one of the countries that joined the European Union in 2004 during Ireland's Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

Of course, our relationships extend beyond the European Union to the United Nations. Irish peacekeepers are part of the forces that stand on the wall between the two parts of Cyprus. We also share great academic and cultural connections. Trinity College Dublin and the University of Limerick promote academic and student exchange research and joint initiatives. Of course, cultural links continue to flourish. The first marking by Cyprus in 2022 of the annual legacy of James Joyce is done as part of those vibrant friendships between Ireland and Cyprus. On this special occasion, I welcome the ambassador to Seanad Éireann and congratulate him on the celebration of Cyprus' independence day. I thank him for being here in Seanad Éireann to mark the Independence Day of Cyprus.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

Senator Paraic Brady: The Order of Business is No. 1, statements on road safety, to be taken at 12.45 p.m. and to conclude at 2.15 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, all other Senators not to exceed five minutes, and the Minister to be given no less than ten minutes to reply to the debate; No. 2, proposed approval by Seanad Éireann of the defect concrete blocks social housing scheme 2026, to be taken at 2.30 p.m. and to conclude at 3.30 p.m., if not previously concluded, with the time allocated to the opening remarks of the Minister not to exceed five minutes, all Senators not to exceed five minutes, and the Minister to be given no less than five minutes to reply to the debate; No. 3, statements on the school meals programme, to be taken at 4 p.m. and to conclude at 5.30 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 five minutes, all other Senators not to

exceed five minutes, and the Minister to be given no less than ten minutes to reply to the debate. On the conclusion of the Order of Business, the House shall stand adjourned until 9.30 a.m. on Thursday, 1 October 2026.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I thank the Acting Leader for outlining the Order of Business, which I support. Last Friday, I attended a lovely event in Athy at the invitation of Eileen Doyle, who runs a choir, Athy Choral Fusion. Along with her choir, she brought the renowned tenor, Paul Linehan, Castlecomer Male Voice Choir, the Baldonnell Singers and the school choir of Scoil Phádraig Naofa along for the night. It was a beautiful night of harmonies, which was the title of the evening. It was a special night but, most importantly, the money raised will go towards cancer and functional neurological disorder, FND, causes. Cancer, as we all know, is a serious illness. No family has been left untouched by it, and funds are always needed for further education, research and treatment. However, FND is at the other end of the spectrum with regard to research, education and treatment. In Ireland, it is the second highest diagnosed neurological condition after migraines, but awareness and knowledge of it is extremely low. I committed to Eileen Doyle that I would raise this matter and seek a debate in the House on FND.

I raise local government funding allocations, particularly the 2027 allocation for Kildare. Kildare has been denied once again a vital uplift in funding. Members will all be aware of the various issues I have raised in the Seanad regarding Kildare for which funding is needed. We are one of the fastest growing counties in Ireland. Yet, we remain critically underfunded. Our budget expenditure per head is just €1,152, which is a massive €403 below the national average. This leaves a total funding gap of €100 million annually. It is completely unsustainable for a rapidly growing population. I ask the Minister to urgently review the local property tax allocations and provide extra Exchequer funding. I also seek a debate in this House on this matter.

I also seek a debate regarding public safety for our councillors and public representatives and raise the immediate need to amend our electoral legislation. Last month, Councillor Rachel Hartigan in Clare successfully passed a motion regarding an urgent issue facing public representatives. Under current rules, candidates are legally mandated to publish their precise private residential addresses on electoral documents. Some councils do not include that information on their website, while others do. In the interests of everyone's safety, no council should publish that information. The danger of this requirement was brought into sharp focus during the summer when approximately 80 female councillors were contacted and had to face a level of severe intimidation. That is completely wrong. Every council should pass a similar motion. We should also have a debate with the Minister in this regard.

Senator Cathal Byrne: We will support the Order of Business.

Today, I want to speak for a moment about a meeting that I had in my office with members of Wexford Macra na Feirme on their concerns about generational renewal. They gave me some fairly startling statistics. At present one in three farmers across the country is aged over 65 while only one in 20 farmers is aged under 35. That is something that all of us in this House have to take stock of. Why is it the case at present that we have such a high average age for our farmers? It is currently 59. Last year, at the ploughing championships, the commission on generational renewal outlined 31 recommendations on what the Government, and I suppose all

of us in this House could do, about generational renewal. The Wexford members of Macra made a clear pitch to me and said that without new young farmers joining the industry and getting involved, we simply will not have the food that the country requires into the future. They put it in stark terms because this is a serious problem that is coming down the tracks.

In my own case, both my father and my uncle farm. There is me and I have two brothers. While we regularly help out, none of us is a full-time farmer. That is something that is found in so many families up and down the country at present.

The Wexford members of Macra spoke to me about how important schemes such as the targeted agriculture modernisation schemes are and how important the exemptions that exist for stamp duty on the transfer of farms from one generation to the next are. A key point that they made to me is that the farmer who retires has to be supported as well and that changes being proposed at European level, which would remove the entitlement of a farmer to a pension if he was in receipt of a single farm payment while providing no retirement scheme while providing no retirement scheme, are simply not workable.

I urge that we have a debate in this House with the Minister for agriculture on generational renewal in farming, and that we hear directly how the 31 recommendations in the generational renewal report are progressing and perhaps seek an update on the measures that will be brought forward in the budget specifically around encouraging more young people into farming.

Senator Sharon Keogan: It is nice to see a Longford man in the Leader's chair today.

With budget day only days away, we are witnessing a government establishment desperately trying to convince the public that Ireland is thriving but, away from the spin and the smooth press conferences, the reality on the ground for ordinary working people is one of absolute survival. Let us look at what happened on Sunday in Moate, County Westmeath. I know the Acting Leader was there. Thousands of transport operators, agricultural contractors and struggling citizens packed into a crisis meeting to send a clear warning to this Administration. They are on the brink. They cannot sustain these crippling fuel costs and if this upcoming budget does not immediately abolish the carbon tax and slash VAT on fuel, our roads will be gridlocked with protest once again.

Instead of listening, how does the establishment react? The Tánaiste whimpers that the EU will not let us change our tax. We are spending over €300 million on our EU Presidency only to have no influence at the table over our own affairs. This is who the establishment really is - out-of-touch Ministers and high ranking civil servants who happily burn millions of euro on international vanity projects while local family businesses collapse at home and then the subsidised mainstream press attacks anyone who dares to point it out.

Let us look at *The Irish Times* editorial choices last week plastering the liquidation of a small dog day-care business across its pages, not out of sudden economic concern for small business but as a highly-targeted disproportionate focus on a local independent figure such as Nick Delehanty because he had been a vocal critic of this Government's asylum and public spending policies. It is a disgrace and an example of weaponising economic hardship to silence dissent, but while the media would gleefully print a hit piece on a critic, they remain utterly silent when the establishment's own narrative is exposed as a total failure and that critic is totally vindicated.

Where was *The Irish Times* or, indeed, any mainstream media coverage of the explosive figures obtained from Dublin City Council by Councillor Gavin Pepper? His official inquiry revealed a dramatic issue in our housing allocation system. Non-Irish households now make up 42% of the social housing waiting list. Furthermore, the share of accepted social housing offers going to non-Irish households was 33%. Dublin City Council admits it does not even monitor allocation outcomes by nationality. We have generations of Irish children locked out of their own communities, living in box rooms with their parents and unable to start families, yet when official data proves that the State infrastructure is buckling under the unsustainable open immigration policy, it is as if the press engages in a co-ordinated blackout. This is a two-tier Ireland. Our own citizens are left out in the cold while the political elite manages a decline it refuses to acknowledge. The public has certainly had enough.

Senator Joanne Collins: It was great to see so many Members standing outside Leinster House today for "Walk Out for Women", where we showed solidarity with women who are subject to domestic violence and coercion. This year to date, ten women have been killed in Ireland. We have to think in real terms. That is ten families and friends who have had to bury somebody because they were unsafe in their own homes. It was great to see so many men and women standing out to show our solidarity with that and to stand up for those women.

On another note, but staying on safety, I want to bring up CCTV cameras in Limerick city and county. The CCTV system was run under the regeneration programme and costs €800,000 a year to fund. The regeneration programme is declining every year. There was 25% taken off last year, and again this year. There was a shortfall last year of €600,000. The mayor of Limerick, Mr. John Moran, funded that from his own pot of money, which should not have had to be allocated to it because it used to come from regeneration funding. Limerick Chamber contacted, first, the Department of housing and local government, which it assumed CCTV funding fell under. The Department passed them to the Department of justice, which passed them back to the Department of housing and local government. It is kind of up in the air as to who is supposed to fund this, but it is €800,000 in the grand scheme of things to run CCTV footage for a city and county for an entire year. In the grand scheme of what is spent in this country, it is pennies, really, when you think about it, to have that safety for not only the residents, but for the business owners and for that additional support for An Garda Síochána when something happens that it has those CCTV cameras to look back on. It is something that needs to be brought up to the Minister for justice, whom, I assume, this falls under. I would appreciate it if the Acting Leader could get on to the Minister and ask him to go back to Limerick Chamber of Commerce, have a conversation and see what can be done because this is a major city and county that does not have that back-up of CCTV footage.

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call the next speaker, I welcome St. Raphaela's primary school who are here in the Seanad with us. They are guests of the Minister of State, Deputy Neale Richmond. They are most welcome to Seanad Éireann today.

Senator Imelda Goldsboro: This morning, I wish to raise an important item that was brought to my attention yesterday. In south Tipperary, winter appeared quite rapidly with torrential rain and high gusts of wind causing power outages and everything else associated with it. I thank the relevant agencies, the local authority, the ESB and all those who worked tirelessly to bring

power back to homes late last night. However, one issue that was brought to my attention was that a number of elderly vulnerable people had been in contact with concerns as to the power returning.

They were concerned with regard to medical supplies, hoists, oxygen and CPAP machines, just to name a few. What they were not aware of is the photovoltaic scheme for medically vulnerable customers. That is what I want to raise here today. It is an extremely worthwhile initiative aimed at households where someone depends on electric power to life support or medical equipment. By its very nature this is a group for whom the security of energy supply and the cost of electricity are particularly important. We know that 137 systems were installed in 2024 and 473 in 2025 and that €11.7 million was allocated to support more than 1,900 homes in 2026.

I would like to ask the Minister to provide an update on the actual uptake of this scheme and in particular to publish the number of installations completed month by month since 2024, together with the associated expenditure. I would also like clarity on how the scheme is being communicated directly to households in the life support category of the priority services register and whether every eligible household is being proactively informed of the assistance available. This scheme is for the vulnerable. It is to help and to assist and we need to encourage more uptake on this, especially coming into the harsh weather of the winter. Will the Leader arrange for the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment to provide an update to the House on the scheme and its current uptake?

Senator Mark Duffy: It is great to see Paraic in the chair as Acting Leader today. I wish him well. I would like to advocate on behalf of An Post postal workers who have given a lifetime of service to the organisation, who have been at the coalface of community and rural life down through the years and who have been a touchpoint for people in areas of rural isolation and being that link for people who needed it most in good times and in bad. As many would know, the merger took place in 1984 between the Department of Posts and Telegraphs and An Post. I have been in touch with two gentlemen over the past 24 hours who are still affected by a lack of resolution in their pension status. One retired in July 2022 after 42 years of service, but when his pension arrived, only 91% of his basic pay allowances were taken into account, with the pension increase capped at 2% per year. They have given a lifetime of service, dedication and work to the State and to community and should not have to fight their corner for what they have been committed to and what is right and just for them to receive.

I am asking that Ministers and the Government knock heads together and deliver for these people as soon as possible. They have given a lifetime of commitment and service to it. The workers did not choose to leave the organisation. The State moved them into a new working pattern and it was meant to protect workers who transferred on the vesting day. It was not supposed to be less favourable than those positions that were held as civil servants. We need to protect and support and make sure that we follow through on commitments that are made. I ask that the Government deliver without delay across all ministries, that it not pass the buck, and that it deliver for these postal workers.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: The deregulation of the taxi system in Ireland was brought in to increase the number of taxis on the streets, especially here in Dublin, to bring competition to the taxi industry and, it was hoped, to bring prices down, so imagine the shock I feel when I

am sitting in a taxi and the taxi driver tells me that he is renting the plate of an individual who owns about 200 plates and he is paying €6,500 per annum for the taxi plate. When I investigated a little further, I found out that there are a number of individuals in Dublin who have between 25 and 200 taxi plates. That does not facilitate the individuals who are paying six and a half grand for the pleasure of driving a taxi. Their first two days are gone in just paying for the rent on the plate, then they have to pay for insurance, petrol, diesel, electricity and whatever else. Where is the regulator in all of this? How can somebody buy a number of taxi plates? Surely to God we should allow these people set themselves up as sole traders. The plan was that they would be sole traders, they would compete with one another, and there would be more taxis on the road. We need a debate on the whole taxi system and how it works in this country. It is grossly unfair to expect any individual to have to pay €6,500 rent. If we are going to operate a rental system for plates, then let the State operate it and let the State benefit from it. Otherwise, let us do away with it.

It is great to see Fine Gael has introduced a new training system for Acting Leaders. I hope they are learning from this, and an essay from each of them at the end of their period to explain what they have learned might be good.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I welcome the Acting Leader. Today, I am going to raise something that was raised yesterday with regard to the fuel crisis. It was raised formally by Senator Kennelly, and I am raising it here today as well. It relates to do with regulation and guidelines around solar farms. I am calling for a debate on solar farms. I am calling for the Minister, or one of the four Ministers in the Department of housing, to come before us. Last week's Commencement matter was enlightening for me to say the least to realise that the Department has not operationalised specific planning and guidelines comparable to the national wind energy development guidelines. I do not know what it is like in other counties, but I listened yesterday to Senator Flaherty on what it is like in the Chair's county, and I know in Galway that we have 1,000 acres in one particular location. We have multiple others, like the communities of Kiltormer, Moyvilla, Coxtown, Abbeyknockmoy and Monivea, under siege and under threat from sprawling solar farms. Everything is working off a county development plan and not working off proper planning regulations and guidelines to be set out by the relevant Department. The energy guidelines are set out by the Department of climate, but unfortunately the guidelines on solar farms are actually just working to the county development plan. Those guidelines are really for roof-based solar farms or solar appliances. The debate would be really welcome. There are many people on both sides of the House here who would like to contribute to it. It is incumbent on the Minister to come before us to tell us the plans about when we can relieve our people of the stress they are under in rural Ireland.

Senator Eileen Lynch: I want to speak about Walk Out Wednesday, which many Senators in the Chamber will have participated in this morning. Walk Out for Women is a campaign which is being led by Monica Murphy of Waterford. I commend her on the work she has done on this and for the cross-party support it has got here in Leinster House and nationally following the reports. It is great to see that many workplaces were involved in it this morning. It is raising awareness of gender-based violence and domestic violence. It is important that we do this. What spurred Monica on to do this was the fact that ten women have already died violently in Ireland in the first nine months of this year. It is incredible to note that this is an increase on seven last year, the entirety of 2023, and an increase on five in 2024.

12 o'clock

Strategies are being put in place and reviews are being done, but it is clearly not working. I remember standing in Cork County Council chamber in January 2022 when Ashling Murphy was violently murdered, which I am sure everyone remembers. I am not sure that we have progressed a lot in those four and a half years. We have seen a lot of work done at political level. I again commend Frances Fitzgerald on the gender violence based directive in European Parliament, and Kathleen Funchion MEP, who currently sits on the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality, FEMM, and is also working on this. In June 2022, Helen McEntee, when she was Minister for Justice, published the third national strategy on gender-based and domestic violence. While this report is continually under review, the most recent annual progress report was published in March this year. It is important that we bring the current Minister for justice into the House to review the progress report that has been published. The measures are being put in. The most recent strategy brought in extra education on consent and coercive control and extra victim refuge spaces. It is clearly not working and we need to see how we can improve things, because it is a massive increase that ten women have died in violence-based circumstances so far this year.

Senator Pauline Tully: Last Sunday, I took part in an event called Walk In Our Shoes. It is a one mile walk for the reform of Ireland's family law court system. There was a walk in each of the 26 counties. It was a peaceful walk and at the end, children's shoes were placed on the steps of a courthouse to symbolise that the real victims of the family law system are the children. I hear from mothers a lot of the time whose relationships have broken down, whether due to violence or coercive control, and access to the children has been granted through a court order. However, the children are terrified and do not want to go to spend time with that partner, yet they are made to go because of the court order. If the mother sends her child, she is heartbroken. The child is crying and upset, having nightmares and so on. If she does not send her child, she is in breach of a court order.

The family law court is not transparent. It needs to be transparent and trauma informed. It needs to be trustworthy and accountable, but it is not at the moment. The *in camera* rule means that every decision is down to an independent judge. There is no consistency across the system and that needs to change. We need to have judges who are educated in trauma and know how to recognise it. We also need social workers and others who work for Tusla to have education in trauma. I have spoken with Tusla about it and I am disappointed by its lack of support for women in this situation. It says one thing but does not provide support on the ground. I have lots of examples of this where I have reached out to it but it is washing its hands and saying that there is nothing to investigate. It does not have specialised people willing to talk to children to find out what the truth is. Children's rights need to be protected. Instead of looking at it as a parent having a right to see a child, we should look at it as the child having the right to see a parent if they so want to and feel safe. Their safety has to be protected as a first call.

There is a national day of action for this campaign today and people are walking from the Four Courts to Leinster House. The walk is leaving at 12 noon. They will be here shortly, so maybe people will go out to meet them.

Senator Mike Kennelly: I welcome our new Acting Leader. We met the Vintners Federation of Ireland, VFI, outside the gates of Leinster House. I highlight the need for Government

support for rural pubs in budget 2027. Since 2005, more than 2,200 pubs have closed across Ireland and the rate of closures is increasing. For many villages, the local pub is not just a business. It is the heart of the community, a meeting place and often the last remaining hub. I had a Commencement matter on this calling for the Government to do everything it could in budget 2027 to support pubs in rural Kerry and across the country and keep their doors open. I stated that day that it was from the cradle to the grave. When you are involved in a community in rural Ireland, the pub is central to your family growing up, to your christening and communion parties, your birthday parties, your 21st and your after-wedding parties. That is how central these pubs are. A sign of how big and central they are is when the captains of the winning ladies' and men's football teams come back to that local parish.

A community organisation called Forbairt na Dromoda bought the Inny tavern in Killeenleagh, Mastergeehy, south Kerry, after the pub had been on the market for more than two years. They raised more than €108,000 through crowd funding, alongside a bank loan, to keep it in community ownership. That is the reality that rural Ireland is facing if these pubs keep closing at an alarming rate. I am calling on the Government to support the request for funding to keep the doors of pubs in rural Ireland open.

Senator Noel O'Donovan: Like other Senators, I welcome the Acting Leader to the House. I agree completely with Senators Lynch and Kennelly on the Walk Out for Women and support for rural pubs.

I talk in this House a lot about infrastructure and I criticise Uisce Éireann from time to time with regard to delivery. Across west Cork in the summer months, we saw investment in water infrastructure in Adrigole and Lisavaird. In Ballinascarty and Shannonvale, works commenced yesterday. It is important to put on the record when works are completed and started. We have seen Government investment into our water network, and it is great to see communities being served by these upgrades. Hopefully, water outages will not happen in these communities in the future.

I turn my attention to our roads infrastructure, another issue I talk about a lot in the House. I call for a debate with the Minister for Transport. Cork county has more than 12,000 km of roads. It is the largest county with the largest number of road kilometres in this country. Thankfully, we have seen increased annual funding for our regional and local roads. I welcome the prioritisation of roads funding in budgets again. I am calling for a debate on the discretionary element of this funding. I know that will also be important for the Acting Leader's county. This is the basic maintenance of our rural and local roads and taking the water off of them. As politicians in these Houses, many will say we should not be talking about local and rural roads, but I am looking for a policy change. This is about saving money for the taxpayers. We need to do more to protect and maintain our roads. You will often hear about the man with the shovel in rural Ireland taking the water off. We need to go back to look at the policy and give discretion to area engineers. It is fine tarring and resurfacing roads, but what happens when the storms and floods come? This is a country that has a lot of rain but we do not maintain and protect our roads. We need a debate with the Minister for Transport to ensure that more discretionary funding is reaching local level. The engineers are brilliant at their jobs, but they do not have discretion to go out to do the maintenance work that they need to do daily.

Senator Chris Andrews: I wish the Acting Leader the best of luck in his position. I extend my condolences to the family of the usher, Seamus Carroll, who passed away yesterday. He was professional and pleasant, and it is often difficult to be both. He was both. He was always professional and pleasant. I extend my condolences to his family and to the other ushers in the Houses.

I return briefly to the Irish Wheelchair Association, IWA, and its decision to send a wheelchair basketball team to the European championships where Ireland will play Israel. There are 900 wheelchairs being prevented by Israel from going into Gaza. Israel has caused many people to depend on wheelchairs. I find it hard to figure out how the Irish Wheelchair Association could accept an invite to play Israel. I have been engaging with the IWA on this issue for five weeks and reasonable questions remain unanswered. Following my most recent contribution on the matter here, the IWA responded after several weeks of silence. I welcome the additional information, but central and serious questions remain. The original fundraiser that the IWA put in place referred to only three other nations. Israel was only named after I raised my concerns with the IWA. I do believe that there was an element of deception in this and I think it is something that needs to be addressed. With the tournament just weeks away, why has there been no promotion on IWA or sports-----

An Cathaoirleach: Senator, in making accusations against people outside the Chamber, you have to be very careful and mindful of Standing Order 52. I know that raising issues of public interest is what people do in this Chamber, and that is very important, but we just need to strike that balance. Please continue. I will add on more time.

Senator Chris Andrews: Thank you.

With the tournament just weeks away, why has there been no promotion of the event on the IWA or IWA-Sport social media? Was there a decision not to publicise the Israeli fixture until the tournament commenced? If so, who made it and why was it made? I also have to ask whether responses to these concerns have been condescending. Would questions about transparency around an Irish international team be treated this way in any other sport? Wheelchair basketball deserves the same scrutiny and accountability as all international sports. The IWA stresses that the final board decision was unanimous, but were concerns raised or alternatives proposed before that vote? If the IWA stands over its robust process, it should be comfortable explaining it. After five weeks, straightforward questions remain unanswered. What is there to hide? Like I said at the start, the wheelchairs are sitting in Jordan. They should be in Gaza. Israel has created so many wheelchair users that it is completely unacceptable that the Irish Wheelchair Association would accept an invitation to play Israel. Israel, like I said, has caused a genocide and the Irish Wheelchair Association is engaging with it and playing with it. This is just unacceptable. It is not acceptable in wheelchair sports; it is not acceptable in any sport.

Senator Linda Nelson Murray: I am delighted to see my colleague Senator Brady as Acting Leader. Well done to him.

On behalf of myself and my Fine Gael colleagues, I pass on our condolences to the usher Seamus Carroll and to all the staff who were friends with him. We are very sorry for their loss.

For the past two weeks, I have been a mammy going around secondary schools on opening nights and trying to figure out the best place for my daughter. I have two girls. They are "Irish twins", so there are decisions to be made for both of them because they come one after the other. I feel the weight is on my shoulders about making sure they get into the right school because going into secondary school is such a massive step.

This morning, I got a phone call from another mammy in the exact same position as me. She is going around trying to find the best school for her daughter. Her daughter has autism. She rang some schools in the Meath West constituency and asked what provisions there are for an open night for her daughter. She asked whether there would be less noise and fewer people and whether they could come in 15 minutes or 20 minutes beforehand. Unfortunately, the schools had not thought that some children with autism might be coming in and might need to just have a bit of calm. That is something I would like us to look at when we talk about inclusive education, and we use those two words quite regularly. The other thing the mammy said to me was that she had gone around two schools. There were four schools her daughter could apply for but only two had autism units. Of the 540 students who will be looking for places, two autism places were going to be available for 2027, so her child has a one-in-270 chance of getting into an autism class. Her child wants to be in a mainstream school and wants to feel accepted by her peers but she needs that extra bit of help in an autism unit. When listening to this lady, I felt so selfish thinking about my concerns about going around looking for a place for my daughter when I do not have the extra worry of trying to figure out whether there will be an autism unit in a mainstream school for her. Although we are spending more than ever, and although I am sure that the Government will put even more into this year's budget, we have to keep looking at what we are doing for students with autism, where the autism units are and, with densely populated areas like Navan with almost 40,000 people in it, how we can possibly have only two schools with autism classes for girls to go to. I plead with the Acting Leader to write to the Minister for education and ask where we are on autism units in Navan and in Meath West more widely for girls who are looking to go to school in 2027. I cannot imagine the stress that that mammy is under right now.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: It is great to see Senator Brady in the role of Acting Leader. I wish him the very best of luck with it.

I also pass on my condolences to the family of Seamus Carroll and all his friends here. It is very sad news. *Suaimhneas síoraí dá anam.*

I want to speak in solidarity with the 100,000 public sector workers who are on a work to rule today. Many employees in this House will be affected by this. There are 19 unions involved, including the largest unions in the country, namely, SIPTU, Fórsa, Unite, the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, INMO, and the Irish National Teachers Organisation, INTO. Right across the country, people will be affected by this, but they are affected because these workers have not been given the demands they looked for. We all rely so much on the public service of this country. Nobody wants to do this. Safe staffing is a huge issue, and they cannot keep working under the current staffing rules. There has been overwhelming support from all the union members that there will be industrial action on 14 October. The Minister, Jack Chambers, seems to lack the understanding that pay and living standards must be protected and that public sector pay has fallen by as much as 5% as inflation has grown. This is disproportionately affecting newer people in the sector who are just starting off on their careers.

We can see the fallout of this because of the high cost of living. People cannot afford to live. We see this particularly in bigger cities like Dublin. There are people coming out of the public sector. They have trained in the public sector. They have chosen the career path of working in the public sector, including the Civil Service, yet they just cannot afford to live.

I urge the Minister, Jack Chambers, to engage, to actually listen and to put pay at the start of talks, not say it will happen at the end. He seems to be digging in his heels. Inflation grows and wages need to grow. The work to rule starts today, and I am in full solidarity with the workers because they do not want to do this. We all know in our own working lives and in our own families how much we rely on the public sector, including the Civil Service. Nobody wants to go on strike, and that needs to keep being reiterated. It is not too late for the Minister to intervene, to actually listen to what the unions are looking for in the first place and to give them the respect they need. Their public sector deal ended on 30 June and there has been no consideration of getting this back again the way it should have been.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: I thank you personally, a Chathaoirligh, for assisting outside today with the Walk Out for Women campaign. There was cross-party turnout here, as could be expected. The Walk Out for Women campaign is a really important campaign. It is a simple exercise that sends a strong message that there can be no place in our society for abuse of women. Women's Aid's femicide watch told us that, by July of this year, eight women in our country had died under violent circumstances. Now the campaign says that that number has grown to ten by the end of September. This is a real problem, and behind every one of those statistics is a woman, a family and a community. I commend Jim O'Callaghan, the Minister for justice, and the wider Government on what they are doing to address gender-based violence, but there is an onus on all of us - as elected representatives, but also just as human beings - to say loud and clear that there will be no tolerance of abuse of women and no tolerance of coercive behaviour, bullying behaviour or violence against women. I commend everybody who partook in the Walk Out for Women today and say to all of us, let us continue to be vigilant every moment of every day, wherever we are. We need to protect our girls, we need to protect our women and we need to protect one another.

An Cathaoirleach: Thanks to everybody who participated in the Walk Out for Women. It is important that the Oireachtas stand with those who are suffering from abuse and coercive control and, obviously, those families who have suffered bereavement as a result of gender-based violence, oftentimes at the hands of people they know intimately. It is something I think we all stand together on.

Senator Gareth Scahill: I wish to extend my condolences to the family of Seamus Carroll, the usher who passed away.

I acknowledge what Senator Goldsboro mentioned earlier about PV solar panels for medically vulnerable individuals. She had a number of questions and was seeking a debate. It is something I spoke about in the House last night during our motion on fuel and energy supports and it is something I have raised here repeatedly. I even tabled a Commencement matter with the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley. It is a great scheme in which the batteries are now going to be included. Senator Goldsboro was wondering how it is being promoted and how the message is getting out there. There is an onus on us to do an awful lot of work on that.

It is something I have raised in the constituency and on which I have received very good feedback. I know there are people within the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, who will support public representatives in getting those allocations for medically vulnerable individuals.

That leads me on to another issue that I did not raise last night during the energy and fuel discussion, which is external wall insulation. It is a substantial business. In 2023, 6,100 homes received SEAI-supported external wall installation, with an average cost in excess of €20,000. The market is worth in excess of €100 million per year. When we have a market worth that much and a Government that has money supporting a scheme like that, and when there is pressure on the wider community to retrofit their homes, sometimes standards can lapse. I am worried that the National Standards Authority of Ireland, NSAI, might not be doing enough in ensuring the quality of the external wall insulation that is going in. There are a number of stages that qualified installers have to complete. There is project-specific design but there is also preparation, boarding, base coat, finish and completion. There are photographs and evidence of materials used that have to be registered the whole way along that process. However, I have been led to believe that installers of this external wall insulation have the opportunity once a year when it comes to their NSAI renewal to select the project they wish to submit and put forward as evidence of them meeting those standards. I do not want us sitting in this Chamber in ten or 15 years' time looking at an external wall insulation redress scheme. We need to ensure that the standards are in place today and that the standards that are in place are monitored and kept up to scratch with. I call for a debate in this House with the Minister on external wall installation but also with regard to a lot of the supports that are there.

Finally, I congratulate Senator Brady on taking his maiden voyage in the Leader's seat. I know he will do a wonderful job.

Senator Eileen Flynn: First, I would like to congratulate Senator Brady. I wish him the very best in his new role.

I stand this morning to talk a wee bit about Seamus Carroll. He was such a lovely person; always smiling and full of energy. Honestly, he would give you the coat off his back if you were stuck around the Houses looking for anything. I remember in 2024 when I was campaigning for this seat. He said to me that he had spoken to such and such a person and told them to give me a number, and I would say, "Oh God, Seamus, thanks very much". He was the life and soul of Leinster House. His wife has also worked in Leinster House. Seamus has been here since 2015. I encourage all politicians, although we are always nice to the ushers anyway, to be a little bit kinder this week because they have lost a friend and a really good work colleague. I am thinking of Seamus's family and all the ushers in Leinster House this afternoon.

We can do as many walkouts as possible around gender-based violence and the courts, etc. I know from personal experience over the summer that the family courts do not work for women in this country. I did not get involved in the walkouts because, as many people here will know, I do not want to be in front of cameras saying, "I support women; aren't I brilliant?". I call on the Houses to have a special committee to deal with gender-based violence and with the family courts. The family courts need to be dealt with in this country. They are not fit for purpose. The courts happen behind closed doors. Women's voices are very rarely heard in the

courts. A new organisation has been set up in County Donegal called Survivors Informing Services and Institutions, SiSi, which supports women in the justice system. Once again, what is the walkout going to change unless every single politician in here who says they support women's rights and does not put up with gender-based violence gets involved? Why are we not calling for better policies and better legislation for women? Why are we not seeking to reform the family courts for women? In many cases, women are forced to go back into violent situations. For the record, I am calling for a special committee around the family courts and gender-based violence.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: Today, I also want to give my condolences to the family of Seamus Carroll and his colleagues and friends. He was a very pleasant, chatty usher and he will be missed.

I want to talk about the decision to light up buildings, including the Mansion House and Trinity College Dublin, for International Safe Abortion Day. It is an oxymoron in that it puts two contradictory words together. The Mansion House is a public building and everyone should feel welcome and represented by it. The National Women's Council of Ireland, NWCI, co-ordinated this initiative, but that organisation does not represent women as a whole. Its members have not been elected and they have no public mandate. Women are not a hive mind who all believe the exact same thing and the National Women's Council should recognise this. It is funny that when women were commenting on its social media posts last night disagreeing with the lightning up of public buildings, the NWCI turned off comments and deleted comments, silencing other women's voices. There was no outcry from the NWCI when a woman in County Donegal was forced by her partner to take abortion tablets against her will. That person has been prosecuted and sentenced since. Women like me who share a different opinion or who differ from what these groups decide is the correct perspective are treated as though we are social pariahs. That is wrong. I try to respect the views of others and other women even though I fundamentally disagree with them. The reality is that the NWCI only wants women's voices if it is an opinion it agrees with. As an NGO that receives funding from the taxpayer, it should be accountable to the public. It is also surprising to see a Fianna Fáil mayor give the go-ahead for this because I know it is not a position shared by many of the members of the Fianna Fáil Party. The Mansion House was essentially used as a vehicle to promote abortion. I think we are forgetting that somebody dies in an abortion. Public buildings should not be used as billboards for only one side of a deeply contested issue.

An Cathaoirleach: I join my colleagues on congratulating Senator Brady on his first response to the Order of Business. Anois, the Acting Leader, an Seanadóir Brady.

Senator Paraic Brady: I thank the Cathaoirleach. Before I respond, I confirm that the time for the group spokespersons on No. 3, statements on the school meals programme, is eight minutes and not five minutes as I mentioned earlier in my opening statement.

Senator O'Loughlin spoke about the Baldonnell Singers and cancer, and awareness regarding FND in Athy. We would welcome a debate this House around FND. I thank Senator O'Loughlin for putting forward this motion. She also spoke about the commuter belt and the budget expenditure per head of €1,152, which is below the national average. It is surprising to

see anywhere below the national average, but especially a town like Kildare that is seen as part of the commuter belt for people coming into Dublin.

It is certainly surprising to see it below the national average. I hope that the Minister can bring it above the average in time.

Senator O'Loughlin also discussed a debate on public safety and public representation. Any debate regarding the safety of our councillors and other elected representatives is certainly welcome. The Local Authorities Members Association and the Association of Irish Local Government have done great work on the safety of our councillors over recent years. Making members' addresses open to the public leaves them in danger of attack. We should look at that. Anybody who is elected should have the right to not have his or her private address advertised on any leaflets from the local authority or anywhere else. It is certainly a discussion that needs to be had. I would welcome discussion with the representative bodies, the AILG and LAMA. They might come forward with something that we can address. I thank the Senator for taking the care to bring up the concerns of our local councillors.

Senator Cathal Byrne spoke about Macra na Feirme in Wexford and about the great work that Macra na Feirme does. We saw the wonderful work it does, especially with young people, at the ploughing championships. It encourages young people to get into farming. As we all know, if our young people are not encouraged into farming, we will not have farmers. The Senator said that one in three farmers is over the age of 65. Another stark figure is that one in three is under the age of 35. The figures are alarming to the say the least if we intend to have food security in this country. I hope there will be supports for younger farmers in the new CAP budget. Everybody has lobbied for that. We need a strong CAP budget if we intend to protect our younger farmers and encourage young people into farming.

The Senator also spoke about people retiring after farming land and the supports they will need from Government with regard to pensions and so on. I support his proposals. These people are after giving their lives to the farming sector. We would welcome a debate on generational renewal and where we intend to go with that. I thank the Senator for his comments.

Senator Sharon Keogan spoke about people who were at the protest in Moate last Sunday and about the anger and anxiety in that room. I attended that meeting in Moate and there was certainly frustration. The supports the Minister, Deputy Heydon, has rolled out, including fuel support for another five months, were very much welcomed at that meeting and were acknowledged by the top table. The supports that Government has given to the sector were welcomed and acknowledged by the people at the top table. Everybody knows where we are at this moment in time with regard to the fuel crisis. We had a debate on it here yesterday evening. The problem is not the price of crude oil but refining the oil when you harvest it out of the ground. We see all the damage that has been done to oil refineries all over the world. Unfortunately, this has seen the price of fuel increase all over the world. Ireland is in the bottom ten EU countries with regard to fuel prices. I would like to see supports in respect of home heating oil such as those the Senator spoke about. I hope the upcoming budget will include supports for people who use kerosene for that purpose.

Senators Collins, Lynch, Fitzpatrick, Nelson Murray and Cosgrove all mentioned this morning's walkout and protecting women from violence. Nobody can condone domestic

violence. This morning, we saw people from across parties walk out to the front of Leinster House. We certainly have to support this sector. I hope we will see a debate in this House regarding gender-based violence. I thank all the Senators for raising the matter here this morning.

Senator Collins also spoke about CCTV in Limerick and about the €800,000 it costs to fund the CCTV cameras in Limerick city. It is a small amount to protect the citizens of Limerick. She also spoke about the regeneration fund and about the Mayor of Limerick having to put in funding. I suppose this falls under the remit of the Minister for justice. I was not really sure but it falls under his remit. CCTV is very important not only in Limerick, but all over Dublin and in our own towns, including Longford, because it gives everybody in the community a sense of security. It gives our gardaí a back-up so that, when crimes happen, they have something to go to that allows them to deal with the problem sooner rather than later. I certainly welcome that.

Senator Imelda Goldsboro spoke about the power outage in south Tipperary. She thanked the council and the ESB for the way in which they dealt with that outage. We have seen a number of storms, including Storm Éowyn, leading to outages in the past. The Senator spoke about medical supplies and about the vulnerable people in society who will need to be encouraged to take up PV environmental schemes. We are talking about vulnerable people in our communities, especially those who rely on electricity to run air mattresses or to support other health needs. Civil Defence is always available to provide support in an emergency. We encourage any citizen who needs back-up services to avail of them. I hope that funding will be in place to support this community.

Senator Tully also spoke about the walkout. She also spoke about children's shoes. In counties all over Ireland, children's shoes were placed on the steps of courthouses in a protest regarding the family law courts. She spoke about social workers, Tusla and child safety. Of course, child safety is a must. It is certainly not something I am going to delve into today. Everybody knows how I feel regarding child safety. It is certainly something we can discuss in the House going forward.

Senator Kennelly spoke about the Vintners Federation of Ireland and support for rural pubs in the budget. As he said, rural pubs are the lifeblood and soul of rural communities, especially in Kerry and in my hometown in County Longford. We have a rural pub, the 98 Bar. On Thursdays, all our young people come there to play trad music. It is wonderful to see 35 to 50 young people coming on a Thursday night to play trad music, to listen to each other and to embrace each other. It is a special occasion for everybody locally. It is the lifeblood of the community. Everybody looks forward to listening to Irish music on a Thursday evening. The Senator is correct. He spoke about a rural pub in south Kerry that the community bought and took over.

I compliment the people of Kerry for doing that. It is a new initiative that shows us they have belief in their community and they have strength in their community. It is very welcome. It is unfortunate that they had to do that but I am glad to see that they can keep the lights on in a rural pub. That is very important. I wish them well with that. Hopefully the next time I am in Kerry I will call in for a beverage. I look forward to seeing it.

Senator Noel O'Donovan spoke about infrastructure and the investment that Irish Water has done. For once in this House we have somebody coming in here not criticising Irish Water and instead complimenting them on the investment and the infrastructure they are putting into his local community, which is welcome to hear. The positives have to be heard in this House as well as the negatives. I welcome that. I hope going forward that we will hear a lot more of those news stories from other counties regarding Irish Water and the infrastructure.

The Senator also spoke about roads funding and maintenance in County Cork, and the maintenance of our local roads falling back to our local engineers who have knowledge on the ground. Certainly that is something a local engineer would have a level of knowledge and a level of experience of, and would see at first hand what is happening on the ground. There certainly needs to be discussion regarding roads funding and the full allocation coming down, with some of it ring-fenced for maintenance during the winter period. It is a worthwhile motion and something that we should discuss in this House.

Senator Andrews spoke about Seamus Carroll. Along with everyone in the House, I would like to sympathise with all the ushers, Seamus Carroll's family and his close friends. It must be very difficult for all his usher friends and all his work colleagues in this House on this very day. I hope we will have a one-minute silence afterwards if that is possible.

Senator Andrews also spoke about the Irish Wheelchair Association going abroad to play a game against Israel. I think our sentiments in this House have been well discussed regarding where Ireland stands with regard to Israel and sport. Any Irish team that travels abroad and represents our country on a national or international level is certainly welcome, and especially people with disabilities. I believe that we should not stand in anyone's way when sport comes into play and especially when they represent our country. The other night our Irish team spoke with their boots on the ground when it came to the victory in the soccer match. I have enough said on that. If there is any more that Senator Andrews needs to know on that, I will ask the Leader to follow up on it.

Senator Nelson Murray spoke about her two beautiful daughters and the decision on the best school for them to attend. The Senator also spoke about autism. One thing she does not have to worry about, but unfortunately other people in the Meath area have to worry about, is the lack of autism spaces in that county. The Senator spoke of the need for schools to have a calm area in the morning around children with autism and for the Government to provide adequate spaces and units, not only in County Meath but all over Ireland when it comes to autism. I will get the Leader to write to the Minister for education to get an update for Senator Nelson Murray regarding autism places in County Meath.

Senator Cosgrove also had sentiments regarding Seamus Carroll, our usher. The Senator also spoke about the over 100,000 public sector workers in the areas of health, education and local authorities who are being instructed on action today for a work to rule. Nurses, civil servants and school staff are among those taking part in the action over the delay in engaging with new public sector pay deals. I know that the Minister, Deputy Chambers, has been ongoing in negotiations with the workers. I hope that there will be a package in place in the upcoming budget and that we will see this resolved sooner rather than later.

Senator Fitzpatrick spoke about the walkout this morning and the work that the Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, has done. She certainly highlighted the work the Minister has done

regarding violence against women. The Senator said that there should be no tolerance for anyone who has committed a crime of violence against any woman. It should be welcome in this House that there should be no tolerance regarding any violence against any man or woman. We have seen an increase to the point that ten women have lost their lives this year already. In the papers this morning we see another three suspected cases in Sligo, Galway and Dublin. It is certainly on the increase. It is something that the Minister will have to address and will have to tackle going forward.

Senator Scahill spoke about the PV solar panels, which he raised yesterday evening. He also spoke about the supports for retrofitting, the NSAI, the building regulations and building controls regarding retrofitting of new homes and older homes, and the grants that are available. It was not the grants that the Senator was actually speaking to; it was about the building controls around the regulations. He is fearful that certain fly-by-night companies may have come into the sector for the quick buck while mixing some of these glues with a different mix and using it to stick the Styrofoam to the walls. He is concerned that in years to come, we will end up with another redress scheme. I agree with the Senator's sentiments that we must have proper building regulations and building controls. I hope that they are there. I certainly will ask our Leader to address this with our Minister to make sure that these are in place and that every company fitting insulation is registered and using the right materials for the climate we have in this country.

Senator Flynn also spoke about Seamus Carroll, our usher, as "the life and soul of Leinster House". She knew him on a personal level. The Senator also spoke about the walkout this morning for women in domestic violence and the Courts Service. When it comes to sensitivity around the courts, families going to court and the break-up of families, it is a very sensitive issue for anybody to stand up in this House and speak about families breaking up and one thing and another. I hope our Leader might get back to Senator Flynn with the information she asked about regarding how she can readdress the courts and the court system. I would not like to make a comment here today on that as I would be afraid to give the wrong comment.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly spoke about buildings being lit up in Dublin for certain communities and for certain organisations.

Some people have agreed with it and some have not. I will ask the Leader to give an update. I was not sure what buildings have been lit up. She said the Mansion House and other buildings had been lit up in the last number of days. I will ask the Leader to give her a full response tomorrow at the earliest convenience.

Senator Mark Duffy spoke about pensions for former An Post workers. An Post workers have been the link to rural communities. The person delivering the post may be the only person some of our elderly people living down boreens and lanes ever see on a daily basis. The Senator spoke about the 1984 dissolution of the then Department into An Post. I will call for a debate regarding that. I would hope that all pensions from that time would be brought up to the same level. I would be hopeful that we may be able to have a discussion in this House on that. I would openly welcome that debate.

Senator Craughwell-----

Senator Gareth Scahill: He congratulated Fine Gael on the training.

Senator Paraic Brady: Senator Craughwell spoke about the taxi service and some companies owning 20 licences or more and hiring them out for €6,000. He also looked for a debate on the ownership of the taxis and why some companies owned 20-plus licences. He spoke about sole traders and the need for a debate regarding sole traders, taxi regulation and taxi services. Certainly, I would welcome a debate on this.

Senator Rabbitte spoke about solar farms. I am delighted that somebody has raised solar farms again. There has been no regulation of solar farms. England has a tiered system from 1 to 5 regarding agricultural land and peat land, with 1 being agricultural land of the highest use and 5 being peat land of the least use. It is not devaluing the land but pointing out that agricultural land has the most value for agriculture and not for generating electricity. Certainly, we should have a debate and look at that in this country. We cannot have vast amounts of good land given over to solar panels. We have seen it in County Longford and the Senator has also spoken about it in Galway. There is certainly a need for regulation of solar panels as well as a debate on funding of community-led initiatives from farmers regarding solar panels. If we got our electricity grid up to standard, the farming community could produce a lot of energy from solar panels on sheds.

I hope I have not missed anybody and if I have, I am very sorry. Senators will forgive me; it is my first day doing this.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: Well done.

Order of Business agreed to.

An Cathaoirleach: The Acting Leader has proposed a minute's silence to mark the passing of Seamus Carroll, a great friend of everybody in this House.

Members rose.

Road Safety: Statements

Acting Chairperson (Senator Garret Kelleher): We are delighted to welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, to the House.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Seán Canney): I thank Senators for raising this very important topic. I welcome the opportunity to address them today on road safety matters. I assure Senators that road safety is a priority for this Government. Road safety is also a shared priority across the EU and improving road safety remains one of the most important challenges facing transport policy across Europe. In that regard, I was honoured to welcome ministerial colleagues from other member states to Dublin where we discussed road safety matters, including how the deployment of connected and autonomous vehicles and intelligent transport systems could help to improve road safety outcomes across Europe.

Over the course of successive road safety strategies, we have witnessed a significant improvement in road safety. We reduced the number of road deaths from 472 in 1997 to 133

in 2021, the lowest level since records began in 1959. Tragically, more recent trends have been less positive. As of yesterday, 141 lives have been lost on Irish roads this year, which is 13 more than for the same period in 2025. We must do better and see a return to the progress we have seen previously. I will now set out some of the work that has been done this year and that is under way.

While I acknowledge that we have recently seen an increase in the number of deaths on our roads, it is also important to note that Ireland is consistently among the better performers in Europe on road safety, ranking in the five EU countries with the lowest number of deaths by population in recent comparative data.

1 o'clock

However, there can be no complacency while lives are still being lost. Ireland's road safety policy is grounded in the safe system approach, which recognises that road safety requires co-ordinated action across speed, roads and roadsides, vehicles, road users, post-collision response, enforcement, education and data. The fifth road safety strategy is our framework for action on road safety. It targets a 50% reduction in deaths and serious injuries this decade. The phase 2 action plan for 2025 to 2027 sets out 12 transformative actions and 77 supporting actions to help us achieve a reduction in road deaths. An example of the key actions being delivered through collaborative working is expanding network safety analysis of the road network to identify high-risk locations, guide investment decisions and prioritise safety interventions, including for the local road network. Other examples are implementing in full all actions in the phase 2 action plan based on the 2023 speed limit review, reviewing and overhauling our learning to drive curriculum and road user safety education more broadly, and developing legislation to facilitate improved road safety outcomes.

I chair the road safety leadership group, which drives delivery of the action plan at ministerial level and brings together the Departments of Transport and justice, An Garda Síochána, the Road Safety Authority, TII, the NTA, the Courts Service, the Medical Bureau of Road Safety, the Health and Safety Authority and local authorities. This extensive and broad membership reflects the number of significant road safety experts working together towards a common goal, which is Vision Zero.

We know that speeding is one of the deadliest behaviours on our roads and we are progressing delivery of the speed limit review. This includes the introduction of a default 30 km/h limit in urban areas, where lower speeds can make the greatest difference for pedestrians, cyclists and other vulnerable road users. In addition, new regulations will come into effect from 1 November to tackle the long-standing issue of multiple learner permit renewals and encourage progression through the driver licensing system.

The national safety camera strategy was published in April and it will assist An Garda Síochána to deploy more safety cameras across our road network. It provides a framework for wider deployment of cameras targeting speeding, red-light running and bus lane infringements, with scope to support enforcement of other offences in future. The camera enforcement oversight group, chaired by the CEO of the National Transport Authority, is responsible for delivering the strategy. The group continues to meet and will report to the road safety leadership group on its progress in due course. We are also investing in behaviour change. I

directed the RSA to ring-fence €18 million this year for road safety awareness, education and campaigns aimed at all road users, including vulnerable road users.

I was pleased to bring the National Vehicle and Driver File, Road Traffic and Roads Bill 2026 before the Dail on 17 September and I look forward to engaging with Senators as it makes its way through the legislative process. The Bill is about making sure that the law supporting road safety, vehicle compliance, enforcement and public administration is modern, clear and fit for purpose. The policy rationale in terms of road safety is straightforward. Local authorities must be able to receive traffic collision data from An Garda Síochána or the Road Safety Authority for the purposes of identifying and addressing safety risks of public roads within their functional area. This will allow for the targeting of maintenance or construction of public roads, and the appropriate allocation of resources.

The Bill also allows a jury to consider the lesser charge of careless driving where a defendant is acquitted of dangerous driving. This arises from a recommendation in Mr. Justice Haughton's report into the death of Shane O'Farrell. In addition, further legislation is being developed to advance graduated penalty points and camera enforcement of mobile phone and seatbelt offences.

The choice to engage in criminal behaviour, dangerous driving and excess speed on our roads leads inevitably to death, destruction and despair. The tragedy on the M9 brings home the stark reality of these behaviours and the unspeakable devastation it brings to innocent victims and to the families left behind. In August, I met with senior road safety leaders from the Road Safety Authority, An Garda Síochána and Transport Infrastructure Ireland as well as officials from my Department and the Department of Justice to explore how we can improve safety on our motorways. The Government is committed to ensuring that our gardaí have the resources, equipment, training and legislation they need to effectively police this type of criminal behaviour.

It is abhorrent that anybody would engage in such reckless behaviour as driving the wrong way down a motorway for any reason. It is particularly concerning if young people are engaging in this behaviour to produce videos for social media. The RSA is currently running a social media campaign that provides advice on what to do if you encounter a vehicle travelling in the wrong direction on a motorway or if you find yourself driving the wrong way on a motorway. In addition, the RSA has also published an information leaflet outlining emergency advice on what to do when encountering a vehicle travelling in the wrong direction. Transport Infrastructure Ireland is also examining a range of measures to mitigate the risk from such behaviour. This is a complex issue, which has many causes and will not be easily solved. It is important that we continue to work together and look at every practical measure available to make our motorways as safe as possible for all road users.

On 1 April, the Road Traffic (Control of Certain Vehicles) Regulations 2026, known as Grace's Law in memory of Grace Lynch, were signed into law. The regulations implement an explicit ban on scrambler use in any public place and strengthen existing provisions and powers of enforcement by An Garda Síochána. I signed further regulations on 21 July to double the charges applying to vehicles seized under section 41 of the Road Traffic Act 1994, as amended. These regulations came into operation on 14 August. There is ongoing engagement between An Garda Síochána and my Department in this area to ensure that we continue to deliver effective enforcement in relation to scramblers.

Additionally, the Government has introduced new regulations in relation to e-scooters. This reflects ongoing concerns around road safety and the recent significant rise in serious injuries, particularly among children. Regulations to make helmets and high-visibility clothing mandatory for e-scooter users came into effect on 4 September 2026 and fees for detention and storage of seized e-scooters will be doubled, which will take effect from 2 October. On 22 September, I signed new regulations to raise the age limit for e-scooter users from 16 to 18. This will also come into effect from 2 October 2026. These are necessary and proportionate road safety measures and they are designed to address the number of serious injuries and fatalities among young e-scooter users. Further measures will be introduced in the coming weeks, including increasing fixed charge notices to €100 for e-scooter offences and the introduction of a new fixed charge notice offence of €100 for not wearing a helmet or high visibility clothing.

Enforcement is a key aspect of ensuring greater safety on our roads. An Garda Síochána is responsible for enforcing road traffic legislation and continues to prioritise road safety. In addition, since May 2024, with powers and provisions introduced by the Road Traffic Act 2024, An Garda Síochána now conducts mandatory drug testing at the scene of serious collisions. Since November 2023, the Motor Insurers Bureau of Ireland has been providing insurance details to An Garda Síochána. Details for 3 million vehicles and 5 million drivers are provided daily to identify vehicles being driven without insurance.

My focus as Minister, the focus of my Department and the focus of all of the road safety stakeholders that we work with, is on the delivery of the phase 2 action plan. This plan was developed by experts, based on Irish experience while considering best practice in other countries, and our focus is on the delivery of these agreed actions. I look forward to hearing the contributions of Senators on this very important topic.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Garret Kelleher): I welcome the girls from Christ King secondary school in Cork, who are here as guests of the Taoiseach. They are all very welcome and I hope they enjoy their day.

Senator Imelda Goldsboro: I thank the Minister of State for coming to the House this afternoon. Road safety is a key priority for Fianna Fáil. Improving road safety requires the right legislation, effective policies, strong enforcement, close co-operation between agencies and authorities and greater public awareness of our shared responsibility as road users. Over a period of just over two decades there had been a significant drop in deaths on our roads from 472 road deaths in Ireland in 1997 to 137 in 2021. This remarkable transformation was achieved against the backdrop of significant increases in the number of vehicles on our roads. However, it is alarming to see a reversal in this trend in recent years.

We have witnessed a marked rise in road fatalities, which has been a serious source of concern to all of us. In south Tipperary, we have seen a number of tragedies on our roads. As late as Monday morning, we heard Michael English speaking about the death of his daughter, the late Bronagh English. Bronagh's mum is Danielle English and her grandfather is Dr. Donie Ormonde, a former Member of the Seanad. A number of their ideas were highlighted, including road markings and road signage that would create awareness, and that they hope will help to prevent the same thing from happening to others in future. Bronagh, who passed away just over a year ago, was a vibrant young lady. We send our sincere sympathies to her family and

to her school associates in Rockwell College. We have had a number of young people die on our roads, including David Lahart and Sonny Tobin, just to name two. These deaths have had a great impact on these people's families and friends. They are left behind to deal with the horrific consequences. The loss of these young people is very raw and sore for these families.

Our approach is about saving lives and preventing serious injuries for all of those who use our roads. The starting point is recognising that road deaths or serious injuries should not be the price to be paid for mobility. The approach is multifaceted. It includes stronger laws, better data, smarter technology, tougher enforcement, safer speeds, safer road design and focused education.

We have the National Vehicle and Driver File, Road Traffic and Roads Bill 2026, which will allow local authorities to resume processing collision data, along with a number of other provisions to address road safety concerns. The next road traffic and roads Bill is under development. It will advance graduated speeding penalties and camera enforcement of mobile phone and seat belt offences. We are progressing the delivery of the speed limit review. We are also addressing repeated permit renewals. New regulations will come into effect this November to tackle the long-standing issue of multiple learner permit renewals and to encourage progression through the driver licensing system. We are increasing enforcement and using technology to deliver better road safety outcomes. The national safety strategy provides a framework for the wider deployment of cameras targeting speeding, red light running and bus lane infringements, with scope to support enforcement targeting other offences in future. We are making roads safer by design. This year, €14 million has been allocated under the low-cost safety improvement scheme for targeted engineering measures at identified risk locations. We are investing in behavioural change. The Road Safety Authority, RSA, has ring-fenced €18 million this year for road safety awareness and education campaigns aimed at all road users, including vulnerable road users.

Road safety is not simply a matter of transport policy. It is a matter of life and death, of families and of communities, and of the fundamental right of every person to travel safely on our roads. Recent fatal collisions have again brought home in the most devastating way the human cost of failures in road safety. Behind every statistic is a person, and behind every fatality are family members whose lives have been changed forever. Understandably, there is public anger and frustration when people see dangerous driving, speeding, uninsured or unlicensed drivers or other serious breaches of road traffic law. They question whether our enforcement system is keeping pace. As legislators, we have a responsibility to respond.

Improving road safety requires the right legislation, effective policies, strong enforcement, close co-operation between agencies and authorities and greater public awareness of our shared responsibility as road users. This is why I welcome the Government's National Vehicle and Driver File, Road Traffic and Roads Bill 2026. This is not simply an administrative or technical Bill. It is an important modernisation and road safety measure, designed to ensure that the laws governing vehicle and driver information, compliance and enforcement are modern, clear and fit for purpose.

We must also be prepared to ask difficult questions about enforcement. Do our gardaí have the information they need when they need it? Are the legal powers sufficiently clear? Are penalty and compliance systems actually delivering the deterrent we expect of them? The Government has already acknowledged that road safety requires legislation, effective

enforcement and co-operation between the Departments of transport and justice, An Garda Síochána, the RSA and other agencies.

At the same time, greater access to information must come with proper safeguards. We must see dangerous drivers being detected. We must see effective enforcement of our traffic laws. We must have confidence that agencies of the State are able to share necessary information lawfully and efficiently to make our roads safer. Road safety legislation is only as effective as our ability to enforce it. As a Government Senator, therefore, I support this Bill and the wider Government programme of road safety reform, but I believe we must continue to challenge ourselves. Where there are gaps in enforcement, we must close them. Where legislation is unclear, we must strengthen it. Where information can save lives, we must use it responsibly. Where dangerous behaviour is putting lives at risk, we must act decisively.

As we are approaching winter, I urge pedestrians, joggers and cyclists to please think of the drivers and make sure to wear hi-vis jackets and slow down. We cannot see people in dark clothes. It is most important to reduce the number of accidents to be aware. We need to let that message go out that people need to wear the hi-vis vests so that we can see them. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Senator Tom Clonan: The Minister of State is very welcome to the House to discuss this important issue. At Christmas 2007, my two oldest children were only nippers. They were five and six at the time. They were getting ready to go and spend time with their grandmother, Margaret Moran, in Nenagh in County Tipperary. She was very excited about the impending visit. She was a very fit and healthy 67-year-old lady. Margaret went to the local supermarket on the Main Street in Nenagh to pick out a Christmas tree. The young guy there told her not to worry and that he would drop it up to the house for her. She went ahead of him and was walking back home. Just opposite the creamery, she was struck by a car. She suffered a head injury and subsequently died in Cork University Hospital.

I saw Margaret in intensive care. She was kept ventilated until her daughters came back from Australia to see her for one last time. There was not a mark on her, except for one small little bruise on her forehead. The swelling of her brain, however, meant that she lost her life. I saw the devastation her death had on that family, which had echoes across the world, including in Australia, and to all of her siblings in Ireland and the UK. I also saw the impact it had on my boys and the questions that they asked me about what had happened.

That experience has happened to 846 families in the last five years. An average of 140 families go through this experience every year. From my work advocating for people with disabilities, I know that there are thousands of people who have acquired injuries through road traffic accidents. They have survived, but their lives have been changed forever. They have acquired brain injuries and an impaired ability to walk. I know of one vulnerable road user, a cyclist, who was working in one of the major law firms in Dublin. He was a very fit guy, using his Strava while he went in and out to work, competing against himself.

He was involved in a road traffic collision. He is now paralysed. His marriage has collapsed and he is now homeless.

Our perception of threat is something that is very important. We hear a lot about drone sightings, which remind me a little of the moving statues of the late 1980s, but that is for another

day's debate. There is kind of a mass hysteria about all of these vague threats, but the most dangerous thing a person does every day in the 21st century environment we are in is get behind the wheel of a car, get onto a motorcycle as I do or, in particular, get onto a bicycle. People need to think.

The statistics are interesting in relation to the fatalities here. The majority of them are men. Of those, the vast majority are under the age of 26. There has been a development in recent years with an increase in fatality rates among older drivers. That is something we need to address and think about. However, when I got my first car in 1987, it was a 15-year-old Renault 12. It was a 1.3 litre petrol engine. If I tried to get it up to 50 mph, I would hear every bit of it rattle. My youngest fella, who has just passed his driving test, now sits into a 2.2 litre turbo diesel vehicle. Speed is an issue. It is one of the dominant factors in road fatalities, injuries and collisions. The vehicles we have available to us now, such as electric vehicles, scooters and e-bikes, can achieve high speeds quickly.

I remember how invulnerable I felt in my Renault 12 at the age of 20, until I lost control of it. I was teaching in Lucan and I used to drive from Finglas every day through the Strawberry Beds. One morning, I encountered black ice and completely lost control of the vehicle. It was not until that happened that I realised that I was vulnerable.

Most of the victims of road traffic collisions and people who cause them are young men under the age of 26. The frontal lobe does not develop fully until you are about 25 or 26. In fact, in the United States in some areas of medicine such as paediatrics, particularly in psychiatry and areas like that, men are considered children until they are 25. We have to find a way of targeting those young guys. There are two ways to do that. We have them as a captive audience, literally and metaphorically, in schools. I know as a former primary school teacher that teachers in schools all around the country could tell you who is likely to be involved in a road traffic accident. We can educate them there.

As a motorcyclist, I have noticed lately that I am constantly being overtaken. I have a 400 cc Yamaha motorcycle and I am constantly being overtaken by people on e-bikes and e-scooters. Very often, they do not have any protective equipment. I have also noticed increasingly that cyclists, young cyclists in particular, indicate by putting out an arm and then manoeuvre. They do not look behind them. I always try to get eye contact with the driver when manoeuvring. They call it the look back or lifesaver when on a motorcycle. There is a requirement for education. Where could we do that? Most likely in school.

In relation to that young cohort, I hear advertisements on the radio, such as RTÉ, talking about road safety and encountering unexpected hazards. The target audience does not listen to the radio. They do not listen to talk radio or watch the news. They are online. The people who are expert in targeting our young people with TikTok should be harnessed. Google, TikTok and Meta, the companies that are resident here, should *pro bono* give back to society and devise a way of reaching this vulnerable cohort of people.

Due to our son's disability, we do not fly on holidays. For the last 25 years, I have been driving to the Continent every year. I have driven all over Europe over the last 25 years. When you leave this jurisdiction, one of the first things you notice is the visibility of roads policing and enforcement in other jurisdictions. That has an impact on driver behaviour. I rarely see An Garda Síochána on the roads here. That is not a criticism of An Garda Síochána, but it is a

matter of resourcing. I know that the Minister of State will be lobbying his colleagues in Cabinet for that investment.

We have personal experience of the tragedy involved in all of this, but I have seen the Minister of State intervene personally, as recently as over the summer when we had the wrong-way driving down the motorway, and take on a leadership role. The definition of leadership is to serve others. I commend him and thank him for that. I do not want to use the pun, but it is clear to me that at least somebody is not asleep at the wheel, whether it is the RSA or other authorities. I commend the Minister of State in his work and wish him well. I hope that he goes a good way towards achieving the target of reducing road fatalities by 50% in the next number of years.

Senator Mark Duffy: I thank the Minister of State for being here and for his work to date on road safety. It is such an important topic and is something that we have worked together on at different stages, including in my role on the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Transport and in his ministerial brief. In recent years, we have seen new challenges that have threatened road safety, including pedestrian safety and cyclist safety. That comes in the form of scramblers and e-scooters, which have proliferated through towns, villages, cities and neighbourhoods and terrorised vulnerable road users across the country in an unprecedented way. We have also seen the rise of wrong-way driving and intentional vigilantism on motorways, which is breeding huge fear and anxiety in night-time drivers on motorways. It has caused insufferable tragedies to families across the country. It is something that is not just an Irish problem. As with most problems we discuss in this House, there is a broader context across the Continent and the globe.

In our work in the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Transport, we have tried to be constructive and proactive in addressing the different challenges that I have just outlined. We have done it in a consultative way as much as possible, led by the Chair, Deputy Michael Murphy. We engaged with the Irish Motorcycle Association in one meeting to talk about the safety from its point of view. We have engaged with the Irish Road Haulage Association to discuss its vulnerabilities, challenges and blind spots as large road users. We also engaged with PARC, the victim group, and the Irish Road Victims Association, IRVA, to hear first-hand the unimaginable impact that a fatality has on a loved one, family member or friend, and the life-altering injuries that are associated with road traffic accidents. We also engaged with cyclists. We recently engaged with Transport Infrastructure Ireland, the Road Safety Authority and An Garda Síochána just this morning as part of a comprehensive review of road safety. I know that the Minister of State is well aware of many of the matters that have been outlined at the committee, but this is a good opportunity for a broader discussion across this Chamber because we all have experience that we can offer.

I note the unprecedented levels of public transport, which can help move people to a safer mode of transport. I would welcome a continuation of investment into public transport routes across the country. Local Link in my home county of Mayo is a great example of that. We have additional proposals that we would like to see realised. We are speaking about road safety, and while I am conscious that discussions around Local Link may be a degree removed, they are inextricably linked, as we can take people out of vulnerable situations and connect them with safe and accessible public transport.

There are a whole range of interventions that can be made. I will use a local example. The fixed speed cameras have created a marked improvement in terms of accidents and fatalities on certain black spots on junctions in County Mayo along the N5 and N17.

They were notorious areas of difficulty and blackspots and have benefited from a fixed speed zone. There have been teething challenges in other parts of the country. The intention, merit and spirit of what is being done is to try to improve road safety, not penalise motorists needlessly. It is important that we do not cynically target motorists in areas where they are easily caught, but instead challenge road safety head on and have that and nothing else as the priority.

We also need to consider our built environment. I ask for and encourage as much investment as possible in low-cost safety measures to make sure that our towns, villages and neighbourhoods are safe places where pedestrians and cyclists feel safe, are protected by strong and proper kerbing and routes and do not feel vulnerable in the built environment. I welcome the reduction in speed limits in certain neighbourhoods and the autonomy given to local authorities in that space.

As a former member of Mayo County Council, I will voice my frustration at times in trying to respond to reports of dangerous areas through applications for low-cost safety measures. There needs to be a more responsive funding scheme. Where there is an incident or tragedy, there is a wait of 12 months before applying for low-cost safety measures and there may be a wait for a number of months to be funded. It may take another number of months for the work to go to tender and more time for the contractor to complete the works. This is something that is difficult for anyone in the community to take if there has been a serious incident or challenge where it has been recognised that improvements need to be made.

I would welcome a more swift and agile response on decisions and a rolling fund for low-cost safety measures such as pedestrian crossings and ramps in neighbourhoods. To be honest, those competencies should be devolved to local authorities rather than applications having to be submitted to the Department. The Department has much bigger projects to deal with. There is a need for overall education and awareness, which need to be constantly reaffirmed. I recently met the Road Safety Authority, RSA, and I am encouraged by its leadership team. The people I met are very passionate about road safety. It is important that we all acknowledge its role in awareness and education, in particular. That is not something that can be done once and a box ticked. There needs to be constant engagement. The roadshows it holds regionally are incredible in terms of their impact on young people, in particular, who are starting out in the world and who have a higher statistical likelihood of a fatality than other road users.

I commend the RSA on its work. It has faced challenges in the past, but I hope we are moving in the right direction in terms of the awareness piece. There are unprecedented challenges. The opportunity to discuss this issue today is a very welcome one because a silver bullet will not fix this. We require an all-of-society and all-of-government approach to make sure that we protect road users, pedestrians and cyclists across the board and make it a safer environment for all users.

Senator Joanne Collins: I welcome the Minister of State. As a member of the Joint Committee on Transport, I am delighted to have this debate. As my colleague across the floor said, we have had months of engagement. What I took out of a lot of that was that this does

not fall under the remit of one Department or organisation. Road safety is everything. It includes the RSA, TII, An Garda Síochána, the Department of Transport and the Minister of State's Department. Everybody needs to work together. I have to include local councils, which have a part to play when it comes to road safety.

My biggest message today would be that if we want to tackle road safety, we have to start by tackling the roads. I understand 85% of accidents and road fatalities happen on rural and local roads. We have a serious issue with our roads and I do not mean national roads and motorways. Between the N69 and the road through Adare, every single year something is going on at the exact same time, which means there are roadworks on both roads leaving Limerick towards Kerry. Local roads are not getting the attention they need. There are roads in County Limerick which have not been resurfaced in the past 30 years. I requested the resurfacing of roads and was told that they are in the 2026 or 2027 plan. Potholes are being refilled, but when the harsh weather comes in they reopen. Outside of the damage potholes do to cars, people swerve to avoid them. They are on dark, small country roads. People who swerve around a pothole near a bend could meet someone coming around the bend towards them. There is big machinery on the roads.

Another issue on rural roads is hedge cutting. It needs to be more regular. The hedge cutting that is done at the moment is done to suit the height of a car. Buses, tractors and trucks have to go over white lines because they fear damaging their mirrors. The cost of a mirror for a truck, tractor or bus is a hell of a lot more than for a car. They are looking after their vehicles and have to go over the white line, which is another safety issue.

We cannot mitigate every single thing that could happen on a road, especially if somebody is going out to deliberately cause dangerous situations, as has happened on motorways. No matter how many messages we put out or alerts in cars or on phones, if people are going out to deliberately cause harm they will not change unless we get to them in school and educate them. We all know that early intervention in all walks of life is best, whether that is road safety, health or justice. Early intervention is key and that is what we need to do.

I am delighted that there are fixed penalty notices for e-scooters, but without Garda enforcement this will continue to be a problem. We do not have enough gardaí. I know the Minister of State is trying his best to get them, but we need to speak to gardaí who are retiring and leaving and find out why. I met a garda in County Limerick a couple of weeks ago who said he is eligible to retire at Christmas and by God he is going. He said he could not stay in the organisation any longer. He did not go into detail as to why, but he was quite disgruntled. We have a serious morale issue. If we could fix that, we could get more gardaí on the books and have more of a supply to go onto our roads.

I drive plenty, mainly around Limerick and up and down to Clare and Tipperary. I have not seen a Garda checkpoint since Covid. That was the last time I was stopped by the Garda, and I am on national and rural roads. I know we do not have enough gardaí to put on to rural roads - there are thousands of roads to man. On our main roads when it comes to bank holidays we hear on the radio that there will be a massive campaign and gardaí will catch people and be out in force, but I have not been stopped over the past four or five years. The last time I was stopped by gardaí was when there were checks during Covid, and that was to ask me where I was going. It was not to take a breathalyser test or check anything with the car.

The NCT is a bugbear of mine. I completely agree with an NCT. My NCT was out this week and when I went to book a test a couple of weeks ago, the closest date I could get was the first week of December in Limerick. It is not an issue that the test is so far away, but when I get a test in December it will be backdated, meaning I will lose a couple of months. My car will have been deemed roadworthy for the past three months, but I will still have to come back in nine months' time and pay again.

It is a little bit of a money thing when it comes to the NCT. It should not be able to say that a car has been roadworthy for the past three or six months when it does not know whether that was the case. Also, a person should not have to lose three months on the other end and have to go back to pay it again as a result of that.

I heard mention of high-visibility jackets across the floor. I definitely agree with them. Often, I drive on country and rural roads. Some people wear all black clothing. Even during the day, if the sun is at a certain height, it is nearly impossible to see such people. There is a need for education in this regard.

There is also the issue of e-scooters and cycling. I do not see this too often in Limerick because I am based in County Limerick rather than Limerick city. However, in Dublin, I see this issue. I am not afraid of the cars, trucks or buses in Dublin. Rather, I am afraid of crossing the road when there is a cyclist coming because they do not stop at the traffic lights.

Everyone has a part to pay, as I said earlier. We have the RSA and other organisations, but every road user has a part to play. Everyone must obey the rules of the road as they pertain to them and respect everybody else on the road. Everyone should walk a day in everyone else's shoes. I noticed this when my daughter started driving. When my children were pedestrians, they kept their heads down and were looking at their phones when walking across roads. To them, as they were at a pedestrian crossing, they had the right of way. They did not check to see whether a car was coming because it was a pedestrian crossing and they had the right of way. By God, since getting into their cars and realising how hard it is to see every single thing around them when they are driving and how much there is to concentrate on, they do not do that any more. Now, when they are walking or see someone coming out onto the road, they hope those individuals look up. There is a need for education across the board for every road user, whether they are walking, cycling or driving. There is a lot to be done in this regard.

I would like to see more investment and funding for councils to look after rural roads in order to stop the high incidence rate of accidents. These accidents may not all be fatal. We see the statistics on fatal accidents but there are also accidents that leave people with acquired brain injuries. I have met a lot of residents and people near me who have had accidents and are left with life-debilitating conditions. Those people have a whole life to live in which they must try to access services, which are quite difficult to access. Their entire families, who have to look after them, are put under stress and strain. We need to be looking at everything in the round.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Garret Kelleher): Glaoim ar an Seanadóir Noonan. Tá sé chun a chuid ama a roinnt leis an Seanadóir Cosgrove. Tá an t-am roinnte i mbabhta amháin de thrí nóiméad agus babhta eile de chúig nóiméad. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit, an Teachta Canney. I wish to raise a couple of points with the Minister of State. The points about vulnerable users have been made well. I will be cycling out to Harold's Cross after this engagement. I agree with the points made about cycling in Dublin. I find it quite scary, and that is partially down to cyclists. It is something for which we all have a collective responsibility. I will speak to that point about vulnerable road users, pedestrians and cyclists. Fatalities around these cohorts have increased significantly. It is a real challenge. These incidents are happening in smaller towns, as well as here in Dublin. They are happening all too frequently.

The advertisement on the television is lovely and catchy with the "30 Town" slogan. It is a lovely advertisement, but the reality for those of us cycling in our urban areas is that the 30km/h limit is not being adhered to in any way, shape or form. I see no adherence to it in Dublin or Kilkenny. It is critically important that there is enforcement on the 30km/h default speed limit, which is something I have asked of the Minister of State before. We also need that speed limit extended in our urban centres because, currently, there are different interpretations as to where the 30km/h speed limit should start. Local authorities need to be mandated to ensure that the default speed limit of 30km/h is enforced. That is hugely important and could make a significant difference for vulnerable road users. A speed of 30km/h feels very different to 40km/h for cyclists, walkers, pedestrians and people with mobility issues or a disability. Those speed limit reforms are critically important. I support the Love 30 campaign led by the Irish Cycling Campaign.

There is also the issue of safety for motorcyclists on our roads, particularly rural roads where resurfacing material is not of the quality it might have been in the past as a result of the constraints on local authority budgets. There is a lot of surface material on our roads now, such as gravel. Farm machinery coming out of yards and fields leaves debris on our roads and causes a significant challenge to motorcyclists as well. I ask the Minister of State to look at those two issues. The red light camera enforcement pilot and speed limit reform are critical issues for me.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: Tá fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit. I too am a member of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Transport. As my two colleagues outlined, we have had many meetings in this regard. I counted 11 such meetings. A huge emphasis has been placed on this. To be honest, the Minister of State has appeared before the committee a good few times more than most, and we are all grateful for that. The committee has heard from union and road haulage representatives, rehabilitation and victim advocacy groups and PARC. The list goes on. These meetings encompassed vulnerable road users, cyclists and those who suffer an acquired brain injury. While there were improvements in road safety in the past few decades, it is disappointing that the situation is not getting any better.

I will focus on the statistics around young men. I raised this issue at the last committee meeting. Nine out of ten deaths involving speeding were male, as were nine out of ten deaths where no seatbelts were worn. A total of 87% detected under the influence were men and 74% of those detected speeding were also men. A total of 75% of those caught using a mobile phone were male. It is not about being anti-man by any stretch of the imagination but we must ask whether we are meeting young male drivers where their needs are. Are we meeting them in the communities? I spoke to witnesses from the RSA last week about the delivery of training programmes and whether we are meeting these cohorts of men in the areas we need to be. It

is all very well having programmes for transition year, but a lot of people do not do transition year. A lot of people leave school before that or skip that year. Should we be looking more at youth centres, youth groups, community training centres and Youthreach? Should we focus our attention on these areas in order to target and education young men and look at where they are at in their own lives? It is not about pointing the finger but, rather, looking at where they are in their lives. Risk-taking behaviour, such as the driving up and down motorways we seen, is horrific for everyone involved, both for the families of the victims and the families of the young people involved. Support needs to be put in place in this regard. We must look at the young people involved in accidents of this nature. Were there early intervention programmes in the house? Had they been involved in juvenile liaison programmes? Did they get the supports they needed as children and young people?

The Garda deputy commissioner was before the transport committee this morning on the issue of roads policing. I asked whether there were enough police driving instructors within the force and if they were going to go to Templemore. I received information that three instructors were trained but subsequently told that there were no vacancies in Templemore. We know that there are not enough Garda police units. We hear how An Garda Síochána wants the roads policing units to operate to their full capacity. However, we have three individuals who are trained and find themselves stuck. They want to go down to Templemore as instructors. That is a question that has to be asked. I asked the witnesses from An Garda Síochána to come back to me in that regard.

I asked the Minister of State a number of months ago whether there should be a commissioner for road safety. He expressed confidence in the RSA, and it is good to see that he is still as confident because I know he has put a lot of work into this.

There are small things like that around vulnerable road users. It is great to hear Senator Noonan talk about cycling in Dublin. As a member of the Sligo Cycling Campaign, I agree that 30 km/h zones should be mandated in our urban, built-up zones because then people would be free. It would help disabled people, cyclists and pedestrians alike. I still argue - I should be the Minister of State's agent for the western rail corridor – that the ultimate way to address road safety is to take more people off the road, particularly trucks, freight and passengers. There is an early morning commuter train that we are pushing hard to get. Hopefully, the Minister of State can have some influence on this. It is from Longford to Sligo in the morning. It would take so much traffic off the road in the morning, including those attending Atlantic Technological University, ATU.

The earliest train that arrives in Sligo is at 10.15 a.m. and it is a university town. We have a hospital and we have civil servants. It is a big and growing regional centre. The Minister of State knows this himself from being a west of Ireland man. There is a reduction in freight licensing, and in the context of an expansion of rail freight services and the western rail corridor, will the Minister of State please talk some sense into his three coalition colleagues about the greenway in Sligo, if he has any sway there at all? I live just beside Sligo Port in Sligo Bay. I see that timber that has been harvested from all around the area is being brought by truck to Sligo Bay. The western rail corridor could easily connect that up, and it could go the whole way down to Foynes, so that we would have a full system where a lot of freight and trucks would be taken off the roads, particularly on our regional roads where we do not have the infrastructure.

We are also looking at offshore wind and developing that. Rail will play a really important role in that. I know we are talking about road safety but the better the availability of public transport, the more people who will come off the road, such as vulnerable road users. Local Link is another aspect and they are all connected. Since I was elected as a Senator, a number of people who live in rural areas of Sligo and Leitrim have come to me about having extra Local Link services. A lot of older and disabled people use Local Link and they are taking them off the road as well.

Senator Garrett Kelleher: I thank the Senator and I apologise to her for being a little bit more strict on the time. Members will be aware we ran about 15 minutes over on the Order of Business so we will now ask Senator Flynn to speak for eight minutes. Before I do, can I get an agreement that the remaining speakers will have two minutes each because I need to bring the Minister of State back in?

Senator Eileen Flynn: I may not need the full time. I will take five minutes.

Senator Garrett Kelleher: If Senator Flynn is happy with that, we will give three minutes to Senators Byrne, Costello and Scahill.

Senator Eileen Flynn: Never say I have never done anything for the Opposition. I will start with the truth. A total of 185 people died on Irish roads in 2025 and 141 lost their lives in the first nine months of this year. Behind those numbers are devastated families and, often, shattered communities. We saw the devastation clearly when five young men died on the M9 in August. A family in the other car was badly hurt, including a seven-year-old boy. This was a terrible tragedy. Nothing we say today can change or take away the grief from those families. We all understand why people are angry and upset. When young people die on our roads, we should all feel that pain. We should ask hard questions about why it happened. We need proper enforcement, better infrastructure and a real end to dangerous driving.

Every day, we see where call-outs and TikTok videos have cost so many lives in this country and beyond for years. We see dares and it was also part of Coco's Law. We have seen young people being bullied online. It is unfortunate when five young men lost their lives here in August. Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil used it as an opportunity to kick five dead bodies and not to think about the families, the mothers, the fathers, the sisters or the brothers behind those five young men. In October 2000, I was in a severely bad car crash. I broke my two legs, my two arms, my two feet and suffered some other injuries as well. I have had numerous operations. I, for one, know exactly how long is the road to recovery. In some cases, that road is a never-ending road. Next Wednesday, I will be back in Cappagh Hospital for a small procedure on my arm and here I am standing up here, 27 years later, and I am still impacted. A drunk driver crashed into the back of me. Little or nothing has changed on Irish roads in the past 27 years.

When we talk about young people on our roads, we need to turn to our legislators and our politicians too when they are travelling at over 160 km per hour on the M8. That was not a mistake; that was purposefully done. Every single politician in here did not have to feel the pain of that. They did not get racist, horrible, hateful comments. It was not put onto all politicians. Although he has not been charged yet, we then saw a politician who was two times over the limit for drink-driving. That was a choice. We had five young men killed on our roads

and I will end this speech by saying Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil used it to kick them. They used it to kick dead bodies. We need better legislation. We need our high-vis jackets. I live in rural Ireland and in the summer and the winter, my children walk in their high-vis jackets. I will now take a seat and I say to the Minister of State that to stop young people dying on our roads, we need enforcement, better policing and to support our gardaí to be able to deal with that.

A TD said to me last week in the private session of the Traveller committee that the Traveller community glorified it and glorified them as heroes. That is a lie. Nobody within my community or my family members glorified what happened on the M9. Every single day, members of the Traveller community pray for the people who were hurt. Bring in better legislation. Hold TikTok and the social media companies to account. We had them in front of the committee last week and, by God, they never answered one question. There is no accountability.

Senator Teresa Costello: As a member of Fianna Fáil, I dispute that we used the tragedy to kick dead bodies. I actually take offence to that. I take huge offence to that. Anyone who watched-----

Senator Eileen Flynn: Have I discriminated against two-----

Senator Teresa Costello: I did not cut over Senator Flynn when she was speaking.

Senator Eileen Flynn: I took really big offence when one of the Fianna Fáil TDs, who is the chair of the youth committee, called young people thugs. Shame on Fianna Fáil. Shame on Senator Costello's party.

Senator Teresa Costello: I do not accept that.

Senator Eileen Flynn: Well, I have said it and I am not taking it back. Shame on Senator Costello's party.

Senator Teresa Costello: Senator Flynn can talk to me outside but she should not shout across the Chamber at me. Anybody who watched TV3 last night will have been deeply concerned by what they saw. It is frightening to see lives lost because of reckless behaviour on our roads. Every time we use our roads, whether as motorists, cyclists, pedestrians or passengers, we are vulnerable. A moment of recklessness, distraction or impairment can have devastating and irreversible consequences. Today, I could not stand here without talking about nitrous oxide consumption while driving. It requires far greater attention than it is getting.

I have been raising concerns about this issue for some time because I have seen the evidence of nitrous oxide use across my own community. I have received repeated reports of people consuming it in cars. I have personally seen people driving with a balloon in their mouth, consuming nitrous oxide and sharing road space with innocent people going about their day, and it is only luck preventing a catastrophe. We need to understand just how dangerous it is. When nitrous oxide is inhaled, the effects can be almost immediate. A person can experience a brief but intense feeling of euphoria, or a high, but they can also experience dizziness,

disorientation, impaired co-ordination and reduced awareness of what is happening around them. Imagine experiencing those effects when you are behind the wheel of a car. A driver needs to be alert to react instantly to a pedestrian stepping onto the road, a cyclist changing position, a car braking in front of them or any unexpected hazard.

There is simply no place for deliberately impairing yourself while in control of a vehicle. Recently, I spent one hour driving around Tallaght with my good friend, local volunteer and former Tallaght Person of the Year, Nico Crowley. In that single hour, we collected 198 discarded nitrous oxide canisters. Some were found alongside roadsides, including close to the M50 slip road. Where they were located, combined with what I have witnessed and the reports I continue to receive, raises very serious questions about nitrous oxide use while driving.

I will make another point really clearly. There can be a temptation to dismiss this as something confined to just young people. That is not what I am hearing and seeing. I am receiving reports of adults consuming nitrous oxide in parked cars and parking bays. I am hearing reports of people dressed for work, people sitting in expensive cars and people in branded work vans consuming it. This is not about demonising any particular age group. It is about recognising a dangerous behaviour for what it is - a serious road safety risk. That is why I am calling for nitrous oxide to be specifically addressed within the prohibited substances framework under our road traffic legislation.

2 o'clock

Our laws must keep pace with changes in behaviour and emerging threats on our roads. If people are consuming a substance that causes disorientation, dizziness and impaired co-ordination and then getting behind the wheel, enforcement authorities need an effective legal framework to respond.

I will continue to highlight the dangers of nitrous oxide consumption while driving and I ask the relevant authorities and the Minister of State to examine urgently what further legislative and enforcement measures are needed. It is simple. If people are driving, they must be fully in control. Consuming nitrous oxide behind the wheel puts drivers, their passengers and every other person on the road at risk. It is an emerging road safety issue and it is a serious one.

Senator Garret Kelleher: As we are caught for time, we will adhere strictly to two minutes. There are four remaining speakers, starting with Senator Cathal Byrne.

Senator Cathal Byrne: I welcome the Minister of State to the Chamber. I will raise three issues. First, at a local level in my home county of Wexford, there are three dangerous crossroads. Unfortunately, over the years, they have been the locations of many fatalities and serious crashes causing devastating, long-lasting harm to people. They are at Kyle Cross on the N11 outside Oilgate, Larkin's Cross on the N25, which is the road that runs from New Ross to Wexford town, and Clohamon Cross on the N80, which runs from Bunclody to Enniscorthy. The Minister of State will be aware that I have previously highlighted these areas. Studies of and public consultations about them are under way at the moment, but I ask that the funding that comes out of those reviews be provided swiftly.

Second, I will speak for a moment about the urgent need for the Oilgate to Rosslare motorway to be progressed. The latest statistics show that seven in ten road traffic collisions occur on rural roads, and extending that motorway - it is expected a planning application will be lodged next year - would be a mechanism to reduce fatalities in Wexford.

Finally, I will raise the issue of individuals who are driving on our roads after being disqualified. At the moment, section 38 of the Road Traffic Act provides they will be subject to a maximum of six months' imprisonment or a fine of €5,000. That needs to be reviewed and strengthened. Individuals who are driving while disqualified should be subjected to far greater penalties.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: I welcome this debate and that it is varied, that everyone is not sticking to the same issues of enforcement and drugs testing, although they are important. However, there is also the issue I will focus on, which is the condition of our roads. In Cavan and Monaghan, there are roads that used to be cart track and which have just had a layer of tar put over them. There is no real strength in the roads for the traffic that is on them. There are roads which the new Local Link buses are too big for. The buses, lorries and trucks are halfway over the white line when travelling on them. That is causing a lot of concern among people, as are hedges growing out over roads. That is also a safety concern. It pushes trucks out. If a person breaks a mirror on a truck, it could cost €3,000.

I was at a meeting on Monday with councillors in the Carrickmacross municipal district who are looking for more roads funding because they can only do 2% of the roads. We are expected to travel on roads that are essentially defective and there is not enough money to resurface and put in place good road structures. That is a major problem, because in July the councillors from Cavan County Council were also looking for more roads funding and they feel their words are falling on deaf ears. Does the RSA communicate much with the councils? Is the Minister of State asking councils whether they are getting enough money to make and keep the roads safe? A lot of the time, there are road safety issues. The low-cost safety schemes - we used to get three in our area - have been reduced to one, and that is also a problem, with dangerous junctions like the ones Senator Cathal Byrne spoke about.

Senator Gareth Scahill: I welcome the Minister of State for this debate on an important topic. I will follow on from what Senator O'Reilly raised. We are able to get money for big schemes, but sometimes the ones that will have a bigger impact and a wider geographical spread are the ones that suffer. As I have raised before, we have spent in excess of €50 million on the safe routes to school scheme, but 50% of the schools that originally applied to that scheme still have to get the work done. Yet, schools are on busy main roads and, predominantly, there are no speed reduction measures outside them.

I noticed recently Kingsland National School had a safety improvement work scheme introduced, which will give periodic speed limit reductions at various times of the day. However, what we need outside schools are speed bumps. They are not cost-intensive measures. The safe routes to school scheme is all the bells and whistles. The speed bumps will have the impact, especially when there is no enforcement outside schools. If people hit a speed bump once, they will not do so a second or third time. They would have a lasting impact on the safety of the children going to a lot of these schools.

I recognise Councillors Ruth Conboy and Valerie Duffy who have done surveys in the schools in Roscommon and listened to parents about the needs they identify. Rather than just getting names from parents and asking who wants to see changes, they are listening and looking for the issues parents identify outside schools.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the tragic incident that happened in Kiltybo between Ballyhaunis and Ballinlough earlier in September, where Eoin Doyle lost his life at a level crossing going home from football training with his father one evening. That is not directly the Minister of State's area, but we need to reduce the reliance on road users having to judge whether a train is coming at these junctions. We need to accelerate the installation of detection and early warning systems.

I must also mention the N60 safety scheme, which the CEO and director of services of Roscommon County Council have committed to. It needs to go into the road safety strategy, so I ask the Minister of State to have a word with the relevant Minister.

Senator Martin Conway: I thank colleagues and the Acting Chair for facilitating me. I welcome the Minister of State to the House. He always speaks common sense, is most approachable and has a policy of getting things done, which is refreshing. As someone who does not drive, I can never work out why people who do are not more safety conscious. Driving is a privilege. It is not available to everyone and motorists need to bear that in mind because, in a split second, they might not be able to drive for the rest of their lives if they are not more careful.

There needs to be more synergy between TII and the councils, certainly regarding national secondary routes. A number of national secondary routes in Clare have had issues. What was done with the speed limits in Darragh was welcome.

I will briefly raise the issue of the car rental fleet. There is a European directive, and people renting cars have a responsibility for safety as well. However, there is a proposal, and a letter was sent in the dying days of the previous Government committing Ireland to the corporate green directive that is being brought before the Commission at the moment. That also includes rental fleets. As the Minister of State is aware, electric rental cars will not work in rural Ireland. We do not have the infrastructure. Even Dublin Airport does not have the infrastructure. I want Ireland to withdraw the commitment to participate in that because it does not make sense and it will essentially close down the car rental businesses at airports overnight. I come from County Clare and Shannon Airport is in my constituency, so I know the importance of car rental, particularly for areas that are not necessarily directly on the tourism wavelength and other areas where people need a car to commute.

The Minister of State might tell us where we are with withdrawing that letter.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Seán Canney): I will start at the end and work my way back. The issue Senator Conway raised is being discussed in the EU. Nothing has been signed. It is within my remit at the moment in the EU Presidency. It is one of the files that is being discussed and no conclusion has been reached on it yet. Negotiations are going on, I hear what the Senator is saying, and I thank him for that.

I will go back to a few things that were said by different Senators. I compliment them. I know they are completely committed to saving lives. In Europe in 2025, we lost nearly 20,000 people to road fatalities. That is a pandemic in any person's language. That is what we are facing. We are, as a nation within the European Union, doing okay, but we are not doing okay because people are dying. That is the bottom line. On the issue of substances, if Senator Costello sends me something on that, I will bring it up with my officials. I think it was well put forward by the Senator and we need to look at it to see what we can do with it.

Education and what is happening with young people came up. The Road Safety Authority is responsible for the roll-out of a national post primary schools offering which is training teachers to become professional learning people who can teach road safety within the schools. This year, we intend to have that programme delivered to all 730 post-primary schools. It is vital we get it out there.

Someone mentioned that 80% of our road network is local roads. It is 94% of the length and it is used by 55% of our traffic. We have reduced the speed limit from 80 km/h to 60 km/h on these roads. These are the roads that need attention to their junctions and whatever else. The low-cost access schemes exist and I encourage all the local authorities to put them together. They will have more access to data from once the National Vehicle and Driver File, Road Traffic and Roads Bill goes through. At the moment, it is daft that the local authorities are not allowed to access the information that the RSA or the Garda have about collisions. That will help them and it will become more workable for the local authorities. They do not have to look for stuff because it is there for them and they can take it out, as it were.

I commend the local authorities on all the works they have done on low-cost accident schemes over the years. They have done a lot but there is much more to do and they need more assistance.

Senator Clonan spoke about education and it was well put.

I would love to see another couple of thousand gardaí on the roads every day. The reality is that we are building capacity to turn out 1,000 new gardaí every year. That is where it is coming to by the end of this year. For me, while we are waiting for that, and that is not something you can magic up overnight, we need to be smart and to use the technologies we have. These intermittent speed cameras, the fixed-point cameras, the technologies that the Garda has and the legislation I am bringing forward will help the force to work more efficiently. Even with the speed vans, at the moment, the inspector of the speed van has to appear in court if somebody challenges the speed fixed notice they have got. When this legislation passes, it will mean that a certification will do in court. That person can be out on the road doing his or her job, which is monitoring speeds. That is a practical move

We have made it mandatory for people on e-scooters to have helmets and high-visibility vests. They have to be 18 years of age. That just happened in the past couple of weeks.

Regarding the early train from Longford to Sligo, the Senator can contact me directly and we will raise that.

Senator Costello mentioned nitrous oxide. Senator Byrne mentioned a number of roads. That is on the roads programme through the local authority. I think they are all someplace.

They are on the agenda. If they come in through the roads request, which should be going in at this stage, we will see what is being delivered on the other side of it.

The issue of drivers who are disqualified is something that we are looking at. The other thing is graduated penalties. If people are 5 km/h over the speed limit or 50 km/h over it, there should be two different types of penalty for that. I am bringing in legislation for that. It is hoped we will have it in before the end of the year.

Gardaí engaging in pursuit during their duty need protection. We are bringing forward legislation and I have met the Garda and the Department of justice. We know what they want. We are talking to the Attorney General to bring forward draft legislation either through regulation or through legislation to help them. Aggravated endangerment is another request they have, that there would be legislation where, when gardaí are put in that position, they get that protection. I know from my meeting with the Garda and the Department of justice that there are more gardaí being trained as instructors in pursuit training and that they would be available from 1 January to start the pursuit training with gardaí in Templemore. That is important. Gardaí are using drones at the moment. They have been very successful in using drones in the pursuit of scramblers. More technologies will help.

I have a written speech here, but I am just answering what Senators asked. We have more schools to come out on the safe routes to school programme. Work is being done and things are happening, but maybe we could be doing more things more efficiently and deliver more for the money we are spending on it. I will be looking at that. We are reviewing that at the moment. We will have some more schools that will be added to the list to get done too.

Reflecting on what everybody said here, I am pleased that Senators all recognise the fact that this is not the RSA, which is being reformed. I meet the RSA regularly because I want to make sure it is doing what it is supposed to do. It has a plan to do things better. It is bringing in ambassadors. For sporting organisations in this country, it would be a simple thing and would cost nothing, where they have 20 or 30 players, whether footballers, hurlers, soccer players or whatever, who come to training and are under age, for those organisations to ensure it is said to those players before they finish training to make sure they put on their seat belts, put their phones away and drive safely on the way home. I learned this from the construction industry. Health and safety was not an agenda item, but every site meeting we had when we brought in the new rules meant we had to talk about safety, what happened on the site and whether there was an accident. That creates an agenda. We need to do that. It costs nothing. It is an attitude change. I am very strong on this, and very little is needed in terms of money. It is just to get people to say that this is their agenda for tomorrow night. They are going to talk about ten things, even at a community council meeting, and the last thing on the agenda is safety on the road. That is the type of thing we need to do to change attitudes. It would bring it into the home and into the school.

I am delighted to have met some children, fifth class students, who got road safety training on bicycles. When I asked them what they learned, the first thing they told me was that they learned how to stop the bike, which is the most important thing. It is easy to pedal the bike, but how do you stop it? That is the first thing they told me. We have a very good basis. We are all working together. Every one of us has personal responsibility. Senator Flynn alluded to everybody having a personal responsibility. We have the Road Safety Authority, TII, the

NTA, and public transport, which I think is a key enabler to reduce the number of people on the roads.

I agree that we need to increase our rail freight. At the moment, 1% of freight goes by rail. We are investing in rail, so we need to make sure we see the dividend, which is fewer trucks on the road and more freight going by rail. Now that we have a connection into Foynes Port, that will help. All of them feed into road safety.

I thank Senators for their co-operation among themselves in divvying up the time. If they have a particular issue, please contact us. I do not have all the answers so I rely on everybody to give their piece and their advice.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Garret Kelleher): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit. Sula gcríochnaíonn muid, cuirim fáilte roimh ár gcuairteoirí. I welcome the guests of Deputy Michael Collins, Chris O'Donovan and Aisling Butler. I hope they enjoy their visit to Leinster House.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 2.21 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.34 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 2.21 p.m. and resumed at 2.34 p.m.

Defective Concrete Blocks Social Homes Scheme 2026: Motion

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister of State to the House. I also welcome his father and uncle, who are here. I welcome Christy O'Sullivan, who is a former Member of Dáil Éireann. I welcome Christy's brother and the Minister of State's uncle, Martin, who I am sure is always very generous at the appropriate birthdays.

(Interruptions)

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome Christy. This will tell people how old I am now, but I served in the parliamentary party with Christy. It is a great honour to have Christy back in the Distinguished Visitors Gallery.

Anois, I call the Acting Leader.

Senator Mark Duffy: I move:

That Seanad Éireann approves the following scheme in draft:

Defective Concrete Blocks Social Homes Scheme 2026,

a copy of which has been laid in draft form before Seanad Éireann on 7th August, 2026.

An Cathaoirleach: The Minister of State has five minutes, all other Senators have five minutes, and the Minister of State shall reply no later than 3.25 p.m.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan): I welcome our distinguished guests to the Gallery: my

father, Christy, who is a former Deputy and served here from 2007 to 2011, and my uncle, Martin, who would have done a good job serving here as well if he had ever got the chance. He might yet. I thank the Cathaoirleach for the warm welcome for my family members.

I welcome the opportunity to address the House on the defective concrete blocks social homes scheme 2026, an important initiative that will ensure social homes affected by defective concrete blocks can access a comprehensive programme of remediation and support. Last week, the motion supporting the scheme was approved by Dáil Éireann. Subject to the approval of this House, the Minister, Deputy Browne, intends to bring a memorandum to the Government seeking approval for the making of the defective concrete blocks social homes scheme 2026. This will enable the scheme to be formally established and will pave the way for the commencement of remediation works on affected social homes.

This scheme will provide a mechanism through which designated local authorities and approved housing bodies can remediate dwellings in their ownership that have been damaged as a result of the use of defective concrete blocks in their construction. Upon the establishment of the scheme, these bodies will be able to commence the process of addressing affected homes and ensuring that tenants can continue to live in safe and secure housing.

As Senators will be well aware, a defective concrete grants scheme was introduced in 2020 to provide financial support to affected homeowners in counties Donegal and Mayo whose homes had been damaged by the use of defective concrete blocks. A number of improvements were brought forward under the Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks Act 2022, which commenced on 22 June 2023. The Government brought forward a number of further significant enhancements to this scheme through the amendment Act of 2025. These measures included, among other changes, amendments relating to the damage threshold for attached dwellings and the introduction of an arrangement to facilitate the construction of adjacent dwellings in specified circumstances.

These measures were designed to provide additional flexibility and support to affected homeowners and to ensure that this scheme continues to respond to the practical challenges arising in individual cases. Measures such as these are delivering real benefits on the ground and significant progress is now being made. At the end of August this year, 604 homes had been remediated, with a further 794 homeowners notifying their relevant designated local authorities of the date of commencement of their works to remediate their homes.

As the Minister, Deputy Browne, highlighted in the Dáil last week, when the current scheme commenced in 2023, it was open to homeowners in four local authority areas. As it stands today, the scheme has expanded significantly since its commencement in 2023. A further five local authority areas have been designated under the grants scheme, bringing the total number to nine counties, namely, Donegal, Mayo, Clare, Limerick, Sligo, Carlow and parts of the administrative areas of Wexford, Fingal and Meath county councils.

Prior to the drafting of the social homes scheme, my Department engaged in extensive consultation with designated local authorities, the Irish Council for Social Housing and a number of approved housing bodies. The feedback received through this process helped to inform and shape the development of the draft scheme. Following the drafting of the scheme, my Department continues to have regular engagement with these bodies.

The draft social homes scheme replicates most of the defective concrete blocks grant scheme in its provisions. It will be available in designated local authority areas where the whole of the local authority is designated under the grant scheme. The scheme, in terms of content, is based on the current scheme for private homeowners, with appropriate amendments, where necessary, to reflect the slightly different nature of social housing.

There are some areas that differ from the private scheme and the way the scheme would be operationalised in practice by local authorities has been the subject of careful consideration. The Housing Agency conducts all of the technical work under the current private scheme. The agency will have no such role in the social scheme. Instead, the designated local authority or approved housing body will arrange the preparation of a building condition assessment report and engage a competent engineer to undertake a report in line with IS 465:2026. Furthermore, the designated local authority or approved housing body will engage a contractor to undertake the remediation works required. The designated local authority or approved housing body will seek recoupment of moneys it expends in remediating a dwelling directly from my Department.

Finally, the designated local authority or approved housing body will be obliged to rehouse tenants, where necessary, while an affected home is being remediated. This will be funded under the ancillary grant element of the scheme to a maximum amount of €16,500, exactly as per the current scheme.

The scheme is underpinned by the national testing standard known as IS 465:2026. On 2 June, the National Standards Authority of Ireland published a revised version of this standard.

The scheme now substantially reflects the provisions of the revised standard, including the prescribed approach to testing for defective concrete blocks. As a result, determinations under the defective concrete blocks grant scheme will be based on the most up to date national testing standard and are applied consistently across all designated local authority areas. I have consistently emphasised the importance of following the science.

This publication requires a review of the operation of the Act, which has been commenced. It is being carried out by the Department with the assistance of external expertise as necessary. Findings from this review may require changes to the current private scheme and any changes may also be brought to the social homes scheme in the future. In February 2026, the County and City Management Association, CCMA, produced a revised estimate of the number of affected dwellings for private and social homes. The Irish Council for Social Housing has also provided an estimate for approved housing body dwellings. Using these estimates for the number of potentially impacted dwellings indicates a revised private and social homes scheme cost of €3.1 billion excluding inflation. It is estimated that there are just over 2,400 social housing units likely to be impacted by defective concrete blocks. Based on average estimated remediation costs per unit of €300,000, the overall cost of the social scheme will be approximately €728 million, again excluding inflation. I am anxious to move this programme forward and to see works commence on these homes at the earliest opportunity. I encourage each designated local authority to make full use of the resources available to them to ensure that affected homes are remediated promptly to the highest possible standards. I also encourage designated local authorities to co-ordinate their efforts to access other schemes and funding streams available that can support the remediation of social homes. The Department will work closely with them on this to ensure the delivery of an efficient, effective and value for money scheme for tenants and the wider tax payer, and in particular to adapt a co-ordinated approach

with the Department's energy efficiency retrofit programme for social homes. This approach will help us deliver not only safe and sustainable homes but long-term benefits for tenants through improved comfort, reduced energy consumption and lower household energy. Furthermore, by co-ordinating their efforts in this way I am satisfied that all funding necessary to deliver high-quality, energy efficient and remediated social homes will be available to the sector. I note that this was a recurring concern of Deputies when the scheme was debated last week.

Concerns were also raised about the institutional capacity of the local authorities in particular to manage and implement this scheme. The Department has for some time supported additional staffing resources where needed in the relevant councils and remains committed to doing so where appropriate as the scheme moves forward quickly into implementation. The scheme is about ensuring that social housing tenants living in affected homes have access to the same commitment from the State as has been provided to private home owners. It is about delivering practical solutions, supporting communities and ensuring that remediation works can proceed as quickly and effectively as possible. I commend the motion to the House and look forward to working with Senators to ensure the successful implementation of this very important scheme.

Senator Joe Flaherty: I thank the Minister of State for his work on this important issue. I echo the welcome for his dad, Christy and his grand-uncle, Martin. I know if it is a school group the Cathaoirleach normally tells them there is no homework for this evening or the next week. I do not know what he has in his bag for them but on the basis of the fact that he served in the parliamentary party with Christy Snr., I am sure he will lavish them with some gift before they go. They should make sure they do not go empty handed. The Minister of State has lavish pockets.

I jest but this is a hugely important issue. I also welcome Deputy Charles Ward to the Chamber. This is a huge issue for him, and he has been extremely passionate. I have listened to him many times about it. I thank him for showing this House the courtesy of coming in to hear the debate. That is important. Any of us who have been to County Donegal in the throes of mica, and who have witnessed the turmoil, chaos and absolute heartache this has caused, knew that this was an issue that had to be addressed. We have come on a long journey. I concede we are not all the way there, but this is an important plank in addressing it and being a full amelioration of what was a nightmare scenario. I know lives, marriages and relationships were lost over this in Donegal. I was up there at the time of the Seanad election with Councillor Martin McDermott and saw the absolute chaos. It was like a war-torn situation around his own family home and other houses of siblings, relations and neighbours who were affected by this. The spectrum of it was frightening to behold and it commanded a strong Government response. We are getting there. As I said, this is an important plank, but we need this issue fully addressed and taken off the table as soon as possible.

This scheme is to enable a designated local authority or approved housing bodies with dwellings located in a designated local authority area to remedy damage caused to dwellings owned by a local authority or approved housing body where defective blocks were used in the construction. The new social homes scheme replicates most of the defective concrete blocks grant scheme in its provision and is based on the current enhanced scheme with appropriate amendments where necessary to reflect the slightly different nature of social housing. Social

homes will receive the same remediation options as those covered under the enhanced scheme for private housing and the same grant cap, grant rates and damage threshold requirements. I was particularly pleased that the Minister of State addressed the issue of staffing within local authorities. There are issues with it and all local authorities, particularly housing departments, are working under huge pressure. I would not like the roll-out of the scheme to be held up through staffing issues, be they in the Department or in local authorities. The Minister, Deputy Browne, brought forward a number of additional significant improvements to the defective blocks scheme in the 2025 Act and these included changes such as providing the opportunity for certain homeowners to apply for increased grants and the construction of adjacent dwellings in specific circumstances. Measures such as these are having an impact and real progress is being made. To the end of August this year, as the Minister of State said, 604 homes have been remediated with a further 794 homes notified of their relevant designation through their local authority.

One point that has not been addressed relates to tenant purchase. The defective blocks issue has gone on for a long time and several tenants at some stage would possibly have liked to buy out their local authority home. They have now reached a stage in their life where they are over 45. As someone who has just turned 45, I can attest it is hard to get a mortgage once you get past 45, even a local authority mortgage. I would like the Department to at least give some consideration to the issue of tenant purchase for these properties. The rules currently governing tenant purchase should be relaxed for these houses on the basis that there has been a gap in time where people would ordinarily have bought their house, but they were obviously not going to buy out a mica-affected house. However, once these houses are ameliorated and put back right, there should be a retrospective opportunity for people to buy out those houses. Apart from that, I am happy with all aspects of the scheme.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I welcome the Minister of State and his family. I also particularly welcome Deputy Charles Ward for his sterling work on this. I acknowledge Councillors Joy Beard, Denis McGee, Ali Farren and Tomás Seán Devine of the 100% Redress party. This is a registered political party that was activated by its advocacy work for people on the ground. We must not forget that. We live in a democracy. These people have a mandate from the people in their community that they represent. I work closely with them from time to time as issues arise. I acknowledge their significant input and the Deputy's leadership in that organisation. That is not to go without acknowledging the enormous work of Deputies of all parties and none on the ground, who have had to work under very challenging sets of circumstances.

Today, Seanad Éireann has been asked to approve the defective concrete blocks social homes scheme 2026, which is standard practice. It is good parliamentary practice, and I am delighted the Minister of State has come here to set out the case for the motion. A copy of this motion draft form was laid before Seanad Éireann, so we would have an opportunity to consider it in some detail. I welcome the opportunity to speak here on what is an important matter. I do not talk about houses and places; I talk about homes.

We are talking about family homes, where people live or are attempting to live under very difficult sets of circumstances. I draw no distinction between social and private housing. All housing is housing. It provides homes. All should be of equal standard. All equal issues in terms of redress should be across the board. I am conscious of section 13(6) of the 2022 Act, which provides for that, but let us be clear: the legislation provides for it but it needs to be acted

on on the ground. I acknowledge the advocacy, as the public representatives have already done. Donegal, Mayo, Clare, Limerick, Sligo and parts of the administrative local authority areas of Wexford, Fingal and Meath county councils are now under this scheme, and that is to be encouraged. Who is to say? There may be an opportunity - there may have to be an opportunity - to include others, but let us leave that for the moment.

I will just touch on a few issues in the short time I have. One is about capacity, which has been touched on. Councils and approved housing bodies, AHBs, are set to be responsible for assessing the properties, appointing appropriate engineers and contractors and rehousing tenants if needed. That is an enormous additional workload in terms of the county managers' or their chief executives' capacity. There are issues of concern around that. I understand that the Department has had ongoing consultation with the AHBs and with the Irish Council for Social Housing, and that is important. That engagement must not stop now, and I ask the Minister of State to take that back to the senior Minister. The level of consultation with the Housing Agency and all local authorities must continue in a very positive way.

Councils are concerned. The city and county managers have expressed concerns to the Department. I am aware of that. I have seen documentation so I am fully aware of what I am talking about. They have expressed concerns to the principal Minister in the Minister of State's Department about funding shortfalls and the capacity to approve landfill facilities, given the anticipated volumes of defective concrete blocks that will be required for disposal. Councils and AHBs have expressed serious concerns that they may be left with significant shortfalls in funding and remediation or rebuilding in terms of properties and replacing new homes. They have expressed this formally to the Department in their engagement in their representative group as sitting county managers, and we have to take that on board. The 100% Redress party described the proposed scheme as "a welcome step". That is an important step. I really wanted to know what 100% Redress thought. It said that it welcomed this and that it was a significant step but that significant concerns remained regarding governance. It had concerns about governance, tenancy rights, independent review mechanisms, staffing capacity and delivery of timelines. It went on to say in its statement that it feared that the draft scheme provides substantially fewer procedural protections for tenants than those available to private homeowners. I ask the Minister of State to take that on board and give the necessary reassurances as time goes on. The party added that a robust framework that incorporates independent technical review, tenant representation, dedicated staffing and delivery timelines will be essential to maintain the public confidence and the consistent decisions across all councils. They are valid points.

I am absolutely supportive that we proceed with this motion. I fully support the Government's motion. Let us now just get on with it. We do not want any more history lessons about what happened in the past. We have to get forward, and the key message has to be constant monitoring, constant appraisal, constant communication and getting people back living in their homes of choice appropriate to their needs in their communities and moving on. I wish the Minister of State every success with this motion.

Senator Mark Duffy: I thank the Minister of State for being here this afternoon. I welcome his dad, his uncle Martin and Fr. Christy, who are here as well. I also acknowledge Deputy Charles Ward, who has done a lot of work, as has been mentioned, in this space. Being from County Mayo, I know first-hand the scourge that has been the defective concrete blocks issue.

We call it pyrite in our area and it is mica in Donegal, and other areas are affected by it. Senator Boyhan very well encapsulated the messaging on it. It is someone's home. It is not a house; it is a home. I have witnessed first-hand, having met with families, the stress and pressure they have always been under throughout this process, every evening coming home from work looking at cracks on the wall getting bigger and hearing gable walls move while they have children in the house. It is just unimaginable. I stood alongside them many times protesting both here in Dublin and at home in Mayo to advocate for better reforms and better supports of the system.

This afternoon is another step in the right direction. It should not matter whether it is a social home or a private home. People deserve adequate housing, a roof over their head and adequate conditions, whether they are elderly and retiring or a young family. They all require a proper and acceptable standard of living and dignity. It has been an unimaginable time. Insurers ran a mile from this issue and lots of people who were unregulated ran from responsibility. The Government has stepped in in unprecedented form, albeit at times not to the speed that any of us would have liked. It is responding in a way that is slowly but surely dealing with an unprecedented challenge that has affected so many people. The measures being brought forward today are very welcome.

I have seen hundreds of homeowners whom I have worked with and tried to help along the way go through the whole process. To walk or drive through different housing estates - in Ballina, for example - and see brand-new houses being built and people now getting on with their lives and being able to put this in the rear-view mirror is very welcome. I also deal with people who are in social homes, who are negatively impacted by defective concrete blocks and who, equally, are looking for remediation and supports through the local authority. This measure will allow for that, thankfully.

I would welcome, as Senator Flaherty and others mentioned, the resourcing of local authorities to deal with schemes swiftly in order to keep things moving along at an expedited pace, with engagement with contractors to make sure that there are common-sense solutions on the ground and that the response is at speed and at scale. I know Donegal is a particularly badly affected area. I acknowledge all the public representatives there, past and present, who have worked with local communities, who are the ones suffering at the end of the day. It is our job as representatives to try to respond to that as much as possible. There have been a lot of difficult days for representatives and families, but I know from seeing families come through the other side that there is a lot of hope and positivity that they have a new forever home that is state of the art and that, please God, will be there long into the future to keep a roof over their head and protect themselves and their family.

I welcome and fully support this motion.

Senator Joanne Collins: I welcome the Minister of State. We in Sinn Féin are not opposing this motion. However, we think it has been approached in the wrong way, and I will give the House the reasons.

Social housing tenants have been waiting a long time for a scheme like this. The problem is that it just does not seem like the Government will 100% fund this, and when I say 100% I mean the demolition, the staffing, the construction disposal and temporary accommodation for the tenants when this is going on. The councils, if this is the case, will not be able to proceed

with the works that are necessary and what needs to happen. Looking at the private scheme that is going on at the moment, homeowners have a shortfall of sometimes €50,000 or €100,000. If the same thing is going to happen with the council houses, there will be councils that will be hundreds of millions short of what they need to do. I am just conscious that we need to make sure that if this is going ahead, it is 100% redress, to include all of what is needed for council houses to be refurbished. I had a family from County Limerick come up to me at the ploughing and they said that they had their house assessed in 2024. They were told there was pyrite in the house. They are still waiting. It is nearly the end of 2026 now. That is two years they are still waiting. The shocking thing I heard was that the walls were tested but the foundation was not.

3 o'clock

Everybody says that the best thing for anything, in education or whatever you do in life, is a good foundation. A good foundation in a house is important. If we are not testing the foundation and we are just going to put whatever fix on the walls - knock the walls and rebuild them or whatever it is that is planned - we are going to end up with a redress scheme for the redress scheme because it is just going to happen again. If there is an issue with the foundation, the foundation needs to be tested and sorted and the house needs to be knocked or whatever has to happen. I am not a builder, so I do not know the ins and outs of what happens down to the nitty-gritty, but I do know that the foundation of anything is important. Will the Minister of State go back to the Department and please look at that flaw that seems to be in the scheme, but also at the shortfall? None of these schemes is going to work unless it is 100% redress. The schemes are just not. Families cannot afford a shortfall of €50,000 or €100,000 and councils definitely cannot. I would like to see the funding going into councils to be able to provide this because the Minister of State mentioned a couple of counties but there could be others where the problem has just not shown up yet. This could end up being in all 32 counties. A review has been initiated but it needs to make real change. The results need to show real change happening and 100% redress. I will leave it at that.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: The Minister of State is very welcome. I welcome Deputy Charlie Ward. He has informed me. I would be asking the stupidest questions about all levels of what is going on in Donegal. I also welcome Councillors Joy Beard, Ali Farren, Tomás Seán Devine and Denis McGee. I am someone who is new to politics and Deputy Ward gave me an awful lot of time explaining things in a very humble and generous way. That can be seen right throughout these Houses in a very considerate and respectful way. He was very willing to work with anyone who was willing to listen, and it paid off. Well done to Deputy Ward and to all the councillors. I thank the Minister of State for listening to what they were saying. I went to Deputy Ward's house. A lot of people would not invite you into their house to show you the situation people are living in. I thank him and say, "Well done".

We welcome this scheme. It has been a long time coming. Local authorities like Donegal County Council have spent scarce resources on this. As has been pointed out, the concrete does not care who owns the home, be it a social home or a private home. I do not want to be negative about it. What I am saying is informed by the councillors and by Deputy Ward himself and relates to the possible defects in the scheme that should be addressed now rather than later. That includes testing the foundations. That must be included in this scheme. It makes no sense

to rebuild a property on potentially compromised foundations and leave the State to carry possible future risk.

Under IS 465:2026, where a dwelling is found to have internal sulphate attack, the appropriate remedy is demolition and rebuild. This scheme must fully reflect the scientific standard. That has been pointed out many times. The review of the standard - IS 465:2026 - has gone to the Minister, Deputy Browne, who must ensure that it is incorporated into the existing private scheme and the social housing scheme.

Temporary accommodation has already come up in the debate. In Donegal, there are 3,150 households awaiting social housing. A conservative estimate is that 2,400 social homes have been impacted by defective concrete. A proper temporary accommodation plan must be in place before large-scale works begin. The Minister of State knows that. We all know we are in the middle of a housing crisis, so people are competing to try to get a house on top of all that. If a temporary accommodation scheme is introduced, it is important that the local authorities and approved housing bodies keep families in their own communities to protect schools and community involvement and support carers. Tenants need to be given a guarantee that once the remediation work has been done, they can return to their homes.

Consideration should possibly be given to the use of modular homes. There are a lot of modular homes in Donegal for the Ukrainian people who arrived under temporary protection. That could be a consideration if they are no longer in use because people have returned home. It is about funding local authorities and making sure that they have enough resources within them. Local authorities are underfunded as it is. They were forced to act because there was not a dedicated scheme. We must make sure that the money going in is sufficient to meet all of the costs and is ring-fenced, including for personnel. Funding must be multi-annual. Where homes must be demolished and rebuilt, they should be built to modern building and energy efficiency standards.

The scheme is going to place enormous responsibility on Donegal County Council, Sligo County Council, and councils in Mayo, Clare, and all the other counties that have been affected. It is the Minister of State's Department and he knows that they have to be fully resourced with proper oversight. A formal implementation group could be set up involving tenants, approved housing bodies, engineers and elected members from councils. The Department cannot correct its own homework. We must ensure that there will be proper oversight and accountability. Good practice and good governance require accountability.

It is great that the State has responded. The State is the only one that can respond to this. Now that there is a dedicated scheme, the rate needs to be upped. The Department can ensure that the local authorities are resourced.

Senator Eileen Flynn: The defective concrete blocks social homes scheme 2026 represents a long overdue acknowledgment of a real injustice to families. Last week, members of a group representing Donegal crèches and childcare facilities held an excellent event in Buswells about the need for childcare in Donegal and in rural communities. There are more than 25 childcare facilities in Donegal - the ones we know of - impacted by defective concrete. My two wee girls go to the local crèche in Ardara. The children's biggest worry is that the crèche is going to fall down. We all had conversations with our children about the defective concrete in it. Billie and Lacey always ask me about when the crèche is going to be knocked. The kids are constantly

worried about the crèche. It is a great facility that holds 40-odd children. The women work brilliantly with the children. It is the heart of the community in Ardara, especially for working parents. President Connolly came to visit the crèche in February. Deputy Charlie Ward and his county councillors have been to the crèche in Ardara. I do not know all the ins and outs of the 25 crèches. I am only speaking to the one that I know best. Genuinely, those childcare workers are plastering that building together themselves nearly every week. That is unsafe.

Today, I invite the Minister of State to take a trip to the crèche in Ardara to see for himself the level of danger. The children are safe. It is not going to fall down overnight - I hope not anyway - but he needs to come down and see it with his own eyes.

When we talk about the redress schemes, in my opinion, what is being done is that the people who bought their homes are getting the redress scheme, and rightly so. Deputy Ward and the county councillors worked very hard on redress. There is no redress for social housing and Traveller accommodation in Donegal, crèches and some of the schools.

What is the Department going to do with the education facilities that are impacted by mica? If this was in Dublin, it would be seen as a crisis. Since it is rural Donegal, it is not seen as a crisis. We have got a housing crisis not only in Dublin but in Donegal, too. Social housing and council housing in Donegal did not even get a proper look in when it came to redress, and some of the Traveller accommodation in Donegal is impacted by mica as well.

Of course, they are not included in the redress scheme. I look forward to some of the Minister of State's feedback around social housing, the Traveller accommodation and, most importantly right now for me as a working mother, the safety of my children and other children in the crèche in Ardara. I would really love for the Minister of State to come and visit the crèche and see with his own two eyes. If he could accept that invitation, it would be a step forward for the childcare workers in Donegal. There are 25 crèches. We are coming together in a few weeks - I hope before Christmas - to come up with a solution and see what we can do collectively in getting new buildings, etc., for facilities because we do not want to lose the crèche in our local community. It would be brilliant if the Minister of State could take up the invitation and work with us going forward on a good redress scheme that includes everybody.

Senator Niall Blaney: I will start by acknowledging the Minister of State's dad, who was in the Gallery. I had the pleasure of serving with him back in the noughties in the Lower House. I am delighted to see him here and looking so well.

The Minister of State is very welcome. It is great that we are getting another further step along the road to dealing with the whole defective concrete block issue. Like colleagues, I also welcome Deputy Ward to the Gallery. In fairness, Deputy Ward and I were two who certainly shared our views, whether we liked each other's view or not over the years. We fought very hard in relation to this. It is great now to be getting to some of the stages we are getting. That is not to say that everything is perfect. I want to outline some of the issues I feel still need to be addressed.

I would like to say on the floor that today is a very welcome occasion. I am delighted that we are here now at this point where councils can start work in dealing with their own stock. Who is more equipped than the councils to deal with their stock? They know exactly what is involved. With Donegal being the epicentre of this defective block crisis, I have full confidence

in Donegal County Council to handle the situation in Donegal. The council is saying that something like around 1,000 of its units are affected by mica. I look forward to it now getting on with the job. However, I would like there to be a stipulation put in that it is not just all about housing schemes. Some people are living in council houses that are more often than not referred to as SI houses or specific instance cottages that were built in different parts of rural Ireland. Those applicants must be given the same affordability to the scheme now and not be left until the very end. Some of these people are elderly and some are not in great health. I want to see all this move in tandem and not have anybody left behind. It was great to see the Minister make the moves before the summer in relation to building side by side. It is great that some families who are dealing with loved ones in very compromised health conditions can now get on with their house and have a new house built alongside the existing house. That was a very welcome move.

I want to address in the small time that is left to me a number of issues as I see them. I think if Deputy Ward, who is in the Gallery behind me, had the chance to speak on this, he would do so in the same vein. On houses that have been sent to the board of appeal, can we get assurance from the Department that the regulations within the new IS 465:2026 are applied to the appeals? Some of the houses that were appealed a number of years ago may have been tested under a different regime. For instance, they may not have had their inner walls tested. However, decisions could be made on them based on old testings which would not be accurate and would not be right. I want to ensure that any testing that is done is in compliance with the current regulation and that the proper outcomes are secured.

There is also a difficulty in Donegal with the market in that anybody going to sell their house now nearly has to go as far as testing the house to prove it has not got mica, and that is wrong. There was a similar incidence of this in Cardiff quite a number of decades ago. They overcame it by using the engineering expertise whereby an engineer is employed for the visual inspection of the house, and with a visual inspection and the test results, certain ratings are given to houses. At the minute, there are questions over the mortgageability and insurability of these houses. It needs an intervention by the Department of housing to ensure there is a process whereby not everybody has to run through a two-year process to sell a house. It really is impacting the market. I would like the Department to seriously have a look at it and come up with a solution to it.

I, too, am aware of the crèche in Ardara which the Senator just raised. Councillor Anthony Molloy has raised it with us at meetings in the past. There are maybe 15 schools in total in Donegal where there are problems at which the Minister for education is looking at the minute with a view to addressing those. That is very welcome. Crèches need to be the same. There are many other commercial buildings, etc., that we still need to address. The Senator raised an issue with Traveller accommodation. If that is the case, that is concerning and needs to be addressed by Donegal County Council. If there is Traveller accommodation that is in difficulty with defective materials, that needs to be included in any council scheme or otherwise.

I thank the Minister of State again for this today. It is very welcome.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan): I join Senator Blaney because I know how vocal he has been on this. I have been honoured to accompany him to a lot of parliamentary party meetings

where he has raised this so actively. Similar to the Senator, I extend a welcome to Deputy Ward, who has lived this and experienced it. This has been his life, essentially, for a good number of years. We can see that when he contributes to the Dáil debates. I have also noticed that when this issue comes up in the Dáil, he stays from start to finish and, even a step further, he stays from the start to the finish of the Seanad debate as well. That has to be acknowledged in terms of how important it is to him.

I thank all the Senators for their contributions to this debate. The defective concrete block social homes scheme represents another significant step in the Government's response to the issues faced by communities affected by defective concrete blocks. It complements the supports already available to private homeowners and extends assistance to the social housing sector in ensuring a consistent and equitable approach across all affected housing tenures. Significant funding has been provided to homeowners affected by defective concrete blocks. More than €405 million has been paid out under the scheme to date. Government funding will continue to be made available annually to meet demand. In 2026, a record €175 million has been allocated to the scheme, more than double the amount provided in the previous year. The substantial increase reflects the growing uptake of the scheme and the Government's continued commitment to support affected homeowners.

I am conscious that local authorities have been preparing for some time, with the assistance of the Department, for what will mark the beginning of an important new phase in the defective concrete blocks remediation scheme. Their engagement and preparedness will be critical to the successful roll-out of the scheme. I understand that some of the affected local authorities have already identified a number of specific homes in their housing stock where remediation can begin once the scheme is signed by Government, allowing procurement to move ahead at pace. The initial cohort of homes will progress to remediation as soon as possible. It will enable the sector to build experience and refine its approach, ensuring the process is managed in the most effective manner possible and, above all, in the best interests of the tenants.

I am well aware of the broader social and community impact of the defective concrete block, DCB, issue. The Government will continue to respond in a practical and effective way to help deliver solutions for individual residents that will also help the wider community. The scheme will ensure tenants living in affected social homes can benefit from the same commitment to remediation that has been provided to private homeowners. It reflects the Government's commitment that no affected household should be left behind and that those living in social housing receive the support they need in an important step in protecting our social housing stock, supporting tenants and ensuring communities can continue to grow and develop in the future.

Today's debate has highlighted the strong consensus on the importance of progressing this matter and delivering the necessary supports and investments. We remain committed to supporting those affected and continue our work to deliver practical and effective solutions. We will continue to work closely with local authorities and stakeholders to ensure affected social homes are remediated and that tenants are supported throughout the process.

As I said, this will include working to ensure that all available State funding is used in as efficient a manner as possible and directing support from my Department for staffing resources, where necessary.

The development of the scheme has been informed by a close collaboration with the designated local authority, the Irish Council for Social Housing and a range of approved housing bodies. Their expertise and experience have been instrumental in shaping the scheme for those designated local authorities. It should be noted that although the Housing Agency does not have a technical role in the social homes scheme, determinations relating to the required remediation option will be made in the same way. A competent building professional will consider the damage and make a decision on the new standard IS 465.

Today, we have an opportunity to take a practical and positive step forward. By supporting this motion, the House can send a clear message that we are committed to introducing a scheme to support the remediation of these homes that have been affected by defective concrete blocks, thereby ensuring that tenants are protected and that the housing stock is restored to a safe and sustainable standard.

I wish to comment on some of the contributions from the Senators. It is important that they took the time to contribute. Senator Flaherty spoke on tenant purchase. It is an important issue, so I am glad he brought it up. It is certainly something that, as a Department, we need to look at in order to give people that option. It is available to most people who are not living in a house that is impacted. The Senator has raised a very important issue.

Senator Flaherty also raised the issue of resourcing local authorities, as others did. That is something we are committed to doing to ensure that the local authorities are resourced. In a similar vein, Senator Boyhan talked about engagement with local authorities. This is already happening at quite a large scale, but where local authorities seek more support and information, the Department will not be found wanting.

Senator Duffy is right to point out that this is not just a house, and that the language we use is very important. These are people's homes and, therefore, we know how emotive this is. People in Mayo have experienced this as well. That is not lost on us.

I thank Senator Collins for highlighting the opposition, but Sinn Féin will not oppose this. That is very important, and it shows that we can work together. Regarding one of the points made by Senator Collins, local authorities will be obliged to accommodate those whose houses are being remediated. That is there, and they will be resourced to do so, which is very important. The uptake has been very strong. I know the Senator said that people were dissuaded from availing of it, but 604 houses have been done to date and there are another 790-odd in the pipeline. Therefore, we are getting there in terms of trying to get to as many houses as possible.

Senator Cosgrove made various points. I want to point out that this is not a closed deal. We are not drawing a line under this and walking away. We will always be reviewing these schemes as we go forward.

Senator Flynn is concerned about the childcare facilities. We would like to get more information on that. Senator Blaney also raised the point. This is a really important issue. These are our youngest, and this is the most important part of education, so we must be sure it is done in a safe manner.

The Traveller accommodation issue was also raised by Senator Flynn. Again, Donegal County Council needs to identify the social houses that it feels need to be addressed in this element of the remediation. That is something we would like to work with it on.

I again thank Senators for their contributions. This is a very important commitment by the Government. People have been through hell, whether they live in private homes or social homes. We are now getting to a stage where we are starting to release that pressure valve and give people a bit of hope that, at the end of this process, they can once again live in safe, secure, high-standard, quality homes. That is exactly what the Minister, Deputy Browne, and all in the Department want.

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 3.24 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 4 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 3.24 p.m. and resumed at 4 p.m.

4 o'clock

School Meals Programme: Statements

Deputy Mark Duffy: I welcome the Minister, Deputy Calleary. He will speak first and he has eight minutes. The debate will conclude no later than 5.30 p.m.

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Dara Calleary): Before I begin, I put on record my sympathies to the family of the late Seamus Carroll. This is a very sad day for our Leinster House family. Seamus was one of our best ushers, always welcoming and helpful, and he always had great pride in this place. I send my sympathies to his family this evening, including his wife, children and grandchildren, and to his Leinster House family as well. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam uasal.

I welcome the opportunity to address the House this evening on the school meals programme and, in particular, the findings of the recently published Nutrition Review Report of the Hot School Meals Scheme and the results of the IPSOS Behaviour and Attitudes survey. These reports give us an important evidence base as we work to strengthen and improve one of the most significant social support programmes delivered by the State for children and families.

Ensuring children are eating healthy, nutritious food is an important commitment under the programme for Government. We want an education system that works for all children, regardless of background or circumstance. The school meals programme, particularly the hot school meals scheme, is a vital part of that ambition.

There are currently some 300 suppliers in the school meals programme, the majority of which supply one to three local schools. Any registered food business operator, including not-for-profit suppliers, meals-on-wheels services, social enterprises, community organisations, co-operatives, local cafés, restaurants and caterers, can become a school meals provider by submitting a tender response to a school's call for tenders. My preferred approach is to have

local suppliers involved insofar as possible. For instance, there are currently 11 meals-on-wheels organisations supplying 40 schools.

The programme is about much more than providing food. It is about ensuring children are in a position to participate fully in education, thereby improving concentration and well-being, supporting attendance, easing financial pressures on families and helping to tackle educational disadvantage. The scale of the programme today reflects the commitment of the Government to those objectives.

The hot school meals scheme, which began as a small pilot under the then Minister, Ms Regina Doherty, involved just 30 schools in 2019. Today, with the support provided by the former Minister, Ms Heather Humphreys, and me, it has grown to support approximately 3,200 primary schools and 550,000 children with hot school meals. Across all meal types, including breakfast clubs and snack provision, the programme now reaches 3,700 schools and approximately 682,000 children, providing up to 3.4 million meals every week. I am sure Members will agree these are remarkable numbers. They reflect the exceptionally significant expansion of this social support over recent years.

As the hot school meals scheme expands, it is necessary and appropriate that we assess how well it is operating and identify areas for improvement. While the scheme has been positively received by schools, parents and children since its introduction, concerns have been raised in regard to nutritional standards, menu options and food waste. For that reason, an interdepartmental working group was established in December 2024, bringing together expertise from my Department, the Departments of Health, Education and Youth, and Children, Disability and Equality, and the Food Safety Authority of Ireland, FSAI. The purpose of this group is to oversee the operation of the school meals programme and make recommendations on its future development.

In September 2025, I approved the secondment of a dedicated CORU-registered dietitian to the programme, working under the clinical supervision of the Department of Health. One of the dietitian's principal tasks was to undertake a detailed review of school meal menus and assess compliance with nutritional standards across suppliers participating in the scheme. The review examined 15 school meal suppliers and analysed 360 meals over a nine-month period. It included all nine major suppliers, which account for approximately 70% of schools participating in the scheme. Site visits were also undertaken to schools and supplier premises throughout the country.

I thank the dietitian for her work on, and commitment to, the review. It found there is a wide variety of meals available under the scheme, with strong availability of nutritious and balanced options. It found that 82% of meal options reviewed did not contain foods considered high in fat, salt or sugar. The majority of principals and teachers reported positive experiences regarding meal quality, nutritional value and choice.

However, the review also highlighted areas where improvements are needed. While a range of healthy food options are available, the data showed that where meals with higher fat, salt and sugar options remained available, those options were often selected from the menu. The review also identified a need to increase fruit, vegetables, salads and wholegrain products, as well as the level of protein content in vegetarian and vegan meals. In addition, the same portion

size is often provided regardless of age, despite the different nutritional needs of younger and older children.

The issue of food waste was also examined in detail. The review found that approximately 18.9% of meals remained uneaten daily. However, when absenteeism is taken into account, that figure falls to 11.1%. Waste was notably higher among older children. The evidence suggests that a combination of factors are contributing to the waste challenge, including meal preferences, menu choice and, in some cases, insufficient time during lunch breaks.

Alongside the nutritional review, my Department commissioned IPSOS Behaviour and Attitudes to undertake the largest survey ever conducted on the hot school meals scheme. More than 86,000 parents, almost 7,000 children, over 1,900 teachers, more than 500 principals and 47 suppliers participated. The results demonstrate clearly that the scheme is deeply embedded within school communities. Some 81% of parents reported that their child avails of the scheme, while 85% of children said they liked their lunch or found it satisfactory. The survey also highlighted a broad recognition of the scheme's benefits, particularly in DEIS schools. Among parents who viewed the scheme positively, the most frequently cited benefits were the provision of regular meals, children's enjoyment of meals and the inclusion of core food groups. Importantly, the findings of the IPSOS survey align closely with those of the nutritional review.

At the same time, respondents identified challenges. Parents and schools highlighted concerns relating to menu choice, dietary requirements, perceptions around processed foods and the need for greater flexibility, including options for both a hot and cold meal. School contracts with food suppliers currently provide either hot or cold meal options, but not both, to schools. Food waste was also identified as an issue requiring attention.

The value of these two reports is that they not only identify where the scheme is working well or where there are challenges, but they also set out clear recommendations. Those recommendations include the development of a standardised menu cycle, improved nutritional compliance, larger food portions for older children, better accommodation of special dietary requirements, stronger auditing arrangements and greater flexibility regarding meal choice. A review of the current food catering models to assess which most consistently meet the nutritional standards will be undertaken. The potential to use a weighting system in the tender evaluation process will also be examined. The reports' recommendations provide a very clear roadmap for the next phase of the scheme's development. Work has started with suppliers and the other stakeholders on their implementation. Tomorrow, the dietician will brief the education spokespersons of all the parties on her work.

The success of the hot school meals scheme should not be measured solely by the number of meals served but also by the positive impact it has on children's health, well-being and educational outcomes. The reports confirm that the scheme is succeeding on a significant scale. However, we are not hiding from the practical measures needed to make it even better.

I thank the officials in my Department for their considerable commitment to the roll-out of this scheme since 2019. This is a major commitment, budget-wise and personnel-wise, on the part of my Department. It is my Department that leads the roll-out and the work on this on the ground, and I acknowledge that.

I look forward to hearing the views of Senators during today's debate, and as I look around the Chamber, many of them have already engaged positively with feedback on the scheme, and I acknowledge that. Go raibh maith agat.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I thank the Minister for his opening remarks. I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak on the statements on the school meals programme, in particular on the recent nutrition review and survey findings.

I begin by saying clearly that I am supportive of the school meals programme. I believe it is one of the most important supports we can provide to children and families across Ireland. The programme is about much more than providing a meal at lunchtime. It is about ensuring that a child can sit down in school alongside their classmates and have access to nutritious food without being dependent on their family circumstances or household income. It is about health, educational opportunity, reducing pressures on families, and, importantly, tackling inequality and child poverty.

The programme has grown enormously, as Minister said, since it began as a small pilot back in 2019, and today approximately 550,000 primary school children are eligible for hot meals across 3,200 schools, and the wider school meals programme supports approximately 682,000 children. That scale tells us something important. This is no longer a small or peripheral scheme. It is a major national programme and a major investment in our children, and we should be proud of that.

The purpose of the programme is clear: to provide regular, nutritious food to children so they can fully participate in and benefit from their education. The Department of Social Protection recognises that the programme is an important part of policy supporting children's attendance and educational achievement. There was a lot about children's attendance at school in the news today, and it is important that if they have a regular meal, it is actually a factor of attending school as well.

There are also other important health dimensions. The nutrition standards for school meals were developed under the Healthy Ireland framework and are intended to align school meals with our national healthy eating guidelines. The Healthy Ireland guidelines promote vegetables, fruit, wholemeal, wholegrain foods and balanced meals, while encouraging appropriate portions and healthier choice. That matters because the food that a child eats is not simply about satisfying hunger for one afternoon. It is about growth and development, concentration and well-being, and establishing healthy eating from a young age. In some cases, the meal provided in school will represent a particularly significant part of the food that the child eats during the day, so we have a responsibility to make sure the food we provide is nutritious, balanced and of a high standard.

I compliment the Minister and his Department on engaging with a nutritionist and bringing a nutritionist on board to support. That has to be recognised because there was no nutritionist at the start, and the Department brought the nutritionist in to ensure it had that done.

It is important we acknowledge the positive findings. The review found a wide variety of meals being offered across the scheme with good availability of nutritious and well-balanced options, and as the Minister said, it found that 82% of the meals analysed did not contain foods considered high in fat, salt or sugar. Teachers and school leaders also gave positive assessments

of the meals, with 78% of teachers rating their nutritional value as acceptable, good or excellent, and 79% giving the same rating for quality. The national Ipsos B&A survey also gives us strong evidence that the programme is valued. It gathered responses from more than 95,000 people, including parents, guardians, children, teachers, school leaders and suppliers across 747 schools. The findings show that the programme is deeply embedded in participating primary schools and that its benefits are particularly recognised in DEIS schools.

So, when we discuss improvements to the programme, we should not lose sight of what is working. We should build on it. The review does, however, identify some areas where improvements are needed. There is need for greater consistency in nutritional quality, and there should be increased provision of vegetables, fruit, salads and wholegrain foods. We need stronger and more inclusive options for children with different dietary requirements, including vegetarian and vegan children. There is also a need for age-appropriate portion sizes.

We must also address food waste. The review found an average of 18.9% of meals were uneaten across all classes, although that fell to 11.1% when absences were taken into account. That is an issue we cannot ignore. Equally, food waste should not simply be treated as a reason to question the principle of providing meals. Better menu choices, appropriate portion sizes, greater flexibility and ensuring children are offered food that they will actually eat can help. Any of us who have reared kids at home ourselves know that we can always have that one fussy eater in the house. I have three, and Covid left me a vegan, so I understand the challenges trying to cater for 650,000 kids. It is not simple, but we will do our best.

There is another issue I want to raise today and it is one that requires attention. This is the access to the programme for four primary schools on the Loop Head peninsula. These four schools are currently unable to secure a provider for the school meals programme. This is particularly concerning because all four are DEIS schools. These are schools serving communities experiencing social and economic disadvantage as well as very real challenges associated with rural isolation. There is a particular irony in this because the school meals programme was designed to support children and schools where need is greatest, yet we have four schools in an area of rural disadvantage that are struggling to access the very programme intended to support them. These schools were also part of the original cohort of schools to receive hot meals before the programme was expanded nationally. There is a real sense of disappointment for those schools and those families that, having been among the early participants, they now find themselves in a position where they cannot secure a provider.

We need to recognise the practical reality of delivering services in rural Ireland. The Loop Head peninsula is geographically remote, and I thank Councillor Rita McNerney for bringing it to my attention last Sunday in Ennis in relation to the four schools. I do not think she knew I would be discussing the hot meals programme today when she was telling me all of this. I told her that I, as a Senator, would do whatever I could to help her and that of course I would do my very best, so I am raising it here with the Minister. Councillor McNerney really wants to support these schools. She is providing meals through the cold meals programme because she really wants to support them. At the moment, it is down to costs, to be quite honest, but there are four schools there.

I raise this issue not as a criticism; quite the opposite. I raise it because I believe so strongly in what the programme is trying to achieve. We have invested significantly in creating a national programme. We have established nutritional standards. We have expanded it to reach

hundreds of thousands of children. We have independent evidence telling us that parents, children and schools value it, and we have evidence showing that the meals being provided are, in the main, nutritious and balanced. We also have evidence showing us where improvements need to be made.

I compliment the Minister and his entire team on the school meals programme. Can we look at the Loop Head issue? If there are other situations like the one in Loop Head, they should also be considered.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I welcome the Minister and thank him and his team for coming here. I acknowledge the very important work that is the school hot meals scheme.

As I was coming up the stairs to the House, I was reminded of a great Kerrywoman, who was the principal of a school in north County Dublin. She asked me to come into the school. This school had been through great difficulties. It was under the patronage of the Catholic Diocese of Dublin and was eventually divided into two schools because the numbers were so large. It was before there were ever any DEIS designations. She told me that what she could achieve was a yearning for learning and for people to come to school feeling secure and safe.

I walked around the school with the principal and she asked me to ask one of the kids a question, which I did. I think I must have picked the boldest and most brazen little kid in the school. She had blonde curly hair, and she first asked me, "Mister, are you Ms McGrath's boyfriend?", and everyone laughed. I then asked her about the importance of school and what she liked most about the school.

She said she liked walking over from the flats to the school because Ms McGrath gave her mam and all mams that came there a mug of coffee and a cigarette. It was most unconventional, but remember that this was a Kerrywoman who had fought well with the diocese, the bishop and the Department of education. She was one of the first non-teaching principals in Ireland. She said that she had moved out of the designated office in the hall because she could not see the point in her sitting in the office. She allowed that to house a coffee machine for parents to go to because she wanted to build relationships with the parents. She believed that if she could build relationships with the parents, she could build relationships with the children.

From that, she discovered that many of the parents could not read or write. There were numeracy and literacy problems. She realised that she needed to engage, but then she was not getting the same uptake, so she introduced sandwiches after school and suddenly parents of children were coming and children were staying back and eating sandwiches. That is my first experience of that sort of social interconnection between family and school. I believe in the importance of food. I believe in the symbolism of breaking bread around people's tables and bringing people together. It works.

I wish to turn to two of the last sentences in the Minister's speech. He said:

The success of the hot school meals scheme should not be measured solely by the number of meals served but also by the positive impact it has on children's health, well-being and educational outcomes. The reports confirm that the scheme is succeeding on a significant scale.

The first is the key lines. I 100% agree with the Minister, in that it is about the welfare of our children.

Going back to the same school, when asked of some children what was wrong with them when they were sent to the principal later, it was consistently that they were hungry. One does not have to be in a DEIS school to see it - one could be in the best schools in south or north county Dublin or, indeed, in Donegal or Cork - but there are children who are presenting to school without uniforms or school bags, without having the opportunity of having a bath for three or four days, and without food. Not only are they hungry, but they are also thirsty. That is the reality of it for so many people. This is important. If there is a high percentage of waste, it is not satisfactory. That is a concern.

This is a good programme. I acknowledge the Minister's predecessor, Heather Humphreys. When I first was talking about this, she asked me to come over to her office one day and she was on fire with enthusiasm and excitement about this. She ran with this, as did her officials. She was very proud of it. I acknowledge the very significant role that she played. She is gone out of politics, but this was one thing that she was passionate about, as I know the Minister is too.

The issue of absenteeism in our schools and how that is connected to waste raises a bigger issue, not about the waste but about absenteeism. I note the Government's campaign on the radio and television on why children are absent from school. That is a bigger issue for another day and another debate. Hopefully, there is cross-collaboration between the Minister and the Department of education because bells have to be ringing if children are not presenting themselves to school. There are issues and problems. However, this is not about condemning anyone. It is about putting the necessary supports in place to address why children in this State are not attending education and enhancing their skills and, eventually, life potential.

When we look at the whole school meals programme, we have to put it into context. There will be difficulties, but we know that the school meals programme supports approximately 682,000 children. The scheme supports the largest catering operation in Ireland with up to 3.4 million meals provided each week. Of course, there are going to be slip-ups and problems on the side, but this is a fantastic operation. This has gone way beyond what we could have possibly dreamed of. The school meals programme is funded by the Minister's Department. I know he is absolutely committed, and his officials are equally committed, with a budget of €286 million in 2026. Wow. These are huge figures, a huge number of meals and a huge commitment. One of the great things about our debate today is that we are putting this out into the public domain. A lot of people do not know the vastness of this operation. We will never know or ever be able to measure the absolute success, but if one is putting food in children, one is reducing expenditure in the family home. It is making them as happy and content as possible. One is giving them the potential or at least assisting them with that wonderful thing - yearning and learning. If that is all one can do as a teacher, that is a wonderful achievement.

I congratulate the Minister and his Department. As someone who sits on the agricultural panel here, I am always conscious of the importance of meals, vegetables, fruit, salads and whole grain foods and, where possible, of them being Irish. It is important. I said yesterday in the Seanad that we were importing over €2 billion in value of fruit and vegetables into a country that can grow broccoli, turnips, cabbage and cauliflower most of the year round. With supports, cloches and various technologies around energy, we could do even better for most of

the year. However, that is for another day. Well done to the Minister. I ask him to continue to drive it. There will be imperfections, setbacks and problems. The numbers are enormous and we will never be able to measure the impact, but from everyone I have talked to - I am sure it is the same for everyone else in this House - it is an exceptionally positive initiative and is going in a way that it is targeted because it is going to the children and the people who matter. I wish the Minister and his Department well as they go out and tweak and fine-tune this important food programme in our schools.

Senator Linda Nelson Murray: I thank the Minister for coming here to discuss the hot school meals programme. I thank him and his team, particularly Mr. Craig Dwyer in his Department, for being so proactive and engaging. It really makes a big difference to us as Senators to be able to get a call back from a Department within minutes or an hour.

I imagine we will be changing the name from the "hot school meals programme" to the "school meals programme" with all the changes that the Department is going to make. Similar to Senator Rabbitte and others, I completely believe in the hot school meals programme. It is one of the most important investments that we have made in our children. We should be proud of how far this Government has brought the programme in a very short space of time. We talk about how it was in 30 schools only eight years ago and is now in 3,200. That is an extraordinary expansion in a very short amount of time.

Behind every statistic is a child sitting down at lunchtime knowing that they are going to get a meal. I spoke to a principal two weeks ago who said that the children in the school were absolutely starving. Last year, 112,000 people went to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul for food assistance. That is how important this scheme is.

I always try to use a bit of my own life in politics. I recall the nuns coming into the class when I was in school about 45 years ago. They would come in and ask who did not have a lunch that day, and the hands went up. It separated them from the children who had a lunch. They got a carton of milk and a hot cross bun, but it made everyone feel a little bit different. Sometimes, they would ask who was hungry and the hands would go up. Sometimes, if it was your birthday, the nuns would give you one of those hot cross buns, which was lovely. I remember it so vividly, but I also remember the children who put their hands up.

Today, no child needs to put their hand up. They have an automatic right to a meal if they are in a primary school and if their school has opted into the programme. For many children, that meal is welcome. For many families, it is a significant saving. It is money that can be used elsewhere. My life has changed in the mornings not having to get lunches ready, but for some children, it is an absolute essential.

I acknowledge the work that has been done by the Minister, the Government, the Department, schools, principals, teachers, staff and the suppliers who have helped to build this programme. I wish to encourage any school that is listening here today that has not opted-in to this programme to give it a real chance because it is a good thing for students. I acknowledge the positive changes that are now being made because this is exactly what good policy should do. It is what working together should do. Earlier this year, I put out a survey on the hot school meals programme following many people's comments on a post that I made. I received 8,000 responses. I visited and chatted to some distributors, called to some schools and listened to my own children, who get the meals. The joint Oireachtas committee on education also produced

a report following many witnesses coming in to discuss hot school meals. The Minister got an unbelievable response to his survey and the work carried out within schools.

I do not think anyone could actively say that we have not listened to people. This is a brilliant example of when we introduce a programme that we listen to the people using it, examine the evidence, identify what is not working as well as what is working, and then improve it. That is exactly what my report and the Minister's report sought to do. The message I heard was not to get rid of the hot school meals. The message was to keep them but make them better. That is the important distinction. Parents overwhelmingly recognised the value of the scheme, but they wanted their children to eat the food. There is no point in having a meal that is nutritiously perfect on paper if a child does not eat it. I remember a guy in the joint Oireachtas committee on education saying that perfection was the enemy of good. This really relates to this scheme. My survey found that 78% of respondents said that their children did not enjoy the variety of food, citing taste and presentation, and 80% said that children would be more likely to eat a fresh cold lunch than a hot school meal.

Those figures should not be ignored and the Minister has not ignored them. However, neither should we ignore the very positive evidence. The Department's own nutrition review found a wide variety of meals and good availability of nutrition and balanced options. It found that 85% of children were ordering meals on average across the classes audited. Teachers were broadly positive about the nutritional value and the quality of meals. The answer is not to choose between nutrition and enjoyment. We need both.

That brings us to the changes being proposed. I especially welcome the move towards age-appropriate portion sizes. It never made sense to me for a child in junior infants to get the same portion as a child in sixth class. The Department's review identified exactly this issue, as did my survey, and it is recommending clear instructions for suppliers to provide different-sized meals for different age groups. That is welcome.

I also welcome the recommendation to improve fruit and vegetable content and vegan options. Importantly, the Department has recommended that schools be given flexibility on a hot or cold lunch from September 2027. That is something for which I specifically called, as did the Minister, and choice matters. Not every child wants a hot meal every day. A fresh sandwich, fruit, salad or soup can be perfectly good options. We should not confuse the word "hot" with the word "healthy" or the word "cold" with the word "unhealthy". It is important to remember that what matters is what is actually in the container and whether the child eats it. Another recommendation is to offer different menus for children in special schools or special education classes. I am delighted with that.

However, there are still some areas where we need to go further. The first relates to special dietary requirements. Senator Rabbitte mentioned those with coeliac disease. A universal school meals programme should be genuinely inclusive. The second is food waste, which was mentioned. The Department's own review found meals were uneaten 18.9% of the time, on average, although that fell to 11% when absences were taken into account. However, that is still too much food going into bins. It is too much money going into bins. I would like us to measure food waste properly, school by school and supplier by supplier. Is it 100% of the lunch? Is it 75% of the lunch? Is it half of the lunch? The changes to portion sizes will make a big difference to the waste, but my report showed that 80% of parents who send in a lunch have not opted out of the hot school meals scheme. We need to encourage parents. If they are

not going to avail of the scheme, they should opt out. We should encourage suppliers to encourage parents to opt out of the scheme if they are not using it. If a child is sick, and I know this through first-hand experience with my own kids, you cannot cancel the meal for that day. You have to give 48 hours' notice if you are cancelling the meal.

A balanced approach is required between highly nutritious food and food that is actually eaten. Removing the high salt, sugar and fat content has to be a good thing, but if the food tastes totally different from the food the child gets at home, it should be considered. I am not advocating for bad food or a high salt intake, but we must take a balanced approach. Some examples on the new guidelines suggest not adding oil or butter to potatoes, rice or pasta, not adding salt to the water when cooking rice or pasta and not putting in bacon, so the famous pasta carbonara that everyone loves is going to change. The guidelines suggest no sausages, which has been really popular, even though sausages were covered in seaweed in many instances. The guidelines also suggest no tinned tuna. We eat a lot of tuna in our homes but it will not be allowed. All chicken curries will have to be served with brown and not white rice. Although this all sounds fabulous, it is very different from what children eat at home. We need to balance this out.

We need to look at the time available for children to eat. It is not in the Minister's remit, but I will be talking that to the Minister for education to see can something be done.

I would like to look at local and community-based food provision, particularly for small rural schools where the current model can be difficult to make economically viable, as in the places that have been mentioned. We also want to consider how to roll out the scheme in secondary schools.

We now have an opportunity to move from a programme that has been rolled out quickly to a programme that is refined, evidence-based, child-centred and genuinely world class. My message today is certainly a positive one. I ask the Minister not to stop or pull back. I know he is not going to. I ask him not to allow legitimate questions about quality, nutrition or waste to undermine the fundamental principle of feeding children in school. Instead, let us listen, as we have, let us measure, as we have, and let us improve, as the Minister absolutely is doing. Let us give children nutritious food that they want to eat because the success of the hot school meals programme should be measured by a simple question: did that child sit down today at lunchtime, receive a nutritious meal, enjoy it, eat it and leave the desk ready to learn? That is the standard we should now aim for and I believe we can achieve it.

Senator Pauline Tully: I am a member of the Committee on Education and Youth, as are Senators Nelson Murray and Scahill. We have done a comprehensive bit of work on the hot school meals programme. We started approximately one year ago. Many witnesses have attended the committee. We have visited schools. Senator Scahill and I visited St. Ultan's integrated school in Ballyfermot. I have to say it is an excellent school all round. Additional supports have been brought in at the school to support not just the children but the parents. Senator Boyhan talked about a principal who would bring in the parents. The school in Ballyfermot brought parents into the facility. They could pop in in the morning, get a breakfast, with a cup of tea or coffee, and get help with form filling or anything like that. It was good. The school has a canteen on site so the food is cooked. There is a rota. It is a big school with many students and there is a rota. The younger ones go in first. The cutlery and dishes are

there and everything is washed. There is no waste in that format. We tried the food and it was lovely. We saw the menu choices and everything else. We found when we were doing our study that where there were canteen facilities on site, it worked best. One of the recommendations in the committee report was that a canteen should be considered for inclusion in all new builds, going forward.

Talking to other schools, there was a mixed response. Most of it is positive and most people agree that hot school meals programme is positive. It is a large investment by the State so you want to get it as right as possible, bearing in mind that nothing will ever be perfect. Where there is good availability of local suppliers, it works well. In some of the primary schools to which I have talked, the supplier is local and can deliver the hot food at lunchtime for the children to eat immediately. However, other schools have said that they do not know about that and there is a lot of waste because the food is delivered in the morning. It is hot when it is delivered. The schools have facilities to heat it, but when you have hot food in a container with a lid on it and it is allowed to cool, condensation forms and the food, including the pasta, gets soggy. One supplier came to talk to the children and they gave her the feedback about the food being soggy sometimes. However, the supplier did not seem to take it on board. It was not an easy issue to resolve because the food has to be delivered at that time for different reasons. However, it is about ensuring the food is hot when delivered to the school, where possible. It should be prepared on site, where possible, or delivered hot, where possible, or, as a last resort, heated up.

I am delighted with and welcome the cold meal option. I know of another school with DEIS status that was getting meals delivered before the hot school meals programme. They were cold meals comprising sandwiches, fruit and milk. The school reported that it was good and it preferred that option to the hot school meals. There is a mix there. It is about considering everything.

Some of the principals who fed back to us said that the tendering process for the supplier was tedious and put a lot of work on them. They had to interview the different providers and give feedback to those who were not successful, if they required it, and so on. Perhaps it is a matter for the Minister for education to address but those principals think we could come up with a better way of ensuring the burden of additional bureaucracy does not fall on their shoulders.

The quality of the food was mixed, but a lot of it was good. Everybody wants to limit processed food. We want nutritional and tasty food. That the portion size was the same for all of the children, regardless of whether they were in sixth class or junior infants, came up again and again. That is an issue the Minister is going to address, which is welcome. There is also a need to ensure diversity in the food being supplied. We have students from different backgrounds. We have students who are vegan or vegetarian. We also have children with additional needs who have sensory issues around certain types of foods. We must try to include everybody.

Food waste came up quite a bit. It was not just about the food waste itself. It was about the waste of the material the food is delivered in if dishes are not available in the school. That is not an option for a lot of schools because they do not have the facilities for washing or even storing plates and cutlery. Even if it is all recyclable, and it is, there is still an awful lot of production and waste to deal with every day. That is an issue that needs to be considered.

Not-for-profit local providers are the best option if the food cannot be produced on site. It means fresher food and supporting local organisations that employ local people. They are not there to make a profit. Therefore, they can charge less for the food and make it more nutritious. They do not have the pressure of trying to make a profit all the time. I taught in a secondary DEIS school for many years.

Because we had DEIS status, meals were provided on site but students and staff could provide the meals and they produced lovely food there. If the home school liaison officer or any member of staff became aware that a student was hungry or from a deprived background and did not have a meal, they could recommend that child receive a meal but nobody else knew the child was not paying.

The unfortunate part about that is someone could have been missed so it would have just been that we happened to find out about it one day. I recall sitting with a first year class one day and they were called out early for their lunch because there was a very popular lunch on the menu that day. There were huge numbers of pupils. Therefore, they let the first years go out of the class a bit earlier and maybe five of six students stayed behind. I asked them if they all had their own lunches and whether that was why they were not going and they all said "Yes, miss". Then one of the girls said to me that she had not eaten since 5 o'clock the day before. I immediately recommended that she be given a meal and she was from then on but it was just due to a chance that I asked the question and she answered. I might never have asked the question or it may never have come to anyone's attention. I even asked the home school liaison officer if she had visited this family and she said she had and everything seemed fine, but it was a notified visit. If it is a notified visit, the home school liaison officer will not walk in on what is happening. There was an addiction issue in the household.

The school meals programme, whether it is hot or cold, is a great idea because it makes sure every child has a meal, there is no stigma attached and we are not fearful of missing anyone. It is a large investment on behalf of the State so we want to make sure the food provided will be eaten by most people and that there is the minimum amount of waste.

It has not been mentioned yet, but the holiday hunger programme is really important too when children are out of school, especially over the summer because it is two months or maybe more and then there is Christmas and everything else. I know it is working well in some areas but it is not available everywhere so we need to come up with a way that every child that is possibly hungry can have access to food over holiday periods. Dealing with food poverty is very important and this is a very important part of that but it cannot be the only part. It is often found that giving cash to families that need it is the most important way so they can ensure they have sufficient money to feed themselves.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: I want to be associated with the vote of sympathy in relation to Seamus Carroll, who was a great character and we always had a bit of banter around the hurling in Kilkenny and Tipperary. He will be sorely missed here.

Like others, I do not want to repeat points that have been raised, but the school meals programme has been transformative. There is no doubt about it. The review that took place was most welcome and very comprehensive. Many important elements that were considered in it will now be added into the scheme. For families, particularly those experiencing food poverty, it has really been a transformative programme.

I want to raise a couple of points about the food security crisis we are heading into. A discussion is thankfully starting to take place around local food production and our vulnerability towards future shocks to food security, particularly in the horticulture and growing sector in Ireland that is unfortunately in freefall because of supermarket prices and many other factors. It would be wonderful if we could put a direct link between the growers and consumers; and the consumers in this case are children of school-going age. It makes that bridge and connection for life between them if we can, insofar as possible, connect local food producers into the school meals programme and incorporate them into the food programme, if it was hot meals or it could be fruit as well. It is my understanding that there could be some element of organic food as well with a certain percentage being organic food. Reducing the level of pesticides young people and children ingest is important as well.

The other point goes back to the one Senator Tully made about school kitchens. There is a really positive connection where there are school kitchens in place and where children themselves could be involved in the preparation of food and learning how to prepare a number of meals per day. All of that could be part of their education programme and really important. It is this connectivity with food because we have grown disconnected from it because of our busy lifestyles and consumer patterns over many decades. There is also the ability to perhaps even have their own school gardens, bring the vegetables in from the school gardens and have a school orchard. I was involved in putting in a lot of school gardens down the years and giving children that gift of being able to grow food themselves, see where it comes from, actually using it and bringing it from the garden onto the plate is important. I would love to see if the programme could be expanded out into having a wider connection and conversation about where food comes from, food security and about educating children to be able to prepare a number of basic meals and bake bread. I know it is a big ask but I would love to see if it could be done and it is important. It will give children a greater appreciation throughout life of our food systems.

The other point relates to my previous role. We set up a deer management forum between the Department of agriculture and ourselves so there will be a lot of venison on the market in the coming years. Is it possible to include venison at local level? There are hotspots around the country where deer are particularly problematic. It is a solution. There is very cheap organic meat out there that would be a source of protein for children. It is accessible and the best quality meat we could have. If there were a way of incorporating it into the school meals programme, even on a pilot basis at a local level, it would be worth doing. I will leave it with the Minister but it is an interesting point. Sustainably caught fish in local coastal communities could also be used. All of this creates a connection between children and food. I would love to see the scheme being broadened like that.

My final issue is on food waste. I agree with Senator Tully's point about schools that have their own facility where cutlery, plates and all of that is there. If all of the materials that are compostable could be brought to a central facility it would reduce food waste quite significantly. That could be tied in with the Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, from the point of view of the circular economy. There are a couple of points. It is a really transformative programme but I would love to see it broadened out into wider education around food and food growing in Ireland.

I have two minutes left and Senator Scahill had to depart so he asked me to raise two more points with the Minister. He received feedback that sometimes the children who may need the programme the most can actually be the children who miss out. The system depends on parents or guardians engaging with an app or online system but the Senator said we need to recognise the reality that, for a number of reasons, a parent may not be able to complete the registration or may fail to place an order. Sometimes the household experiencing the greatest difficulties may also be the household that is least likely to engage consistently with an online process. I know that in the review it is stated that at a local level schools can identify a child who is in need so that issue will be addressed.

The final point the Senator asked me to raise is that principals and teachers know their children and if a child arrives into school without a meal having been ordered and school staff know the child needs to be fed, there should be a mechanism to provide that meal.

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome representatives from Prosper Fingal to the Gallery, who are guests of Deputy Duncan Smith.

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: I strongly support of the hot school meals programme. Despite some ongoing negative commentary from some quarters, I believe this is a really good programme. It is a programme that is designed to do something simple, practical and important, which is to make sure children have access to a decent, nutritious meal during the school day. We need to keep this basic principle at the centre of this debate.

Sometimes, when I listen to the commentary around the hot school meals programme I am genuinely dismayed. I am dismayed by some of the negativity that has been whipped up around the scheme simply to suit the algorithm, generate likes and have a video go viral. This is absolutely disgraceful. I am dismayed when legitimate questions about how we can improve the programme are turned into sweeping claims that the programme itself is somehow a failure. I am particularly dismayed when a few sensational headlines, a few photographs or a few examples are used to create an impression that does not reflect the experience of the hundreds of thousands of children and their families who actually use the scheme every week.

Of course we should scrutinise public programmes, and especially ones like these that are costing a lot of money. We should ask difficult questions. We should review nutritional standards regularly. We should look at food waste. There is, however, a difference between scrutiny or reviewing and scaremongering and undermining commentary. This programme is making a real difference. It is now available in approximately 3,200 primary schools and supports more than 550,000 children and their families. Some 3.4 million meals are provided every week, as outlined already, and this is significant. We need to think about it for a moment; millions of meals provided free of charge every week. That is progressive. That is modern. That is what a caring society with resources does. It is now deeply embedded in the primary school system right across the country. For some children that meal might be the only hot meal they get that day or even that week. We cannot lose sight of that. We cannot have a debate about the appearance of a particular meal, or whether it lives up to the exacting standards imposed by privileged commentators with little real-world experience, while forgetting about the child sitting in the classroom who is hungry. Hunger affects children. It affects their concentration, energy levels and participation. It affects a child's ability to get the full benefit from his or her education. It also leaves deep and long-lasting psychological scars. I spoke

with a woman at an event recently who spoke with tears in her eyes about how she felt being a hungry child in school many years ago. Many years later, this experience still haunts her.

Professor Katriona O'Sullivan and her story are incredibly important to this debate. Her memoir *Poor* tells us in very stark terms what childhood poverty and hunger can mean. She has spoken about being hungry for food but also hungry for love, care and nourishment. In one account of her story, she recalls her need for school dinners and contrasts that with the other children who could afford to be choosy. She wrote of the other children, the "loved ones" as she called them, who could complain about what was served while she would have eaten anything. This is an incredibly powerful reminder of the difference between discussing food from a position of security and experiencing hunger yourself. When we talk about the school meals, let us remember who we are talking about. We are talking about children who did not choose the circumstances into which they were born. We are talking about child poverty, which is a huge stain on society and something we need to eradicate. Children should be able to sit down at lunchtime knowing there will be food to eat. It is as simple as that. Because of the hot school meals programme, this is now a reality for children in Ireland and I am proud of this Government for making it possible.

This programme is not just about families experiencing the most severe poverty. It is also about ordinary working families and financial pressure. A family with two children in primary school can save approximately €1,152 a year through the scheme, which is significant. As a mother of two young children who has packed lunches for many years, I know it is about more than the money saved; it is also about time saved, it is about the head space and the shopping, the preparation, the lunch boxes, the decisions about what put to into them and the mental load of thinking about lunches every single evening. Have we bread left? Do we have fruit? Will they bring it home again? In north county Dublin, people get up incredibly early every morning. People commute long distances. They are paying large mortgages and high rents. People are working extremely hard. People are trying to manage work, childcare, school, bills and all the pressures of modern family life. When the State steps in and takes away one of these pressures, it matters. It gives people a bit of a break. My son's school will be introducing the programme shortly. The kids are excited but I can tell you the parents are more excited.

I feel strongly about the universality of the scheme as well. Everybody gets a meal. Everybody sits down together. Everybody gets on with their school day and everyone is equal. The children learn about food from their peers and they try new things and new food that they might not try at home. Yes, there are things that we need to improve. The rapid roll-out of the scheme means there are teething issues. The Minister, Deputy Calleary, has moved quickly to deal with them and I commend him. The two reviews, including a detailed nutritional review and a major survey of the children, parents, teachers, principals and suppliers, were really welcome and have identified areas that need improvement. They will be improved and the Minister has outlined what he will do there. We should be proud of all that the State has achieved. Children in school in Ireland get free school meals and free schoolbooks and they receive one of the most highly regarded educations in the world. This is something to be proud of. Our careful management of the economy and our resources by the Government has meant that we are in a position to do this. I commend the Minister and his colleagues in government on all the work they have done on this and every other scheme that benefits families and children in schools across Ireland. Go raibh maith agat.

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Dara Calleary): Gabhaim buíochas le gach Seanadóir as an díospóireacht úsáideach seo agus a dtuairimí ar scéim na mbéilí scoile. I think there seems to be broad agreement across the House about the significant support to children and to families the hot school meals scheme is. It addresses child poverty and it addresses nutrition. The debate reflects a shared commitment across the House to ensuring that every child has access to nutritious food during the school day and that no child who is disadvantaged because of hunger or food insecurity has to put their hand up, as Senator Nelson Murray said.

Our reports provide us with a strong evidence base for the next development of the scheme. Importantly, they confirm that the hot school meals scheme is working. It is delivering real benefits for children, for families, for parents, as Senator Clifford-Lee has said, and for schools across the country. The overall programme reaches almost 682,000 children and delivers up to 3.4 million meals each week. Anybody who is stressed about planning one lunch of a night should think about planning 3.4 million meals every single week. Yes, there will be challenges with that volume. I want to acknowledge Senator Tully, as I meant to do in my opening remarks, and give my thanks to the Joint Committee on Education and Youth for the huge work they did in this space. Some 682,000 children and 3.4 million meals is a significant outturn. The findings of the reports show a high level of support among parents, children and schools, with the vast majority reporting that they enjoy their meals. The schools recognise the positive impact the school meals scheme is having. I also want to place on record my thanks to school communities and the school leadership teams. Senator Tully has pointed out the challenges of the procurement system. That is something we try to make easier but it is taxpayers' money and we have a responsibility. We are very conscious of that as well.

Senator Rabbitte rightly referred to the challenges being faced by schools on the Loop Head Peninsula as they seek to access the scheme. This time last year we had 112 rural schools, similar to the four schools in Loop Head that she mentioned, which did not have access to the scheme. As a result of the work of the team in my Department, we have brought that number down to 12. There is a lot of work going on in that space and in that area in trying to come up with a solution that works. We want this scheme to be given to and have access in every primary school.

I will reflect on the improvements. We will introduce a standardised meal cycle that will ensure consistency in nutritional standards. It will allow parents to plan. We have to improve the fruit, vegetable and wholegrain content of meals. We have to ensure that the vegetarian and vegan options provide sufficient protein and that there are options available for those with different dietary requirements. We have to deliver age-appropriate portion sizes. We must tackle food waste and packaging waste. I put it to Senators Noonan and Tully that this is built into the procurement space in terms of how we minimise the packaging but it is definitely something we are very conscious of. We are focused on that cold meal. With regard to Senator Nelson Murray's comments, let us not confuse a cold meal with an unhealthy meal, and a hot meal likewise. There is certainly a big need for that.

We are not putting these reports on shelves to come back to in ten years. We have started the work already. When we launched the report, our officials were briefing the main suppliers in a simultaneous exercise. We will begin the work of implementing the recommendations and keep in touch and in communication with them. Clearer instructions will issue to suppliers on immediately addressing portion size, on improving fruit, wholegrain and vegetable content,

and on the standardised menu cycle. We are also examining the hot and cold food options ahead of the academic year beginning in 2027.

5 o'clock

Nutrition will be key, as will the work in terms of partnerships with schools, suppliers and other Government Departments.

School food waste is a major challenge, but it always was. That was one of the reassuring aspects of the parent survey in particular. Approximately 42% of the 80,000 parents who responded said that food waste was always a challenge. It was touched on by all Senators in terms of their personal experience. That is not to say we are taking it lightly. Factors including absenteeism, menu preferences and meal choices are going to be crucial in that.

On Senator Scahill's point about the app and ease of cancelling meals, that is a challenge because we have to look at the procurement models as well. I agree 100% in terms of local input. Personally, I would prefer local, community and not-for-profit models, ideally. Given where we have come from, we have a very good basis in relation to this programme.

I have to say that if Senators had told me at the end of January 2025, when I became Minister for Social Protection, that we would be spending as much time as we have dealing with school meals, hot or otherwise, I probably would have looked at them strangely. It is such an important investment from our Department. I owe it to my two predecessors, and to the officials who have worked incredibly hard, to drive it on.

In terms of Senator Noonan's suggestion, I cannot speak to venison but I agree that local food content is important. Yes, in a fishing community, they should have fish. That comes to protein, nutrients and dealing with so many of the areas.

Senator Tully mentioned the holiday hunger programme, which is something we did this year. We funded it in conjunction with the Department of education in some schools around the country. I will get the Senator a note on it. We are in the middle of budget discussions around it again for next year. It is absolutely crucial, particularly in schools for children with additional needs, that we keep that connection through the summer period.

As I said, this has been a very useful discussion. A dietician from our Department who is based in the Department of Health will be briefing the education spokespeople of the parties and the Chair of the committee tomorrow, if Senators wish to come along to that. It will be a very interesting conversation. There will be an opportunity to get her perspective and engage with her on what she has come across and what we need to do. As I said, we have an implementation plan. We are engaging with suppliers and school communities. It is inevitable that these changes will not happen overnight, but we are on a trajectory and travelling a road in relation to this programme which will enhance it and ensure that the overall benefits are retained while we address many of the challenges. Gabhaim buíochas le gach Seanadóir. Bhí sé úsáideach cloisteáil uathu. Táimid ar thuras an clár seo a dhéanamh níos fearr agus tá sé sin mar thosaíocht dom agus don Rialtas.

An Cathaoirleach: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire agus le gach Seanadóir who participated in the debate. When is it proposed to sit again?

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: At 9.30 a.m. tomorrow.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar athló ar 5.05 p.m. go dtí 9.30 a.m., Déardaoin, an 1 Deireadh Fómhair 2026.

The Seanad adjourned at 5.05 p.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Thursday, 1 October 2026.