Letter from the **Editor**

Alan English



athryn Thomas, presenter of an upcoming RTÉ documentary on the skinny jab, looks out from the cover of a new-look Life magazine, interviewed by Sarah Caden.

The magazine has been refreshed in a bigger, non-glossy format because of a change in printing arrangements. New features have also been introduced, including an astrology column by Rachelle Hicks on page 2. Labour Party leader Ivana Bacik is first up in the My Pet and Me series, enthusing about her rescue dog Ginny, and Westlife star Nicky Byrne kicks off another fresh weekly feature, sharing his stand-out sporting memories.

I'm well used to the reality that readers react to format changes in different ways, positive and negative, but in 15 years of editing newspapers I've never once had a complaint about the text size in articles being too big. And so, perhaps with that in mind, I'm flagging up a small change that I suspect may be welcomed by those whose eyesight isn't what it was — the text size in Life has been increased, just a touch, without any decrease in the volume of articles, or the

number of words afforded to the magazine's regular features and columns.

On page 6 of this section, there's a 3,000 wordplus interview by Niamh Horan with the new housing minister, James Browne, branded The Wexford Pimpernel last week by a columnist from another parish. The aforementioned Bacik complained in the Dáil that Browne was nowhere to be seen, but Niamh pinned him down for a highly engaging interview — despite the best efforts of his policy adviser to wrap things up before she had finished firing her questions at him.

March 24, 1996, marked the beginning of a regular fixture in this paper — the cryptic crossword, compiled by Martin Walsh every single week since. Today, after setting exactly 1,500 puzzles, Martin retires from crossword compiling. We thank him for ingenious puzzles over the past 29 years. He'll hardly remember that his very first clue -1 Across (5) - was "Smell we object to is good in the garden". I won't keep you waiting a week for the answer to that one: it was "humus".

And, no, I didn't work it out. Looking back at archive editions of the paper from when Martin came on board in 1996, I came across a piece by Liam Collins about the Dunnes Stores powerhouse Margaret Heffernan. Lo and behold, Heffernan's daughter and effective successor — Anne — turns up this week.

Heffernan features prominently in Wayne O'Connor's forensic account of how the University of Limerick controversially paid more than €8m for a long-vacant Dunnes branch in that city.

It's a great, revealing read − and the evergreen Liam pitches in with another one on page 14. Perusing the details about wills on this page last week, he spotted that a resident of Ailesbury Road, Dublin 4, had left the tidy sum of €11.6m. That man was the late Chris Comerford, the former boss of Greencore, and Liam revisits a tumultuous time in his life in a gripping read about a Sunday Independent scoop from 1991.

With the Oscars being decided next Sunday, Hilary White and Chris Wasser hand out their own awards in a lively People & Culture feature and you can read all about Ireland's rather edgy Six Nations win against Wales in Cardiff across seven pages in Sport. Now bring on France!

Your complete Sunday read



News in brief

Man hospitalised after Crumlin shooting

• A man was rushed to hospital with serious injuries following a gun attack in Dublin on Friday night. The 39-year-old was targeted by a gunman at a home on Rutland Avenue in Crumlin.

A garda spokesperson said: "Shortly after 9.45pm on Friday, February 21, 2025, gardaí and emergency services responded to a report of a firearm discharge at a residence on Rutland Avenue, Crumlin.

"A 39-year-old man sustained serious, but non-life-threatening injuries, and was taken to St James's Hospital.

It is understood the man was shot in the leg and will survive, but will stay in hospital over the weekend.

Status yellow weather alert for 15 counties

 A status yellow wind and rain warning has been issued for 15 counties today, with spells of very heavy rain and high winds forecast tomorrow. The warnings will take effect for Carlow, Kilkenny, Wexford, Wicklow, all of Munster, Donegal, Galway, Leitrim, Mayo and Sligo from 2am until 3pm today. A further yellow wind warning has been issued for Donegal, Galway, Leitrim, Mayo and Sligo from 3pm today to midnight tonight.

Today will be wet and windy with very strong winds and widespread rain. Highest temperatures of 11C to 14C. Rain will gradually clear eastwards through the afternoon, with scattered blustery showers in the evening. Tomorrow will be fresh and blustery with sunny spells and showers. Top temperatures are expected

No winner of €2 m Lotto jackpot

• The numbers drawn in last night's €2,000,000 jackpot Lotto draw were: 08, 28, 29, 34, 44, 45 (bonus 43). There was no jackpot winner. The €1m Lotto Plus 1 jackwpot numbers were: 01, 02, 09, 21, 22, 43 (bonus 37). The €250,000 Lotto Plus 2 numbers were: 13, 23, 24, 29, 37, 47 (bonus 9). The raffle number was 1356.

Waterford is first 'autism-friendly' city

 Towns across Ireland were recognised at the AsIAm Autism Friendly Towns Awards, with Waterford becoming the first city to gain 'autism-friendly' status.

The awards recognise areas that are accessible and nclusive for autistic individuals. Killarney and Drumcondra were also awarded Autism Friendly Town status, joining towns such as Clonakilty and Maynooth.

The event was hosted at the Mansion House by Lord Mayor of Dublin Emma Blain. The chief executive of autism campaign group AsIAm, Adam Harris, said: "An autism-friendly community is one that sees, understands, and values autistic people.

Renewed appeal for missing woman

• A renewed appeal has been issued for Esra Uyrun on the 14th anniversary of her disappearance from Dublin. Ms Uyrun, who was 38 at the time, has not been

seen since leaving her home in Collinstown Grove, Clondalkin, at about 7.15am on February 23, 2011. She drove from her home in the family car, a grey Renault Twingo with the registration number of 08-D-23067. The car was later located on the promenade in Bray, Co Wicklow.



Ms Uyrun, inset, is described as 5ft 3in tall, with dark hair and green eyes and was last seen wearing black leggings, white Nike trainers, and a dark top. Although a number of searches have been carried into her disappearance, Ms Uyrun's whereabouts remain unknown.

Her family are appealing for people to come forward to assist with the garda investigation. Gardai are asking anyone with any information, no matter how insignificant it may seem, to contact Ronanstown garda station or any garda station.

Dublin woman leaves over €4m in will

• Kathleen Keville, with an address at Cork Street, Co Dublin, left an estate valued at €4,363,723.

Other wills include: Liam Bannon, Mountshannon Road, Lisnagry, Co Limerick, left €2,070,980; Daniel Black, College Park, Terenure, Co Dublin, left €1,444,8172; Jeremiah Byrne, Ormeau Drive, Dalkey, Co Dublin, left €1,507,040; Noel Cawley, Eadestown, Naas, Co Kildare, left €1,167,806; Mary Clifford, Brompton Lawn, Castleknock, Co Dublin, left €1,059,895; Margaret Corcoran, Belleville, Blackhorse Avenue, Co Dublin, left €3,418,687; Alfred Ronald Dawson, Milltown Bridge Road, Co Dublin, left €2,094,684; Dermot Dowling, Chesterfield Grove, Castleknock, Co Dublin, left €1,209,209; Ethna Dowling, Lakelands Park, Terenure, Co Dublin left €1,806,348; Leo Duffy, Offington Park, Sutton, Co Dublin, left €2,305,532; Michael John Robert Higgins, Maynooth, Co Kildare, left €1,128,575; Peter John David Hurley, Torquay Road, Foxrock, Co Dublin, €2,486,399; Bernadette Mary Luykx, Offington Lawn, Sutton, Co Dublin, left €1,253,203.

The value of estates may include property, including the family home, and should not be regarded as cash

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Leinster House reviewing cheaper car charging rates

KEN FOXE

einster House has confirmed it is reviewing the bargain senators to charge their electric vehicles (EVs).

Politicians and staff of the Oireachtas have been benefiting from rates way below the market standard since the introduction of charging stations in the country's most exclusive car park.

The kWh (kilowatt-hour) rate that applies is just 30 cent compared with rates of between 47 and 59 cent for the most commonly used public facilities. The cheap prices also exclude all costs involved in the provision of the charging facilities, with the OPW having footed the bill for that work.

It is understood the Oireachtas is losing money through the subsidised service and has now confirmed a review is under way.

A spokeswoman for Leinster House said: "Increasing the rate charged per kWh for EV charging is under consideration by the facilities management unit.

"Any increase in the rates would be subject to approval through the proper governance channels, namely the Houses of the Oireachtas Com-

The rates being charged are not reflected either in the generous annual travel and accommodation allowances available to TDs and

This allowance — which ranges between €5,250 and €34,065 per year depending on how far a politician lives from Dublin - is based on civil service mileage rates for standard petrol or diesel vehicles.

However, no change has been made to reflect the fact that some members are using electric vehicles and offered a facility to charge them at way below market prices.

Asked about whether any consideration had been given to reviewing the allowance payments for users of EVs, the spokeswoman said it wasn't up to the Oireachtas.

"The rates set for the payment of travel and accommodation allowance (TAA) is a matter for the Department of Public Expenditure," she said.

The e-charging rates were even lower in the past and during an initial two-year trial period, there was no cost at all.

An information note said: "Initially the electricity costs were not recouped. The costs were negligible, and it was agreed that we would not recoup from members as members of the public did not have to pay to use ESB EV-charging points units at that time.'

When more permanent e-charging infrastructure was introduced in 2021, the rate was set at just 18 cent per kilowatt hour.

By the first quarter of 2023, it had jumped to 26 cent, but in the second quarter it was dropped to 23 cent after a new public sector deal was signed cutting energy bills for a myriad of public bodies.

The price rose again in the third quarter of 2023 to 25 cent, before a short-lived increase to 29 cent at the end of that year.

The Oireachtas again chose to cut the rate for the first nine months of last year to 25 cent, before settling on the current 30 cent kWh rate in the final quarter of last year.

Late last year, a new mobile app system was introduced, which meant TDs, senators and staff have to pay upfront for e-charging.

However, the amount of money reclaimed since the introduction of charging at the Leinster House complex has been miniscule.

Between January 2022 and November 2024, just €7,526 was collected in payments, according to records released under Freedom of Information.

A further €531 was paid by users through the new mobile app in the final nine months of last year, documents showed.

X-ray system that cost state gallery €125k lying idle for eight years

Machine unused as building had no lead-lined room to absorb radiation

GABIJA GATAVECKAITE

The National Gallery of Ireland spent nearly €125,000 on an X-ray machine in 2017 which has never been used.

It was paid for by the taxpayer through the Department of Culture, Arts and Media under Creative Ireland's Digitisation Scheme.

Further questions will be prompted about spending practices by public bodies after it emerged in recent weeks the Arts Council spent €7m on a failed IT system.

 $An\,X\text{-ray machine allows artworks}$ to be examined without damaging them. It has not been used because the gallery does not have a lead-lined room in which it could operate. It is now considering setting up

a mobile unit on site this year eight years after it was bought for €124,805. Because the machine contains a

radioactive component, it must be stored in a lead-lined room which absorbs the radiation. The component — the X-ray bulb

- has not been installed and remains in London, where it was bought.

The Office of Public Works (OPW), which was embroiled in a spending scandal when a bike shed at Leinster House cost €336,000, has been helping the gallery find where to locate the X-ray since 2018.

A room was found, but there were doubts about how much weight it

could bear because of the lead. In November 2019, a tender was put out but the single bidder was deemed non-compliant. It is not clear who issued the tender or exactly what it was for.

The gallery has previously considered putting the machine off-site. It is now considering if it can be installed in a mobile unit, in line with guidance from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Officials now expect the X-ray

machine to be operational sometime later this year. Spending on it is detailed in the

National Gallery's annual report for 2023, first submitted to government on October 14 last year. It is understood the fiasco is detailed under a heading entitled

"non use to date exchequer funded fixed assets". The revelation is expected to be

discussed at Cabinet this week. Senior ministers were left furious

after the €7m spend on an IT system emerged. Former Culture Minister Catherine Martin was accused of holding on to the information until after the general election, when she lost her seat.

There are likely to be further questions over when she was made aware of the spending on the X-ray

The Comptroller and Auditor General labelled the spending of public money as "ineffective" in its analysis.

A spokesperson for the gallery confirmed the €124,805 cost and that it was funded by the government's Cultural Digitisation Scheme.

"The system will be used for streamlining our operations," they said. "Currently, some elements of the X-ray system are stored securely on site while the main component, the bulb, is stored with the supplier. The gallery is now exploring the use of the X-ray system as a mobile unit and working hard to find a solution with the relevant experts and stakeholders."

The gallery board is understood to be satisfied with how effective internal controls were in 2023. An external audit was carried out, which is believed to have not identified any significant issues. Two external audits were held in 2023 focused on areas of higher risk.

There are a number of monitoring $\,$ systems in place, including reporting arrangements for finance and regular reviews by senior management.



WAYNE O'CONNOR

ublin Zoo and Fota Wildife Park have requested €25m in state funding to support their species conservation efforts.

The request was made to the Office of Public Works (OPW) by the Zoological Society of Ireland, which is responsible for both the zoo and park last September before the Government announced its 2025 Budget. Zoo director Dr Christoph

Schwitzer told OPW chairman John Conlon the funding would support half of a €50m capital development plan.

The other €25m would come from the parks' revenue streams and fundraising activities, Schwitzer wrote in correspondence released under Freedom of Information laws

"Over the next five years, we have ambitious plans to be at the centre of Ireland's efforts to be a global leader in species conservation and to contribute to fulfilling the State's commitments under the National Biodiversity Action Plan 2023-2030 and the United Nations (UN) agenda for sustainable development," he said.

The biodiversity plan outlines a need to reduce the intensity of biodiversity loss and address an acceleration in the global rate of species extinction.

The UN's sustainable development agenda aims to preserve oceans and forests while tackling climate change.

Dr Schwitzer said that significant funds and effort will go towards a strategic plan for Dublin Zoo, which as well as aiming to increase visitor numbers to 1.5 million per year by 2031, will also target saving wildlife globally. Part of this plan also looks at establishing closer links between the zoo and the OPW.

Since 2021, the Government has provided Dublin Zoo with a €2m capital grant, and Fota Wildlife Park with €1m, under the National Development Plan to support their investments in infrastructure. The Zoological Society said its government supports are used to partially support conservation, education and animal welfare projects.

"These supports contribute to the development of world-class facilities, support sustainability initiatives aimed at reducing the

environmental footprint, and to ensure the highest standards of care for animals," said a society spokesman. "All funding received is care-

fully allocated in accordance

with governance standards and is fully reported in the Zoological Society of Ireland's annual accounts." A spokeswoman for the OPW said capital grants for the zoo and wildlife park have been in-

creased to a combined €4.2m

this year because of the impact

of construction cost inflation since 2020. She said the level of support that might be provided in future years will be considered in the light of competing priorities for capital funding from the OPW's budget "and the Government's overall fiscal parameters when

the annual estimates are being considered". Both parks received emergency funding during the pandemic to help them cope with financial difficulties brought about by

Covid-19 restrictions. About €1.6m was allocated to 70 small and medium-sized zoos and aquariums at the end of 2020. Dublin Zoo and Fota Wildlife Park were given €1.1m.



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