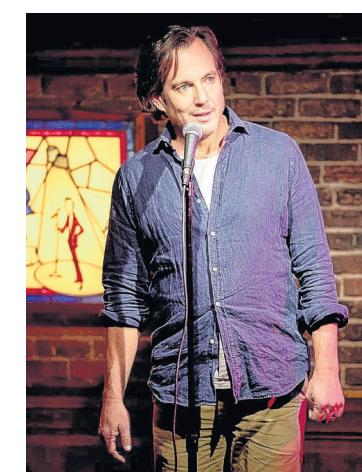


IRISH RUGBY'S BANDWAGON DOESN'T PLAY BY THE LAWS

 Denis Walsh
 Sport


“We are fascinated by Michelin and bored by food poverty. Last Christmas, 3,000 people queued for food parcels but we don't want to hear too much about that

 Trevor White
 Opinion


DON'T GIVE UP THE DAY JOB LAUGHABLE MIDLIFE CAREER CHANGES

 Emma Jacobs
 Business

Starmer battles for his future as closest aide resigns

Cork man Morgan McSweeney quits over sending of Peter Mandelson to US

Labour MP says UK prime minister's position 'untenable' amid calls to resign

 MARK PAUL
 London Correspondent

UK prime minister Keir Starmer was battling to save his premiership last night, following the resignation of his closest aide, Cork man Morgan McSweeney.

McSweeney, the backroom mastermind behind Starmer's rise to the Labour leadership and the party's return to power, quit over the decision to appoint the Jeffrey Epstein-linked Peter Mandelson as the UK's ambassador in Washington.

McSweeney acknowledged in his resignation statement that he advised Starmer to give his old mentor Mandelson the job. He said this was

placement was not lined up. Four hours after his exit, it was announced that McSweeney's two deputies would do his job in an acting capacity to prevent a power vacuum at the heart of Starmer's Downing Street operation.

Some of Starmer's critics on Labour's backbenches remained adamant that McSweeney's exit would not save the prime minister, whose position is in peril over Mandelson, and also over Labour's disastrous slide in polls.

Kim Johnson, Labour MP for Liverpool Riverside, told Sky News the "buck stops" with Starmer and his position was "untenable". Brian Leishman, a Scottish MP, said Starmer should "look at his own position and question whether he should follow McSweeney's lead".

‘Debt of gratitude’
 Starmer did not mention the Mandelson scandal in his reaction to the exit of McSweeney, with whom he said it was an "honour" to work. He said he had "turned around" Labour's fortunes: "Our party and I owe him a debt of gratitude."

McSweeney, originally from near Macroom in Cork, worked with Labour in the UK for 25 years. He was a protege of Mandelson during the Tony Blair years.

He later became close to Starmer, whom he helped to rout the left-wing acolytes of former leader Jeremy Corbyn, repositioning the party back towards the political centre.

Allies of McSweeney paid tribute to him last night. One Labour MP told *The Irish Times* he would be "sorely missed for his political brilliance".

If the UK prime minister survives the coming weeks, his next moment of danger could come after a February 26th by-election in greater Manchester, where Labour is under pressure from Reform UK and the Greens. If he survives that, he may come under pressure again following difficult Scottish and Welsh elections in May.

Morgan McSweeney: advised Keir Starmer to appoint Peter Mandelson

"wrong" given the extent of Mandelson's links to US sex-offender Epstein, which Starmer has said the former ambassador "lied" about.

"[Mandelson] has damaged our party, our country and trust in politics itself. In the circumstances, the only honourable course is to step aside," said McSweeney.

Furore
 While the Irish man's position had been under pressure for days as a furore over Mandelson consumed Westminster, McSweeney's resignation yesterday still took senior members of Starmer's cabinet by surprise.

Pat McFadden, one of the UK cabinet's most experienced members, had just hours earlier said it made "no sense" for McSweeney to resign to relieve pressure on Starmer, "if the prime minister stays".

"I don't think it would make any difference at all," he told the BBC.

In a further sign the Irish man's resignation was hastily executed, a permanent re-



Mudders in arms Celebration at Navan parade ring

Jockey Danny Gilligan with Westandtogether in the parade ring after winning the Gibney's of Malahide Handicap Hurdle at Navan Racecourse in Co Meath.

Photograph: Brian Lawless/PA

Irish Ukraine aid 'well below' that of smaller states

Official correspondence acknowledges shortfall compared with other EU allies

 JACK POWER
 Europe Correspondent

The Government's financial contributions to Ukraine are "well below" the amount of support provided by most other European Union states, including countries with smaller econo-

mies than Ireland, according to the Department of Foreign Affairs' top civil servant.

Internal correspondence be-

tween Government depart-

ments, seen by *The Irish Times*,

acknowledged the State has ex-

ited far less financial aid to

Kyiv, since Russia's full-scale in-

vasion four years ago, when compared with many other European countries.

Joe Hackett, Department of Foreign Affairs secretary general, sought space in the budget for a further €100 million package of "non-lethal" military aid for Kyiv, in an August 28th, 2025 letter to his counterpart, David Moloney, in the Department of Public Expenditure.

The letter said while the Re-

public's support to Ukraine was "substantial", it was "well be-

low the contributions of most

EU member states, including

Ireland needed to continue

to "demonstrate solidarity"

with Ukraine in the face of sus-

tained Russian aggression,

Hackett wrote.

The letter, released in re-

sponse to a Freedom of Infor-

mation Act request, said a fresh

package of aid for Ukraine

would complement "the sub-

stantial additional support be-

ing provided by like-minded EU

partners".

The Government has to date

provided €467 million in financial aid to Ukraine since Russia launched its full-scale invasion in 2022. About half of that was spent on "non-lethal" military aid, such as medical supplies and body armour.

Some €125 million in sup-

port was committed during the recent visit of Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskiy to Dublin at the end of last year.

Nordic and Baltic states, who

are among the biggest backers

of Ukraine, have started to criti-

cise other EU countries for not

pulling their weight to help shore up Kyiv's position.

Finland, which shares a lengthy border with Russia, has provided €3.2 billion in military aid to Ukraine since the Russian invasion, a spokeswoman for the Finnish government said. Estonia has sent €500 million worth of defence equipment to Ukraine.

→ **Fast-tracking Ukraine – why Europe is wary of bending the rules for EU entry: page 7**

Opaque homebuying system driving prices higher – report

 EOIN BURKE-KENNEDY
 Economics Correspondent

The Republic's homebuying process is stoking bidding wars and pushing property prices higher, a new study has found.

To assess how bidder behaviour changed under different auction processes, the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) conducted a controlled auction experiment involving some 800 participants.

It found participants' bids were pushed higher in open auctions managed by estate agents or online platforms than in sealed bid auctions.

"Participants in open auctions were more likely both to exceed their original budget and to bid higher than their view of what the property was worth," said the think tank.

Most homes nationwide are sold by way of private treaty auc-

tions – what the report calls "open offer" frameworks – with an estate agent co-ordinating valuations, advertising, viewings and managing bids.

Under this process, sellers are free to consider multiple offers, and the auction can involve multiple rounds of bidding with the highest offer being selected. Buyers are typically informed by the estate agent if someone has put in a larger bid than them and are asked if they wish to top that.

Auction fever
 "Auction fever and loss aversion" can drive individuals to outbid each other and exceed "their pre-stated ideal budgets", said the ESRI.

A recent report by property website MyHome, which is owned by *The Irish Times*, found that 40 per cent of properties sold in the Republic in

2024 were settled at 10 per cent or more above the original asking price. One in seven transactions was settled at 20 per cent above the asking price.

The ESRI study was funded by the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission. The institute also surveyed buyer and seller experiences and expectations. It found "significant gaps in people's knowledge of rights and responsibilities" and a low level of "trust and transparency" in the homebuying process here.

While more than two-thirds know it is illegal for a seller to accept multiple deposits for the same property, only one in five know that agents can legally continue to market a property after it goes "sale agreed".

Additionally, most people did not know that a buyer can pull out of a sale without penalty before contracts are signed.



Weather

Mix of cloud, sunny spells and scattered showers for the late afternoon, rain heavy at times in southern and eastern parts.

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Home News

Defence Forces: Eight members of the Defence Forces were either under investigation or appeared before the courts accused of sexual offences last year. Page 3

Big tech: Firms have been lobbying EU justice commissioner Michael McGrath over a law on addictive apps. Page 4

World News

Japan: Prime minister Sanae Takaichi's party has secured a more than two-thirds majority in a key parliamentary election. Page 6

Business Today

DAA: The Minister for Transport faces a new round of board trouble at DAA, as unfilled vacancies and looming departures threaten a power vacuum. Page 12

VC funding: Irish SMEs saw venture capital funding fall last year for the first time in seven years, a report shows.

Sports Monday

Soccer: Erling Haaland kept Manchester City in the title race with an added-time penalty to defeat champions Liverpool in a chaotic finish at Anfield.

Rugby: Italy travel to Dublin this week with increased belief that they can cause a Six Nations upset.

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