



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters	307
Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate	308
Disability Services	308
Special Educational Needs	311
Schools Building Projects	314
Schools Building Projects	317
Public Transport	319
Earth Day: Motion [Private Members]	322
Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions	357
Ceisteanna ó na Comhalkaí Eile - Other Members' Questions	370
Ceisteanna ar Pholasaí nó ar Reachtaíocht - Questions on Policy or Legislation	372
Post European Council Meeting: Statements	383
Public Health (Tobacco Products and Nicotine Inhaling Products) (Amendment) Bill 2026: Second Stage	414
Public Health (Tobacco Products and Nicotine Inhaling Products) (Amendment) Bill 2026: Referral to Select Committee	447
Vehicle Registration Data Exchange with the United Kingdom: Motion	447
Message from Select Committee	452
Health Information Bill 2024: From the Seanad	453
Dublin Central By-election: Issue of Writ	455
Galway West By-election: Issue of Writ	455
Earth Day: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]	455

DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 22 Aibreán 2026

Wednesday, 22 April 2026

Chuaigh an Ceann Comhairle i gceannas ar 9 a.m.

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 39 and the name of the Member in each case:

Deputy John Paul O'Shea - To discuss the provision of bus connections to and from Charleville train station.

Deputy Ged Nash - To discuss the fact that no schools in disadvantaged areas of Drogheda are included in the DEIS plus scheme.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí - To discuss the issue of "ghost buses" and the rollout of the new NGAVL system.

Deputy Louis O'Hara - To discuss the lack of respite care services in County Galway.

Deputy Albert Dolan - To discuss battery energy storage systems and solar planning guidelines in rural Ireland.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil - To discuss junior cycle certification processes for students in special schools.

Deputy Barry Ward - To discuss the need to promote an increase in the uptake of flexible work practices.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne - To discuss the planned new Courtown coast guard building.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly - To discuss the need for out-of-hours GP services for Fingal West.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - To discuss the ongoing crisis of capacity at University Hospital Limerick.

Deputy Rory Hearne - To discuss the number of affordable purchase homes delivered in Dublin city.

Deputy Colm Burke - To discuss Mayfield library and community centre.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - To discuss delivery of a permanent school building for Owenabue ETNS, Carrigaline, Cork.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett - To discuss the detention of an Irish citizen by German authorities.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty - To discuss the extension and refurbishment project at Lucan Community College.

Deputies Seán Crowe, Paul Murphy and Ciarán Ahern - To discuss challenges facing Scoil Maelruain Junior National School and Senior National School.

The matters raised by Deputies Louis O'Hara, Naoise Ó Cearúil, Paul Nicholas Gogarty, Seán Crowe, Paul Murphy, Ciarán Ahern and Naoise Ó Muirí have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Disability Services

Deputy Louis O'Hara: Carers across Ireland are the backbone of our healthcare system, saving the State an estimated €20 billion annually. Despite this massive contribution, they remain undervalued and pushed to the brink due to systemic failure to provide adequate respite. Respite is not a luxury. It is a fundamental necessity that prevents burnout, protects mental health and ensures the most vulnerable in our society receive sustainable long-term care. Organisations such as Ability West do fantastic work supporting families in the local area, and do their very best with the resources they have, but the reality is that in County Galway many parents of children with disabilities simply cannot access respite because of the lack of capacity and funding. The responsibility for this lies with the Government.

One parent has told me of how she has been fighting for overnight respite for her son with high care needs for some time. She informed me that no availability exists because he needs two-to-one care and his needs are too high. She said the system is very broken if the children with the highest level of needs are getting turned away. Another parent told me of her 12-year-old son who is non-verbal and autistic and has an intellectual disability. He attends respite at St. Teresa's respite house in Ballinasloe run by Ability West. She stressed that the staff there are exceptional and the care provided is invaluable but this support is already extremely limited with access only twice a month.

At present respite services have effectively been withdrawn due to a child requiring a crisis placement. While this child absolutely deserves appropriate care and support, the reality is that one child's crisis has resulted in other vulnerable children and families losing a service they depend on and this should never be allowed to happen. The situation has become so uncertain that although her son was offered a respite night this Saturday, she was warned he may have to be collected at any stage with little notice if issues arise. For her this is not respite but instability. She said that respite is one of the few places where he feels safe, secure and understood, and faced with the risk of this safety being disrupted she has had to make the difficult decision not to send him. No parent should be put in a position where they must

choose between getting a break and protecting their child from a potentially distressing experience.

These are just two examples but they reflect the experiences of many families and many carers when it comes to accessing respite. Many parents are unable to access any support for their children. Many have to travel very long distances to access care. I have been told that out of 40 children who attend St. Oliver's Special School in Tuam only two can get respite at St. Teresa's in Ballnasloe. There is no overnight respite for children in the Tuam area, which Ability West has raised with me previously. Ability West has indicated a willingness to expand services, including the development of an after-school respite programme at St. Oliver's school in Tuam but the main barriers are funding and support. What will the Government do to increase funding for respite services in County Galway to support the expansion of services? When will this happen? As I have said, parents have been left waiting for years and years in many cases and they deserve much better.

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Marian Harkin): I thank Deputy O'Hara. The Minister, Deputy Foley, thanks him for raising this important issue and I will respond on her behalf. The HSE is very much aware of the importance of respite service provision for the families of children with disabilities and the impact the absence of respite service provision can have on other services being delivered.

As Deputy O'Hara said, respite is a vital support for families and service users, and potentially helps to prevent out-of-home full-time residential placement. Respite also helps to preserve the family unit and supports family stability. In this respect, respite is a key priority area for the HSE for people with disabilities and their families. The increased investment in respite services in recent years has impacted positively on the level of service delivered in successive years. From 2022 to 2025, overnight respite provision increased by 26% while the number of day-only sessions more than doubled in the same period. The HSE project, while adjusting for data gaps, will be above target for the full year for respite activity in 2025. About 7,500 people avail periodically of centre-based respite, with regional disparities in access to the service and overall unmet need. Budget 2026 provides €25 million additional funding for respite expansion, supporting close to 10,000 additional overnight and 25,000 additional day respite sessions.

I am pleased to share with Deputy O'Hara that a number of new respite initiatives are under way in Galway, which add to the breadth of respite services available this year. Resilience Ireland is developing a new children's respite service, which will provide valuable support to families in this region. Ability West, and I agree with Deputy O'Hara on the great work it does, is establishing a new centre-based respite service in Tuam, providing critical access to respite for young adults in the area. There are also plans for a range of respite initiatives across Galway city and county over the summer period. This will involve a range of activities, including coding, sporting events and summer camps.

To provide some figures for respite funding provision for County Galway, from 2018 funding has increased by more than €53,000 to €149,000. This is an increase of approximately 275% over the seven-year period. The number of people in receipt of respite over the same

period has increased by approximately 24%. In the national service plan for 2026 the HSE has committed to investing €25 million in respite services.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: I welcome any additional investment and the plans the Minister of State has outlined for Tuam and elsewhere. I would make the point that proper respite care is the very least we should be able to provide in a very wealthy country for our most vulnerable citizens, their families and those who care for them. The Minister and her Department must ensure this happens. There is no excuse for having a system that is under-resourced and not meeting the needs of vulnerable children and their families. We clearly still need to go further because many of the parents who are in touch with me are simply not getting the services they need. I ask that there continues to be specific engagement on this issue with the likes of Ability West and supporting the proposals it has and that the Minister of State outlined, particularly for the likes of after-school respite and things like that, which can make a big difference for people.

I also ask for specific funding for the area of crisis placements to be considered so that the emergency cases, such as those I outlined earlier, do not displace others from their planned respite. These are the kinds of assurances the families in touch with me are looking for because, as I said, for them respite is not a luxury but is absolutely essential. The risk of burn-out is real without it.

The Toghermore campus in Tuam provides a real opportunity through equine therapy to provide another form of respite to families and to bring real benefits to children with disabilities. That opportunity must be taken by the Government. Locally, we expect to see that project being progressed. I know that Ability West is very keen to work with the Government and the HSE on this.

I also want to mention the Before We Die campaign. There are obviously significant issues with the lack of space in residential care. I have constituents who cannot access full-time residential care for a loved one who has an intellectual disability and who desperately needs it. We must do much better for our vulnerable citizens. They are being failed.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue, which is a priority for the Minister, Deputy Foley, the Department and the whole Government. I agree that respite services are essential for people with disabilities and their families. The Government is committed to the continued expansion and development of respite services, as set out in the programme for Government and the new National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030. To support the HSE in its work to provide and develop respite services and in recognition of the importance of support for disabled people and their families, budget 2026 provided significant additional funding to support respite service expansion in 2026. As I said earlier, there is €25 million in additional funding. That funding will be used to support a range of service openings and expansions across the country, including a range of respite initiatives over the summer period. There will be a particular focus on strengthening provision in areas that currently have a lower level of supports.

I heard what the Deputy said about crisis funding and its importance and I will bring that to the attention of the Minister because it is a crucial issue for many families. There is the real risk of burn-out for families.

The Deputy mentioned the equine centre. This is not contained in the response I have before me but I remember visiting the equine centre in Ability West and the excellent work done there. I will mention that to the Minister.

Special Educational Needs

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: We have three exceptional special schools in Kildare North, namely, St. Raphael's Special School in Celbridge, Stepping Stones Special School in Maynooth and Sapling Special School in Kill. Indeed, the Minister of State met the school management of Stepping Stones this day last week, and I thank him for his work and engagement. It is much appreciated. In recent years, we have seen an increase in the number of special schools throughout the country and, under the leadership of the Minister of State, we have seen an increase in the number of special classes in mainstream education. This ensures that children get equal access to education and equal opportunity regardless of their background and perspective.

All children who go to a special school or are in a special classroom have goals that are set out at the beginning of the year for them to achieve by the end of the year. There are some students who go through the junior cycle profile of achievement, JCPA. There is level 1 and level 2. This affords students in special schools the ability to have a level 1 or level 2 certificate at the end of completing the junior cycle. That is crucial for those young people when some of them want to go into the workplace in the future. It also provides a great sense of achievement and pride, not just for the student but for their families and the entire school community.

At present, schools must manually generate JCPA certificates. The Department does not hold independent completion records of the students who have completed the JCPA and certificates are not automatically issued. As a result, junior cycle completion in special schools depends entirely on school level administration, unlike mainstream settings. The deputy principal in St. Raphael's in Celbridge was in touch with me about the lack of meaningful junior certificate recognition for their students and the increased administrative burdens on school staff.

We made a representation on the issue and the Department was in touch with the school one week after we raised it. Certificates will be issued to last year's students. However, it should not be up to the schools to issue certificates. It should not be up to me or anybody else to contact the Department about these certificates being issued. It is about due process, fairness, equality and recognising the work and effort of the students, the staff and the families who have helped the students get to that point.

There are some other concerns about some of the content that teachers have been recommended to teach. Staff have raised concerns about some of the material, which can be infantilising and quite childish for students who are 12- or 13-year-olds, or older. Those staff feel there needs to be more of an acknowledgement that every child's development and learning journey is very different, and that needs to be acknowledged. Some are more developed in certain ways than others, and that needs to be acknowledged.

The main issue is that students deserve recognition equal in dignity to their peers. That does not only apply to special schools. Now that we see the increased opening of special classes in mainstream secondary schools, it is important for those students to feel equal to their peers in

the year. Ensuring they have a certificate to show that is part of it. As I said, it would mean they could go into meaningful employment in the future and have something to show for it.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth (Deputy Michael Moynihan): I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. If he does not mind, I will depart a little from the script with which I have been provided. It is hugely important. We are talking about inclusion and making sure we get the best possible education for children with additional needs as they go through primary and post-primary school. As the Deputy rightly said, we are announcing more special classes. We are really trying to make the education system fit for purpose in meeting the needs of students with additional needs. As with other countries, we have seen the need growing across Ireland and the OECD. I have said many times that I shudder to think what is happening in the undeveloped countries. We are really trying to come to terms with it.

The Deputy mentioned St. Raphael's, Stepping Stones and Saplings special schools. I met representatives of Stepping Stones last week. I meet representatives of special schools regularly and have been to a huge number of such schools across the country. I applaud the work that is being done in the special schools and in special education, in particular. The Deputy mentioned special schools and I have met their representatives. From this week on, I will be having a number of regional meetings with the principals of special schools right across the country. We are starting an engagement process in Sligo on Friday. It will be right across the country. We will be meeting the leadership in special schools to get an understanding of the challenges that are being faced.

The Deputy raised the issue of the State exams and certification. It is hugely important that we have uniformity at the very core. The Deputy mentioned his representation in relation to certificates being issued. That is simply not good enough. We have to make sure for the student cohort who are going to special schools. A huge amount of work is being done in the schools and by families to equip students for life after school with the best possible engagement and fulfilment they can have in the life they lead. If we are true to the word "inclusion", we must include everybody. A lot of work has gone on in relation to designing the junior certificate and, indeed, the leaving certificate at the special school level. It is important we ensure that at the end of that process, it is the very same for the students who are going to the special school, in that the certificate is issued and we work through the various challenges to make sure they are on the same level as their peers in mainstream education. It is something we are looking at very closely. I intend to make sure that happens. It is not the case for public representatives; I know the Deputy is deeply invested in special education. He has spoken to me many times over the last 12 or 14 months or so in relation to the challenges that are being faced, and I appreciate that. We had a very successful visit to the Deputy's part of County Kildare recently. I actually saw first-hand the excellent work that has been done in some of the school communities there, which I mentioned in various discussions we have had not alone in the Department but in the wider sphere as well.

To address the Deputy's point, it is important that the student cohort who are going to special schools earn the same recognition as any of their peers. We have to ensure that the certificates are generated and issued within the State exams system within the Department. I can assure the Deputy that it is something we need to address because it is an issue that has arisen. We

are working on it, and we have a lot of work done in designing the various schemes over the past while to have it student focused as well. It is something I intend to take very seriously.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: I thank the Minister of State for his response and, indeed, as I mentioned at the beginning, his hard work in this area. There has been a marked improvement in special education in the country since he took on the role as Minister of State for special education. I commend him on that. I want to thank him as well for his continued engagement because I have been raising issues with him continuously and he has always engaged in an open, fair and constructive way, and I think many people across the House will say the same.

I am not going to go over to previous points but what I would like to do and as I always do on a Topical Issue matter, parliamentary question or oral parliamentary questions, is try to come up with proposed solutions. We can all identify problems, but actually identifying the solutions is the key aspect we should be doing a little bit more of as public representatives.

The first solution I have is automatic certification, that is, introducing a centrally triggered junior certificate profile of achievement process for all junior cycle students, including level 1 and level 2. The second is a clear national certificate to develop a recognisable certificate of junior cycle completion for level 1 and 2 pathways, issued directly by the Department. Finally, we need a review for parity of esteem to examine junior cycle certification arrangements in special schools and address the perceived structural inequality. Those three steps would go a long way to solving this. Maybe it does not seem like a huge issue to a lot of people but for those going through special education, particularly with the increase in special classes in mainstream, it will become more of an issue. It is just about due recognition for hard work and the effort made by the students, their families and the school community.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: The Department is keenly aware of it. There is always room for improvement and we are very understanding of that. We are challenged every day to make sure the education system is improving into the future right across the education system and, indeed, for special education as well. What we are going to invest in special education now will have huge benefits for students, families and society in the long term. I firmly believe that it will give a greater understanding.

Parity of esteem is one thing, and automatic certification is hugely important. We have to stand back and say that students who are going through special schools or special education must have parity of esteem with their peers. At the core of inclusion is ensuring students have the same rights and attainability and ensuring the best possible outcomes when they go beyond school. We did introduce some funding this year for the transition period from schools to adulthood. That is something I would be very keen to address. I addressed it again last night during Private Members' business.

I take the Deputy's points. I can assure him that this is something we will very much take on board. We will work very closely with the Deputy in relation to this. I am very keen to see automatic certification. The key phrase is "parity of esteem" so that everybody is treated equally and we understand and acknowledge the work that is being done by students, their families and the school communities and give recognition to that. I will work on that with the Deputy. I thank him for his engagement and his interest in special education over the last while.

As I said, it is important that we, as Members of the House, continue to advocate on behalf of the most vulnerable because it is by that we will be judged.

Schools Building Projects

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: The Government seriously needs to reassess and reconfirm its commitment to imminently provide the full extension and refurbishment project promised to Lucan Community College going back to 2010. We are talking about dedicated classrooms for children with special educational needs, physical education space and refurbishment. The current piecemeal solution of a reduced phase 1 and temporary repurposing of some rooms for special educational needs and reviewing the situation in relation to the originally promised phases 2, 3 and 4 is not satisfactory.

Lucan Community College has a long and illustrious history in my constituency. It goes back to the vocational education committee, VEC, in the 1950s on the Lucan Newlands Road. By 1997, with population increases, the new Lucan Community College was established on its current location in Esker Drive under what is known today as the Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board, DDLETB. This school rapidly gained a reputation as a centre of excellence, so much so that it started to need lotteries for places at a very early stage. Today, even acknowledging the deficit of second level school places and the fact that the Department is always behind the curve in providing places, it is the co-educational school of choice in Lucan. Lucan Community College has always been massively oversubscribed. Parents and children want to go to this institution because of the quality of teaching and the depth of its curriculum. When it started out in the new building in 1997, it was a state-of-the-art facility. However, it soon found itself needing to increase its intake. It has approximately 956 pupils today. Its capacity has not matched that increase in population. Different parts of the school started deteriorating over time - stuff that could not be fixed with summer work schemes and other tranches of funding. It is now overcrowded. It needs a major extension and significant refurbishment. These days, parents apply to get their kids into the school in spite of, not because of, the facilities of the school. I have been told by several exasperated parents who have more than one child in the school that this is the case. They know that the school facility is not great but that the teachers are fantastic. A lot more is needed, but the Department is dragging its heels.

To put it in context, I first heard about this and I was raising Dáil questions in previous terms going back to 2007 when it was gradually moving towards the architectural planning stage in 2010. However, it took several more years to get the design and the planning permission in and it dragged on to 2020-21 when, eventually, it started moving towards the tender. In 2024, however, there was a delay in terms of issuing letters of intent. The school felt huge relief when this finally came through. They thought the extension was finally coming but last summer, in replies to parliamentary questions, it was indicated by the predecessor of the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, that due to the length of time between planning and construction, there was going to be a review of the project. Everyone thought this was going to involve tweaking and shaving stuff off because we know the costs have increased but no, the plan was now to build a modular building that was well insulated and long lasting, etc., but on a much smaller footprint, with no indication of what is going into the original footprint and over what period of time.

Phases 2, 3 and 4 are very opaque. There is no transparency. No one knows exactly what is going to happen. We need a commitment today that phases 2, 3 and 4, because we are talking about modular builds, can be designed and put into the current footprint, if that is possible, or if it needs a new planning application, that process can start so that in a matter of a year or 18 months, we can move on.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta. If memory serves, in a previous incarnation in a previous life, he raised this issue at an education committee. That is going back some time. I thank him for raising and outlining the issue in relation to Lucan Community College. The Department of Education and Youth is progressing the delivery of a large timber frame modular extension to Lucan Community College. The project will deliver nine additional classrooms, a science laboratory and preparation area and a design and technical graphics room. Construction has already commenced on site. This delivery method and model of construction offers an extremely high quality, carbon-friendly building, combined with fast delivery. The Department officials are engaging with the school patron, the Dublin-Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board, and the school authorities in relation to progressing this accommodation. They remain available to provide support on this project, including the scope for repurposing some of the existing classrooms for special education provision. The National Council for Special Education is engaging with the school authorities in this regard and, of course, the Department has a repurposing scheme which provides €30,000 for start-up grants for each new special class and up to €70,000 for repurposing existing accommodation for special classes.

The Deputy will be aware we recently published €7.55 billion in sectoral investment for education across the education system, and a lot of that is due to a strong emphasis on maximising existing capacity and prioritising school building projects which meet the most urgent need. In this regard, there will be a strong special education dimension to projects being rolled out.

The Deputy mentioned the families in the school. There is a project being moved ahead, which I outlined in earlier comments. We, in the Department, will continue to work with the school authorities and the patron body, Dublin-Dún Laoghaire ETB, to ensure needs are met within the Lucan area.

We see a huge amount of investment going into school building projects across the country. Over the past five or six years, extraordinary funding has been spent on them. However, when it comes to individual schools - as I indicated, this project has been discussed for a long time, going back a number of years to when the Deputy first mentioned it at meetings - it is important we continue to liaise. This first phase of it is on-site. This allows us to get very good high-spec projects built, and to get them delivered in faster time. We have seen many challenges in relation to projects going on too long.

I will endeavour to liaise with Department officials in the planning and building unit to ensure the entire need of the school community, not just this building project but the entire need, is met. I thank the school authorities for their engagement with the National Council for Special Education and the Department in relation to provision of special education, which is a huge core in any building projects we are doing, that is, to ensure we have a provision for special education. I will endeavour to ensure the Department and Lucan Community College

continue to liaise so that the needs of the school community and the community at large are met in any new developments.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: The school has had to take the decision to subdivide rooms and to move students in order to have special educational needs classes in a setting that is not going to disturb students. I will give a few quotes from parents. Parents have said that every month that passes is actively harming children, that the school is not fit for purpose, that children with additional needs have been failed despite explicit promises and that children are stressed, more constrained and are falling behind through no fault of their own. There is confusion in terms of earlier responses from the Minister, Deputy Naughton, which said that phase 1 would include special educational needs classrooms but now it does not. Another parent said that it is entirely unclear as to the process and that the lack of transparency here is atrocious.

Another very concerning thing is that because of the overcrowding in the school, on a number of occasions students have been found eating their lunches in toilets when it is raining because they have nowhere inside to go. The staff do not allow this and they are told to move as quickly as possible but some of them go in there because there are radiators and it is a warm places to eat. That is not acceptable in 2026. This is the level of the conditions the students are being forced to endure. There are no areas for kids to have extracurricular activities and to meet and have casual chats that make school days, days to remember. It is all about into class and out of class. There is no room to engage and have that quality of life in the school environment. It is heartbreaking to see this for the children.

What we need are firm commitments in respect of the phase 1 modular building, the timber framed and well-insulated building. That is all well and good but in the original outline of the building, can we get clear answers from the Department that phase 2 can be commenced very quickly, because it is modular? The same goes for phases 3 and 4. Can these be designed and planned so they can go in a lot quicker and that in 18 months to two years, we can see the buildings?

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I thank the Deputy for outlining the challenges within the school community as well. It is important we have the best possible school environment for all students. Every student, no matter what their ability, must have a positive experience within the school. Phase 1 of the project is on-site and for delivery. The quality of the building going in is top class, as I understand it. That is moving at pace. The Deputy is looking for clarity in relation to how we are going to do the next phases of the project. I will liaise with the planning and building unit in the Department and with the Minister, Deputy Naughton, to ensure we get clarity for the school community, the school authorities, the ETB and the parents and students as fast as possible in relation to phases 2 and 3 and the building of it. I will endeavour to do that.

I take the points the Deputy raised in relation to the toilets and so forth very seriously. They do not rest easy with me. I will bring those points back to the Department and ask it to liaise with the Deputy in relation to the next phases. It is important the phase that is under way is completed as a matter of urgency because it shows that we intend to invest in Lucan Community College now but also into the future so that we best serve the future needs of the school and the community. I will endeavour to do that.

Schools Building Projects

Deputy Seán Crowe: We are talking about two schools here - the junior and senior schools. All the TDs in the constituency have visited the schools, and we are all of the same mind that work needs to move ahead. In 2011, the Department agreed to two extensions to the junior and senior schools. In 2014, there was a visit to the schools, and the Department felt it was necessary for a rebuild. Ever since, the school authorities have been trying to get the schools built. There is mould, water running down walls, water dripping from the ceiling and tiles collapsing, and the list goes on. Clearly, it is not an ideal situation for hundreds of school children and their teachers in the school. What we are looking for is action relation to this. It has gone on long enough. The parents and school community feel they have been let down and left behind. It just shows how long it takes for a new build to be built. The Department said that it was necessary for this to happen.

Deputy Paul Murphy: This is very simple. The school building, as it is, is simply not fit for continued use. There are serious health and safety concerns. When we visited there was very clearly water still coming through and sitting on top of tiles. You could see water coming in beside an interactive electric panel, which clearly represented a danger. A couple of years ago there was a partial ceiling collapse while children were in a class. There is mould. It is simply not suitable as it is. What is frustrating is this was recognised in May 2014. An architect appointed by the Department of education recommended a complete rebuild for both schools yet we still do not have substantial progress.

This has been a real saga, the latest step being in July of last year when full 2a plans were submitted by the school. It still has no formal acknowledgement of that or a timeline for that. We know the Department got it. I asked the officials at the public accounts committee last week and they acknowledged they have it but it is simply not acceptable. The school is looking for a meeting with the Minister and the officials to map out a timeline to ensure these children get a suitable school building as soon as possible.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: As my colleagues have said, there are three of us here from the constituency but it is fair to say the five TDs in our constituency support the school in this regard. There is a short-term and long-term need in the school. The short-term need is to get an emergency grant to fix this roof, which is badly leaking. Almost daily water is dripping into classrooms and leaving pools. When we were there one of the classrooms was referred to as the Amazon rainforest by the students because of the rain coming down. There are buckets in classrooms and it is destroying the children's work, at times. Teachers cannot have any desks in that area. The panels on the roof collapsed on parents during a parent-teacher meeting. It is happening during school hours and the management cannot really predict where these collapses are going to happen. In the short term the roof needs to be done. As for the longer term, the Department approached the school in 2011 about adding 20 new classrooms. After three years, the Department's architect suggested a whole new rebuild. As Deputy Murphy said, that was in 2014. We are 12 years on from that and the school just wants to push the project along and that is what it is looking for now.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I thank the Deputies for raising the issue. I compliment them as constituency TDs because nearly every issue they raise is done on a cross-party basis. It is great to see it because education is so important. It is very important to be unified. We have had a number of issues with the Deputies we are working on but it is important to acknowledge the co-operation they have on this. This shows me the challenges there are in relation to the school and the decision that was taken.

A major project for the school was to build 20 mainstream classrooms along with additional classrooms for special education needs and associated work. This project is currently at stage 2a of architectural planning, where the preferred design option is developed to a stage where the project can be fully cost planned, and prepared to lodge for statutory approvals. The Department received that submission in July 2025 and a detailed review is ongoing. Part of the submission review will include a stakeholders meeting between the school authorities, design team and project manager, which will be held once the stage 2a report has been reviewed. It is important because that is the crucial piece. We have that report a number of months at this stage and, as Deputy Murphy quite rightly said, the officials confirmed to him we have it, so we need to move that on to the next stage. What is exasperating people in many of the questions I am answering here on an ongoing basis is the delay in getting school buildings beyond the design and the initial thoughts. The Deputies have demonstrated quite clearly there is need for this school and the Department has accepted it going back over a decade or so. It is important we move with the submission that is there.

On the immediate issue with the roof, I wish to clarify if there is an application in for emergency works for that. I will endeavour to go back to that application to see where that is at rather than give lip service to it in the Chamber. I understand the seriousness of it because of the co-operation between the Deputies. I will endeavour to find out where the submission is at, how soon we can get that reviewed and on to all the stakeholders.

There is a lot of detailed planning that goes in to ensure we are getting the best possible outcome. The Government has committed a huge amount of funding over the past number of years and into the future to school buildings across the country. At school visits I have made, we have often see there are major challenges with the buildings. I will go back to the Department and ensure the submission received in July is reviewed in a timely manner and that engagement is brought back to the stakeholders, including the school authorities, project manager and so on. I will endeavour as well to ensure I can report back to the three Deputies on where the current application for emergency works is.

Deputy Seán Crowe: The school's most optimistic expectation is that it will take more than four years from the green light through to completion. Can we really stand here and say we cannot build two sets of classrooms and a new school within 12 years? It is just not acceptable. Children in Tallaght are being left behind. That is clearly what is happening. What message does that send to the children in these schools that it has taken 12 years? The Minister of State talks of repairing the roof but it is not repairable. That is what the school is telling us. It is unacceptable. We need some action here. We are asking for at least a meeting with the Minister and the officials.

Deputy Paul Murphy: There is lots in the roof report carried out by Morris Roofing and Cladding. The key point is the roof has gone beyond economic repair due to its nearly 50 years

of age. The fundamental problem is the school is over 50 years old and needs a new replacement building. That is not just the opinion of some teachers, students or parents but of the architect originally appointed by the Department 12 years ago. There is an additional issue in that when the new school building opens, there will be 36 extra places in special classes, which obviously for the children in the area, and for the Minister of State given his particular responsibilities, is an extra reason to get this happening as quickly as possible. I re-emphasise the point about a meeting with the Minister and officials.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: The principal and staff of the school are doing a brilliant job and it is a fabulous school. It is a big school in Old Bawn. There are about 700 or 800 students in it. It is lucky the school has a big site where it will be possible to build the new school at the same time as keeping the existing building going and doing it in phases without the need for additional funding for modular or temporary accommodation for the students. The school can do this project with relative ease on its existing site. We call again for a meeting with the Minister and Department officials to get this thing moving. We all know it has been delayed for too long and there is a real, urgent need here.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: With any funding going in from the State to new schools and buildings, it is important we have the special education part of it as well. That is a decision that has been taken by us in the Department to ensure we are accommodating children with additional needs within any new build. I take the point it has been 12 years. There was mention of 2011 and 2014. It has been too long. There is a report in with the Department and I will endeavour to find out where that is at. I also take the point that sometimes we spend an awful lot of time, effort and money to try to patch something up while we are waiting for the essential build. Deputy Crowe mentioned four years until completion. You are looking at a number of cohorts of students who started out thinking this would be completed by the time they were completing school and then it takes another round of students to go through the process again. I will look to have a meeting and serious engagement with the Deputies and the Department of education to ensure we can prioritise this and make sure any road blocks that are in the way are moved but also that we understand the challenges. Right across Dublin it is great to see schools that have space because we are really challenged with space in a lot of Dublin school communities. However, there is space here so we need utilise it and ensure we do that. I will endeavour to find out what is happening with the report that is with the Department since July 2025.

I will also endeavour to undertake the Deputies' request. I thank them very much.

Public Transport

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: Delivering an efficient and accessible public transport system is essential to the daily lives of working people across Dublin city and to meeting our climate objectives. The case for public transport speaks for itself. Every single full bus takes 80 cars off the roads, reducing emissions by over 90% and freeing up 300 m of roadway. Week after week, however, I hear from northsiders that they have simply given up taking the bus, not because they do not want to use it but because they cannot afford to trust it. They cannot rely on it daily. Citizens are experiencing frequent no-shows, last-minute cancellations and long

gaps between buses. We still hear on an ongoing basis of ghost buses, services that appear as due on the TFI Live app and on the displays but never arrive. How can we expect commuters to shift to public transport when they are plagued by issues every day?

I have spoken about this in the Chamber before, but this situation has become so commonplace in Baile Átha Cliath that a website called *buscancellationsdublin.eu* has started pulling together the data on cancelled buses. In any other sector or walk of life, this would not be acceptable. Northsiders are just trying to get on with their daily lives, yet they are being let down time and again by Dublin Bus and the National Transport Authority, NTA. The delays cause real distress. People are missing work and medical appointments and struggling to get to childcare commitments. I understand from the CEO of Dublin Bus, Billy Hann, that a new next generation automatic vehicle location, NGAVL, system will be piloted in September. This cannot come soon enough, and I really welcome it. As Mr. Hann has acknowledged, the title “real-time passenger information” is effectively misleading, as the system now is just a countdown from when the bus leaves the depot, with no ability to respond to what happens *en route* to the bus stop. The next generation AVL system must provide passengers with the reassurance they need and deserve while waiting for a public transport service.

The long list of issues I hear concerning the 73, 130 and 15 bus routes in my constituency are underpinned by the simple fact that commuters cannot trust that their bus will even show up. When a service is delayed or full, that is frustrating, but when it does not show up at all, with no explanation and no update, that really undermines public confidence in the system and in public transport as a whole.

We cannot settle for this standard of service that people have been forced to tolerate in the last few years. This is even more relevant in the current climate and in the current energy crisis, with the pressure on fuels. It is an opportunity, at one level, to get people out of cars and onto public transport. If we are serious about our climate targets and about building a country where an carr a fhágáil sa bhaile is a genuine choice rather than a gamble, then public transport must be reliable enough from the first minute in the morning to the last minute at night.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Seán Canney): I thank the Deputy very much. I welcome his question, which is on an issue that is very topical at the moment. He is right that we need to give people confidence in the public transport system so they will continue to use it for all the very good reasons he spoke about.

We are strongly committed in the Government to providing all citizens with reliable and sustainable mobility options, and public transport plays a key role in the delivery of this goal. To support this objective, in budget 2026, the Department of Transport secured €940 million in funding for the public service obligation, PSO, and Transport for Ireland, TFI, Local Link services, and a further €980 million in public transport capital investment.

Despite this investment, I know that customers can and do encounter issues concerning service cancellations and reliability. Bus cancellations can occur for a variety of reasons, such as issues with the availability of drivers and mechanics causing services not to run to schedule. The NTA has assured me that it is acutely aware of the importance of good-quality information being made available to customers regarding bus departure times and on-street displays. The TFI Live app aims to provide this information. The real-time information displayed on the TFI Live app and on the on-street signs is provided directly by the bus operator responsible for

operating the service. The onus is on the transport operator to provide live disruption information if, for unforeseen circumstances, a bus is unable to complete part of its schedule. This information can be relayed to customers using the on-street displays and the TFI Live app. The NTA holds weekly meetings with operators to discuss performance, understand challenges and identify where improvements can be made. In instances where performance drops, financial penalties are rigorously applied. Where a bus does not operate due to circumstances within the operator's control, a reduction is made in the amount due to the operator equivalent to the cost of operating the cancelled service. The contracts also provide for deductions to be made when punctuality and reliability targets are not met.

In relation to the specific issue of vehicle location and tracking information, the NTA awarded Trapeze ITS the contract to develop and implement a next generation automatic vehicle location system for Ireland's public transport buses. This centralised system will replace the existing fragmented automatic vehicle location systems and will offer better real-time information for passengers. It will enable two-way communication with drivers and monitor the performance of buses against their schedules. The system will also provide tools for service controllers to make interventions, such as curtailment or cancellation of services, and, importantly for customers, will generate the real-time passenger information used in information displays for the public.

The next generation automatic vehicle location system project is a centralised, more modern, cloud-based AVL solution to be used by all PSO operators. It consolidates the existing five systems, which are up to 15 years old. This will bring advantages in terms of consistency of data across the operators. The system will be more robust and will have more modern bus control features that will assist bus operators to run services against schedule, providing accurate and reliable data for passengers on real-time displays. The first implementation of this new system in Waterford is due to go live in June and is currently in testing. The system will be rolled out to other operators during the course of 2026 and 2027, including Dublin Bus, Bus Éireann and Go-Ahead Ireland services.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: Go raibh maith agat. I welcome the confirmation that the NTA is taking the issue seriously and progressing plans to modernise the existing system. I welcome the fact it looks at it weekly and has a structure in place in this regard.

One thing that does concern me is that at the moment we are very reliant on the operators to share data and to push it into the system. I hope that in the new setup that will happen automatically, rather than there being a reliance on various operators to release data into the system. As much of that process as possible should be automated so that the end user is getting the data without even having to think about it and without having any dependency on an operator, whoever it is.

The 73 bus service, which I mentioned earlier, was originally the 123 Imp service. These were smaller yellow and red buses that used to run in and out of the city centre. It was a hugely popular service on the north side. The NTA took a decision to give it to a new operator and rename it the 73 in the autumn of last year. There are ongoing issues with that service. We are awaiting detailed information on the performance of the route from the NTA since early March. We have clarified what we are looking for but we are still waiting for that information. This service is a vital one for that part of the north side. I want to keep it on the agenda until the

service works for local citizens. I ask that the Minister of State give the NTA a nudge to publish that information and get it back to us.

Deputy Seán Canney: I will go back to the NTA regarding the 73 bus service to seek the clarification the Deputy requires. There is no doubt about that.

Further to the updates I provided earlier on the next generation automatic vehicle location system and practices by the NTA and bus operators to support a better real-time information system for passengers, I note that a number of actions have been taken that will help to address this issue. These actions include the replacement of older antennas on buses, with close to 800 to be replaced. GPS receiver boards on Dublin Bus services are in the process of being updated, with 300 buses updated to date and the balance to be updated in May of this year. Operational practice has also been modified to help address the issue. The NTA has developed a tool that can be used by Dublin Bus and Go-Ahead Ireland to monitor the efficiency of trip cancellation processes. This will help ensure real-time passenger information takes account of all cancellations as they arise.

10 o'clock

Finally, as I noted in my opening statement, the new system is planned to go ahead in Waterford in June and the roll-out to the other areas will be taking effect straight away after that, in the rest of 2026 into 2027. It will consolidate the five existing systems, some of which are 15 years old, into one central one. This will bring advantages in terms of consistency of the data that people will get from across all the operators. The system will be robust with more modern bus-control features that will assist the bus operators to run services against schedule and provide accurate and reliable data for passengers on real-time displays. If we have the system correct, the information will be live and people will know. We invest a huge amount of money in public transport but we want to make sure we are generating the confidence in the public so that they can use it.

Earth Day: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

recognises that the triple planetary crises of climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss are an existential threat to humanity;

notes that the 22nd of April, is Earth Day, where people around the world are called to stand in defence of the only home we share;

declared a climate and biodiversity emergency, becoming the second national parliament in the world to do so, and in so doing recognised the importance of Ireland responding to these crises in 2019;

further recognises that:

— to address this challenge, the Government has committed to achieving a climate neutral economy by no later than 2050 and, through carbon budgets and the Climate

Action Plan, to reduce by 51 per cent the annual greenhouse gas emissions reported for 2030 compared to 2018;

— these commitments are underpinned by the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015, amended and strengthened in 2021, which acts as a foundation for the State's climate policy, and provides the legal basis for Ireland's climate ambitions;

— biodiversity targets are driven by Ireland's 4th National Biodiversity Action Plan 2023-2030 (NBAP), which aims to meet international commitments, including 30 per cent protected land and marine areas by 2030, this plan is on a statutory footing, and public bodies have a duty to contribute to these targets;

— achievement of these ambitions requires a Whole-of-Government approach to the decarbonisation of the energy system, the provision of electrified public transport at scale, the retrofitting of Ireland's building stock, and the development of new renewable energy sources;

— the ongoing crisis in the Middle East has demonstrated that the objective of affordable, secure and decarbonised energy cannot be met through importation of fossil fuels, which are carbon intensive and subject to rapid price shocks;

— in confronting the fact that 29 per cent of Irish households are in energy poverty and hundreds of thousands of electricity and gas customers are in arrears, we must ensure that in moving to a net-zero Ireland we adhere to the principles of the Just Transition Commission, and must reach those furthest behind first;

— energy crises disproportionately impact the most marginalised, including one parent families, carers, disabled people, members of the Traveller community, and older people are driven by an energy system that is too reliant on expensive imported fossil fuels; and

— climate change and its consequences are and will continue to have profound effects on human health and the wellbeing of future generations;

notes, with concern that:

— the Minister for Climate, Energy, and the Environment has indicated that the Government will miss its 2030 emissions reduction target by half, and has provided no emergency plan to reverse this trajectory;

— the Environmental Protection Agency, in preparing its latest emissions projections, found that the Government had not included any significant new policies or measures in the Climate Action Plan 2025, to close the gap in meeting 2030 climate targets;

— relevant Government Ministers have not yet fulfilled their duties under the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Acts to attend the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Climate, Environment and Energy, and outline corrective measures to meet sectoral emissions ceilings;

— the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council and the Climate Change Advisory Council published a joint peer-reviewed analysis in 2025, indicating a potential €8-€26 billion in compliance costs for Ireland through missing climate targets;

- the Government has proposed legislation that will fundamentally undermine the functioning of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act, by exempting carbon intensive projects from scrutiny under that Act;
- the Government intends to increase Ireland's reliance on fossil fuels through the creation of a State-owned Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) terminal which will be reliant on imported gas and subject to geopolitical price shocks far beyond the State's control;
- the enabling legislation for a State-owned LNG terminal, the Strategic Gas Emergency Reserve Bill 2025, seeks to pre-empt scrutiny of this project under Section 15 of Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act, suggesting that the Government understands that it is not compliant with Ireland's climate targets;
- an LNG terminal will lead to locked-in fossil fuel industry expansion that does not align with Ireland's binding climate obligations;
- a similar provision in the Dublin Airport (Passenger Cap) Bill 2026 suggests that the Government is placing the interests of airlines ahead of the need for a healthy environment and climate action;
- the newly published Critical Infrastructure Bill 2026 will allow the wholesale exclusion of carbon intensive projects from scrutiny under the Climate Action Act;
- despite a target of 5 gigawatts (GW) of new offshore wind energy by 2030 under the Climate Action Plan, no new offshore wind projects have been delivered, and the projects currently planned amount to less than 5 GW;
- the Government is due to fall well short of its retrofitting targets of 500,000 residential retrofits and the deployment of 400,000 heat pumps by 2030;
- the National Development Plan Review 2025 has reversed the previous Government's policy of providing a ratio of 2:1 investment in public transport over new roads, which will undermine plans to improve public transport and reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the transport sector;
- rapid growth in the number of data centres in Ireland has created significant induced demand for electricity, which will eliminate the net positive effect of new renewables projects and lead to increased energy prices for ordinary households;
- the Government has raided the €3.15 billion Climate and Nature Fund to plug holes in its infrastructure budget;
- the Marine Protected Areas Bill has yet to be published;
- the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, has disbanded its climate division;
- funding for farmers to implement the NBAP is wholly inadequate;
- the Final Report for Phase 2 of the National Land Use Review has been with the Minister for Climate, Energy, and the Environment, the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the Minister of State at Housing, Local Government and Heritage almost a year and is still not published;

- the Government has not fully met its legal obligations under the Climate Act as emissions limits do not account for the Land Use, Land Use Change, and Forestry sector;
- the Government has not yet addressed the recommendations of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Climate, Environment and Energy regarding the preparation and delivery of Carbon Budgets 3 and 4 (2031-2040); and
- the Climate Action Plan 2026 has been significantly delayed and is still not yet published; and

calls on the Government to:

- re-commit to the legally binding target of 51 per cent emissions reduction by 2030;
- remove any provisions from draft legislation that limits the effectiveness of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act;
- implement the recommendations of the Independent Advisory Committee on nature restoration and to adequately fund Ireland's Nature Restoration Plan; and
- protect vulnerable households from the ongoing fossil fuel price crisis through new targeted supports and safeguards, by speeding up access to home energy upgrades, and by ensuring that Ireland develops its own secure and clean renewable energy.

Today, 22 April, is Earth Day, a day that has been marked since 1970. For 56 years, people around the world have used this date to speak for and act for environmental protection around our planet. It is appropriate, therefore, that on Earth Day this House supports the motion I am proposing and delivers a powerful message. The energy crisis is the climate crisis. On behalf of the Green Party, I am proposing this motion as people across our country experience the consequences of another global spike in the prices of energy. The origins of this energy price crisis is our country's over-reliance on fossil fuels. The war in Iran has, for the second time in four years, shown how our economy is at the mercy of the whims of Trump, Putin, Netanyahu and of the Ayatollah. Ireland needs to be able to generate its own energy so we can make our own choices. The only way to achieve true fuel security in Ireland is to stop importing it. Our country will remain vulnerable to energy shocks until we transition our entire economy onto renewable sources of energy.

Countries that have already taken this step to move to renewables have economies that are better placed to cope in the current crisis and are therefore better able to protect their own people from the worst of the energy price spike. In Spain, renewable energy now generates 50% of the country's electricity coming from wind, hydro, and, increasingly, from solar. Spain has seen dramatic growth in the use of solar power in the past six years. This is one of the contributing factors to Spain having the lowest wholesale electricity prices within the EU. This solar revolution did not come about naturally and simply as a cause of Spain enjoying a sunny climate. For decades, solar supplied only a minor part of the country's electricity. However, following the Ukraine invasion in 2022, the Spanish Government, recognising its vulnerability to international energy shocks, took a deliberate policy decision to reduce its dependence on imported gas and move much of its economy towards renewables. In Denmark, over 83% of the country's electricity is generated from renewable sources: wind, bioenergy and increasingly solar. Interconnection with other Nordic countries provides an additional layer of protection. These countries have shown that governments can lead the fight on decarbonisation but at the

same time create energy independence for their economies and leave all their citizens better off. Yet, over the past 15 months, the Government has demonstrated that it does not possess the belief in this transition to make the case for it convincingly to the Irish people.

Therefore, on a national basis, what should Ministers be doing to progress this transformation of our energy systems? First, the Government needs to speed up the delivery of the offshore wind farms that were successfully bid for during the term of the previous Government. An Coimisiún Pleanála and the Maritime Area Regulatory Authority, MARA, need to be given additional expert staff so they can more quickly process and decide on applications for offshore winds and for large-scale solar arrays. The Government also needs to speed up investment and delivery of improvement in our ports. Right now, Belfast is the only port on the island capable of supporting the construction of offshore turbines. This has to change. We need to develop Cork and Rosslare ports so they can support the delivery of offshore wind but also that they can enjoy the benefits of the support industries and the economic development that will gather around sites where electricity generated by wind is brought onshore.

We need big and bold actions. The urgency with which we need to protect Irish households from this energy price shock, and the next one that probably is not far down the road. Over the past two months the Government has allocated over €750 million in new emergency spending to deal with the energy crisis. While this money is needed to protect households and businesses from the current crisis, not one cent of that money works to protect or prevent either our economy nationally or individual households from experiencing a similar price spike the next time there is a global emergency. A total of €750 million spent and it is all entirely reactive, entirely short-term and in no way changes or reduces our vulnerability.

I want to make three suggestions about what this bold action could look like. The Green Party proposes a new fully-free solar programme for all households in receipt of the fuel allowance. Eight solar panels will be provided to each home. This will mean solar will reach the most vulnerable households more quickly. It will reduce their energy bills at a time we know they can be subject to rapid price shocks. Investing €400 million a year for five years, which is about half the cost of the package that was agreed last week, would provide free solar energy to hundreds of thousands of energy-poor households.

Second, we propose that the Government creates a social leasing scheme for electric vehicles, EVs, for essential workers. This will be based on a scheme operated by the French Government over the past two years. As a social leasing scheme, it would operate where small-scale electric cars would be leased on a five-year basis by the State to essential workers who need to drive to work or have limited transport alternatives. This model, with the State making an initial contribution to reduce the monthly cost, would remove what we all recognise as the biggest barrier to EV uptake, namely, high upfront costs. An upfront investment of €500 million, about two-thirds of what was agreed in the emergency package signed off last week, would deliver 70,000 small electric vehicles under this scheme.

These schemes are not cheap. Activating them would mean upending our spending plans this year and next year, and I am sure it would cause a couple of furrowed brows on officials of the Department of public expenditure as well. However, at a time we are in the enviable situation to be one of a small number of European countries reporting a significant budget surplus, that we would go through a second energy crisis, again driven by our dependence on

imported fossil fuels, and not take big and bold action to reduce our dependence, would be a failure to act as an act of national self-sabotage. We must acknowledge that the climate crisis is the energy crisis and that the solutions are not cheap but understand that once those solutions are invested in, they can bring immediate savings to hard-pressed households, will lessen our energy insecurity and have the added benefit of decarbonising our economy.

Our third proposal does not require major State expenditure. Over the past number of months, the Green Party and I have been urging the Government to allow for the deployment of plug-in solar in Irish homes and to take what steps that are needed to resolve any safety concerns related to it. In March, in response to the current energy crisis, the UK Government announced it would make plug-in solar panels available to British households. These easy-to-install panels have become commonplace in Germany. Over 1 million units have been installed. They are sold by major retailers. They are affordable and are easy to install. They can be used in apartments that cannot have rooftop solar and in rental properties as well. We know these panels could save people money on their bills now in the midst of an energy crisis. I asked the Taoiseach about this issue last month. I have questioned the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, on a number of occasions yet there is still no clarity on how or when any technical issues regarding the large-scale deployment of plug-in solar in Ireland will be addressed.

The actions needed to shift our economy to renewables are not only taken at State level. Communities are coming together to fill the gap Government inaction has left. The Ennis Environmental Action Group has led a voluntary public information campaign to inform neighbours and friends about the grants available under SEAI schemes. This work has led to a 2.6-fold increase in applications to the warmers homes scheme in that area. This sort of effective peer-to-peer sharing of information is helping to better spread information, but also break down preconceived notions about these schemes. At a time we know people are looking to better understand how the retrofit process works, I ask the Government to look at what the Ennis Environmental Action Group did and how it was able to make the case for transition within its community.

The argument for changing our economy to run on renewables is no longer just an environmental one. The cost-of-living consequences of sticking with imported oil and gas should not be borne by another generation of Irish householders. The energy crisis is the climate crisis and as a country, we have the natural resources to allow us to produce renewable energy at scale-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: -----and right now we have the financial resources to support the development of these new industries.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: Let us not wait until the next war or the next fuel crisis; let us act now.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I will take three and a half minutes.

We are in a situation now where the Government is set to miss its 2030 emissions reduction targets by half and there is no plan to reverse that trajectory. The Environmental Protection Agency's, EPA's, latest reports found the Government has not included any new policies or measures in the climate action plan to 2050 and we will pay for this because €8 billion to €26 billion in compliance costs for missing targets can be imposed.

The Government is also encouraging carbon-intensive projects. It is legislating for a State-owned LNG terminal. It is lifting the passenger cap in Dublin Airport, missing retrofitting targets and encouraging data centres, and it is boasting about that as well. The Government has utterly reversed - it is not going forward - in climate action and it is following a trend worldwide, where governments have no interest whatsoever. That includes governments that are considered climate deniers like Trump's, but the same goes for the Irish Government.

I will mention the dependence on fossil fuels and the food crisis, which the recent protests exemplified. The crisis caused by the US-Israel war on Iran, which the Government sat silently by about when it visited Trump, has highlighted the addiction of capitalism to fossil fuels, utter dependence on intensive agriculture, which is being developed and deepened in this country, and a huge dependence on synthetic fertiliser and pesticides and Gulf-based fossil fuels. It has been warned that if this crisis persists, fertiliser prices will increase and ultimately food prices will rocket, causing huge problems for the poorest people on the planet, but also for western economies.

In Ireland, if anything was shown by the recent developments, it was that we should introduce free public transport. It has been done in other countries. The Government is way behind on retrofitting. It is a model that requires large amounts of money upfront and it needs to be rolled out across all homes, not just for people who already have very nice incomes and homes. There is huge energy poverty in Ireland. The motion cites that almost one third of households are in energy poverty. There are huge arrears on gas and electricity bills. The ESB needs to be taken back into public ownership and run on a break-even basis. We should not just be subsidising profitable companies with one-off payments.

LNG is a dirty fossil fuel. Let us be clear. There should be no more fossil fuel infrastructure because if it is set up, it will encourage it to be developed yet again. It is not just a stopgap. It will increase our dependence on fossil fuels. We need to invest in renewables and stop this dependence on fossil fuels.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I thank Deputy O'Gorman and the Green Party for tabling the motion, which we support. We have also tabled two amendments, which I will mention later.

The main point is that history will not treat this Government kindly, if history gets to be written. Maybe that is what it is counting on. One after another, the Government is ripping up its climate commitments relating to LNG, data centres, public transport, nitrates, marine protected areas, MPAs, forestry, you name it. The Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael-Lowry lackey Government is going backwards. It is no coincidence this is happening. Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and whoever is in government with them serve the interests of big business. That is who benefits from the expansion of data centres, extending the nitrates derogation and locking us in to fossil fuel dependence on LNG.

Recently, a booklet called *Sitka Spruce the Amazing Timber Tree* was distributed to Irish schools. It included an endorsement from the then Minister of State with responsibility for forestry, waffling about forests being homes for birds and animals - not if they are Sitka spruce, they are not. These plantations are biodiversity dead zones and should never be promoted as a solution to the climate or biodiversity crisis. Deputy Michael Healy-Rae might have resigned but his cynical pro-business greenwashing attitude lives on. It is shown in the Government's amendment, which ignores the core demand of this motion, that is, for the Government to recommit to reducing carbon emissions by 51% by 2030, a supposedly legally binding commitment. Instead, we get vague waffle about being "fully committed to ... climate ambition". However, the only semi-concrete target mentioned is climate neutrality by 2050. The Government is also trumpeting an €18.9 billion investment in the national grid. What it fails to mention is that this will be swallowed up by data centres, just like they have swallowed up the increase in renewable energy in recent years. The Government has gone all-in on the AI bubble, so all this grid expansion will go to big tech too and it wants workers to pay for it through higher household energy bills.

That is what People Before Profit's amendments are about. We say ordinary people should not have to pay for a climate crisis caused by capitalism. It is why we have always opposed the carbon tax - not just increases to it, but the entire tax. It is time to make big polluters pay. The Green Party motion notes the rapid growth in data centres in Ireland will lead to increased household energy prices. It leaves out that it has done that already, including under the previous Green Party coalition, and it does nothing to fix it. Our amendments are about banning the building of any more data centres, taxing existing data centres to fund a €500 energy credit for households and making sure data centres pay the same price for electricity as households and not half price as they do currently. Our amendments also call for making public transport free and the expansion of bus and rail services. It makes no sense that during a fuel crisis, the Government is cutting taxes on petrol and diesel, which we welcome, but doing nothing to incentivise people to use public transport. Fares are being abolished in Australia in response to the current energy crisis. The same needs to happen here.

Deputy Charles Ward: I thank Deputy O'Gorman and his staff for bringing forward this important motion. I particularly want to share my concern that despite a target of 5 GW of offshore wind energy by 2030, no offshore wind projects have been delivered. Ireland has huge potential to become a global leader in wind energy, particularly through offshore developments. County Donegal has immense potential given where it is situated and the amount of wind we gather off the Atlantic Ocean and it would benefit hugely from developing offshore wind.

I have spoken previously about the severe deterioration of the fishing industry and what we have seen in recent years. Due to the decline, many fishers are forced to find work abroad. Given the nature of the work and their area of expertise, naturally many of them look for offshore work, but instead of availing of work in Ireland, they are forced to go away to England, Scotland and Germany. The Minister of State would be shocked to know how many constituents in Donegal have to go abroad to find maritime work. Given that we are an island nation with huge volumes of wind and marine resources, surely we should be able to provide plenty of work here. Surely fishing towns in Donegal such as Killybegs and Greencastle would be prime spots in which to develop offshore wind energy, but once again, we have been held back by a lack of infrastructure.

In a session of the Joint Committee on Fisheries and Maritime Affairs, I was told by Wind Energy Ireland that Donegal has the wind and good water depths, particularly inshore towards Donegal Bay.

At present, it is challenging for us to generate offshore energy in Donegal because of the electricity grid; it needs to be updated. The lack of grid is probably one of the biggest challenges facing us. To get electricity out of Donegal, we will need a stronger grid so investment is essential. We can harvest it but we cannot take it ashore.

In 2025, 13% of the cheapest electricity was wasted because of the grid. It is simply not strong enough to carry the power that comes from the wind farms and most of the wind farms are left dormant; they are not moving. We have had to switch the turbines off at time which is absolutely crazy when they could be generating power. The figure is significantly higher in the northwest where the electricity grid is at its weakest. It is a disgraceful waste when the potential is there, but we have to have the courage and to invest. We have to invest in the future, now. In Donegal, if we had a more advanced, up to date grid, that could handle this we could be in a prime location to harvest the power and take it ashore. The wind breaking technology is there. Wave breakers are all over the north of Scotland and they are generating power. We have to have the courage, we have to have the belief and deliver.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan): I move amendment No. 1:

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

"affirms that, the Government:

- is fully committed to delivering on Ireland's climate ambition across all sectors, and to progress climate action in a planned and coherent way in pursuit of the National Climate Objective of a climate neutral economy by 2050, in a way that ensures that sustainability, affordability, competitiveness and energy security are all central to our future climate planning; and
- is acutely aware of the impact on households and businesses of the recent increases in fuel prices, and is progressing both immediate and longer-term measures to support households with these costs;

notes that:

- work is ongoing across the Government to deliver on climate commitments and accelerate climate mitigation efforts every day, supported by unprecedented Government funding across the National Development Plan (NDP), which will fund major upgrades to deliver carbon emission reductions, including major public transport projects, more efficient public buildings, and supports an €18.9 billion investment into the Irish electricity grid;
- this Government is committed to the delivery of major public transport projects, the NDP Sectoral Investment Plan for Transport, published in November, provided €10.1 billion for public transport, as well as an additional €2 billion from the Infrastructure, Climate and Nature Fund to progress MetroLink, giving a total of €12.1 billion for public

transport, this compares to an allocation of approximately €8.7 billion for roads capital investment;

— the unprecedented €505 million worth of practical measures introduced by the Government on 12th April, included:

— further reductions in excise duty on diesel, petrol and marked gas oil (green diesel) in addition to a deferral of the planned increase in carbon tax, scheduled 1st May until October 2026; and

— reductions in excise duty, including the National Oil Reserves Agency levy reduction with effect from midnight on 14th April and will run until 31st July, 2026;

— Government will also be establishing a new road transporters' support scheme, as well as supports for coach operators providing local link services, at a cost of €40 million per month for three months;

— a comprehensive €100 million Fuel Subsidy Support Scheme to assist farmers, agricultural contractors and fishers will be put in place;

— this package of supports is in addition to the measures announced in March, which included:

— an expansion of the diesel rebate scheme, backdating it to January, to help sectors of the economy most impacted by the rise of fuel costs; and

— an extension of the fuel allowance season to help the most vulnerable with the cost of home heating;

— the Government has established the National Energy Affordability Taskforce, to identify and implement additional measures that will enhance energy affordability for households and businesses while delivering key renewable commitments and protecting security of supply and economic stability;

— the Environmental Protection Agency's most recent emissions reporting confirms progress in delivering on climate action and records that Ireland has recorded overall greenhouse gas emission reductions for a third consecutive year, with a decrease of 6.8 per cent in 2023 followed by a further 2 per cent reduction in 2024, this is despite the concurrent increase of approximately 1.5 million people, more than one million new homes and over one million extra vehicles on our roads;

— Ireland is a world leader in electricity generation from renewables which has increased fivefold since 2005, and that in February 2026 wind energy provided a record 50 per cent of the State's electricity;

— Ireland has now reached a record circa 8 gigawatts (GW) of renewable generation capacity, up from 4.8 GW in 2020, and renewable energy provided half of Ireland's energy in March 2026;

— the Government is committed to 5 GW of installed offshore wind capacity, with 5 Phase One projects all currently being progressed through the planning system, and the

Government is also aiming for 20 GW of offshore wind by 2040 to help power a new green industrial revolution;

— the Offshore Renewable Electricity Support Scheme Tonn Nua site, offshore wind auction was successfully concluded in November 2025; and

— the 2025 Zero-Emission Vehicle Intelligence target for electrical vehicle sales of 195,000 was surpassed in October 2025, and Electric Vehicle sales are now at over 227,000;

— the Climate Action Plan 2025 and its predecessor, Climate Action Plan 2024, provide a strong framework for continued delivery of climate action across all sectors each and every day, including measures and actions that are multi-annual in nature and effect, and the Government is committed to supporting their implementation;

— projected costs of compliance with the European Union (EU) climate and energy targets have not been confirmed at this point in time and that there are several routes to compliance available within the overarching EU framework, and the Government's focus is on implementing the measures at hand;

— the Critical Infrastructure Bill 2026 is a targeted piece of legislation that allows the Government to designate certain critical projects or programmes as critical infrastructure, including:

— grid infrastructure which is vital for Ireland's climate, societal and economic objectives, it does not seek to undermine the functioning of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act;

— climate considerations will continue to be fully integrated into decision-making processes, including through the planning system and national policy framework, even where limited and exceptional provisions apply;

— the Government's position on the need for a State-operated Strategic Gas Emergency Reserve, in the form Liquified Natural Gas, has been clear - it is a priority project of a strategic nature required to mitigate the major consequences for our society and our economy that would arise if Ireland was to experience an interruption to our gas supplies via subsea interconnection;

— the proposed Dublin Airport (Passenger Cap) Bill 2026 will enable the sustainable development of Dublin Airport, with full regard to environmental constraints, legal obligations, and the independent regulatory role of the Irish Aviation Authority, while supporting national connectivity and economic resilience;

— the National Residential Retrofit Plan 2026, announced on 27th January, introduced a number of new and expanded measures to make energy upgrades more affordable, and accessible to many more homeowners;

— in Budget 2026, the Government provided a record allocation of €640 million, targeting 73,000 home energy upgrades this year, this includes a record €340 million for the Warmer Homes Scheme which provides fully funded upgrades for those in energy poverty and will target 11,500 upgrades this year;

- capital expenditure of over €1.7 billion has delivered over 257,500 home energy upgrades from 2019 to end Q1 2026, and there are already over 170,000 heat pumps in existing homes and businesses across the country;
- the 4th National Biodiversity Action Plan, which was published in January 2024, strives for a 'whole-of-Government, whole-of-society' approach to the governance and conservation of biodiversity;
- the finalisation of the Report for Phase 2 of the National Land Use Review is advancing with a view to publishing later this year;
- work is ongoing on the general scheme of the Bill to amend the Maritime Area Planning Act 2021, to provide for marine protected area designation through the National Designated Maritime Area Plan (DMAP) process with a view to bringing forward proposals this year; and
- the MPA LIFE Ireland project (2024-2033) has been working at a practical level to help deliver Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) in Ireland in line with the DMAP process and the principles of public participation, co-design, co-development and co-delivery, this nine-year €25 million project co-funded by the EU will focus on the social, economic and ecological dimensions of MPA designation."

I very much welcome any opportunity to discuss sustainability, renewable energy, opportunities to reduce emissions and, of course, biodiversity and nature restoration. It strikes me, though, that we do not debate nature restoration and biodiversity enough in the House. Even in the 20 minutes the Opposition had to put forward their case on the motion, which alludes to nature restoration, ten seconds of it referenced biodiversity in nature. In fairness, Deputy Murphy referenced MPAs, Sitka spruce plantations and water quality but Deputy O'Gorman had ten minutes to begin and did not reference nature and biodiversity. It strikes me how low a priority nature and nature restoration are on the Opposition benches.

That said, I welcome the opportunity to discuss the motion. The Government has tabled a countermotion. We must oppose this motion because it calls for a restatement of commitments already in law, does not reflect established statutory and parliamentary processes and fails to acknowledge the significant body of work under way across government.

Let me be clear from the outset that the Government is fully committed to delivering on Ireland's climate ambition across all sectors, and to progressing climate action in a planned and coherent way. Our approach ensures that sustainability, affordability, competitiveness and energy security remain central to policy. We are also acutely aware of the impact on households and businesses of recent increases in energy and fuel prices. Energy affordability is a core priority and that is why we have taken action by introducing one of the most comprehensive support packages in the European Union.

The motion draws attention to concerns regarding the State's current trajectory, suggesting a lack of progress. The facts, however, demonstrate a very different reality. The EPA's most recent emissions report confirms our progress, recording overall greenhouse gas, GHG, emission reductions for a third consecutive year. We saw a decrease of 6.8% in 2023, followed by a further 2% reduction in 2024. Ireland now has the lowest level of GHG emissions in 35

years, despite the concurrent increase of approximately 1.5 million people, the construction of more than 1 million new homes and over 1 million additional vehicles on our roads.

Work is ongoing across government every single day to accelerate climate mitigation efforts. We are undergoing a renewables-led energy transformation. Ireland is a world leader in renewable electricity generation, which has increased fivefold since 2005. We have now reached approximately 8 GW of renewable generation capacity, up significantly from 2020 levels. In February this year, wind energy provided a record 50% of the State's electricity.

The Government is prioritising offshore wind, with five phase one projects currently progressing through the planning system. The offshore renewable electricity support scheme, ORESS, Tonn Nua offshore wind auction concluded successfully last year and will make a major contribution to Ireland's clean electricity supply. We are also advancing the solar for schools programme, which successfully completed installations in over 2,000 schools as of 2025. To attract the next generation of investment in strategic energy-intensive sectors, our large energy user action plan is deploying a plan-led approach to co-ordinate the delivery of key enabling infrastructure, ensuring that long-term industrial growth is fully aligned with Ireland's green transition.

To support this rapid transition, we are backing our ambitions with unprecedented investment. The Government has approved an unprecedented €18.9 billion investment in the electricity grid. In the transport sector, the national development plan sectoral investment plan provided €10.1 billion for public transport, alongside major projects such as MetroLink and the DART+ programme. Electric vehicle uptake also continues to grow.

We are delivering warmer, more comfortable homes through the national residential retrofit plan. Since 2019, more than 257,500 home energy upgrades have been delivered. In budget 2026, the Government provided a record allocation of €640 million, targeting 73,000 home energy upgrades this year. This funding includes a record €340 million for the warmer homes scheme, supporting those experiencing energy poverty.

I want to speak to what we are doing on biodiversity and nature. I fully accept and appreciate, as the Minister of State with responsibility for this area, that we have a massive tide to turn in terms of the loss of species and of habitats. We are leaving no stone unturned when it comes to restoring nature. We will soon have an amendment to the Maritime Area Planning Act 2021 where we will see MPA legislation included. This will set the way very shortly after for MPAs to be designated.

For the first time ever, in budget 2026 there was an allocation of €100 million for the National Parks and Wildlife Service, which allows us to put in place a structure where we can restore nature across the board. I will give a brief example of what this looks like. I recently visited counties Galway and Mayo where I saw the extraordinary work being done by the Wild Atlantic Nature LIFE project there. They are investing in the restoration of habitats and the removal of invasive species. There are so many wins in this approach. First, the farmer or landowner is getting paid to participate in this scheme, so they win. Second, the local development companies are leading out on this. The local development companies who employ so many people locally are administering and putting in place the measures to ensure this can be done at scale. One of the big benefits is that the same farmers and fishermen, who are in the west where it can be more difficult to earn a decent income, are the ones being

employed directly by the local development partnership to actually carry out this work, including to remove invasive species and restore peatland habitats, for example. We will increase the scale of this; we will scale it up. There are even more benefits because the rhododendrons they are removing is being processed and turned into a biochar, which has so many benefits for farming and renewable energy. To say there is nothing happening in that area would be completely unfair and the advisory committee's recommendations will be published shortly.

Despite this substantial body of work, the motion presents several demands that are either unnecessary, inaccurate or premature. First, it calls on the Government to recommit to the legally binding target of a 51% emissions reduction by 2030. As that target already is provided for in law under the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015, no further recommitment is required.

Second, the motion expresses concern that the Critical Infrastructure Bill 2026 limits the effectiveness of the climate Act. This is incorrect. The Bill is a targeted measure to accelerate delivery of certain critical projects including vital grid infrastructure. It does not seek to undermine the functioning of the climate Act nor does it disapply climate obligations. Climate considerations will continue to apply through planning and wider statutory processes. Many of the projects that will be supported by this Bill are of strategic importance to the State's climate action ambition, including critical electricity infrastructure and public transport projects. Without these projects, we will not be able to meet our overall climate targets and delays in their delivery will have significant negative consequences in this regard.

Third, the motion mischaracterises the proposed strategic gas emergency reserve. The Government's position on this has been clear. This is a priority project of a strategic nature required to mitigate the major consequences for our society and our economy that would arise if Ireland were to experience an interruption to our gas supplies via subsea interconnection. It is a State-led, transitional reserve intended strictly for emergency use and it will be divested when it is no longer required to secure our energy systems.

Fourth, the motion demands the immediate implementation of the recommendations of the independent advisory committee on nature restoration. We have not published the recommendations yet.

This will be launched on 29 April and anyone who wishes to attend is more than welcome.

Fifth, the motion calls for the removal of provisions from the draft legislation that limit the effectiveness of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act. It is a matter for the Oireachtas through the established legislative processes to scrutinise proposed legislation as it is progressed through the various stages. It is through these established democratic procedures that legislative proposals are examined, refined and determined, rather than through sweeping motions that overlook existing statutory frameworks. The Government's counter-motion reflects the reality of the decisive actions already being taken and the commitments already in place. It offers a balanced, practical and deliverable path forward. We are making tangible, measurable progress in reducing emissions, expanding renewable energy, improving affordability and advancing the conservation of our biodiversity.

We have the plans, the legislative framework and the unprecedented investment in place to deliver on our climate ambitions. I reiterate that the Government rejects the Independent and

Parties Technical Group motion and proposes a Government counter-motion that more accurately reflects the reality of the situation.

Deputy Seamus Healy: The programme for Government commits to intensifying the transition to lower cost renewables and electricity generation and to transitioning away from imported fossil fuels. We can see just how expensive fossil fuels can be since the illegal US war on Iran, just how dependent we are on them and how vulnerable that makes us to price shocks. Successive Governments have been too slow to move away from expensive, imported fossil fuels and worse still, are now reversing the existing policy.

The Government must expedite investment in our renewable energy infrastructure to insulate us from the worst impacts of the turmoil of a world oil supply shock. In the long run, the only way to prepare for future energy shocks is to invest substantially in our energy infrastructure. Offshore wind and wave power should be the priority and funds from the Infrastructure, Climate and Nature Fund should be used for that. The energy crisis and climate change disproportionately impact the most marginalised. Efforts to address climate change, like carbon tax, the cost of retrofitting and electric cars, also affect PAYE workers, one-parent families, carers, the disabled and older people the most. A total of 29% of households are in energy poverty, 300,000 families are in arrears with their electricity bills and 180,000 are in arrears with gas bills. As a result, the just transition measures are absolutely vital.

Low-cost, even free, public transport is a key issue in climate policy, particularly in constituencies like Tipperary South where public transport is limited, to say the least. If you work in south Tipperary in somewhere like Clonmel and work in any of the local industries like Abbott; Boston Scientific; Merck, Sharp and Dohme; Medite of Europe; Tipperary County Council; or Tipperary University Hospital, you must drive to work. Low-cost or free public transport must be put in place. The town bus service in Clonmel has been an outstanding success and this service should be rolled out to other areas in the town, like Old Bridge, Powerstown, Redmondstown and Clerihan. Crucially, it should be extended to other towns in the county, like Carrick-on-Suir, Cahir, Cashel, Tipperary town and Fethard. This would be hugely advantageous from a climate point of view and also from a societal point of view.

The Government will fail dismally to meet the retrofitting targets of 500,000 home retrofits and 400,000 heat pumps by 2030. These schemes must be ramped up considerably and delays under the warmer home scheme - a very good scheme - are unacceptable. Two years is not simply good enough. The retrofitting of local authority houses must also be put in place. It is currently moving at a snail's pace and is almost non-existent. The projected budget surplus of an additional €4 billion must be used to do that.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I thank Deputy O'Gorman for bringing forward this important motion. He is absolutely right to highlight the need for the Government to recommit in a serious way because it seems to have abandoned any serious effort to address the climate and biodiversity crisis that threatens our planet, threatens the ability of the planet to sustain human life in the long run and will certainly impose a huge cost on ordinary people unless it is addressed and addressed as a matter of urgency. It seems that this is one of the many areas in which this Government has bent the knee to Trump and his climate denialism, his warmongering and his obnoxious agenda in general. Pulling back from any serious efforts, giving up and abandoning to a significant extent attempts to deal with the climate and

biodiversity crisis is another one of those pretty pathetic submissions to the Trump agenda. You can look at what Trump's warmongering has now done. It is not only raining down death and destruction - by the way, all of that is an environmental disaster and if that level of militarism continues, the destruction of the climate is an absolute guarantee - but it is also imposing a huge economic and financial cost on ordinary people here. We saw the consequences of that.

We need to address this. That means recommitting to the climate targets and addressing biodiversity and things like the marine protected areas, which the Government has dragged its heels on. There is a pathetically low level of protection of our marine area and the biodiversity in it. What is absolutely critical - this is where I have a genuine disagreement with Deputy O'Gorman and others in the House, including on the left - is that it has to be a just transition. For the 320,000 people who are in electricity arrears, the 180,000 people who are in gas arrears and the one in four people who are suffering energy poverty, according to the ESRI, any further imposition on them of a financial cost over issues like energy flies in the face of any suggestion of a just transition. That is why we oppose the carbon tax.

You are discrediting the climate agenda by saying that ordinary people should pay carbon taxes when they are not profiting from the destruction of the environment. They have no choice about the energy they use. We should be targeting the people who profit from the destruction of the environment. That means the fossil fuel companies, the data centres and the people who are actually holding up the addressing of the climate and biodiversity crisis or, worse, profiting from it. We need to actively encourage people to buy into the green agenda by supporting things like free public transport, giving things like energy credits and rolling out free retrofits, which are paid for through progressive taxation. That is the sort of thing that can bring ordinary people on side with the urgent need to address the climate and biodiversity crisis.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I welcome the very comprehensive motion that has been set out by Deputy O'Gorman. It is now accepted that we will miss our 2030 binding target of a 51% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. At last, Ministers are accepting that. The Government has failed to develop offshore wind energy, anaerobic digestion and hydrogenation, and it is only starting with solar. This means just not climate and environmental damage but also economic damage. The Irish Fiscal Advisory Council and the Climate Change Advisory Council estimate that we face fines of between €8 billion and €26 billion due to our failure to meet our international obligations, which are also moral obligations. Meanwhile data centres continue to be built at pace. They are currently using almost one quarter of our electricity supply, but sure it is okay; we will supply them with electricity for roughly half the cost of what Joe and Mary Public pay in their household.

The next big, bright idea is that we will import fracked gas from America. During Trump's recent pronouncements, he said we need to do this. When the Taoiseach was over there, I heard him talking about it. We will have it in a floating terminal in the Shannon Estuary, even though the exploration and extraction of fracked gas is banned here. The latest one is the Critical Infrastructure Bill. This is the next thing coming down the line.

One section alone - section 7 - is there for no other purpose than to facilitate huge environmental destruction at the stroke of a Minister's pen and this needs to be stopped. It is clearly designed to override any environmental concerns the county councils, local

communities or anybody else has. The Minister can simply disregard the scientific evidence of extensive climate damage and overrule it. Guess what? It will facilitate private investors along with public projects.

It is clear what we are doing. We are dancing to the tune of the American Chamber of Commerce. We are being told our economic model is broken so we will just keep going with it; we will just keep jumping in. That is what the Government is doing here. Projects will be given the green light and planners at local authority level and scientists will just have to look on in horror. Data centres, fracked gas terminals and all sorts of dodgy mining will be made easy. Instead, the Government should speed up the delivery of offshore wind energy, wave energy, anaerobic digestion which it has completely ignored, hydro which it has completely ignored, and solar which is only moving at a snail's pace. It should ease the tax burden on HVO fuels for heavy transport and buses. It needs to expand the home retrofit scheme to reduce the amount of fuel used and speed up the warmer home scheme.

Deputy Pa Daly: World Earth Day is a day that should be about hope, urgency and leadership but the truth is that the Government has failed on climate action. It has failed on fairness and has failed on any kind of just transition. If emissions continue on their current path, climate change will have profound consequences for Ireland. We can see the warning signs already: more frequent flooding; stronger storms along the coasts; rising sea levels threatening coastal communities; and increased pressure on farming from unpredictable weather, drought and flooding. Our food system, biodiversity, water quality and public health will all be put at risk, and Irish towns will face repeated flood damage. These impacts are not distant or abstract; they are happening now.

There was some mention earlier of plantations and biodiversity. Nowhere is this more real or apparent than in the tributaries of the River Feale in Listowel, the Abha Bheag and the Smearlagh. Not only has the biodiversity been decimated in that area in that there are no brown trout left in the rivers, but it has been completely wrecked by the plantations of Sitka spruce. We saw the flooding in Listowel two weeks before the election which has not yet been analysed in the reports that have been published. Because of the plantations, because of the vertical drainage, a surge came from heavy rain and flooded two or three parts of Listowel town. That has never been addressed but I would put it down directly to the plantations upriver. As I said, the impacts are not distant; they are happening now.

Ambitious climate action is not optional; it is essential. Acting now means protecting communities, safeguarding rural livelihoods and ensuring that energy security in an unstable world is prioritised. There should be ambition but there should also be fairness. Climate action will only succeed if it brings people with it. Lowering energy bills, expanding affordable alternatives, investing in renewables, resilience and ambitious transition is the only way to protect Ireland's future while no one is left behind. Unfortunately, the record of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael on climate action is littered with missed targets and broken promises. They promised that today's pain would bring progress tomorrow. They assured us that carbon taxes would change behaviour and they consoled us in the face of skyrocketing prices by telling us that better things were around the corner, but that is incorrect. Ordinary people are paying the price because we have not seen a just transition. In fact, it is the opposite; ordinary people are being punished by Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and even the Greens, all because they cannot afford to transition.

Sinn Féin recognises the magnitude of what is before us. We see that urgent and ambitious action must be taken. We have to get it right and we are not going to do that with the approach that has been taken to date. This is eco-austerity. Sinn Féin has repeatedly warned the House from the very beginning that the Government's approach could never work due to the inequitable outcomes. Regressive measures that prioritise eco-austerity over just transition produce growing resentment and fear among ordinary people. They fail to leverage climate action and actually set us back.

As the criticisms grow, it is getting harder for the Government to ignore the mounting evidence. We are deeply dependent on imported fossil fuels, emissions reductions are lagging, climate targets are slipping and energy independence is starting to look like another opportunity that has been let slip through the Government's fingers. That is the legacy of this Government.

The reality of what people are dealing with in the cost-of-living crisis is that families are being crushed. The balance is not right and Government is completely out of touch. We have the highest electricity prices in the European Union. While households are being fleeced, giant data centres are getting sweetheart deals. Families are paying six to eight times more in network charges than data centres. Let us call it what it is. Households are paying for grid updates driven by massive corporate demand and corporations are not paying their fair share. That is a political choice made by this Government. The solutions are there to end the rip-off but the political will is not.

After the war in Ukraine and now what is happening in the Middle East, global instability is being exploited and corporations are cashing in. Still, for three years the Government has failed or refused to give the energy regulator extra powers to tackle price gouging and anti-competitive behaviour. Sinn Féin would act to regulate standing charges, enhance transparency and make sure that the biggest users of energy pay their fair share because households should not be doing it. There is a design flaw in the energy system that is not designed to serve the people. As I said, we are dangerously overdependent on imported fossil fuels with 94% of imported energy fossil-fuel based. There is a clear way out of this which is the delivery of Irish energy independence, not as one Government Minister says by sitting on their hands and navel gazing about offshore wind but delivering.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Climate change has real and profound implications for us here in Ireland and right across the world. Here in Ireland, as globally, it is most likely those on the lowest incomes and the poorest who will potentially pay the highest price. I think the Irish people understand that very clearly. Sometimes when listening to these debates, we might imagine that the Irish people are yet to be persuaded that climate change is real and we need to tackle it. I do not believe that is the case. Of course, there will always be a need to continue to highlight these issues but in my experience, people are more aware than ever. I see more enthusiasm for tiny towns, biodiversity projects and river cleaning than I have ever experienced.

However, the frustration people have is that they feel their efforts are not only being undermined but being completely wiped out ten times over by the policies of this Government. The efforts that people make by recycling, reducing their energy and upgrading their homes disappear into a puff of vapour when compared with sweetheart deals that are being provided for data centres. We have the absolutely glacial pace of delivery of retrofitting and likewise

with renewable energy. Of course, it is frustrating for people when they are making these efforts when they are trying to make decisions in their own life and they are seeing the effective subsidisation of these enormous energy consumers, such as data centres. We have some of the highest energy prices in Europe particularly when it comes to electricity and people are absolutely crippled with it. This affects domestic users and also small and medium-sized businesses. When I talk to the owners of small and medium-sized businesses about the pressures they face, energy costs are right up there and nowhere near enough is being done.

What is happening with renewables is incredibly frustrating. We could have had the same debate ten years ago and we would be saying every community building and school across the State should have solar panels and they should be supported to do so. A comparatively very small number of them do, even though the appetite is there, because the Government schemes are not there to support it. Looking at the current crisis that we face, we are more vulnerable than most countries across Europe to rising oil and gas prices because of the Government's failure. Companies that have looked to invest in wind energy, particularly floating offshore wind, have taken their resources and invested elsewhere because the pace is so slow here.

The Government is set to miss its 2030 targets by a country mile. The opportunities for Ireland are huge as well as our obligations in terms of reducing emissions. Tá deis dhochreidte ann, go mór mór timpeall an chósta, do phobail, do chathracha agus do bhailte ach níl an Rialtas ag baint buntáiste aisti. Níl sé sin maith go leor. Ordinary Irish consumers will pay the price and the planet will pay the price for the failure to deliver on renewables. It is totally inadequate.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: As the Minister of State knows, housing is the number one social crisis currently affecting the State and the cost-of-living crisis is the most immediate economic challenge. However, climate change represents an existential challenge, not just in this country but across the entire planet.

We can see every single day the impacts in urban and rural Ireland as well as elsewhere in the world of the failure of governments, particularly those in wealthy countries, to meet their emissions reductions targets. As others have said before, this Government is on course to miss its targets. They are not just legally binding targets; they are scientifically established targets for emissions reductions to deal with the threat of climate change. To make matters worse, the Government is pursuing a policy that is heaping the majority of the cost of emissions reductions on families, workers, and small and medium-sized businesses. That is imposing enormous pain, particularly at a time of a cost-of-living crisis. Then, of course, there are others in this House and outside it who want to minimise, if not outright deny, the fact that climate change is real. They want to simply continue as things are. The consequence of Government failure and climate denial by others is that public confidence in meaningful climate action is being undermined.

The solution, of course, and what people are calling for, is the just transition outlined by my colleagues and others. That is front-loading investment in critical renewable energy, in public transport and in a retrofit programme that meets people's needs, not one based on their ability to pay, and prioritises energy for households, employers and workers, not data centres.

There is a relationship between this and the protests that have taken place across the State in recent times. While they are primarily about the failure of the Government to tackle the cost-of-living crisis, they are being exacerbated by its climate policies: overdependence on

fossil fuels, failure to provide adequate green transport infrastructure or public transport infrastructure, and just not listening to communities. Aidan Regan, a political economist from UCD, made a very interesting observation recently. He said governments here and elsewhere are faced with a trilemma in that they are trying to reconcile three irreconcilables: a model of economic growth that is deeply unfair and unsustainable, and a climate policy focused on carbon taxes and pricing, heaping the burden on workers and families, all the while undermining public confidence in democracy. He makes an appeal for a change and for progressive politicians to build an alternative alliance, one that focuses climate mitigation costs on the very wealthy corporations and individuals, provides a just green transition for workers and families and restores proper democracy. That is the solution to this crisis.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: The question is: where is the just transition? The people out there do not feel it and do not see it. I do not know how many times I have used the term in here. We talk about Ireland being a wind superpower but that is all we are talking about. We will talk about the difficulties that arose when switching from developer-led to planning-led systems but the fact is that we have not been able to fundamentally make use of that one serious resource we have in the form of wind. I have not seen any adequate speed-up or streamlining of the system to improve this. We do this at a time when we have seen multiple reasons to do it on the basis of, obviously, improving the environment, even from an energy security point of view, the issues that have arisen in relation to the Russian war against Ukraine and the absolutely disastrous, illegal war being fought by the Americans at the behest of Israel against Iran. We do not even know long term where that will go.

Obviously, it is very hard not to talk at this point in time about the fuel protests. That is accepting that we are not in a world where renewables can offer solutions that are necessary as regards vehicular transport from the point of view of farmers and hauliers at this point in time. We know, however, that we could separate out our reliance on fossil fuels from an energy production point of view. That, at least from the State's point of view, would be a real win but again when we talk about just transition, the Government, in its defence of carbon taxes, will talk about the retrofit scheme. As Deputy Ó Broin said, the problem with the retrofit scheme is that it has looked after those who can afford to pay the most, so we are probably looking at some of the best houses in least need of retrofitting getting the most money from this State. It did not go to the people who needed it most.

Then, at times, we have people put under severe pressure, whether we are talking about the burning of turf or any other issues. We have not dealt with the absolute price gouging that has gone on from energy firms in relation to those who are hurting the most. I do not know how many times Deputy Pa Daly and others have been in here speaking about the need to deal with standing charges and about the CRU having greater powers to address any of these issues. That is before we get into the issues of flooding and the mitigations and protections we know about because of changed circumstances. Again, this Government has dithered and taken far too long.

What we need to see are real movement and supports for people because none of this is good enough. Unfortunately, it is a continuity of failure.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: We have an incredible opportunity here for energy security and independence because of our massive wind resource, offshore wind in particular. We have the

opportunity to democratise our energy system, give people cheaper bills and, more importantly, give them ownership of the energy system. We have the opportunity to deliver warmer homes, retrofitted homes, a public transport system that is accessible and affordable and, most importantly, the building of sustainable communities. That is what we can do and what we need to do.

The Government, however, has taken an entirely different approach. It has taken the approach of targets that it has failed to meet at every hand's turn. It has taken the approach of pontification and hypocrisy, with one rule for households and another rule for data centres and large commercial enterprises. There is no greater example of that than carbon tax. It has almost come to the point that you are not serious about climate action unless you support carbon tax but let us look at the Irish carbon tax and how it is employed.

New research from Trinity College Dublin published in the *Energy Research & Social Science* paper lays bare the deep inequity at the heart of the Irish Government's approach and the Irish carbon tax. The study finds that adoption of sustainable technologies like heat pumps, solar panels and electric vehicles is overwhelmingly concentrated in affluent areas. It says that disadvantaged communities are being left behind by rates five to seven times lower than wealthier areas. The pay-then-reimburse grant model system disproportionately benefits those who can afford high upfront costs. The Government's approach locks out renters, people living in apartments and low-income households. Instead of a just transition, we see a two-tier system where the wealthy get the supports to go green while everyone else is left to foot the bill through higher taxes. That is the reality. In effect, it is a massive transfer of wealth. Those people who are proposing and supporting a carbon tax should say if they are net beneficiaries of the carbon tax and if they are being subsidised in terms of purchase of electric vehicles or retrofitting. Have they drawn down thousands of euro in taxpayers' money while at the same time the rural dweller is left as a massive net contributor? It is a massive transfer of wealth and a deep inequity at the heart of this Government.

Deputy David Cullinane: I welcome the opportunity to have a debate here on climate action and commend the Green Party on bringing forward this motion. The frustration for me when we have debates on climate action is that, in part, yes, the debate is framed around carbon taxes, which is one part of the overall strategy, and we have our view on whether or not it is effective, which was very clearly set out by my colleague an Teachta O'Rourke. The other is that we have a discussion about high-level targets which we never meet. Any climate action target I have ever seen this State commit to we have not met it. I do not see a sense in our continuously setting high-level targets which we cannot reach and not having a debate about how we will actually meet them or having concrete plans, Department by Department, area by area, as to what we are doing and what we can do to meet those targets.

I will give one example of this in my constituency because it is really important to me and I have been out there a number of times and am a really big supporter of it. I refer to Waterford Port. Waterford Port and, indeed, Rosslare Europort in Wexford are uniquely placed to play a really strong part in offshore renewable energy. They want to do it. They have the capacity to do it. They have the ability to do it, the plans and the drive, and it would be transformative for Waterford and for the south-east region.

11 o'clock

In fact, if we want Waterford to become a zero-carbon city, then this is the game-changer. The port has submitted its landmark planning application to An Coimisiún Pleanála. It is a multimillion euro terminal that is being proposed at Belview. The Maritime Area Regulatory Authority, MARA, has granted the maritime area consent. The plans consist of a 250 m extension of the existing wharfs, land reclamation, more operational facilities, office space, a new electric substation and solar panels for enhanced solar power, so it is transformative. Here we have a port that wants to play its part. It is moving through the planning process; I get that. However, there is a concern, as with lots of these big projects, and I think this is critical, that in the final analysis it may not get the backing and the funding from the Department and Government that it needs. I want the Government to prove everybody wrong. It goes back to what I said. High-level targets are one thing. Here is a plan, a planning application and a funding ask that will come very quickly and will be transformative.

The proof of the pudding will be in the eating. If we are serious about this, the Government will fund it. I want to impress upon the Minister and the Government the importance of this for Waterford and the south east. For those of us who will go out and aggressively sell the advantages of offshore renewable wind, there will be some kickback, as there always is. I will be one of those who will go out and say what we need. We need to have the backing of the Government and the Departments to make this happen when push comes to shove.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta O'Gorman agus an Comhaontas Glas as an rún den scoth seo a chur chun cinn. Tá sé tráthúil agus Lá Domhanda na Cruinne á cheiliúradh againn inniu. Tacóidh Páirtí an Lucht Oibre leis an rún.

This motion provides a stark picture of just how far we have slipped and continue to slip in terms of our climate goals. I have been really struck by how little emphasis the Government has placed on our response to what is the greatest existential crisis we face not just as a country but as a planet, and it is a climate and biodiversity crisis. I was listening to the Minister of State, Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan's, comments earlier about the lack of focus on biodiversity in the Opposition. That could be not be further from the truth and I am disappointed the Minister of State is not here for this. This Government, which the Minister of State is a part of, is determined to systematically destroy biodiversity in this country by ignoring and actively disapplying environmental laws and environmental considerations when it comes to critical infrastructure.

The Government is scapegoating environmental law for its own failures to deliver and undermining laws that were designed to protect our biodiversity and our natural environment. This Government wants to import hugely polluting fracked gas via a new LNG terminal. These two issues alone have huge impacts on our biodiversity and we are fighting against this in opposition all the time. This Government has also extended the nitrates directive, despite the fact that the quality of water in our waterways and lakes continues to decline. At the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Climate, Environment and Energy, which I am privileged to be a part of, we have tried to shine a light on the huge destruction of biodiversity and nature going on in various locations like Lady's Island Lake in Wexford and the Blackwater river in Cork. We have investigated the large-scale, illegal commercial extraction of peat for export and profit, destroying our bogs and peatland habitats, as well as undermining our vital carbon sinks. The committee has investigated the EU's proposal to eliminate the LIFE programme, the only

dedicated fund in Europe for nature restoration and a scheme that has major positive impacts on biodiversity and nature restoration projects across Ireland.

Later today, we will be looking into salmon conservation. I have not seen the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, at any of our climate committee hearings on biodiversity. As the Chief Whip said to another Deputy yesterday, you do not need to be a member of committee to attend it. We would welcome the Minister of State's input. I know he has a genuine passion for and dedication to biodiversity and nature. I would like to support him in his role but I would suggest that rather than criticising the Opposition, his efforts would be better placed in trying to ensure that our Government focuses on biodiversity issues being raised by the Opposition and regularly at the climate committee on a cross-party basis. He should ensure that the EPA, the National Parks and Wildlife Service, county councils and other institutions are resourced to effectively enforce our climate and nature laws. What we have seen from this Government over the past year and a half is climate backsliding, both in terms of our level of ambition and in terms of the actual numbers. Of course, rhetorically this Government remains committed to our climate ambitions and it recognises the importance of decarbonising our economy and our energy sector and so on, but it undermines it every day of the week. It is laid out plainly in this motion and I commend Deputy O'Gorman on putting together a compilation of this Government's willful failures, its greatest hits when it comes to climate, energy and the environment.

Alarm bells have been going off more or less since day one of this Government. Let us take the removal of the 2:1 spending ratio on public transport to new roads in the programme for Government, for example. Clearly, this is a very regressive move, particularly given the positive steps that had been taken by the previous Government in the investment and roll-out of more public transport services in rural areas, the reduction in fares, etc. Transport remains the second highest emitting sector in our economy. Decarbonising it to the greatest extent possible would go a long way to helping us reach our climate goals, not to mention the associated public health and quality-of-life benefits and the improvements it could have on congestion on our roads. However, at a time when we are trying to see a modal shift away from private car use towards greener, more sustainable modes of transport like buses, rail, cycling, walking and so on, the Government's major change in policy was to pour more concrete and tar, which is just a bit depressing.

Public transport projects like DART+ Southwest, projects that would have a real positive impact on people's lives, are unfortunately just getting pushed back. Even on a more local level for me and for the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, we have heard absolutely nothing about the programme for Government commitment to carry out a new independent feasibility study for an extension of a metro out to Dublin South West. It is looking like we will finally be able to say with some degree of confidence that construction on the MetroLink will begin soon and that is very welcome, but we now need to start looking ahead and we should be looking in the direction of Dublin South West. My frustration with these delays and the Government's apparent lack of urgency in delivering these public transport projects is not purely from a climate perspective. Reliable, efficient and affordable public transport is a quality-of-life issue too, and our cities are completely gridlocked. Dublin is the third most congested city in the world and people are wasting hours of their lives sitting in traffic every day, every week.

At the end of last year, Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, threw up the white flag on the M50, effectively saying there is nothing more it can do to address traffic congestion. A Galway bypass has recently been approved. This will be welcome in the short term but what happens when that road inevitably gets clogged with more traffic just like the M50 and every road we build? Where is the plan for the Galway Luas? Where is the plan for better buses, like the express service from Oranmore to the city centre that Councillor Helen Ogbu is pushing for? We saw the plan for the Cork Luas published last week, which is great but we need to see urgency from the Government to get it delivered.

Energy is, of course, on everyone's mind at the moment. In the Labour Party we have been clear that this needs to be a moment of revolution in our energy system. What we are experiencing at present is not an energy crisis; it is a fossil fuel crisis. Many of us have been sounding the alarm about our dependence on oil and gas for years from a climate perspective, but the last number of weeks have illustrated in no uncertain terms that there are also financial costs associated with our continued dependence on oil and gas. That is aside from any fines we might get from the EU for not reaching our climate targets. Ordinary workers, households and small businesses are now paying the price for our overreliance on dirty fossil fuels. I was really glad to hear an acknowledgement from the Tánaiste yesterday morning that our dependence on fossil fuels is not sustainable, but the inertia we have seen in this area so far can no longer be tolerated. The events of the last few weeks have exposed just how scandalous it is that we have not added a single watt of energy from offshore wind to our grid in 20 years. Our most abundant renewable resource remains largely untapped offshore. We are certainly not going to reach our 2030 target, which was set in the previous programme for Government and the 2021 climate action plan of achieving 5 GW of offshore renewable capacity by 2030. The Minister is now framing that target to deliver 5 GW as being to have them under construction by 2030. That seems to be the best we can hope for. There has been no urgency to build up our renewable capacity. No great effort has been made to wean us off the fossil fuels that are not just harming our environment but causing real financial pain for workers and families up and down the country.

The latest exercise in climate backsliding we have seen from this Government is an attack on our climate laws. It does not want to bother with the climate Act any more. It is just an inconvenience. Instead of addressing our infrastructure deficits, the Government is scapegoating environmental concerns and judicial reviews.

There are any number of reasons that it takes time to deliver large projects here but dumping on environmentalists and environmental law is just dishonest. The Government is looking for someone or something to blame for its failure to properly resource our planning authorities, regulatory bodies and courts over the last ten years. None of the delays to the national children's hospital will be because of environmental objections.

Section 15 of the climate Act is there to ensure that our public bodies account for the fact that we are living through a climate and biodiversity crisis and that the decisions we take now will determine whether things get better or worse. There are also serious constitutional questions about this move. If it is to be the case that a designation by the Minister or the Government means that a core statutory duty, such as that contained in section 15 of the climate Act, can be disapplied, there would essentially be unfettered discretion, enabling selective exemption from legislation. Such a power has already been tested in the Supreme Court, where

the case for it failed. Essentially, if the Bill allows the Executive to decide which projects are critical and therefore freed from climate constraints, the Government is effectively deciding when and to whom the law applies. That is not acceptable. This Government has unfortunately shown a total disregard for our existing laws, particularly environmental provisions.

I will reiterate my strong support for this motion. I could go on but I will finish by again stating that the story of this Government when it comes to climate is one of backsliding, a lack of seriousness and great rhetoric that is then undermined in practical actions. It is a story of a government without ambition on climate.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I welcome this motion and thank the Green Party for bringing it forward. I absolutely agree that the energy crisis is a climate crisis, but it is also a social justice crisis. The reason we are here and the reason so many people are at the mercy of global and international fossil fuel shocks is that this Government and the previous Government did not put in place plans to insulate communities and homeowners from these energy shocks. It is not the case that we did not have warnings previously. After the invasion of Ukraine, we saw incredible increases in the price of electricity and gas. It was at that time that the Government should have put in place measures to insulate and future-proof homes and to protect those who are least able to weather these shocks.

We in the Social Democrats put out a press release in September 2022 that called for the Government to urgently ramp up investment in social energy, double grants for solar panels and give free panels to those who were eligible for the warmer homes schemes. I spoke about how not implementing proper large-scale investment in solar was a wasted opportunity. Some 1 million homes in Ireland were suitable for solar panels and should have been eligible. If the Government had listened at that time, this country would be in a much better position to weather the current shock.

That was a wasted opportunity on the part of the previous Government. Only last week, the Social Democrats reiterated our calls for large-scale investment in solar so that everybody can avail of its benefits. I refer not just to those who are financially secure but also to those who rely on supports, including disability supports and fuel allowance, and those families who are working but who find it difficult to invest in future-proofing their homes because they are worried about paying rent, their mortgage or for childcare. People do not have money sitting in their bank accounts that they could use for these measures. We ask that the Government support our calls and the calls in today's motion to really invest in solar because we cannot continue to go through this cycle of energy shock followed by failing people in our communities and placing the burden on them.

As it is Earth Day, I also want to talk about nature. We should not talk about climate and energy without also talking about nature. It is all inextricably linked. I have studied and worked in the area of environmental protection since I was 17. I have worked in a multitude of areas and I must say I find it very frustrating to see where we are now and how we have not used the last 30 or 40 years to protect our environment. I am really sick and tired of hearing governments say that they are supporting climate action and nature protection while doing the complete opposite. Last week in the Dáil, we debated Government-proposed measures that would undermine the climate Act, the very Act we brought in during the term of the last Dáil to protect against and mitigate the huge crisis that is the climate crisis. I am also sick and tired

of seeing governments using the environment purely for photo opportunities and greenwashing exercises. I am sick and tired of the disconnect between what is spoken in here and what happens on the ground.

I will give some very small illustrations of where we are going so wrong in this country. We have national parks without management plans and where nature is not prioritised. We have protected areas where there is no protection. Every year, the Minister of State responsible for biodiversity signs off on the hunting of endangered red-listed birds and other endangered and protected species. It just does not make sense.

Compartmentalising nature separately from everything else that we do just does not work. Nature, climate and environment have to span every single portfolio because unless we do it that way, we are never going to get this right, we are never going to make inroads and we are going to leave people and the environment behind. If we do not get this right, the environment will continue to regenerate, but our lives, energy security, food security, mental health and ability to engage with our environment and our neighbourhoods will be heavily impacted. It is all highly linked. I ask that when the Ministers are sitting at the Cabinet table, they try to incorporate nature, the environment and climate change. It is only then that we will manage to make inroads and make the changes. We cannot separate nature from everything else. It just does not work like that.

Deputy Liam Quaide: I thank Deputy O'Gorman for proposing this motion today. It is particularly welcome because the protection of our natural world and climate action are foundational to everything else but have dropped off the political agenda to an alarming degree.

Last week, near Cobh in my own constituency, constituents reported extensive hedgerow destruction during nesting season. The people who witnessed this activity were very distressed by what was happening. They reported it to the National Parks and Wildlife Service, which told them that it had no staff to send out to investigate. They also reported it to An Garda Síochána but no intervention followed. I appealed to the Minister of State, Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan, to redeploy NPWS staff from outside east Cork. I appreciate him doing so in a timely fashion. It was also appreciated by local residents. However, this episode really highlights the absolute gutting of NPWS resources in east Cork for years now, which has left the region entirely exposed as regards the enforcement of wildlife protection provisions.

As I have raised here previously, it is incredible that east Cork has not had a ranger for 12 of the last 15 years. It has also had no district conservation officer for close to two years and there has been no regional manager over east Cork and Waterford for years. We are now in the extraordinary position whereby if something serious happens in east Cork, such as the destruction of hedgerows or habitats, staff have to be deployed from outside of the region, which only happened in this case following an appeal to a Minister, because the NPWS in the region is so overstretched. As happened in Cobh, all too often immense damage will already have been done by the time there is any investigation. Hedgerows are vital habitats. They are nesting sites, wildlife corridors and part of the ecological fabric of rural communities. They also help with the retention of excess rainfall, thereby contributing to flood mitigation.

When I previously looked into whether there had been efforts to recruit for these long-vacant positions in east Cork, the responses I received from the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan's, Department were so opaque as to be insulting. This really needs to be prioritised for east Cork.

Deputy Jen Cummins: According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, global temperatures have already risen by 1.1°C above pre-industrial levels and it is increasingly likely that they will exceed 1.5 °C within the next decade without rapid emission cuts. The United Nations environmental programme estimates that around 1 million species are at risk of extinction, largely due to human activity. In 2019, Dáil Éireann declared a climate and biodiversity emergency, becoming the second country in the world to do that. However, there are targets to meet under the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015 and Ireland's fourth national biodiversity action plan. There are loads of action plans with all of these targets set out but if we do not meet them, we are off track and we will have a seriously detrimental effect on our future. The Environmental Protection Agency reported in May 2025 that even with all the planned policies, Ireland is off track for its 2030 climate goals, with only a 23% reduction in emissions expected.

Despite growing awareness, data from a global survey done by UNESCO showed that 70% of young people surveyed could not explain exactly what climate change is or explain it very well. While climate change spans many subjects in schools, we need a dedicated subject. However, it is not only for young people in schools but for all of us - individuals trying to offset problems caused by industry and external factors outside this country. These are tiny things, drops in the ocean. As a city TD, I have to say that nature, biodiversity and all of those things are so vital. We are very vulnerable to pollution, both in the future and now.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: As Deputy Cummins said, Ireland declared a climate and biodiversity emergency back in 2019. This motion aims to renew that because absolutely nothing has happened. It is a bit like St. Augustine when he said, "Grant me chastity and continence, Lord, but not yet". We talk the talk, but we never walk the climate action walk, and that is a depressing fact.

I do not have time in two minutes to talk about biodiversity but my statements on biodiversity were made quite recently and are on the Dáil record. However, I do want to talk about our overall approach to climate action. It is a pity that there are no Sinn Féin Ddeputies in the House because Shinnners speak with forked tongues when it comes to climate and carbon taxes. No one likes a carbon tax, and obviously in the context of the fuel emergency right now we need to give short-term measures to people, but the concept of a carbon tax is accepted worldwide. It is the implementation of it that is the issue. Some of our Sinn Féin colleagues mentioned that it does not necessarily help rural Ireland enough and that the current implementation of it does not help poorer families, that it disproportionately helps those who are better off. However, the principle of a climate tax actually makes sense to discourage the use of fossil fuels and encourage people to move towards alternatives.

This is where we get to the point that we do not have those alternatives. There has been underinvestment in public transport and the grid to allow us to be self-sufficient and self-reliant in energy and have EVs powered solely by Ireland. We have done nothing about tidal or wave power. We are gradually getting towards offshore wind power and have done very little about solar power either. We are way behind in terms of meeting our 2030 obligations and have to wake up and smell the coffee. We might be making a small net contribution to climate change, but we are disproportionate in terms of population and we have a responsibility towards Ireland and the world.

Deputy Paul Lawless: Today, on Earth Day, I raise the very important issue of our pollinators. Our native Irish bees are in significant jeopardy as a result of the importation of foreign bees. The importation during the Covid-19 years increased by fivefold. Studies have shown that the rate of hybridisation in Irish colonies has increased by almost 300% over the past six years. That means our native Irish black honey bees are mating with other bees in the area. Beekeepers obviously cannot control that. They are mating and the result is a hybridisation effect. If we allow this importation to continue, particularly of yellow bees, there is a very significant risk that we are going to see the extinction of our native genetic strain of bees.

This is a very important issue and there have been calls by the Native Irish Honey Bee Society to enact the Protection of the Native Irish Honey Bee Bill 2021. We had the association before the Oireachtas committee recently and we heard about the devastating effects of hybridisation. I am calling on the Minister of State to do something. The Bill passed Second Stage in the previous Dáil. It is really important that we see the passing of that Bill to protect our own bees, pollination and biodiversity in the country.

I also want to raise the climate fines this country is facing. The climate advisory council and Irish Fiscal Advisory Council, IFAC, outlined and warned the Government that we could face up to €26 billion in climate fines as a result of the previous Government signing very ambitious targets. Will the Minister of State outline on the floor of the Dáil what fines we are expected to face as a country as a result of these climate action targets?

Deputy Michael Collins: We have been a long time talking about targets in this House and we are way off our game. To be honest, I have spoken quite a lot about Barryroe oil field and fossil fuels since I came into the Dáil, and I often got Deputies sitting to my right screaming and roaring back at me. After the past two weeks, they now know that we cannot do without fossil fuels. Common sense has prevailed. In fairness, I will be honest that I need education as well. There is no point in me just shouting that fossil fuels are the way forward and moving on. That is ridiculous too, but I always felt that Barryroe should have been explored because it could have been a chance to fund renewables, the renewables that we promised this nation when I came into the Dáil ten years ago and that have not been delivered. It is the only way forward.

We should sit down and put together a cross-party group of people with maybe extreme views on every side, as long as they would not be getting overly angry with each other, to see if they could come to a consensus in the middle because there is a middle ground there somewhere. We do have to look after the environment, and I am big into that. However, it should not come at a price and it is coming at a huge price to the people of rural Ireland with the carbon tax. Carbon tax hits rural people 99% more than anybody else. Those are the facts. People can be in denial and they can say this or that.

We know the mindset within Fine Gael. Leo Varadkar, the former leader of Fine Gael, has proven it this week when he decimated rural people and agriculture. It was an absolute disgrace. That was his mindset the whole time and he is now coming clean. He did not say that when he was below at the ploughing championships. He did not say that when he was canvassing around rural places. He told us we were great people. We now find out that Fine

Gael does not like farmers or rural people at all. The Minister of State should read his statement. It was not good enough.

Deputy Colm Brophy: Leo Varadkar does not speak for Fine Gael.

Deputy Michael Collins: He should at least apologise to the people of this country because he hurt people, and he does not need to do that. He is a former leader. He needs to advise maybe and not attack the ordinary people.

There are over 300,000 people in energy poverty. How can we create a solution to this? Is it solar panels? The Green Party had to take the hit on this big time because it was in government. To run a home on solar power, and I have talked to experts about this, homeowners need up to €20,000 and they get a grant of €1,800. That is a pittance. The Government needs to encourage people to put solar panels up on sheds, on the roofs of houses and maybe on lawns. It needs to encourage people away from having to use electricity towards using their own power. That was where the Green Party should have come in and it failed to do all this. All it wanted to do was apply the carbon tax so it could double the number of cycleways up and down the country. I was canvassing in Galway last week with Councillor Noel Thomas. The people of that community were furious. Hundreds of households, not just one or two, asked why were there double cycleways. I agree we need a single cycleway and a single walkway, but the carbon tax is being used and abused as a tax to put forward fancy projects. It is the same as greenways, where people are saying their land is being stolen from them. These are hard-working farmers who do not want to give their land to have miles and miles of black tar put down through the middle of it. It is insane. It is time to stop these fancy silly projects and put the money back into the country.

I am willing to sit down with the Green Party, and have no problem in doing so, because some of its ideas are very good. We need to marry them with the people who might be on the other side and have concerns.

We have concerns about vehicles at the moment. I put forward a proposal to the Taoiseach two weeks ago about a battery operated lorry, something people thought I would not do, but the Taoiseach did not answer. The proposal was to carry out a pilot project in west Cork, because I know a person who wants to do it. Such lorries work in New Zealand and Japan, but Ireland will wait for 20 years before we will consider such vehicles because we might put forward something ahead of the rest of Europe and wake up to the realities of what is out there. This is where we are going. We need to sit around the table.

On public transport, Local Link has done some wonderful work for a couple of years. Over the past eight or nine months, it has had tenders and has told us there is no money to run bus operations. The Minister of State, Deputy Canney, told people to walk to work, cycle and take a bus. That is nonsense for most people who cannot do that. It annoyed people and that resulted in the protests at the present time.

I congratulate Damien Long, who bought the Viaduct bar and, it is to be hoped, will make something like we are used to at exits 14 and 9 in west Cork. It will be a park-and-ride system. There is no train for 18 miles in west Cork. In the next 12 months, we hope, people can go to the Viaduct and get a bus to Dublin. I want a such a service. All of my neighbours and friends

want to leave Mizen Head and the Beara and Sheep's Head Peninsulas and get a bus that will take them to a train. We certainly cannot get a train. We had it, but we blew it in the 1950s. There is no point in going back over that.

There are also delays in retrofitting, which needs to be looked into. Progressive politicians need to have a cross-party alliance, whether that is the Green Party or any other party. We all need to sit around the table and toss out the solutions. Let us consider buses that can be battery operated. We need to look at solutions and work on them to ensure we do not end up being laggards like we are.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Happy Earth Day, with thanks to Deputy O'Gorman. I want to begin with solar, including plug-in solar. People always say that this Oireachtas has one of the highest numbers of Gaeilgeoirí, which it does. It also has one of the highest numbers of beekeepers, including me, Deputy Paul Lawless and Senator PJ Murphy. Bees are one of the most fascinating creatures in Ireland. They feature in our Brehon laws. There used to be the tradition of telling the bees, where you would tell your bees about the passing of a loved one. They were intrinsically linked with our history, but they need our help. I welcome the work of Deputy Lawless and Senator Murphy with the native Irish bee Bill. As a Dub, I raised this issue at my first ever meeting of the agriculture committee in respect of how we need to work in conjunction with the North on the Bill. We are not importing bees but if they go through Belfast Port, there is no point in legislation. We need to protect native Irish bees. I have nine colonies and they teach you a lot.

We need a quick and decisive decision to help people with solar. There is strong public demand for solar panels across my constituency. I have referred to how apartment dwellers are blocked from being able to avail of reduced energy bills due to the fact that they do not have access to rooftops. The UK Government is fast-tracking this at the moment. The German Government has introduced a policy. All that is needed is a 500 W or 800 W solar panel on a balcony with an inverter plugged into a socket. People could use a battery in conjunction with that to help with the cost. I hope this will be looked into.

I raised this issue on a previous occasion and concerns were raised about the danger of plug-in solar. I am aware that without proper execution there is a possibility that if people used two 500 W or 800 W panels on a single extension lead plugged into a single socket, there could be risk of fire. We could have a government scheme to make sure my proposal is implemented properly. That would reduce bills immediately and if we introduced a grant, the payback period could be reduced and people could be helped immediately. Multiple studies have showed that, in conjunction with small scale batteries, solar panels can help people who are struggling with costs right now.

I welcome the work done by the SEAI and the Minister, Deputy O'Brien. Local authorities can also access support for energy upgrades. While canvassing across my area, I have found there is sometimes a delay. We need to investigate how tenants can avail of cheaper solar panels for terraced houses. If work was done at one time, that would reduce the installation fee. People have also raised concerns with me regarding installation quotes, which can vary hugely. People want to know that they are getting fair value and want transparency and confidence.

For anyone who is not familiar with plug-in solar, I have established what it involves. I welcome the comments of the Minister that it is under consideration. It would be a simple fix to help the people I represent.

On batteries and smart meters, home batteries make solar more useful. Instead of using the low value of electricity produced during the day and losing it, people can hold it and use it when they need it most. Smart meters are helping and allow people to understand their usage more accurately through their smart phones with a direct link. The CRU has also made it clear that smart services require customer permission to access data, which is important for public trust. If used properly, smart meters can really help.

The private wires Bill is being developed and will address barriers for EV uptake in Dublin. Many people do not have a driveway and live on terraced streets, apartments or homes. I will push for the Bill, one of the goals of which is to facilitate on-street parking.

I would like to finish with bees. Ireland has 98 species.. Some 77% comprise solidarity, which nest in the ground. We have white tailed and buff tailed bumblebees, which are lovely insects. I look forward to working with Senator Murphy and Deputy Lawless.

Regarding another nature-based solution, in Dublin the Green Ocean Foundation has installed oyster farms across Dún Laoghaire and Howth. I hope the Government will consider expanding the scheme. Oysters are filter feeders and a single oyster can filter hundreds of litres of seawater a day. In doing so, they improve water quality on a local scale and help the cycle of nutrients. Oyster reefs are used in productive and shallow coastal habitats and can encourage biodiversity.

We need to work in conjunction with nature for nature-based solutions, be it pollution or coastal erosion. When oyster beds clean water, they also encourage sea life, and that encourages a reef, which reduces coastal erosion.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to get the opportunity to speak here today. I believe in the climate change, but I do not agree with others about what is causing the change. Climate has changed dramatically over the centuries and decades. In the 1740s, Ireland went through a desperate famine and we lost a third of our population due to hunger, cold and rain. People could not save turf, had no hay for their cows and cattle starved over the winter. The country was burned out of it for 100 years in the 13th or 14th century. In the 1890s, there were floods in places like Gneeveguilla, where a bog was washed into the Lakes of Killarney 12 miles away. In a field in the Clydagh Valley, 11 men were washed down the river by a flood that affected the lads in Ballynavenooragh, Fenit west or something.

I do not agree we on this earth can change the weather in any way. What is going on is costing us an awful lot of money. The road in Fossa, a national primary road going back to Killorglin and around the Ring of Kerry, was narrowed and there are now footpaths and a cycleway on both sides beside the carriageway. Buses and lorries have to pass each other going east and west.

Our rivers are not being cleaned. We are waiting for assessments, reports and this and that. The Flesk river flooded in 2022, which affected the national primary road to Cork outside of Glenflesk. I went through it in late 2015 or early 2016 and I thought I would not get home that night because I did not know where the road finished. The water was 3 ft over the road and

there is a 10 ft drop at the side. After several requests and deputations by me and many others, the Minister of State, Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran, cleared the river.

He gave us a small bit of money and we were allowed to clear the river. The road has not flooded since. Those are the facts, whether the Minister of State likes them or wants to hear them or not.

We are losing a lot of lives on roads. People are very hurt over that. A lot of pedestrians are being killed along local roads because the hedges are not cut. People are not allowed to cut them in the summer when the hedges have gone mad. Pedestrians are walking outside the yellow line because they are afraid their eyes would be picked out along the ditch, and then they get hit by motorcars or whatever.

During the last protest, the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, told us that we must walk and cycle more. That is hurtful to people who have a time limit to get to work. People have to drop off children to school and do 100 different other things. To tell them to go cycling or walking is absolutely ridiculous.

The last thing I will mention is the carbon tax, which I never voted for in this Chamber and never will. A great case was made at an IFA meeting last week by a sound farmer. He questioned why they should be paying carbon tax when they are sequestering carbon. They have hedges and ditches and when they are growing grass, carbon is being sequestered. That is the God's gospel truth. Every farmer is complying and putting AdBlue into his tractor, jeep or whatever vehicle it is but he or she is still made to pay carbon tax. Those are the points the Government needs to address. It is not fair, especially on farmers because they sequester more carbon than they generate. I ask the Government to look at that. In October I certainly could not vote to allow the Government to extend reducing the carbon tax to 2030. It does not make any sense. The Government states that the carbon tax goes towards retrofitting but many people are refused the retrofit grant.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Colm Brophy): I thank Deputies from across the House for their contributions to this debate. Obviously, as we have heard, the strength of feeling on this issue is evident. Having sat through this debate, a range of views have been expressed. The Government welcomes the engagement. There are serious issues that require serious and sustained action. It is important to address some of the points raised during the debate.

First, I will speak to the contribution we had on bees. As Deputy Heneghan will know, I am the Minister of State in the Department of justice, and we in the Department of justice are beekeepers as well. We have our own bees on the roof of the Department, which contributes to the excellent work the Deputy does with his beekeeping. Our honey is very badly called - excuse the pun - "Just Honey". There you go.

There have been claims that Ireland is not making progress on climate action but the facts demonstrate otherwise. The Environmental Protection Agency's most recent reporting confirms overall greenhouse gas, GHG, emission reductions for a third consecutive year. Furthermore, Ireland now has the lowest level of GHG emissions in 35 years. That progress has been achieved while the population, housing stock and economy continue to grow.

It has been suggested that the Government is failing to protect vulnerable households from recent fuel price pressure. Again, that is not correct. We have introduced one of the most comprehensive responses in the European Union, including the recent €505 million package of practical measures. This included further reductions in excise on petrol, diesel and marked gas oil, along with the deferral of the planned carbon tax increase. This is in addition to the previously allocated €250 million in targeted supports to assist those experiencing immediate financial pressure.

It is important to note that budget 2026 also provided a record €640 million for home energy upgrades, including €340 million for the warmer home scheme which provides fully funded upgrades for households experiencing energy poverty. Additional supports also remain available through the fuel allowance and additional needs payments.

We are also undergoing a renewable-led transformation on our energy system. Renewable electricity generation has increased five-fold since 2005. Ireland has now reached approximately 8 GW of renewable generation capacity while wind energy supplied a record 50% of the State's electricity in February 2026. The Government is prioritising offshore wind, with five phase 1 projects progressing through the planning system alongside an unprecedented €18.9 billion investment into the electricity grid.

Significant progress is also being made on biodiversity. The fourth national biodiversity action plan is now in place on a statutory footing and promotes a whole-of-government approach. The €25 million Marine Protected Areas LIFE Ireland project supports the delivery of marine protected areas through public participation and codesign. There have been claims that funding for farmers to implement the national biodiversity action plan is inadequate. In reality, farmers are supported by a multilayered funding system, including the €1.5 billion ACRES.

In respect of data centres, the Government's position has been clear. We will focus on sustainable development of strategically significant energy-intensive industries, including data centres, through the Large Energy-User Action Plan published only this year and in alignment with Ireland's broader Government objectives. We will continue to focus our efforts on supports for families and businesses in need through our national energy affordability task force.

The Government fully agrees with the need for climate ambition, biodiversity restoration and support for households. Where we disagree is with a motion that restates commitments already contained in law and that does not reflect the established statutory and parliamentary processes or acknowledge the substantial work already under way across government.

The legally binding target of a 51% reduction in emissions by 2030 is already provided for in law under the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act. In respect of the removal of certain provisions in the proposed legislation, it is a matter for the Oireachtas through the established legislative process to scrutinise proposed legislation as it progresses through the various Stages.

The Government's countermotion more accurately reflects the reality of the position. It affirms our climate ambition across all sectors, recognises the need to protect households and businesses from energy pressures, notes the progress already being delivered and supports a practical, balanced and deliverable pathway forward. This Government is taking decisive

action to reduce emissions, expand renewable energy, protect nature and support households through the transition. We have the plans with the legislative frameworks and the investment in place to continue that progress. I conclude by thanking the Deputies across the House for their contributions today. However, as indicated by my colleague, I do not accept the motion before the House and I present the Government's countermotion in its place.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I thank Deputies for their contributions to this debate, particularly those Deputies who indicated their support for my motion. In the effort to try to find a bit of common ground among Deputies who disagreed, I was delighted to hear Deputy Michael Collins speak about supporting one of his constituents who is trying to move transport and heavy goods vehicles, HGVs, onto a battery source. I recommend the Deputy look at the zero-emission heavy duty vehicle purchase grant scheme that is in place. In my time as Minister, I had the opportunity to take part in the launch of a number of heavy-duty vehicles being done by ATC Computer Transport and Logistics. It turned approximately 10% of a large heavy-duty vehicle fleet to electric vehicles. It can be done. I am delighted to see Deputy Collins advocating for that in his constituency.

I am afraid my efforts to find common ground cannot extend quite as far as aligning myself with Deputy Danny Healy-Rae's version of history and science. There is only so much we can do in one day.

I thank the Minister of State for his contribution. I am disappointed the Government is not prepared to accept the motion the Green Party has put forward and is instead tabling a countermotion, which frankly refuses to acknowledge the very real setback in climate action we have seen under this Government. There is serious denial on the Government benches around the scale of the challenges we face in Ireland. The attitude is that the foot can be taken off the pedal now that it does not have to deal with the Green Party at the Cabinet table.

At the very centre of this Government approach is the unambiguous statement by the Minister for climate and energy that Ireland will miss its 2030 emissions targets by half and the fact he has provided no emergency plan to seek to address that or reverse that trajectory. The climate consequences of that failure, of not reaching these targets, will have very real consequences for our economy as well. The Irish Fiscal Advisory Council and the Climate Change Advisory Council published a joint paper indicating the costs for Ireland as a potential range of €8 billion to €26 billion in compliance costs for missing climate targets. Even if we took the lowest end of that range, €8 billion, out of our budget in a year, that is a surplus wiped out. The comfort we enjoy now in terms of being able to deal with emergencies - for example, Covid, the Ukraine war and responding to the Iran war - that is being put at risk by our country's and our Government's failures to take the actions that will avoid these fines. What is particularly infuriating is that on this issue the Government is waving the white flag four years before the target deadlines come in. I do not know of any other targets set by the Government where it would be seen as acceptable for the Government to give up four years in advance. What the Government needs to do now is rapidly publish a climate action plan, fully align it to next carbon budget cycle and set out the additional measures, new measures and extra measures that will get Ireland back on track for our 2030 targets.

In his speech earlier, the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, had a bit of a go at me because I did not reference nature and biodiversity in my initial ten-minute speech. Funnily enough, I

was going to give him a little compliment in terms of a bit of good news yesterday in the context of his Department. Yesterday, my colleague, Senator Malcolm Noonan, recognised it was World Curlew Day. That was celebrated because we are finally seeing some breeding pairs come back to various parts of Ireland led by the NPWS. I was going to acknowledge the Minister of State's role in that. However, if he is not giving any space, I am not going to give it either. That good news is reflected at a time when we also know there is a major crisis in terms of migratory birds. The number of migratory birds coming to Ireland has decreased rapidly in the past 30 years. A number of species have been particularly impacted. I suggest to the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, that rather than taking cheap digs that he looks at what he is not doing in his Department and looks at funding for farmers and nature-based solutions. That is funding had been put aside in the Climate and Nature Fund. There was €3.15 billion to deal with these kinds of issues and particularly to provide funding to farmers. We must recognise that if we are going to ask farmers to take nature-based solutions on their land, we have to pay them for that. We have to ensure new income streams are being provided. That money is gone because the Climate and Nature Fund was raided. Some €700 million of that, which was available to fund nature-based solutions that would have had a huge impact on biodiversity in our country, is not available anymore. That should be the focus of the Minister of State's work.

This House declared a climate and biodiversity emergency in 2019. I wish to emphasise the word "emergency". It was more than justified when we consider the scale of the risk to every person that climate change and biodiversity loss poses. In declaring an emergency, this House also took on the responsibility to respond to that emergency with action. The previous Government - the Government I was part of - took that responsibility seriously. We implemented ambitious targets. We passed the landmark climate Act. We funded the infrastructure we need to make that transition to a net zero economy. The Government is not treating this emergency with the seriousness it deserves, and worse, it is undermining the very mechanisms that have been put in place and that will allow us as a society to respond. No amount of hand waving away, in the context of the amendments to the motion, can change the fact the Government is undermining the climate action Act, defunding public transport and giving up on climate and biodiversity targets.

In tackling an emergency, sometimes the scale of the problem seems so large that it is difficult to make it tangible and make it real in the context of daily lives. However, this is not one of these times because the madness that we are seeing in the Middle East has made the climate emergency all too real for every one of us in Ireland. The energy crisis we face is a fossil fuels crisis. Many of us grew up hearing about the oil price crises of 1973 and 1979. Now, our generation is experiencing the second energy price crisis in four years. It is the second caused by a war in another part of the world and the second caused by the whims of an unstable political leader. We can free ourselves from the position of vulnerability we are in.

There is only one viable long-term solution to avoid these energy shocks and that is for Ireland to produce its own abundant renewable energy on our own terms. However, there is a lack of urgency and a lack of determination to address these challenges at pace by this Government. This lack of belief is translated into a failure to be able to convincingly make the case for this transition to the Irish people. Now, too often we see the opposite. We see an effort to scapegoat climate action for wider difficulties in the delivery of infrastructure.

I wish to conclude on the message that change in how we power our economy and our society can happen. Our European partners have shown that it can be delivered at speed and the benefits that accrue to the populations of those countries. This evening, the Green Party will join with other political parties and civil society groups outside the gates of Leinster House to remind the Government, which seeks to vote this motion down, that Ireland needs real climate action. The energy crisis is a consequence of the climate emergency. It is time for the Government to act. Let us establish our energy independence. Let us protect Irish households from high fuel bills into the future. Let us take that huge step towards meeting our climate and biodiversity targets.

Amendment put.

An Ceann Comhairle: In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is deferred until tonight's voting block.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 11.58 a.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 12 noon.

Sitting suspended at 11.58 a.m. and resumed at 12 noon.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: We extend a very warm welcome to the students of the Holy Faith school in Glasnevin who are in the Public Gallery. They are very welcome.

There is real anger among workers and families pushed to the brink by the cost of living. People are working and paying their way yet they are falling further behind with each passing week. We finally have a very frank admission from the Minister for public expenditure, Jack Chambers. He now admits that last year's budget - in his own words - did not give workers a break. There it is. The Taoiseach's own Minister is finally saying out loud what we have been telling him for six months - what the Taoiseach has been denying for six months - that his €9.4 billion budget did absolutely nothing for ordinary working people. In fact, it left them worse off.

That budget drove the deep anger and frustration we now see across the State. As prices were rising and bills were mounting, while working families were under the most severe pressure, the Government withdrew supports. It abandoned its election promises one after another, and it left people high and dry. The Taoiseach had the resources and he made the wrong call. Now the consequences are everywhere. Workers are squeezed, households are stretched to breaking point, people are cutting back on basics and making impossible choices, wondering how they will get through the week, not to mind the next month.

The Taoiseach's own Minister now admits the truth. Will the Taoiseach do the same? Will he admit that he got it wrong? Will he accept that his poor decision-making left working people exposed to the full force of this cost-of-living crisis? Let us be clear. The Government did not just fail to help people but it made things worse. Workers were punished but others did very well - corporate landlords and the banks. Big funds were protected. Those at the top were well looked after. That was the Government's political choice. That was the Taoiseach's personal priority. The Government withdrew supports and then it piled on the costs and increased the

charges. School transport costs are up. The junior and leaving certificates were reintroduced, and all of it landing on those same people - the workers and families who are already struggling. The Government does not listen or understand. It is out of touch with the reality of people's lives.

The Taoiseach's Minister now says that everything is on the table for the next budget. Everything. Let us test that. Is his promise to cut the USC on the table - a promise he broke? For low and middle income workers, the USC is a constant drag on wages. Every extra shift and every extra hour worked is taxed again. It punishes work and eats into pay packets.

D'admhaigh an tAire, an Teachta Chambers, nach raibh aon fhaoiseamh d'oibrithe sa bhuiséad deireannach. Táimid á rá sin leis an Taoiseach le sé mhí anuas. An féidir leis glacadh leis sin anois faoi dheireadh? An aontaíonn sé lena Aire féin?

Having failed workers last October, is the Taoiseach seriously asking them now to wait until next January to see any support from him? The crisis is now. It is immediate. It is being felt every single day at kitchen tables across the country. People cannot wait.

The Taoiseach: As a result of the budget last year, public expenditure will rise by 8.6%. That is not failing anybody. That is a very high increase in investment in public services that all workers benefit from - families and people generally. It is investment in education, health, childcare and right across the board but most critically in housing. Housing remains the number one issue facing our country. We put unprecedented investment into housing so that young working people could benefit from significant supports, from the help to buy scheme, the first home scheme and the rental tax credit. We introduced a significant range of supports to increase housing supply so that young people could be in a position to buy and rent houses they could afford. We will continue to relentlessly pursue the housing question.

In the budget we also, critically, put huge investment into infrastructure. We need new roads, a metro and public transport. All of that helps workers. That is the strategic decision we took to make sure there would be unprecedented investment in water, the electricity grid for electricity and energy, and in terms of road infrastructure and public transport.

Deputy McDonald ignores all of that because she does not adopt a strategic approach to jobs or to the economy. She should always remember that the most important thing in life is that we have an economy that can provide jobs to people. Last year 57,000 extra jobs were created in the economy, which is for working people. They are jobs that will enable them to navigate life, notwithstanding the pressures.

We did not forecast the war in the Middle East. I listened to Deputy McDonald yesterday and today and she ignored the fact there is a war in the Middle East, which is directly impacting fuel prices. That has led to the increase in fuel and has also impacted on other issues. It will filter into other parts of the economy, which is impacting on workers and on families more generally. That is why we announced a €750 million package, which will help workers, farmers and contractors. Food production is very important. The general excise duties will help also.

We also increased the State pensions by €10 in the budget. We increased child support payments. Deputy McDonald ignores that. It was the biggest increase ever. The families of children aged 12 plus get €16 extra, bringing it to €78 per week, while there is an extra €8 for

the families of children under 12, bringing it to €58 per week. That was to deal with child poverty because we did prioritise child poverty, along with housing and infrastructure.

We also prioritised disability. An extra €500 million was allocated to disability services. We increased the domiciliary care allowance by an extra €20. We made choices to support and target our resources at those most in need, and those sectors that needed significant investment.

We increased the fuel allowance by €5 per week. We extended it by a month and we brought 50,000 working families into the fuel allowance for the first time ever, which will help them in some shape or form, and alleviate pressure on them. In terms of energy, we also extended the reduction in VAT. We had reduced VAT to 9% on gas and electricity. We have now extended that out to December 2030. We have record funding for home energy upgrades, which benefits many workers. A total of €558 million was allocated in the budget.

Deputy McDonald mentioned education, schooling and so on. We now have free GP care for children under the age of eight. Every individual aged 70 and over has automatic eligibility to a GP visit card.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach. I call Deputy McDonald. The Taoiseach can come back in.

The Taoiseach: We have free school books and free hot school meals across every single school in the country-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach. His time is up. I call Deputy McDonald.

The Taoiseach: -----which benefits workers, working families and society at large.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach's response is very telling because he ignores the immediate reality of people's lives.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Hear, hear.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: He ignores the fact that hundreds of thousands of households cannot pay their electricity bills; that families the length and breadth of the country are struggling with their rent, grocery bills, and to put bread on the table. He does not want to know that. There is nothing strategically positive about leaving people in poverty. There is nothing good about creating that level of stress or hardship for families and workers across the country. The Taoiseach's own Minister accepts that. He has said out loud what we all know: that the last budget failed working people and families. He has said and accepted that. How very telling that the Taoiseach cannot accept that.

He turns his face away from the people he should serve. He turns his face away from the reality of their lives.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It seems, no matter how hard it gets-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I call on the Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----Fianna Fáil and Micheál Martin, are quite happy to let people struggle on but people will not tolerate that-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy's time is up.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----and the Taoiseach will get his response again.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Hear, hear.

The Taoiseach: Tá cogadh ar siúl. Tá a fhios ag an Teachta é sin. Níl aon amhras ach go bhfuil brú faoi leith ar theaghlaigh ar fud na tíre agus ar mhuintir na tíre de dheasca an chogaidh atá ar siúl agus ardú praghsanna de dheasca an chogaidh sin.

The Deputy has ignored and failed to mention the fact that the war in the Middle East has been a significant factor in the increase in fuel prices. Everybody knows that except her. Equally, she attacked measures in the budget that targeted the poorest working families and the poorest in society. She did not believe in targeting. She wants universality across the board.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach is completely out of touch.

The Taoiseach: She had a similar approach to Liz Truss on the energy question.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach is completely out of touch. Does he actually pay bills?

The Taoiseach: We have-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Does he go to the supermarket?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach's time is up.

The Taoiseach: Sorry but I did not interrupt the Deputy. She has always had an inability to allow other people to speak because she does not like the truth.

An Ceann Comhairle: Fair hearing, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: All I am saying is that we know people are under pressure.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Do you?

The Taoiseach: That is why we introduced the €750 million package.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Do you?

The Taoiseach: That is why we introduced the €2 billion-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: No, you do not.

The Taoiseach: -----social protection package to protect pensioners and workers who needed support.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach. I call Deputy Bacik.

The Taoiseach: We will do more, and we will do more in the next budget, just as we did in previous budgets.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: When?

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Next year.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Yesterday, the Taoiseach described Ireland's economic outlook as positive but in a wealthy country, one in five children lives below the bread line. Nearly 5,500 are now homeless. We are once again approaching a new school year with a shortage of special education places. Tonight's programme "RTÉ Investigates: Inside the Care System" highlights the shocking State failings in respect of children in care. The Children's Rights Alliance has described the haunting gaps in our country's response to children in need of care.

We know the State takes a child away from their parents and places them in care only as a last resort and in the most extreme circumstances, generally where a child is subject to serious risk. I used to act as guardian *ad litem* on behalf of vulnerable children in care proceedings, in some of the most distressing situations imaginable. Demand for care places has increased, yes, but a lack of capacity has always been an issue in the system. We have been approaching a breaking point for years.

Tusla now routinely asks the courts to approve placing a child in care while at the same time asks the judge not to grant a mandatory order requiring compliance with its legal obligations. This is extraordinary. Having decided that a child's situation is so dire as to require the State to act as the parent, Tusla, it seems, cannot recruit or retain enough staff to provide that State care. A starker failure could scarcely be conceived of.

Another vulnerable group is children with additional needs. Again, the Government has known of the exponential growth in the number of children requiring a special education place for this coming academic year. We in the Labour Party welcomed the news that 430 places have been made available and acknowledged that but the shortfall was 600. That is without accounting for all those parents who have had to accept a place in a mainstream or a special school knowing it is inappropriate for their child's particular needs.

In February, we saw the public outcry following the debacle over threatened cuts to special needs assistant, SNA, allocation. Our SNAs and teachers do extraordinary work under sustained pressure but they are being asked to deliver inclusion in practice without the key resources they need in schools. That is not fair or sustainable. Inclusion is officially the national policy of the State but without adequate resourcing, it is meaningless. Every week, we all hear from principals, teachers and exhausted parents who are fighting for the appropriate supports for their children.

These problems are not going away. During the general election, Labour launched its children's charter, a roadmap for strengthening the rights of children in Ireland. Those in government have been failing children. Despite budget surpluses, we see the Government failing children in care, children in poverty or homelessness, and children with additional needs. Will the Taoiseach adopt a planned response to guarantee the rights of every child in Ireland, including the rights to a home and to a local school place?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising what is an extremely important issue. There is a child poverty unit within my Department which actually had a significant impact on the last budget but everybody attacked it because it just targeted those most in need. I hope the Deputy will agree with me that what was done with the child support payment was going in the right direction to deal with poverty among children. It is. Others want universality everywhere but we do need to target and make choices if we do want to reduce consistent poverty among children, and I am determined to do it. With the Minister of State, Deputy Dara Calleary, in the last budget, we took significant steps in that direction.

On the RTÉ documentary on special care, the care of young children and children coming into care, the experiences described are extremely disturbing. The Government takes that with the utmost seriousness. There has been considerable investment, structural reform and a very determined effort to eliminate inappropriate placements but demand for services is increasing at a very rapid rate. Demand for Tusla services has more than doubled since the agency's establishment in 2014. In 2025 alone, 106,000 referrals to Tusla were received. That is a 10% increase on previous years. Clearly, there are complex societal pressures, including domestic violence, homelessness and addiction.

About 5,900 children are in foster or residential care. Close to 3,000 young people are in aftercare. We will continue to invest, to increase investment and to try to enhance services. Recruitment is not necessarily a funding issue alone; it is also about getting people of the right quality. We have more work to do in this area in terms of full therapeutic supports for children in care.

In terms of special education, the bottom line is that we brought forward a portal with an early date for applications for special classes and so forth. This has resulted in a significant increase compared with last year. That dramatic increase has seen us end up with 6,000 pupils. We will be providing for children for next September. We are now looking at over 26,000 special needs assistants. The Deputy said they will not be getting support but they will be. The new inclusive special-class approach will ensure one teacher and two SNAs for every six pupils. That will result in a very significant enhancement over and above what had already been provided for in terms of SNAs. The numbers are growing very significantly, as is the overall budget for special education. The Cabinet has approved €650 million extra in current

funding for education, with a significant amount of it directed towards accommodating special education. I can go through all the various classes and special schools that have been established. We will meet what is required.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: We acknowledge that the Government is spending money. That is not in doubt but our issue, and that of parents, teachers, SNAs and school communities all around the country, is the question of how it is spending it and the lack of a planned approach. The Taoiseach mentioned the €650 million bailout for the Department of education as if it were something to be proud of but the fact that it was necessary is exactly the problem. It shows the lack of planning. Parents are crying out for school places and supports for children with additional needs. We are seeing a lack of planning. The bailout is all over the place. How did the Taoiseach not know the money would be required? He knows the number of children who require additional school places.

The same applies to the care system. We are seeing money spent on special care centres that are unregulated, unregistered and under the radar. These are private facilities that lack supervision and inspection. The amount of money being spent is extraordinary. RTÉ has stated it costs €750,000 per child per year for a special placement.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach will now respond. The Deputy's time is up.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Yet we are failing children because the Taoiseach's Government is failing to plan.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to respond, please.

The Taoiseach: I disagree. It was a decision to bring forward the date so parents and schools would have ample time. It has transpired that parents of many children who were in mainstream classes have applied for special classes. The Deputy is now acknowledging that we are spending money but some weeks ago she was saying we were cutting back on SNAs.

Deputy Ged Nash: We were because the Government got it so wrong.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: The Government was.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please. Allow the answer.

The Taoiseach: That is what the Deputy said last week, knowing full well-----

Deputy Ivana Bacik: The Government was cutting back.

An Ceann Comhairle: Allow the answer.

The Taoiseach: No, sorry. A rule of thumb is that if SNAs are not required in any school in any given year, they should not be there. There should always be regular checking.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: But it was a matter of how it was done.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please.

The Taoiseach: No, it is not. I get that when in opposition, politicians have to do what is required but the bottom line, I take it, is that the Deputy is not opposing the increase in SNAs.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputies, if you do not listen, the Taoiseach is entitled to resume his seat. I call Deputy Stanley.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The ongoing problems with the National Ambulance Service are not being addressed. I raised the serious gaps in the ambulance service, particularly in County Laois, with the Taoiseach last year, and it is through no fault of the staff. The number of staff in the county has not increased in the past two decades, despite the explosion in its population. Five vehicles are based in the county, with just two available most of the time. That is five nights of the week. On Monday and Tuesday nights, just one vehicle is available. This vehicle is often a long distance away, so if a serious incident arises, no ambulance is available to attend patients. This is happening on a regular basis in the county. I can list off several cases recently where that has happened.

Crews in Laois can be sent to Dublin, Wexford, Wicklow, Westmeath and Waterford. Often when they are almost at the patient's location, they are stood down and told to turn around and come back because another ambulance has just reached it. Recently, a crew from Portlaoise was two or three minutes from a scene in Wicklow but it was turned back. Dynamic deployment is not working. Crews are chasing around the country, travelling long distances without picking up patients. One crew came on to a shift recently in Portlaoise and was despatched on six occasions. On four of those occasions, the crew was stood down, including when it was almost where the patient was. It was told to turn around and come back to Portlaoise empty. On one of those occasions, it was away for almost four hours while emergencies were waiting in Laois.

Calls are being stacked. Between the time a call comes in, it could be two hours before an ambulance is actually deployed due to shortages. In a recent case involving an elderly woman in Clara, the call came in at 6.27 p.m. but the ambulance did not get there until 9.51 p.m. - almost three and a half hours later. Meanwhile, there was a person in Portlaoise with a serious injury but the three ambulances were gone and there was nobody to pick up that person.

There is no rapid response vehicle in the county, despite the fact there are 56 in the State. Civil defence and the fire service are picking up the slack. Rathdowney fire service in one corner of the county dealt with four cardiac patients within a three-month period. Crews are going without regular breaks, meals, etc. The service is understaffed and under-resourced.

Will the Government provide a rapid response vehicle in County Laois? Will it ensure that at least two ambulances and crews are on at all times? Can it engage with the National Ambulance Service? The Government and the Minister for Health need to do this and get a more logical deployment model.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising an important issue, particularly for his constituents in County Laois. We have a National Ambulance Service. I am sure the Deputy will appreciate I cannot run the National Ambulance Service from here but I will engage with the issues he raised and I will talk to the Minister for Health about them. The National Ambulance Service will always defend the model it has, and it has consistently defended it over time. Notwithstanding that, we have heard illustrations, observations or commentary from different parts of the House about how that service has not been optimal in terms of delays attending particular accidents, events or locations. I heard about one yesterday from Deputy McAuliffe, involving an elderly woman in Dublin waiting four hours.

We will engage with the National Ambulance Service but the investment has continued apace. I take the point made by Deputy Bacik earlier that it is not just about investment. I accept that. It is about how the investment is deployed and allocated and what the productivity outcome is from moneys we allocate. Since about 2022, the HSE has invested about an additional €75 million in the National Ambulance Service, with staff numbers increasing by 761 in the same period. Over 85% of National Ambulance Service staff work in direct patient-facing roles. That does help improve ambulance response performance, with additional emergency ambulances, immediate care services and developing alternative care pathways, including community paramedic services.

As the Deputy knows, a new helicopter emergency medical service has been established in the west and the north west. That does not affect Laois. There is further investment this year as a result of the budget, with €34 million for renewal and expansion of the fleet. This is €34 million for emergency ambulances and other response vehicles. The investment is continuing. We are looking at about €291 million being spent on the National Ambulance Service in 2026, with about 2,503 employees. That is up again on the same period last year. Further investment is planned this year, with 21 extra crewed ambulances at peak demand, four intermediate care vehicles and the continued development of clinical hubs and alternative care pathways.

I will speak to the Minister about the emergency response vehicle for Laois and will ask her to reflect on and engage with the National Ambulance Service in terms of the model it uses.

Deputy Brian Stanley: When we compare what we have to what Scotland, which has similar population and geography, has, it has 5,000 staff while we have just over 2,500. Scotland has 1,500 vehicles while we have 620, so I think the Taoiseach accepts there is ground to be made up.

The spring economic statement that came out yesterday shows there are substantial resources there. I am not asking the Taoiseach to throw that money around like confetti. I do not want him to do that but I want the Government to make the ambulance service a key priority in the forthcoming budget. It is essential. We have heard enough over the years about the golden hour. If an ambulance does not get to a person for two or three hours, time is lost.

I am asking the Taoiseach and the Minister for Health to ensure County Laois is provided with a rapid response vehicle because we are at the crossroads of Ireland with the N7, N8, N80 and N78 all going through the centre of the county. I am asking the Taoiseach to ensure there is positive engagement with the National Ambulance Service to sort out rapid deployment and to ensure two or three ambulances are on at all times in County Laois.

The Taoiseach: Regarding the spring-October statement, the general Government balance is in surplus but all of that money is being used. There is an Exchequer deficit of €1.1 billion. The rest goes into the funds, which we have provided for. Nobody is commenting on that. That €10 million is not hanging around somewhere to be used. The bulk of it has been allocated to the funds and it is being invested in the economy, housing, infrastructure, wind energy and so on.

If we look at the ambulance service over a ten, 15 or 20-year period, a revolution in emergency care has happened, for example, the Pre-Hospital Emergency Care Council and emergency medical technicians. The professionalisation of the entire area has been quite remarkable and has led to very significant outcomes in terms of responses to patients and first responders. It has been dramatic compared to what we had historically but I accept the Deputy's point that there are legitimate issues that need to be examined by the HSE and the National Ambulance and I will ask the Minister to do that.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I need the Taoiseach to listen very carefully. He keeps standing up here and keeps mentioning the protests in this country and the war. I will put on the record why the protests happened in this country. They happened because of the increase in taxation on fuel. I will show the Government how it can counteract this, and I have said it on numerous occasions. The Government should cap the price of fuel from which it takes tax. It is the same as income tax for every worker in this country. I will give a summary. At the moment, it is €1.92 for the haulage sector. Minus the VAT, that gives you €1.56. The Government has put a package in place for which most of them will probably not be able to qualify because most of them are under pressure. It is not only householders who are arrears but they are also in arrears. The bus companies and everyone is now in arrears. If the Government capped the fuel cost-----

The Taoiseach: Arrears?

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: They are in arrears on repayments for their trucks and tax arrears, so they cannot qualify for the Government's package.

For everyone in this country, the Government would cap the fuel prices at €1.70 for white diesel. That would mean it would not have had to put the package in place for hauliers and everyone else in this country. It would include the package that the Government is coming out with. What that would come back to is that if you cap it, it creates stability across the country, and also creates forecasting for 12 months.

What has to happen here at every budget going forward, and from now until the next budget, is that the Government has to put in a cap on what it takes in taxes. If it was €1.70 at the moment with the tax, even with the war, if there was an increase in fuel, we would not even be at €1.93 at the moment. It is the tax on the increased cost that is bringing it to €2.20. If you cap the fuel, all businesses are covered, and anyone who is registered can claim back the VAT. That makes for a stable economy.

I cannot understand why the Government cannot look at this. It can do the same with green diesel for everyone in the agricultural sector and whatever sector uses it. It can do the same with kerosene, which covers all the packages that the Taoiseach is talking about, such as home

heating, which people rely on. It can do the same with petrol. That would mean that every worker in this country, every person who is caring for people, including gardaí, nurses, carers and the fire service - across the board - has something at source, but the Government has to give the cap, which creates the stability, for that to work. Take the taxes up to €1.70, but after that, no more tax. I have spoken to so many businesspeople, and everyone agrees with me.

The Taoiseach: First, let us deal with that issue. The spin all along has been that we have taken in more from the VAT increase than we have given in reductions. That is not true. The bottom line is that because of the measures we took on 13 April, the percentage of the taxation component of the price of a litre of Euro-Super 95 petrol is set to fall to 44% compared with 58% at the end of March. The measures we have brought in have de facto significantly reduced the tax component of the price of fuel. Our overall package was about €750 million. The cost of that package, I acknowledge, is €670 million because we would gain about €82 million in the VAT component of it. That deals with this idea that we are getting more back.

On a cap, we do not favour capping the price of diesel or petrol. We think it should be specific fuel support packages for farmers and contractors. The Deputy is automatically assuming that most people will not benefit from the package, and he sort of said that was because of arrears. I was not quite clear what he was saying. I accept that people have to be tax compliant, but I would argue that the vast majority are tax compliant. Indeed, if they work with Revenue, Revenue has already said it is going to be flexible and so on. If people have arrears with others, that does not mean they are not entitled to the package. They will be entitled to the package.

It is a substantial package. Particularly in road haulage, the sector was quite satisfied with the nature of the package. The package for contractors and farmers is quite extensive at over €100 million, with a very significant reduction in the costs. People will be able to benefit from it. The Deputy has not set out with precision why he believes the vast majority will not be entitled to it. I would like him to explain why he thinks the vast majority will not be entitled to it.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: No problem.

The Taoiseach: It is an important point. We have put forward a very significant package to get down the cost; there is no question about that. The figures are there in terms of how substantial the reduction is compared to what the tax component was. We will work out the package for farmers and contractors, and we will be in a position to outline those shortly. We have also provided a range of other supports to people more generally across other sectors of the economy.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: It is easy to know the Taoiseach has never been involved in business because he would understand stability and forecasting if he had been. Everything that he discusses is the package. Is there one package there for the working person in this country who is travelling? The Taoiseach is talking about 2.3 million vehicles. He mentioned road hauliers. Road hauliers, in this package, are 17% of the transport network in this country. There is the Irish trucking haulage. Until this package was introduced, you did not get a subsidy

if you were drawing your own goods. Now, they are included in this package. This is what I am talking about.

If the Taoiseach had done what I told him on a cap on the cost of fuel, he would not have had to introduce any package. Everything would work itself out. If a person was going to work in a car, a van or otherwise, with the package on white diesel, everyone would get it, and everyone on petrol would get it. That means that not only householders would get it, but all the businesses up along. Anyone who was registered could claim their VAT back, which would reduce their costs in providing stuff for people. I am not talking about a package for this person or that person. I want a package for everyone, and a cap applies to everyone, not just one sector.

The Taoiseach: Have you costed it?

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Yes.

The Taoiseach: How much?

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: The same revenue you had six weeks ago is the exact same revenue you will have today.

The Taoiseach: No, that is not the way-----

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Look at the package.

The Taoiseach: This is a falsehood that you are presenting.

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry, Taoiseach, excuse me.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: The Taoiseach asked me.

The Taoiseach: With the greatest of respect, it is an absolute falsehood you are presenting.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Will I answer you?

An Ceann Comhairle: No, you will not, Deputy.

A Deputy: It is fairytale economics.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Do you want me to answer?

The Taoiseach: You need-----

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I will do a live debate with you and answer you. There you go. Live - the two of us.

An Ceann Comhairle: Excuse me. It does not work like that, Taoiseach. You may further engage outside this forum.

The Taoiseach: I am speaking through the Chair. He is shouting across.

An Ceann Comhairle: Yes, through the Chair.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Live debate. Come on.

An Ceann Comhairle: You do not expect the Deputy to answer you. You can further engage. He can ask a question, absolutely.

The Taoiseach: But I cannot.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I can. He asked me a question.

An Ceann Comhairle: Yes, but do not give the answer here. You may need further engagement.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Thank you, a Cheann Comhairle. Like everything, he just wants to run down the clock.

An Ceann Comhairle: That is enough, Deputy.

Deputy Martin Heydon: You have your video clip now, Richard. You are happy.

A Deputy: He ran down the clock on Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael anyway.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy. The Taoiseach will finish his response without interruption.

The Taoiseach: I am entitled to pose a rhetorical question as a form of debate.

An Ceann Comhairle: Yes, you are. It is Deputy O'Donoghue who is not entitled to answer it.

The Taoiseach: I would make the point. I know the Deputy was involved in the protests----

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I was supporting them.

The Taoiseach: -----and I know he took a role and so on like that, and he was deciding who was going to get all, and who was going to get-----

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Sorry now.

The Taoiseach: -----which I do not agree with, but-----

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: On a point of order, that is out of order.

The Taoiseach: I want to ask you-----

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: On a point order, I went down and negotiated as a public representative. You had someone on the live airwaves who has misled the public.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, resume your seat.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: He has made a challenge against me.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, resume your seat.

The Taoiseach: Deputy, what I will say to you-----

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: He has made a challenge against me. Live debate. That is all you are good for, running down the clock.

An Ceann Comhairle: Resume your seat.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: He made a charge.

An Ceann Comhairle: That is the end of Leaders' Questions. The Deputy does not wish to hear the response.

The Taoiseach: Finally, through the Chair, I have worked with the Deputy before. He is doing a lot of shouting and roaring here today in the Chamber. He has asked me about different things in the past, plenty of times, as a Dáil Deputy, and I have responded to him. I treated him courteously. All I am saying is that I have no difficulty discussing with the Deputy at any time.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: No problem.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Séamus McGrath: We all understand in this House the enormous challenges faced by first-time buyers in securing home ownership. House prices are high, with the median price

now at €390,000. With increasing costs in everyday life, it is becoming increasingly difficult for first-time buyers to afford to purchase a property. In this context, I find it deeply unfair and inconceivable that the State imposes an additional cost on first-time buyers in the form of stamp duty. Stamp duty applies to first-time buyers when they purchase a new or second-hand home at a rate of 1%. If we take the purchase price of a house of €450,000, the stamp duty cost for first-time buyers is approximately €4,500.

I am surprised that this topic does not generate more discussion and debate. As a government, we have put forward significant supports for first-time buyers, such as the help-to-buy scheme, the local authority home loan, the first home scheme and others. It is totally inconsistent with those policies that we, as a government, on the other hand, impose a cost on first-time buyers in the form of stamp duty.

It is estimated that approximately €60 million was collected in 2024 in stamp duty from first-time buyers. That is a very high figure, and it further highlights the burden that is placed on first-time buyers through stamp duty. I am strongly arguing here today that we should reintroduce a relief for first-time buyers on stamp duty up to a certain value of property. That relief was in place before, until 2010. I believe it would be a fair and equitable approach by the Government and would be consistent with our other policies to support first-time buyers.

Additionally, in the case of new homes, the help-to-buy scheme applies to first-time buyers, who can claim back their tax for the previous four years, up to a maximum of €30,000. However, when first-time buyers are purchasing second-hand homes, there is effectively no support in place. Introducing a relief on stamp duty for second-hand homes, as well as new homes, would provide additional relief for first-time buyers.

We have to continue to find pathways for first-time buyers to secure home ownership. A lot of good policies have come forward from this Government and the increased focus on affordable housing is certainly very welcome.

However, as a State, it is urgent that we remove this additional burden in the form of stamp duty. That €4,000 or €5,000 is a hidden cost when someone is purchasing a house. It does not form part of the deposit or the mortgage and it is badly needed by first-time buyers in fitting out a new home and getting themselves established. I would strongly urge the Taoiseach here today to work with Government colleagues to come up with a relief for first-time buyers from stamp duty and to bring this measure forward at the earliest possible time.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising what is a very important issue for first-time buyers. The entire focus of this Government and the last Government is and was very much on alleviating pressures on first-time buyers but also enabling them to be in a position to buy houses at an affordable level.

The positive news is that as a result of measures we have taken, the numbers of first-time buyers drawing down mortgages have increased very significantly as a percentage of overall mortgages over the past five years. It is quite significant. The Deputy is correct in saying that 1% stamp duty on a house value up to €1 million is what is currently there. As he knows, there was a move in the taxation system towards simplification and to keep it very simple and straightforward. We brought in measures to prevent or disincentivise the investment funds and others from buying up blocks of new houses so as to make sure the supply of new houses would

be there for individual buyers, and particularly first-time buyers. The Deputy is correct; in 2010, a decision was taken to streamline the stamp duty rate structure for both first-timers and those acquiring their second or subsequent residential property.

On what we have done in the last number of years, a suite of measures has been brought in, most notably the help-to-buy scheme, which is quite significant, the affordable purchase schemes and, of course, the first home scheme. They have been very effective in the market. The level of support under the help-to-buy scheme is the lesser of €30,000 or 10% of the purchase price of the new property or the amount of income tax and deposit interest retention tax, DIRT, paid in the four years before the application of the relief. That has proven to be a substantial support for first-time buyers. Then we have a whole range of other provisions, such as the local authority purchase and renovation loan. There are about 6,000 availing of the first home scheme. The vacant property refurbishment grants are also quite substantial in respect of vacant or derelict properties. I think the Minister is looking at extending the first home scheme.

In regard to the taxation treatment of it and the stamp duty, that obviously falls for a budgetary consideration. We will - and we will engage on this at Government level - give consideration to that, along with other supports for first-time buyers. I understand the motivation here. We want to enable young people to be in a position to buy houses and affordability is obviously a key factor in that decision. I would not rule anything out and it is certainly something we will give consideration to.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I thank the Taoiseach. I welcome his response and I fully accept what he said about the Government supports for first-time buyers. They have been quite significant and the proof of that is in the figures on mortgage drawdown. There are a high number of first-time buyers in that position to draw down a mortgage and that is welcome. The Taoiseach is also correct on the simplification of the system in 2010. I would argue that one of the unintended consequences of that was that it imposed a stamp duty charge on first-time buyers. It is only consistent with our other policies that we would look to introduce a relief on that. I also accept that is something that would have to be discussed in a budgetary context. I repeat here again today, however, that if the Taoiseach can take that up with his colleagues in Cabinet and in particular with the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance, I think it would be the only fair, equitable and consistent approach by Government in parallel with the other supports we have put in place for first-time buyers.

The Taoiseach: Certainly, and as the Deputy said, help-to-buy is probably the most significant intervention we have taken in the last number of years. We will, at Government level, give consideration to this issue, and to whether there is anything further we can do to help alleviate the pressures on first-time buyers, particularly in terms of the application of stamp duty.

Ceisteanna ar Pholasáí nó ar Reachtaíocht - Questions on Policy or Legislation

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: This morning, we hear of another scandal involving the care of vulnerable children in this State. Forged references were provided for staff at special

emergency accommodation for children, putting vulnerable children in harm's way. These settings, as the Taoiseach knows, are unregulated, poorly resourced and unregistered facilities not inspected by the authorities, yet more than 1,000 children were placed in these settings last year. The State pays out literally millions to private operators to run them, all because of a severe shortage of foster carers and regulated care home placements - a shortage, by the way, that the Taoiseach's Government allowed to develop. What is the Taoiseach's response to this scandal and how will he ensure accountability for this, which is just the latest in a long line of such scandals?

The Taoiseach: As I said earlier to Deputy Bacik, who raised this issue on Leaders' Questions, we are extremely concerned about this issue of forged letters, which is completely unacceptable and very serious for the care of young people who are taken into care. The numbers referred to Tusla have expanded to an extraordinary degree, which reflects wider issues within society of different kinds. We have substantially increased the current and capital funding, doubling capital funding and so forth. The recruitment of qualified staff is key. A lot of work has happened in that area in terms of investment in additional grades, improvements and so on, and we are going to have to do more on that front. I would pay tribute to a lot of Tusla staff out there who do an awful lot of good work looking after a lot of people who need that care and assistance.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Last Thursday, I was in Westminster with Lisa Phillips, the courageous campaigner and survivor of abuse by Jeffrey Epstein. We met with British MPs who are supporting Lisa in seeking access to information about the extent of Epstein's criminal activities. Survivors are campaigning for full disclosure of all information held by the US Department of Justice on Epstein's global trafficking network. We know there are hundreds of references to Ireland in the Epstein files held by the US Department of Justice. We know he visited Ireland several times and that he had business interests here. Deputy Duncan Smith and I have asked the Taoiseach about references here to Epstein's activities. I think he said the Government here has no files related to Epstein. What I am asking now is, to ensure justice for survivors, would the Taoiseach consider taking a proactive step by appointing a senior counsel or a Government official to carry out a scoping exercise into the US Department of Justice files to see what information there relates to Epstein's activities in Ireland?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to respond. The Deputy's time is up.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: We need to get more information on this.

The Taoiseach: I know the Deputy has raised this on a number of occasions and I commend the survivors on the work they are doing. It is very courageous. We do not have access to the State Department files at all but we would encourage the full release of all documentation and files in relation to Jeffrey Epstein and, if there are files referencing Ireland, that those would be released.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: There are.

The Taoiseach: I will discuss it with the Minister for justice again. I also received a very late request to meet, when I was in Washington. It was very late in the day that I received that request. People said I did not bother meeting. I will say no more. I can talk to the Deputy about this but the Government has no files. To our knowledge, there is nothing in the Department of justice and so on. I will discuss with the Deputy what mechanisms there are to do this.

Deputy Holly Cairns: Yesterday, the window for submitting observations on the development in Bessborough expired but the window for this Government to act has not. Behind those stone walls, women and children were put through hell and for 76 years the State turned a blind eye. Today, the Government is doing the same, as if the grim legacy of Bessborough can be buried under apartment blocks. It cannot.

Eight hundred and fifty-nine babies who died there have never been found and are likely in unmarked graves on the estate. There has never been a comprehensive investigation. Survivors have been consistently retraumatised by the State. The Government has an opportunity to change that legacy and to fulfil not just the legal but moral obligation to find the bodies of these babies and provide a dignified burial and memorial site.

If we do not act, we are complicit in further injustice. We owe survivors more than that. Will the Taoiseach act?

The Taoiseach: I take a different perspective in terms of how the Deputy put it. I do not think the State today or the Government today is complicit in anything that happened over 50 years ago and right throughout that period. I actually do not. It is easy language to throw out there or to say that we are ignoring-----

Deputy Holly Cairns: I said for 76 years the State was complicit.

An Ceann Comhairle: There is no right to respond, Deputy. That was rhetorical.

The Taoiseach: Personally, I think what happened is reprehensible. I have never understood it. What happened in earlier eras is that the poor homes evolved into the county homes, which evolved into the mother and baby homes. Some people-----

Deputy Holly Cairns: What about what is happening now?

An Ceann Comhairle: I have already addressed that, Deputy, thank you. Now, Deputy Coppinger.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: On 8 April, four gardaí with a search warrant barged into the home of a therapist. They shouted at her and her daughter to put down their phones, not to move and to tell them where her files were. They would not let her take a photograph of the warrant or talk to her solicitor. They said they would seize her phone and laptop. They did all this in front of her daughter, who has health conditions, and said her mother knows what she has done. The therapist had to ask them to stop shouting, such was the level of aggression.

What were they looking for? They were looking for the counselling notes of a client. They were not looking for drugs or guns but the counselling notes of a client she was trying to heal. The therapist had arranged with the client to hand over these notes when she returned from being abroad. I do not have the time to go into all of the dates and details here. The key issue is why was a therapist treated like a criminal in her home? Why has the Taoiseach and his Government allowed therapy notes of sexual assault survivors to become such an integral part of trials in the first place?

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. Her time is up.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Will the Taoiseach tell his Minister to outlaw this practice in trials entirely?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to respond. The Deputy's time is up.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy knows the Minister is bringing in six substantial-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: He is not ruling it out, though. They can still be-----

An Ceann Comhairle: This is not the forum for back and forth, Deputy.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: If the Ceann Comhairle had let me finish the sentence, the Taoiseach would have heard that.

The Taoiseach: I was not able to speak more than four words and the Deputy interrupted me. This is ridiculous. The Deputy is either serious about raising an issue or not.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The Taoiseach needs to answer the question.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy needs to refrain.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy knows the answer to it. She has made assertions that are false about the Minister for justice. He is going far as the Constitution allows in terms of access to counselling notes. The Deputy knows that.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The Minister is not ruling it out.

The Taoiseach: Do not be so disparaging and negative about the bona fides of the Minister for justice on this issue.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: What about the therapist? Is the Taoiseach okay with that?

An Ceann Comhairle: This is the wrong forum, Deputy. Do not ask follow-ups at Questions on Policy or Legislation. Deputy Paul Lawless.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Why do we bother?

Deputy Paul Lawless: I want to raise my concerns about the retirement age for emergency personnel and particularly for the retained fire service. Every year, very valuable members with huge amounts of experience leave the force - the retained fire service. In one station alone, 100 years of experience will be lost over the next number of years. These are individuals who undergo medical examination every year after the age of 50.

My view is that if a person wants to continue to work and if they are eligible and passing their medical examination, they should be allowed to do so. It is particularly in the context of the Workplace Relations Commission proposals in 2023. There was a major issue with recruitment in the retained fire service. I welcome the fact that has changed but there are a huge number who will have to leave. The new recruits need to have experience.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach will respond. The Deputy posed the question and his time is up. The Deputy must now allow the Taoiseach to respond.

The Taoiseach: The retirement age was 55 and it is now 62. We actually have made very significant progress on extending the age at which somebody retires in the Garda, the Army, the fire services and across the board in emergency services. The original reason was the nature of the work. Obviously, because of the investment in health services over the past two decades and better lifestyles and so on, people are living much longer, people's quality of life is much better and people are fitter at older ages than they would have historically been. That is why the age limits have increased and we will continue to keep all of that under review. However, there will always be an age of retirement in emergency response services. That is clear. Obviously, the authorities concerned specifically with this area will do their research, analysis and assessment.

Deputy Aisling Dempsey: Child and adolescent mental health services, or CAMHS as we know it, supports young people up to 18 years of age with moderate to serious mental health difficulties. At 18, they are expected to move to the adult mental health services, AMHS. While, logically, we know that these young people are adults, many still need our help and particularly the ones who are in the care of CAMHS. They can be so incredibly vulnerable, yet they and their parents appear to be facing a cliff edge in care in some cases. When they push for the transition from CAMHS to AMHS, they are put off, in my constituency anyway. They have been told to wait until the person is 18 and then AMHS will get involved. A mother has been in touch with me about her son who is suicidal. Another mother has been in touch about her daughter's eating disorder. We cannot stop the care with CAMHS today and start with AMHS tomorrow. It is not feasible for these people. Can we change that recommendation to a requirement?

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I thank the Deputy for raising this really important issue. As she knows, most children and young people receive the care they need from CAMHS and are discharged. However, some young people may need to transition to adult services. I accept and acknowledge that transitions between services can

be difficult, and that is why I established a specialist group in the Department of Health policy oversight structures to examine the process. The recommendations of the group were informed by feedback from over 200 young people who transitioned between CAMHS and adult mental health services. It included listening to the voices of young people, using electronic files and the appointment of co-ordinators. It has produced a report, which is being implemented by the national child and youth mental health office. I would be happy to talk to the Deputy about those too. It is something I am acutely aware of and it is raised a lot. I thank the Deputy for raising it today.

Deputy Edward Timmins: Last night, in Baltinglass in rural west Wicklow, I met a group of 12 people. These were small businesspeople ranging from contractors to farmers. What they all had in common was the massive impact of the fuel crisis on their livelihoods. These were very reasonable people whose livelihoods are under threat. The package announced ten days ago will not solve their problem. It does not cover all contractors, such as those working on building sites, and there is little confidence the rebates proposed will happen quickly.

I urge the Taoiseach and his Government officials to do two things. First, will they engage with the contractors not benefiting from the scheme to ensure they are included? Many of these are working on house building sites, which we know is so important in this country. Second, will they ensure the scheme is simple and pays out quickly so that those who are suffering see an immediate benefit?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. Material hauliers are covered but I accept some contractors in specific sectors may not be. I will engage and ask Ministers to engage with the relevant groups there because we want the packages either for transport or for the agricultural contractor area to be inclusive. We do not want people excluded. The proposals have been worked up in the Department of Transport and they are being worked up in the Department of agriculture. We are very conscious of the need to get this formulated as quickly as possible so that people can benefit from the rebate, which will be quite significant going back to March for the agricultural areas and for contractors more generally. I will take on board what the Deputy has said, particularly about any gaps for any particular group that might be unwittingly or unintentionally excluded.

An Ceann Comhairle: I welcome the Fermoy active retirement group to the Visitors Gallery. They are guests of Deputy Noel McCarthy and are very welcome.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Cuirim fáilte. I am really worried about the number of families I am meeting who are struggling with their energy bills. We know 315,000 households are currently in arrears but there are tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of others who are literally struggling just to pay their bills every month. The Taoiseach has to acknowledge that what his Government has done is not enough to help them. There is a growing divide between those who have the resources to be able to retrofit or put up solar panels and those who do not and who are meeting ever rising bills.

It is especially in the context of the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, suggesting there could be increases in energy costs of 8% or more. Does the Taoiseach accept now that the Government has to do something to support ordinary families with the cost of electricity?

1 o'clock

Sinn Féin has advocated for the reintroduction of energy credits but it is not good enough and it cannot be good enough for the Taoiseach to tell people to wait until next year's budget or to say what we are currently doing is enough. Families are under huge pressure and they need the Government's help.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy said he was concerned about a growing divide. His solution would actually widen that divide for those on the lowest incomes. We have taken measures. The excise duty reductions help everybody by definition.

Deputy Matt Carthy: What about electricity costs?

The Taoiseach: We will deal with electricity costs. Three tankers were attacked this morning in the Strait of Hormuz. This is a very serious war. The Deputy keeps talking as if the war did not exist. We do not know where this might lead to. We were all hoping, two or three days ago, that we were heading for a peaceful resolution of this war. Three ships were attacked this morning in the Strait of Hormuz so nothing can get through. Imagine the impact that will have on prices. The Deputy's view is to spend everything now. We want to support families. We have to make sure we can support families and support them substantially in the latter part of the year as well.

Deputy Brendan Smith: On the last sitting day here before Easter, I raised the very serious difficulties confronting farmers and agri-contractors due to the enormous increase in the price of green diesel at that time. I also referred to the increase in farm input costs, such as fertiliser. Combined with those additional costs has been the reduction for some time in the prices paid to farmers for farm products, namely commodity prices. Following the Government announcement of a scheme to help offset some of those costs. It is essential that the details be announced at an early date. The scheme needs to be as straightforward as possible and not tied up in paperwork. There also needs to be some flexibility on timelines. Farmers and contractors need those payments issued as quickly as possible. For many of those hard-working people there are real cash-flow problems at present and the Department has to act with the utmost urgency to ensure these essential payments issue to eligible applicants as quickly as possible.

The Taoiseach: I appreciate that the Deputy raised this issue of the impact of the war and increased fuel prices on farmers and agri-contractors more generally. I welcome the people of Fermoy, who are right in agricultural country as well. The need for a detailed package to be announced quickly is accepted. My understanding is that within the next week or so a package will be outlined by the Department of agriculture in respect of farming and contractors. Then we may have to look at the construction sector. Some will be covered by the haulier and transport provisions but others may be outside. We will see if we can close that gap.

Deputy Emer Currie: I am raising childcare again today. There are not enough places and we have poorly planned spaces. Dublin West is peppered with either unused crèche buildings or sites where crèches were supposed to be built but were not. I know this is happening in other parts of the country too. Developers are currently required to supply crèche facilities in

large housing developments but not to industry viable specifications. The result is that some crèches are built too small, are poorly designed or are badly located and they can often be left empty for years. We also have sites where crèches have not been built even though the developments are complete. During a childcare crisis, we cannot have childcare places going to waste. We must have a planning system that prioritises and designs for childcare.

The Taoiseach: For the first time the State is moving beyond funding alone and directly supporting the creation of childcare places. Under the early learning and childcare capital programme, up to eight facilities will be delivered this year, providing about 800 additional places, focusing on under threes as well as rural and disadvantaged areas. There are very significant planning frameworks governing the development of childcare more generally. Budget 2026 marked the highest ever level of State investment. It is now at €1.5 billion, which is a 12% year-on-year increase but there are still significant issues. There is significant demand on places and we will continue to work on those. I encourage the Deputy to talk to the Minister for children in respect of this. Hopefully, in the forthcoming budget, we will in a position to do more in respect of childcare.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: I want to raise the planned Garda headquarters at Northern Cross. As the Taoiseach will be aware, this was announced eight years ago. I and many people in the constituency are getting frustrated because we are getting mixed messages. Last week, the Minister of State with responsibility for the OPW said he hoped that this would commence in 2028 but then he went on to say that no site has been identified. The elected representatives for the area have been told for the past seven years that a site had been identified and is being progressed. I am asking the Taoiseach to get us some clarification because the last thing we need is mixed messages.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. The Minister of State responsible for the OPW is solid citizen. When he says things, he generally means them. I will discuss the issue with him and try to get clarity. In all of these developments, site acquisition is always the key enabler and sometimes the absence of a site can be the cause of a project not developing. I will ask him and come back to the Deputy.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I want to ask about drugs policy. On-street drug use is a significant issue in Cork city. Local residents feel unsafe and intimidated. Needles have been found at bus stops, at playgrounds and outside schools. Problem drug users have been pushed from one part of Cork city to another. They were in the city centre and now, as the Taoiseach will know, they have been in Turner's Cross and Ballyphehane in recent weeks. We are next. The Government's drug policy has failed with devastating consequences for individuals, families and communities. A UCC study shows that 35 people a year die from problem drug use in Cork city. These are preventable deaths. We need an enhanced community policing response but crucially we need a long-term solution. We need a health-led approach, greater addiction services, decriminalisation and a safe injection facility. We should not have to wait for the review of the service in Dublin. Last night, the drugs committee heard that 40 years of evidence shows that these are effective. They reduce on-street drug use, reduce the spread infectious disease, prevent overdoses and connect people to services. I have one simple question. Does

the Taoiseach support a safe injection facility for Cork city and what will he do to make it a reality?

The Taoiseach: That is not the panacea for this issue, but there is an issue here. Of that there is no doubt. I have been in touch with the Garda on the specifics of the areas the Deputy has identified because there is a lot of concern and anxiety among residents. It is not because of Government failure on drug policy, by the way. There is individual responsibility here too. There are bad actors as well in terms of the drug pushing and so on. I am fully in favour of a health-led approach to addiction. That is what we have in essence. There have been different manifestations of that over the past number of decades but we essentially have a health-led approach and will continue to have that. We also need an enforcement and policing response to protect people in communities from unacceptable behaviour or any violence that may result from certain people behaving badly.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: I want to raise a very practical measure that could support families and community sports. Will the Government consider introducing targeted tax relief for households and families on their memberships of sporting organisations? Many families in my constituency are under serious financial pressure to give their children the opportunity to be members and join multiple sporting organisations, whether it be soccer, hurling, camogie, athletics or swimming. The list goes on and on. If they want to play additional support such tennis, golf, basketball, volleyball or cricket, there are additional specific membership costs for all of these. Providing a modest tax relief for membership of sporting organisations would help put money back in the pockets of individuals and families. Importantly, this measure would not only support families, but it would also strengthen local clubs by boosting participation and membership. It is a simple targeted initiative that would promote health, community engagement and well-being, and the sustainability of grassroots sports. It is an idea worth serious consideration in the context of budget 2027. I am looking for the Taoiseach's support on it.

The Taoiseach: Is it all sporting organisations?

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: Yes, all sporting organisations.

The Taoiseach: I recall that about two years ago we looked seriously at tax relief for gym membership. As part of the budget preparations, I will discuss what suite of taxation measures we will adopt to try to alleviate pressures on people.

There had also been tax relief in respect of philanthropic donations to clubs and so on, but that all sporting organisations would be covered by a tax relief is a new one. Some charge low enough fees; some charge high fees. I do accept that in the current climate, with fuel costs and everything else, there are a lot of pressures on people, and inflation is at elevated levels because of what happened following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2021, 2022, 2023 and 2024. It had been coming down before that war. We will examine this in the context of the budget.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I have serious concerns about a proposal by An Post to relocate a sorting office from Edmondstown in Rathfarnham to Lucan later this year. This facility has

served people in Knocklyon, Whitechurch, Firhouse and Rathfarnham for decades. Closing it would be a particularly bad blow, given the recent closure of the much-valued and much-used post office in Rathfarnham village. It will impact postal services in our area. It will have knock-on impacts with regard to delivery times and general service levels. Instead of having a relatively short and convenient journey, people in Rathfarnham will have to travel across the congested M50 all the way over to Lucan to pick up their parcels, and that is if they have a car. If there were to use by public transport, it would be a two-hour journey each way.

An Post is a public service. Accessibility has to be one of its guiding principles, and this proposal is contrary to that. I ask that the Taoiseach ensure that An Post invests in the services locally in the Rathfarnham-Edmondstown area rather than forcing people to travel across Dublin South-West to get their parcels.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this. That sounds like an excessive journey across. I do not know whether he has engaged with An Post on this, but perhaps he should. I certainly will alert An Post to the fact that he has raised it here and get its plans and background. Normally it does not do stuff that would result in a deterioration of a service. We had similar issues in another location and it worked out okay. I do not have the full background to this but we will raise it with An Post.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I want to ask the Taoiseach about a situation in the mid-west at the moment. I am one of the first people who would be out defending the rights of people to come here under international protection and beneficiaries of temporary protection coming from the war in Ukraine. They have a right to be safe and a right to be looked after. However, I want to tell the Taoiseach about someone who has been in this country three months and who at the weekend committed his eighth crime. He has been charged with his eighth crime. This is a man from Ukraine. Many people have that right, and I would defend the right of people to be here, but this is somebody holidaying here and on a crime spree at the expense of the taxpayer. We have to give space to the criminal justice system, but for someone flaunting our laws, abusing communities and being a thug, what mechanism is there to send him back? I think he has lost all right to be here in this country. The quicker we get him back the better. People have a right to be here, but this is not a right. This is an abuse of a right. This is criminality.

An Ceann Comhairle: I do not believe it is necessary to name the nationality in our forum. I just do not think it is in any way helpful to-----

Deputy Cathal Crowe: How else do I convey a situation, a Cheann Comhairle?

An Ceann Comhairle: You conveyed it well without having to name any nationality, and people understand-----

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I respectfully disagree. I have a representational role here for my constituency.

The Taoiseach: More generally, my understanding is that the Minister for justice has powers, and the Deputy should raise the case with the Minister because the Minister for justice has the

capacity to deport people who have been convicted by the criminal justice system of crimes. I understand quite a number of deportations have happened in respect of others, but, again, that is all subject to clarity. That is my understanding, and I encourage the Deputy to raise the specific issue with the Minister for justice.

Deputy William Aird: I wish to raise the issue of payment terms applied by State and semi-State bodies to contractors. I welcome that payments are guaranteed but I have been told that payment terms can stretch to four months, which is simply not acceptable. These are small and medium-sized operators, the backbone of small enterprise across Ireland, who must cover fuel, machinery, wages and other overheads all upfront. They cannot wait months to pay staff or creditors. Payment delays are placing real financial strain on otherwise viable businesses. I respect that commercial contracts are not for direct interference but it is reasonable to question why State agencies, which should set the standards, are imposing such lengthy payment terms. I ask that the Government examines this issue and ensures fair, timely and responsible payment practices for small contractors across Ireland. Will the Taoiseach send a memo to all the Ministers asking them to talk to and engage with all the agencies?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising a very fair question. I would be equally intolerant of overly lengthy periods for paying contractors, particularly small to medium-sized enterprises, which need to be paid in a timely manner. I know that in the recent discussions with the Irish Road Haulage Association in which the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, and the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, were engaged, issues around payments and rebates, and the timeliness of those, were raised. Undertakings have been given to try to speed up some of those repayments, rebates and so on. It is a very fair question, and the State should act honourably and reasonably in these circumstances.

An Ceann Comhairle: We have two final Deputies. I will give them 30 seconds each. I call Deputy Cathy Bennett, to be followed by Deputy Charles Ward.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: In recent months, the Irish Government launched an advertising campaign in Australia encouraging those who built Australia to return home. Emigrants, however, face significant challenges returning home. While appreciating recent efforts to expand countries with which Ireland has reciprocal recognition arrangements regarding driving licences, will the Government ascribe equal priority to Irish citizens who are returning home in order that they can get driving licences?

Deputy Charles Ward: I have an issue regarding the Minister for children not answering a question. The Ceann Comhairle ruled that the question was okay. It feels like we are being silenced here. I need the Taoiseach to ensure that the Government will take a whole approach to addressing children in support hubs with defective concrete.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Seán Canney): In relation to the drivers' licences and the reciprocation between countries, we are acting on that with a number of countries, including the US. Last week we signed an agreement with Moldova, and we are looking at how we can speed up the process and give equal recognition between

Australia and ourselves. Just this morning I read a report of a review I got. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and I are working on this.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: And the USA.

Deputy Seán Canney: And the USA, yes.

The Taoiseach: I did not quite get the specifics of Deputy Ward's contribution, but the mica scheme is progressing fairly significantly now. Hundreds of millions of euro have now been successfully allocated and invested. The Deputy says in respect of children but-----

Deputy Charles Ward: It was to do with a support hub for children. The question was tabled and the Minister refused to answer it.

The Taoiseach: I will have a chat with the Minister about that.

Post European Council Meeting: Statements

The Taoiseach: I attended a meeting of the European Council on 19 March in Brussels. Once again, leaders dealt with a very full and important agenda against the backdrop of a very challenging and volatile international environment. The substantial items discussed included Ukraine, the situation in the Middle East and European competitiveness. There was also a Euro Summit, which assessed the state of the European Union's economy. Other items on the agenda were European security and defence, migration, the Democracy Shield, multilateralism and child protection online. I will set out the main results of the European Council with regard to support for Ukraine, the conflict in the Middle East, multilateralism and European competitiveness. The Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, will speak later to the other issues.

I will begin with competitiveness, a crucial issue for Ireland and Europe and one that is now firmly at the top of the European Council agenda. Supercharging Europe's competitiveness will also be a main priority for Ireland's Presidency of the European Union. The March European Council took further decisive action on strengthening Europe's competitiveness and unlocking the full potential of its Single Market. Leaders established the highest level of ambition for a new One Europe, One market agenda to be implemented during the course of 2026 where possible, and by the end of 2027 at the latest. As I said, this comprehensive agenda of concrete measures with ambitious deadlines will also provide the key strategic focus for Ireland's upcoming Presidency of the European Union Council in the second half of the year.

We will advance priority actions across five specific areas: deepening and integrating the Single Market; further simplifying rules and reducing regulatory and administrative burdens; accelerating decarbonisation while ensuring affordable energy; fostering industrial innovation and renewal in strategically important technology sectors; and mobilising necessary public and private investments. On the Single Market, priority measures will include a new 28th regime for company law, called EU Inc. This will make it easier to set up businesses across the EU, providing instant access to the Single Market. It will be digital-by-default to help innovative start-ups scale and grow. Work will also be undertaken to improve mutual recognition of

professional qualifications and skills as well as addressing fragmented product labelling and packaging requirements.

Leaders called for agreement this year on all omnibus simplification packages tabled by the Commission, including an ambitious AI omnibus to be presented by the end of July. This work will reduce administrative burdens for businesses.

Leaders also called on the Commission to undertake an in-depth regulatory review of the current EU body of law, to eliminate outdated provisions, overlaps, and inconsistencies, while ensuring that all new initiatives are in line with simple-by-design principles and better regulation principles. Access to affordable energy is vital for our competitiveness. A key lesson of the past few weeks and the impact of the conflict in the Gulf is that Europe must become more self-reliant when it comes to energy and we must break our strategic dependence on imported fossil fuels. Europe must deliver the clean and abundant energy needed to power the economy of the future. Priority actions include agreement this year on the European grids package, including faster permitting procedures, to enable the injection of more renewable energy into the system. At the same time, targeted solutions are needed to protect our citizens and businesses from the recent and very significant spike in fuel prices.

Leaders invited the Commission to present a set of temporary and targeted measures, taking into account the differing situations of member states, and the need to address the particular vulnerability of energy-intensive sectors, including reducing risk of relocation and protecting jobs. Consideration of these measures by leaders will continue at the informal meeting of the European Council, which I will attend in Cyprus from tomorrow.

I have also written to President von der Leyen to set out the need for Ireland to retain the flexibility to introduce specific, temporary and targeted emergency measures to support the most affected sectors of our economy during this crisis. On industrial renewal and innovation, it is clear that the current geopolitical environment requires a new focus on strategically important investments in the technologies of tomorrow, reducing strategic vulnerabilities, while maintaining the deepest possible co-operation with like-minded global partners. Priority measures will include a mapping of dependencies in strategic sectors to be completed by the Commission this year, in co-operation with member states, as well as targeted and proportionate European preference in select strategic technologies.

Leaders also called for agreement this year on the industrial accelerator Act proposals presented by the Commission last month, along with further proposals to be presented shortly on strengthening Europe's capabilities in chip and cloud computing technologies. On mobilising investment, leaders reinforced their commitment to a savings and investment union with fully integrated capital markets being a necessary foundation for sustainable economic growth and competitiveness. This will enable more sustainable funding sources to support the development of fast-growing young firms at the technological frontier, including in digital and green technologies. Europe needs to improve its competitiveness to deliver for its citizens. The March European Council has set out a very ambitious agenda. The Commission's One Europe, One Market roadmap, shared with leaders last week, sets out our action plan. The upcoming Irish Presidency of the Council will be strongly focused on delivering it.

As Russia's aggression enters its fifth year, we cannot allow this war to be normalised. Ireland and the European Union must continue to demonstrate our full solidarity with Ukraine.

The European Council in March held an exchange of views with President Zelenskyy and leaders will continue these discussions with the President at our informal meeting in Cyprus tomorrow. Unfortunately, leaders were unable to reach agreement with all 27 member states on Council conclusions. Instead, a separately agreed text on Ukraine was agreed with 25 European Union Heads of State and Government, with Hungary and Slovakia not joining. We agree that Ukraine must have the budgetary and military means to continue to exercise its inherent right of self-defence to counter and deter Russia's aggression, which continues. The crisis in the Gulf is very serious but we must retain the ability to support Ukraine and to keep pressure on Putin.

Ireland strongly supports the agreement for a €90 billion loan to Ukraine. Getting these funds to Ukraine on time is critical for both Ukrainian and European security and we regret any moves which delay its disbursement. With a change of government in Hungary, I am confident that this critical funding can soon begin flowing to Ukraine. I had a call with Prime Minister-elect Magyar last week and I look forward to working with him and his new government on this and other pressing issues on the EU's agenda.

We also need to secure agreement on the 20th package of sanctions. This is about increasing the pressure on Putin to agree a ceasefire and engage meaningfully in negotiations. Ireland strongly supports further measures to raise the costs to Russia, including by targeting the shadow fleet and its enablers. These vessels are transporting Russian oil while practising irregular and high-risk shipping practices. They threaten maritime safety and security and pose an acute environmental risk. I regret that the US-led trilateral peace negotiations have effectively stalled. I hope that fresh momentum can be injected into this process, as we need to see an end to this war. Of course, President Putin could choose to end his illegal war tomorrow. Any peace agreement must be just and lasting, protecting Ukraine and Europe's vital security interests. That is why the €90 billion is so important. It sends a real signal that Europe is behind Ukraine budgetarily and is behind Ukraine for the long haul. I am glad that Hungary has already lifted its block on the loan and its block on the new round of sanctions. This has happened while I am speaking and it is very welcome news. It is positive for that package to go to Ukraine. It will be a great relief to the people of Ukraine. Ireland remains a strong supporter of EU enlargement and we will work to advance Ukraine's accession during our European Union Presidency. We commend Ukraine's continued reform effort,s despite the very challenging circumstances and again, with a new leadership in Budapest, we are potentially looking at a formal opening of accession negotiations with Ukraine. We are also looking at Montenegro's accession process, which has made very good progress. Ireland would like to be in a position to have all chapters of that more or less completed by the end of our Presidency. It will be challenging but that is our objective.

Ireland remains deeply concerned about the war in the Middle East and the Gulf, which has escalated significantly since the European Council met in Brussels last month. The extension of the ceasefire as announced by President Trump Is welcomed. However, the situation remains very volatile. The Strait of Hormuz remains blocked by Iran, the US blockade of Iranian ports continues and a return to negotiations remains unclear. My understanding is that three ships were attacked this morning in the strait, which is very worrying news. Dialogue and diplomacy offer the best path to a lasting solution. Only through negotiations can a permanent end to the conflict be achieved and wider regional security assured. Escalation is in the interests of no one. We have seen the very damaging impact of the closure of the Strait of Hormuz on our

economies, business and households. The Strait must be reopened, and free navigation must be guaranteed in full respect of the law of the sea. Ireland's position throughout the conflict is that all parties must uphold international law. The ceasefire in Lebanon is very welcome but clearly very fragile. Ireland remains deeply concerned about the appalling nature of what happened in Lebanon and about the security situation in southern Lebanon, in particular regarding the impact on the civilian population, which has been completely disproportionate and unacceptable. Initial discussions between Israel and Lebanon - the first since 1993 - are welcome. I hope these US-facilitated talks lead to a permanent ceasefire. We must do all we can to support a positive outcome that can lead to a comprehensive and sustainable peace. Such a settlement must include the disarmament of Hezbollah and security guarantees for both Israel and Lebanon as well as respect for Lebanon's territorial integrity.

European Union leaders and I have also been very clear that UNIFIL troops must be protected and their mandate respected. The killing and targeting of UNIFIL troops is completely unacceptable. I again commend our Irish troops for the huge contribution they continue to make in Lebanon in the service of peace.

At the European Council meeting, European Union leaders reiterated that, despite dramatic developments in the region, Gaza and the West Bank must not be overlooked. The European Council called for the full implementation by all parties of the ceasefire and all other provisions of UN Security Council Resolution 2803, in line with other relevant UN Security Council resolutions. The Council also reaffirmed its commitment to international law and a comprehensive, just and lasting peace based on the two-state solution in accordance with relevant UN Security Council resolutions where two democratic states, Israel and Palestine, live side by side in peace.

European Union leaders also discussed the humanitarian situation and the need for the rapid, safe and unimpeded delivery and sustained distribution of humanitarian aid at scale into and throughout Gaza in accordance with international humanitarian law. The Council called on Israel to reverse its decision regarding the new registration arrangements for international NGOs, which will severely restrict their ability to operate in the occupied Palestinian territory and significantly worsen the humanitarian situation. All border crossings should remain open.

We remain very concerned and disturbed by Israeli actions that seek to undermine the stability of the Palestinian Authority and prospects for a durable path towards the two-state solution. Israel must immediately release revenues withheld from the Palestinian Authority and extend the correspondent banking services waiver between Israeli and Palestinian banks. The European Council also condemned the massive increase in settler violence against Palestinian civilians and underlined the importance of de-escalation in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Ireland is extremely concerned by the expansion of illegal settlements in the West Bank. Leaders called on the Government of Israel to reverse the expansion of settlements, which are illegal under international law.

Since the European Council last met in March, Ireland has condemned the law passed by the Israeli Parliament to expand the scope of the death penalty and revive its implementation in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory. Ireland is particularly concerned about the discriminatory nature of the law as it relates to Palestinians. The European Union has noted its long-standing principled position against the death penalty and urged Israel to abide by its obligations under international law. At the European Council meeting, I advocated for the re-

examination of the EU-Israel association agreement in light of egregious Israeli breaches of human rights and democratic principles. We have continued to call for this in light of continued unacceptable Israeli actions.

Leaders had an exchange of views with the UN Secretary General, António Guterres. In this discussion, we reiterated our commitment to multilateralism and the protection of the international rules-based order and the need to support the UN system. We discussed multilateralism in the framework of challenges to international law, notably in relation to Ukraine and the Middle East. We joined the Secretary General in calling for an end to conflict in the Middle East and a return to diplomacy. Ireland is committed to maintaining the strong working relationship between the EU and the UN over the course of our EU Presidency and focusing on underpinning the multilateral order.

This was a significant and action-orientated meeting of the European Council. I look forward to continuing my discussions with fellow EU leaders in Cyprus over the next two days. I also look forward to continuing our discussions in this House on this very important agenda of work for Ireland, especially as we take up the responsibility of the EU Presidency from 1 July.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: It is reasonable to ask what it would possibly take for the European Union to suspend the EU-Israel trade agreement. What possible threshold must be met and what new horrors and breaches of international law are required before it moves away from its position of intransigence and failure? At times, we have debates in relation to the EU and some on the benches opposite try to make the Sinn Féin position on Europe sound complicated. I think it is pretty straightforward. We do not propose to leave the European Union. We want to be in it but we are extremely critical of it. This is one of the areas we are critical of.

The EU's handling of the conflict in Palestine has been appallingly shameful. This is a further example. It reflects the Union's abject failure. The failure to stand up for international law is an act of cowardice from the EU. Israel has violated human rights in Palestine and Lebanon, and the EU has still not taken action. Despite multiple legal opinions and the clear evidence we have seen on our screens, the EU has shown absolute cowardice when it comes to standing up to Israel. It is abundantly clear that Israel has violated the human rights conditions of the agreement. The agreement is predicated on respect for human rights by virtue of Article 2. It is very obvious that Israel is in breach of that article.

It is important to remember that suspending the association agreement is not a sanction. It is a decision to correctly apply the provisions of the agreement, particularly Article 2, which clearly predicate the entirely beneficial trading arrangements that Israel enjoys on respect for human rights. The reputation and credibility of the EU is in tatters due to this. It is incredible that it has failed to take any meaningful action against Israel. We are moving into a very dangerous world for everyone if we continue to allow international law to be undermined without consequences. If we stop enforcing international law on one country, we risk giving a free hand to all rogue states to act as they see fit.

The Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, highlighted to the Taoiseach the issue of the recent sanctions package. At this stage, attention will now turn to the next sanctions package. The new sanctions package identifies aluminium as a subject of sanctions. That obviously has

implications for Ireland. It is right and important that aluminium be sanctioned. Will the Minister of State comment on that issue? This sanctions package did not include atomic energy, the Russian atomic agency, Rosatom, and the officials connected to it and it is important that the next sanctions package does. The Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, has clearly called for Rosatom and all who are associated with it to be included in a sanctions package. I have asked the Minister of State about this before and he has said he is in favour of it. It is important that Ireland makes its voice heard in pressing for that to be included in the next sanctions package. That would be an effective action.

In the last session of post-European Council statements, I expressed disappointment and frustration that the conflict in Sudan was not referenced. That is remarkable. If you talk to international experts, humanitarian organisations, human rights organisations and the Sudanese community here in Ireland, they will make the point very clearly that this conflict will continue. We have seen the slaughter continue in recent weeks and months. Some 50 people were killed at a wedding and there was a further massacre of civilians in El Fasher. Day after day, people are being killed but, because it is happening on the African continent, it barely raises any comment. I do not direct that remark at the Minister of State but, across the political establishment throughout Europe, it draws very little attention. It is the view of people from the Sudanese community and those experts I have mentioned that, until such time as this issue reaches a point close to the top of the agenda in Europe and the United States, the war will continue. The conflict has now been ongoing for nearly five years. It is crucially important that Europe starts to raise its voice. Ireland needs to lead the charge in that regard. The flow of weapons has obviously been affected by the war in the Middle East but it continues nonetheless and has resulted in the slaughter of tens of thousands of Sudanese civilians over recent years. It is not acceptable. I urge the Minister to ensure this is a priority in future meetings of the European Council.

Deputy Seán Crowe: This was another European Council meeting that refused to hold Israel and the US to account for their destabilising actions in the Middle East or to acknowledge those actions. Where was the condemnation of the actions that started this war? Our trade partners are an exception to outrage when it comes to killing children, journalists, ambulance drivers, medical responders and innocent civilians.

No one is here to defend Iran's human rights record but, if you were to read the conclusions of the European Council meeting, you would swear that Iran had fired the first shot. The line is that "Developments in Iran and the wider region threaten regional and global security." It is anyone's best guess what developments are being talked about. The European Council assures us that it is "closely monitoring the far-reaching impact of the hostilities". The EU has shown itself to be a paper tiger. We are completely unwilling to use our collective diplomatic and economic power to prevent the US and Israel from riding roughshod over the region and killing who knows how many thousands of people in the process. It rained oil in Tehran but that is okay because Trump and Netanyahu murdered the ayatollah and some of his family. The European Council seems more concerned about "migratory flows towards the European Union" than ending conflicts and saving innocent lives. It has the gall to say that it will put an end to Iran's destabilising activities without a single word about Israel, bar a weak attempt at asking for it to stop invading quite so much of Lebanon.

What more needs to be done for the EU-Israel association agreement to be scrapped? Is it another genocide like Gaza? The EU cannot credibly claim to uphold human rights while sustaining preferential trade with a state whose conduct has been found by multiple international bodies as amounting to genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes. Those are the words of the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Palestine. It would not even be a trade sanction. It would be simply exercising Article 2 of the agreement that states Israel enjoys special trade privileges so long as it respects human rights.

Israel has ethnically cleansed Gaza, expanded its presence in the West Bank and tried to take over 20% of Lebanon. Human rights must be non-negotiable. Israel has crossed every red line and engaged in countless breaches of human rights and international law. We either stand for human rights or we do not. We either stand for international law or we do not. If the EU is to have any credibility on international affairs, weak words like the Council's conclusions are not going to cut it any more.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: When the European Commission proposed to slash Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, funding by as much as 25%, the response from the Irish Government should have been to rule out any cut at all. Instead, the Government decided to run for political cover claiming that it was just a starting point. It should have told Europe flat out that any proposals to cut CAP funding were a non-starter for Ireland.

Last week, we got an insight into perhaps why that was the case, when a former Fine Gael Taoiseach cynically degraded rural Ireland as a whole. He said he was seeking an honest conversation. Well, how about this? It was a Fine Gael Government that led the negotiations on the current CAP and a Fine Gael-Fianna Fáil Government that signed off on it. They did so during a period when Ireland had become a net contributor to the EU budget. In doing so, they gave their blessing to a European budget that saw the amount assigned to fund CAP reduced from 37% to 30%, a cut in real time for our farming families. We now know that Ursula von der Leyen wants to do the same thing again. We also know that an element of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil think rural people have it too good.

The agriculture Council is due to meet next Monday to discuss the next CAP. Will the Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, in his closing remarks, address whether Ireland will categorically rule out accepting the EU budget that contains further cuts to CAP? Will he also commit to advocating for new, enhanced and reinvigorating funding?

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I welcome the opportunity to engage on behalf of the Labour Party following the European Council meeting of 19 March. The meeting had an extensive agenda: Ukraine and the Middle East; competitiveness; defence; multilateralism; and democratic resilience. These are all complex challenges which have clearly become more challenging since that date, as the Taoiseach acknowledged. We have, unfortunately, seen further developments in the Middle East, with Trump and Netanyahu's illegal war only deepening there.

In Brussels, on the morning of 19 March, I participated in the Party of European Socialists, PES, pre-Council leaders' meeting along with other PES leaders, including Spain's Pedro Sánchez and Commissioner Teresa Ribera. Last weekend, we had another engagement hosted by Prime Minister Sánchez in Barcelona in the shape of the Global Progressive Mobilisation

summit, at which we heard addresses by global leaders of the left, including President Lula of Brazil, Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa, Mia Mottley from Barbados and Elly Schlein from Italy. It was an inspiring gathering where we discussed challenges and opportunities facing the left across Europe and the world.

What struck me was not just the scale of the crises we all face but also the clarity of the responses offered by those on the left and in the socialist movement internationally. As the Irish party within the Party of European Socialists and the S and D group, the Labour Party is proudly European and we assert the principles of a social Europe with an emphasis on climate action and an active state that can engage on housing, workers' rights and equality. The Spanish left Government has shown leadership on climate, renewables and so much more.

I raise three points that the Minister of State might also bring back to the Taoiseach. I very much welcome the Taoiseach's comments and ambition that the Irish Presidency this year will see an acceleration on the steps towards EU accession for Ukraine. The Labour Party is proud to stand in solidarity with the people of Ukraine against the brutal regime of Putin and his colonial and imperialistic aggression against them. We are concerned that there are still Russian interests in Ireland, and we need to be clearer about sanctions for those. We very much welcome the change of government in Hungary and the fact that the €90 billion loan for Ukraine will now, it seems, be facilitated. That is hugely important and I welcome it. We will work the Government to ensure that during this Presidency, EU accession for Ukraine can be accelerated.

A great deal more could be done on the US-Israel war, however. It is deeply disappointing that the EU is not taking further steps to ensure the suspension of the Israel trade agreement. We see that Israel is now leading in the bombing of southern Lebanon and is seeking to do to southern Lebanon what it has already done in Gaza. We all very much hope that the ceasefire will hold, but there are clearly huge accountability issues and sanctions that need to be undertaken against Israel.

With the defeat of Orbán in Hungary, Netanyahu has lost what has been described as his "EU firewall" against sanctions. It is hoped that Ireland, along with Spain and other allies, will now be able to press harder on more sanctions against Israel and, in particular, the suspension and ending of the trade agreement, as well as the passing of the occupied territories Bill here at home.

The implications of the illegal war being waged by Trump and Netanyahu against Iran and Lebanon and the energy shock that has generated have clearly shown just how exposed the EU is and how exposed Ireland, in particular, is given our over-reliance on imported fossil fuels.

The S and D group in the European Parliament has called for two key measures to be adopted by the European Commission to deal with the enormous disadvantage being faced by citizens across Europe and in Ireland. First, it is calling for a temporary energy emergency regulatory tool to fast-track the development and roll-out of renewables. We have seen it done in Spain where energy costs are now four times cheaper than in Ireland. The group is also seeking strong measures to protect vulnerable households, including an EU-wide social leasing scheme to give people access to clean energy solutions without upfront costs.

We see that the package coming from the European Commission also gives a facility to states to have a windfall levy on the taxes of fossil fuel companies. Let us do that in Ireland.

Tax these windfall profits further but let us also accelerate away from our dependence on fossil fuels. Today is Earth Day. There is no better day to look for an urgent ramping up of our capacity to generate electricity through renewables. This Government has been very slow and indeed has been regressive compared to the previous Government. We need to see more and we will be pushing the Government on this. We have seen the benefits in Spain and elsewhere regarding energy costs, energy security and climate emissions.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I am glad to have the opportunity to contribute on post European Council statements. The discussions at the meeting were very much dominated by the war that is still going on in the Middle East. It is an impossible thing because it is changing by the day. A meeting of the European Council could be convened, and all terms could have changed by the evening time. Nearly all of this is outside the control of the Government and the European Union bloc, but how we respond to it is within our control.

I, like other Members, went out two weeks ago and met with protestors regarding the fuel prices. I met some of the best of people there and their concerns were very legitimate, and a package was eventually agreed by the Government. While we all knew it, although it does not always directly stare us in the face, and it was a concern during that week, was that some of the parameters of our taxation regime when it comes to fuels and VAT rates are controlled by the European Union. The European Union bloc needs to reflect on that and have more flexibility at this time. I note that Poland and Spain were reprimanded in words, but we do not know to what extent they will be reprimanded thereafter. I do not know what the outcome of that discussion was, but we need more certainty because this war has become so uncertain. It is a very fluid situation. The Government's responses will have to be fluid, as will those of other European states. If everything we hear in the media today is true, this is going to continue beyond the month of April and possibly through the summer. If that is the case, it will require more interventions by the Government and State. It will also require more interventions by other European governments. We need to know how rigid the European Commission and eurozone's parameters are and what more can be done by the European bloc.

The Ukrainian conflict is repeatedly spotlighted in Europe. We speak about it through one lens, but I have heard from countries on the eastern flank of the European bloc that they fear the conflict in real terms. They have had huge budgetary shifts whereby they have moved spending programmes from certain fields to a military spend. It is alarming how militarised the eastern flank of the European Union has had to become.

Last month, President Zelenskyy and his cabinet published figures which Russia has said it disputes. The figures from the Ukrainian Government state that 19,546 Ukrainian children were effectively kidnapped or rehomed during the early months of the war and have not been brought back. Some have been domiciled in Russia for four years. I do not know under what circumstances that has happened. I have tried multiple times to find out what is going on there. We refer to front lines, Zaporizhzhia, power plants being banned and drones going into the sky, but 20,000 children, which is a huge number, are missing. We do not know where they are, how they are being cared for or how many have been repatriated with their parents. There have been prisoner exchanges throughout the war. Russian and Ukrainian prisoners have been handed back. When I examined this issue a couple of months ago, the figure was around 19,000. What the hell is going on? It is perverse in any conflict that children who have been taken alive from a front-line war situation are held against their will and that of their families.

The correct word to use is "kidnapped". They have been kidnapped by the Russian state. Vladimir Putin has blood on his hands. It is perverse and wrong that almost 20,000 Ukrainian children are in Russia. I have not heard this discussed sufficiently by any European leader in many months. I ask that the issue be spotlighted from an Irish position when the Minister of State is next in Brussels.

I refer to the recent attacks in Lebanon, which were discussed. The welfare of military personnel, be they Irish or other nationalities, should be of utmost concern to us and attacks on them should be condemned.

Things are going to gear up quite a lot over the coming weeks as we prepare for the EU Presidency, which will be a very proud moment for our country. I look forward to different events taking place around the country and I thank the Minister of State for the effort he has put in so far with his opposite numbers across the European bloc and here in Government channels to devise a positive programme from an Irish perspective. I conclude by reiterating my point on the parameters of taxation and what we can do with mother ship Europe. We need interventions on the home front as this crisis continues. All of that needs to be very much spotlighted.

As I said, close to 20,000 Ukrainian children are missing. There have to be answers. When something goes out of the media spotlight it filters away and no longer becomes a source of discourse. This should matter to us.

Deputy Martin Kenny: As the Minister of State knows, we are living in very uncertain and volatile times across the world, in particular with conflicts in so many places around the globe. We are all very aware of the impact this is having, in particular on fuel prices and other commodities in Ireland. It is all having a knock-on effect on food prices and the food chains in the European Union. I am sure these are issues that are to the forefront of everyone's mind.

I want to concentrate on the beef industry. The volume of Irish beef exports fell by 5% in 2025, and across the European Union, beef exports fell by 2.2%. The volume of Irish beef exported to the UK fell by 5%. EU beef production is expected to decline by a further 1% this year. There has been an increase in beef imports from countries outside of the European Union, the majority of which comes from Mercosur countries, even before the Mercosur trade agreement comes into place.

An EU-Australia trade deal is coming up, which will see 30,000 tonnes of beef coming into the European Union. The EU must reverse the decline in beef production and not leave us in a position whereby we are dependent on importing food from the other side of the world. Irish and EU food is produced to the highest standards from an environmental and animal welfare point of view. Given the volatility in the world, it does not make sense to leave EU food security in such a vulnerable position. Sacrificing it for guns is not an option. Many people in Europe fear that is what is happening. A farmer recently asked me who would feed Ursula von der Leyen's army. That is the kind of impact this is having on people.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Deputy Kenny should tell him that she does not have an army.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I understand that, but that is the view people have developed from all of the talk about more and more militarisation.

The cut in the CAP budget needs to be reversed. People need to be reminded that CAP payments or subsidies, as Leo Varadkar would now call them, are not free money for farmers. CAP was established to ensure food security, increase productivity and guarantee fair living standards for farmers across the EU. It was designed to stabilise markets, harmonise competitiveness and have rules across every member state to create a secure and sustainable affordable supply chain of food for everyone. Leo Varadkar's comments were shameful and they are another example of the anti-farmer and anti-rural rhetoric we hear from parts of the Government, in particular Fine Gael. It is no wonder Fine Gael refused to stand with farmers or listen to protesters when it has such an attitude towards rural Ireland.

For the EU to have food security, Ireland needs to have food security. As an island nation, we should ensure that we have a proper and thriving fishing industry. Yet, the Irish fishing sector has been decimated by Dutch, Danish and Norwegian fishing fleets which plunder Irish waters. The Government has stood by and allowed this to happen. It did not even bother to vote against the deal in February. The Irish fishing fleet has been let down by this Government and successive governments over the years. This needs to change. We need to stop the industrial scale fishing with super-factory ships and reckless overfishing again and again while the Irish fishing fleet, which has played by the rules, is thrown against the rocks and totally betrayed.

Ireland is very proud of our neutrality. We have a history of peacekeeping and standing up for human rights and international law. We are proud to be members of the EU Security Council and respected for our stance on these issues by other countries across the globe. That is why it is important that we maintain the triple lock and our neutrality because that is exactly what people want to happen.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I welcome and commend the fact that Ireland was one of the voices in recent days to put forward the suspension of the EU-Israel Association agreement. It is insane that that has not happened to date. Europe is operating with hypocrisy in sanctioning Russia but not Israel. I remind the House that the suspension of the EU-Israel association agreement does not involve sanctions. Rather, it is the revocation of a privilege. Israel enjoys a preferential status in trading with Europe and to suspend the agreement is not to apply sanctions, which is what we need to do. Our first step towards the application of sanctions is dropping the preferential treatment we currently provide to Israel. What will the Government continue to do in this regard? As I said, I welcome that we were one of the countries pushing for this. How will we keep it on the agenda and make sure that the EU-Israel association agreement, in line with its human rights commitments, is fully suspended?

I want to talk about the digital omnibus, which I have raised on previous occasions. In the Taoiseach's contribution at the outset of this debate, we heard a lot about the competitive elements of AI and the enterprise and innovation space, all of which is welcome. I acknowledge that there is a place in a simplification agenda for small businesses, in particular, to address the duplications in different directives that require them to meet compliance standards in multiple ways. I get that. However, what nobody in the Government ranks seems to want to admit is that the simplification agenda has been hijacked by big tech to push for

deregulation. The Taoiseach used those words in his contribution. He said the work will reduce administrative burdens for business. It is deregulation under the guise of simplification and harmonisation.

One thing that was lacking in the Taoiseach's speech was any reference to rights and protections. Normally, he at least pays lip service to the issue but there is nothing in his contribution about the fact that while we allow businesses to flourish and create systems and ecosystems for businesses to use technology to advance business and enterprise in Europe, we must also protect the rights and protections enjoyed by citizens and consumers in the European Union. That is, essentially, what the European Union is most proud of. I would like to understand this, in particular in light of the security risks and privacy concerns around the European digital identity wallet. What assurances can the Minister of State provide that any digital omnibus package will address those vulnerabilities, rather than accelerate their adoption without the adequate protections that citizens require?

I want to speak to something else the Taoiseach failed to mention.

2 o'clock

I will read out the direct quote from the conclusion of the Council meeting:

On the basis of the lessons learned from the 2015 migration crisis and to avoid a similar situation, the EU is ready to fully mobilise its diplomatic, legal, operational and financial tools to prevent uncontrolled migratory movements to the EU and preserve security in Europe.

Based on those conclusions surrounding migration at the EU Council, why has the Government committed to the Chişinău process? What is the precise reason? How can the Government reconcile that with our previously outspoken record on human rights, particularly in areas like the Middle East and Ukraine? We are putting ourselves forward for membership of the UN Human Rights Council in the second half of next year. We consider ourselves as a State to punch above our weight when it comes to human rights diplomacy. What this is doing and what the Irish Government has committed to do in undermining the European Convention on Human Rights, ECHR, is launch a full-frontal assault on human rights.

We all notice that it is not called the “European convention on human – unless you are a migrant – rights”. That is essentially what this is trying to do. It is trying to say that we want the ECHR and that we have created this framework above member states within the European Union to which we are all accountable. Indeed, it is across the Council of Europe and allows us to ensure member states build their economies and societies within a human rights framework. The word “human” is sacrosanct in this regard, however. Everyone gets to enjoy those rights. To carve out a little bit around immigration so that we can essentially drop our standards for inhuman and degrading treatment and torture when it comes to those individuals is a precedent that I am not willing to tolerate and one everyone in this House should be enraged at. If we start coming after migrants, we are going to see various other groups in society targeted quite quickly after that. It is not okay and I seek assurances from the Government, particularly as we approach the EU Presidency, as we are looking to take a seat at the UN Human Rights Council and in a time of increased global conflict, that the Government will commit to the ECHR and remove any suggestion to follow the Chişinău process.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: Mar is eol don Aire Stáit, tá an domhan athraithe go hiomlán, go háirithe anseo san Eoraip. Nuair a smaoiníonn muid faoi chúrsaí fuinnimh, is léir go bhfuil athraithe móra ann. Tá siad le feiceáil i gcomhthéacs na hIaráine agus an tionchar atá ag an gcoimhlint sin ar an Eoraip agus ar Éirinn. When we speak of international conflict, we have to recognise the impact it has from both a European and Irish context. Increased oil and energy prices are connected to it. That needs to be recognised, particularly when we are debating in this House. We need to acknowledge that increased fuel and energy costs are Europe wide and worldwide. They do not affect Ireland alone. The Government has taken severe and serious steps in trying to address the issues in Ireland.

As the Minister of State will be aware, the election of Péter Magyar in Hungary and the end of the autocratic rule of Viktor Orbán was discussed at the recent European Council meeting. The huge mandate Mr. Magyar received signifies an end to autocracy and that Hungary is open to democracy. There have been some developments in Hungary since the new Prime Minister came into place, however. I refer to his comments that the Druzhba pipeline with Russia should open and the feelings of the Ukrainian people and President Zelenskyy in that regard. We need to look at some of these comments quite carefully. We cannot forget - this was also stated at the European Council meeting - that we must continue to stand with the Ukrainian people and not let any member state or changes to member states have any influence on how we support the Ukrainian people. This is a prime example. If that pipeline is reopened, it will have a negative impact on Ukraine and a positive one on Russia, particularly when we are trying to stall the limits of Russian financial ability.

I mentioned energy prices at the beginning of my speech. The EU has agreed to a co-ordinated EU action when it comes to energy, but there is a need to accelerate the energy transition. My perspective, and I think that of most people in this House, is that we must do it in a sustainable and renewable way, including onshore and offshore wind and solar energy. We must prioritise renewable energy as much as possible.

There have been comments over the past few weeks about an opening-up of the discussion around nuclear energy. We need to have that serious conversation. I am not talking about large nuclear plants but, rather, small modular reactors, SMRs. We look at Denmark in this country as a good example of how to do energy. It has done offshore energy better than anywhere else in Europe. Some might argue it has done it better than anywhere else in the world. Denmark banned nuclear energy in 1985, including research, but it has now changed that because it realises it needs to have an energy mix. What I have been calling for and continue to call for is that we review our nuclear ban. I am not calling for a nuclear power plant, but we must allow research into the pros and cons. We might come to the conclusion that it is not for us, but at least let us do it in an informed manner.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: It is great to have an opportunity to speak about the European Council meeting. The message could not be clearer from Europe and Ireland that we are operating in a far more volatile and uncertain world. Conflicts in the Middle East and Ukraine are driving our instability, and that instability is driving directly into energy prices and supply chains. People are facing the consequences of that in the form of cost-of-living increases. Energy is right at the centre of that. The Council has acknowledged as much. When fossil fuel prices spike, Europe suffers. We remain far too exposed to forces we cannot control. We have a huge challenge and crisis at the minute, but we have to take this as an opportunity to move

from volatility to stability. Ireland cannot continue to rely on fossil fuels and hope for that stability. That is not a strategy; it is a risk. Other speakers have spoken about how this is a risk we can do something about. We are not short of resources. Rather, we and the European Union are short of urgency. I hope this latest crisis will ensure the EU moves faster.

I see these opportunities in County Louth every single day. We have wind and water resources as well as the geographic position. We have a skills base. The Minister of State knows the county very well. Crucially, we have the infrastructural potential, particularly in places like Greenore Port. Greenore Port, as the Minister of State knows, has the potential to become the key operations and maintenance port for offshore wind in the Irish Sea. That is not pie in the sky; it is a practicable and deliverable project. It has planning permission. It would support offshore wind deployment, create jobs and anchor long-term economic activity in the region.

Potential does not deliver jobs, however; decisions supported by Government and made in this House do. I have huge ambition for this country. We can be a global leader in renewable energy, not just a participant in it. We can harness our natural resources to not only create energy but export it. We have that expertise. In reality, we have been talking about this for far too long. The European Council has set out the direction to accelerate renewables, invest in infrastructure and build the systems that will allow us to reduce dependence on the volatile fossil fuel markets, but Europe needs countries like us to deliver on it. We are not just part of the solution; we can be absolutely central to it. If we do not step up, not only will we fail ourselves but we will also weaken Europe's overall energy security and competitiveness.

If we talk about creating the resilience to move to stability, we know that oil and gas markets are hugely volatile and that geopolitical shocks can trigger sudden price hikes. We also know there will be another oil crisis. It is not a question of if but, rather, whether we will be ready for it and whether we are preparing right now because we are too exposed. This is why we need to move faster. Other speakers have spoken in this regard. We need to ensure we are moving on this.

With regard to Deputy Ó Cearúil's contribution around nuclear energy, it is 40 years away in Ireland if we look to it, but hydrogen energy is not. It is a new technology but it can be a huge part of the solution. We need to derisk that transition. We need to clear the funding pathways and the timelines that industry can work to. We have an incredible strategy from the Department of environment on hydrogen and alternative fuels, such as hydrotreated vegetable oil, HVO, for heavy goods vehicles, HGVs, and all of these things, but we have to make sure we are working on it.

The Minister of State will be leading out on many of our meetings during the European Presidency. Ireland needs to lead on this. Europe needs to lead on this. Energy and renewable energy need to be a key target and aim of the European Presidency.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: The decision not to suspend the EU-Israel association agreement is an act of profound moral cowardice. Israel has violated every aspect of the human rights conditions attached to the agreement. It is committing genocide in Gaza. It is murdering citizens in the West Bank. It has started an illegal war against Iran. Now, it is also bombing Lebanon. This is not a normal government. This is a rogue state that has crossed every red line and engaged in egregious breaches of human rights and international law. Since this

genocide in Gaza began, however, EU leaders have failed in their commitments to EU rights, failed to uphold international law and failed to stand up to Israel. Again, this week, the EU had the opportunity to finally send a clear message to Israel by suspending the EU-Israel association agreement and it shamefully chose not to. In this Chamber, we cannot sit around and wait for the EU to act. This Government must take trade with Israel into its own hands and pass the occupied territories Bill in full for goods and services. Ireland can and should act where Europe will not.

This takes me to another point in relation to the Technion contract or the links that University of Galway has with that Israeli institution. It is deeply concerning that yesterday "7 LÁ" exposed that the Nelson Mandela Foundation is now reviewing the use of Nelson Mandela's name by that university because of its links with Technion. This is something that a lot of campaigners in Galway have long campaigned on. They have asked the university to end any links with that Israeli institution. It is high time that it did just that. It is a shame that the Nelson Mandela Foundation has been forced to review its relationship with the university. I assume it feels that under the moral circumstances it is compelled to do so given the use of Nelson Mandela's name by that university.

My final point relates to the continued use by the US military of Shannon Airport. Too often I have heard Government TDs and Ministers talk about the illegal war in Iran in totally and utterly abstract circumstances. Do we have full control in relation to this? No, absolutely not. Nobody is saying that we do. However, it is outrageous that we continue to allow the use of Shannon Airport by the US military as it continues with its illegal war in Iran and atrocities around the world.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The EU has decided to do absolutely nothing about the genocide being heaped on the Palestinian people. Yesterday, an attempt was made by Spain, Slovenia and Ireland to raise the issue of not just trade but the special trading status that the EU has. The EU is the largest trading partner with Israel, bar none. It is some indictment on the EU that it is now lining up four-square behind an imperialist power that is heaping such misery on the population, such as the death penalty being introduced, gendered violence and sexual violence being committed and people being killed since the ceasefire. Whatever about the EU, because we could talk about that all day, at least Slovenia has introduced laws that have banned trade between Israel and Slovenia in certain conditions. It is very similar to what was proposed in the occupied territories Bill, and Spain has done likewise. Ireland has done absolutely nothing. It is very easy for the Minister of State to go and virtue signal in the Europe, but he has the power to do something here in Ireland.

The first issue is Shannon Airport. There has been a massive increase in overhead flights, which are obviously military related, and the Government has no interest in doing anything about it. Shannon is a major hub for the US military. The second issue is the occupied territories Bill. The Government is sending it back for more legal advice. That is an absolute ruse because 350 lawyers have already examined this and said there is nothing illegal about it. The Government gave a commitment before the elections two years ago that it would move on this. People were under that impression. Where is the occupied territories Bill? Senator Frances Black feels that the Government is delaying now on this. Ireland claims to be standing four-square with the Palestinian people, yet it is going to allow, and in fact it has encouraged, the Israeli soccer team to come and play here in October. The Government is out of step with

the Irish people on that issue. It has judged that very badly. There will be a campaign to stop that match. The "stop the game" campaign has already started.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Israeli regime and the United States have rained down death and destruction on thousands of people in a criminal war they instigated in Iran and Lebanon. The Israeli regime has done that following nearly three years of a genocidal slaughter against the Palestinian people. It continues to allow illegal settlers to run amok, terrorising Palestinians on the West Bank. It is now going to introduce a law to execute Palestinians who are resisting an illegal occupation of their land. There are reports in the past week of animals being used to rape Palestinian prisoners under the Israeli authorities. Against that background, the European Union fails to suspend the EU trade association agreement, the special trade status this regime gets. Despite the fact the Government was forced to raise that issue to call for a re-examination of this thing, it continues to allow the US military to go through Shannon Airport. Flights go through our airspace facilitating the US military machine, which is involved with this regime, committing these crimes. It refuses to pass the occupied territories Bill. It refuses to call for a boycott against the football match that Ireland are playing with Israel despite even UN experts saying we should not be playing football with teams involved in illegal occupation and genocide.

In the Taoiseach's speech, the only group whose disarmament he called for was Hezbollah. It was not the Israeli regime, which refused to sign the non-proliferation treaty, NPT, and is in the dock for genocide, but Hezbollah. I wish to give a brief history lesson. Before the Sabra and Shatila massacre in 1982, which was investigated by a former Irish foreign affairs Minister, Seán MacBride, Hezbollah did not exist. That massacre was essentially orchestrated by the Israelis and Lebanese Phalange fascist forces. At the time, it was deemed by Seán MacBride and the UN to be a genocidal massacre. It was only in the aftermath of that genocidal massacre by Israel and its allies that Hezbollah came into existence. It was a response to the terrorism of the Israeli state, yet we still refuse to sanction that state. We treat it as normal when it is clearly a terrorist state.

Deputy Albert Dolan: When we talk about these statements post the European Council meeting, it is so important that we have a conversation about the positive role that Europe and being part of Europe can play in all our lives. We are yet to see many of the benefits that were envisaged in a European Union and from a trade perspective. We do not have an opportunity to deal with banks across Europe. We do not have an opportunity to deal with energy companies across Europe. We do not have an opportunity to deal with a whole range of trade opportunities that would ultimately benefit consumers and reduce costs right across Europe. We often talk here about the cost-of-living crisis and the impact it is having on people's ability to carry on with a normal life, but the European Union is the tool that can ultimately help reduce costs throughout the EU.

There needs to be a more concentrated effort there. We are a small nation, but we have an opportunity to engage with the European Union and see benefits from that as well.

Energy security is absolutely critical. I welcome the announcements from the Commission about the AccelerateEU package. It is welcome that it is going to allow European states to take all the necessary actions to be able to protect ourselves against what is the largest oil shock in the history of the State. We have to be really careful there because we do not know how bad

this can get. We do not know how expensive fuels and energy can become, so we really have to take every measure possible to, first, secure our own energy independence and then simultaneously ensure that we are able to negate any negative impact it could have on the economy. That is going to be a very difficult balance to find.

Ireland's position in Europe is a very strong one when it comes to agriculture. We have a very strong history of food production and producing food in a sustainable manner. It is very important that when the CAP negotiations begin, Ireland defends food production and the ability of our own people to produce our own food. It is going to be so important that the CAP reflects the contribution European food producers make within the European Union.

I also want to talk about an area where I feel the European Union is failing at the moment, namely, competitiveness and the cost of doing business. I am the spokesperson for enterprise and I also sit on the enterprise committee. We have been doing a body of work over the last six months to a year. We have been speaking to many different representatives about the cost of doing business and just how expensive it is. This is something that is replicated across Europe. If we are to be competitive as a Continent and a Union, we need to make sure that we do not trip ourselves up. It really comes down to managing costs and ensuring that there can be success within the European Union, and that we do not become unattractive to people seeking to create jobs in our country. I am conscious of the time.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht labhairt linn tráthnóna maidir le cad a thit amach ag Comhairle na hEorpa i Mí an Mhárta. Ar an gcéad dul síos, ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh an fógra a tugadh ar maidin go bhfuil an Ungáir tar éis a veto a bhaint ar an gcabhair a bhí le tabhairt don Úcráin de bharr cinneadh na comhairle cúpla mí ó shin. It is a very welcome development and it is a testament to the fact that there has been a change of government in Hungary, which has removed the block to assistance being provided to the people of Ukraine.

If I can, I want to touch on three points maidir le torthaí Comhairle na hEorpa. They are the ongoing focus, as Deputy Dolan rightly stated, for a laser-sharp approach to competitiveness. I will also discuss energy and the role the European Union can play in securing the affordability and security of our Union's energy supply. The third point is to make sure we keep online safety at the top of our minds, and the importance of the European authorities taking their responsibility very seriously with regard to the Digital Services Act.

First, I want to touch on competitiveness. I welcome the conclusion from the Council about the need to drive on with the One Europe, One Market agenda. I welcome the ambition of trying to get that started this year. It is very important that the signal is sent, not only on the back of the Draghi report but also in terms of the actions the Commission is taking with regard to looking at the simplification of regulations across the Union, making it easier to do business, embedding principles like "once-only" in how individual businesses and companies engage with each other across the Union and, as Deputy Dolan said, really harnessing the power of the Single Market to make it a truly seamless experience and to make it really come to life for its citizens. In addition to that - this is an area where we in Ireland need to step up more as well - we need to create an SME ecosystem that is focused on helping SMEs not only start but scale up. Many times in recent months, President Macron has been quoted as saying that Europe needs to develop its own industrial champions. We need to develop our own commercial

leaders. We cannot be overly reliant on other countries around the world for our software platforms, logistical support or whatever the case may be. We do need to create an ecosystem that not only supports SMEs but where they provide a product or service in the market that is good, strong and commercially viable, and that we incentivise and promote a scaling approach. While domestic policy can incentivise that, it is something that must be at the heart of the European Single Market policy as well.

Turning to the affordability of energy, in March, the Commission announced that it was going to put in place a toolbox of measures to help member states deal with the energy crisis. This morning, there was some talk about reducing electricity taxes across the Union. In terms of the linkage between the Union and its citizens, it is really important that Irish people see the real impact of that toolbox of measures, and that they are made very visible in people's lives. As a Government, we must show the power of the European Union in co-ordinating not only energy affordability but also energy supply. We really need to start stepping up to the plate in regard to the development of a battery strategy, whether a national one here in Ireland or one that is developed at European Union level. Australia has set the template for how we should develop a battery strategy. That is key to securing not only energy security but also the long-term viability of renewable energy being the primary power source for our country, but also countries around the European Union.

I draw the attention of the House to the need for us to continue to ensure that the European authorities exercise their responsibilities in a speedy and efficient way with regard to digital enforcement. There was a lot of discussion a few months ago about the importance of online safety and regulations. It is important for citizens to see that our membership of the European Union gives us access to fantastic things like the Single Market, but also to show that it gives us the regulatory teeth to take on multinational companies that are contravening their responsibilities under the Digital Services Act and threatening the online safety of young people and that they can be dealt with appropriately at that level. I know that is something the Minister of State, Deputy Thomas Byrne, and the Minister of State, Deputy Niamh Smyth, are actively pursuing with our European colleagues in order to achieve that.

Deputy Pa Daly: It is difficult to overstate just how precarious the geopolitical context has become. We are going from one disaster scenario to the next, and the consequences will no doubt be felt for generations. No words are sufficient to condemn the impunity or disregard for human life that is on display. When we think back to recent human history, we ask how we could have let it happen. There is conflict across the world, in Palestine, Sudan, Lebanon and Ukraine. Even though there is no conflict in Cuba at the moment led by an international warmongering country, the blockade of oil in that country has led to the worst economic and energy crisis in recent decades. Mexico, Spain and Brazil recently called for dialogue to address the gross humanitarian crisis that is happening in Cuba, but there is not a peep out of this Government about the situation there. Why is that?

Why do we remain silent so many times? We already saw the three-card trick the Government pulled in the run-up to the election about the occupied territories Bill. Eighteen months later, we are still waiting for it to be enacted. The Government has shown cowardice on an international scale. We are looking at international law being torn up. Human rights are optional. Institutions built to prevent catastrophe are under attack. We have seen what the US has done to its health and humanitarian outreach to foreign countries. It has been withdrawn

from them. The US has stopped supporting UNRWA. Our collective humanity is under massive threat. We are witnessing a massive breakdown in global leadership.

The EU too is drifting towards militarisation. There are escalating trade tensions that threaten jobs and livelihoods and a raging cost-of-living crisis has resulted from wars and conflict. We have seen a devastating collapse in international development funding across the global south. We must be seen to be a neutral country and be proud of it. We cannot be seen to be neutral on injustice or war crimes. We must be militarily neutral, independently principled and committed to human rights, international law and the institutions that are under attack. If the Government is moving away from neutrality, it should put that to a referendum. Our position has got us respect for years. This reputation cannot be gambled away. Any move away from neutrality will not be supported by the Irish people.

The neglect of the Defence Forces is a political choice, and running a bulldozer through it will not fix it. The scale of human suffering across the world is staggering. We all know what has happened in Palestine over recent years. For the Jewish Power party to be wearing golden noose lapel pins on their suits in the Knesset in Israel is a staggeringly depressing visualisation.

What they want is separate facilities for people who have been convicted or sentenced to death, no visits apart from authorised personnel, no legal consultations except by video link, and assassinations or hangings to take place within 90 days of sentencing, closing off appeals and clemency. Is this where we have ended up on the international stage? Israel's human rights group has described it as institutional and racist violence against the Palestinians.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit.

I note that in Brussels in March, the key areas were again Ukraine and the €195 billion or so in support. Since then, we have had the Hungarian election, which, as others have noted, will hopefully free things up. I hope that at the informal meeting in Cyprus tomorrow and the day after, we will receive some signs of positive engagement from the Hungarian side, if we have not already done so.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: We got them this morning. It is all happening.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I missed that because I was at a committee meeting. It is fantastic to hear.

The Middle East is going to come up again, I am sure, just as it did before. You never know from one day to the next what is going to happen. The last thing I heard related to the status of the blockade.

I know matters are complex because of the historical and neighbourly relations some member states have with Israel, but we seem to be letting the genocide, the occupation of Gaza and the occupied territories fall through the cracks. I am aware that the Irish Government will say this is not a debate on the occupied territories Bill and that I have raised it before, but we have got to keep moving on this. We can have the argument over whether services should be included during the debate on the legislation, but let us get to the stage where the legislation is coming up. On engagement with our European colleagues, the matter of Israel seems to have gone even further down the agenda. It needs to be kept as topical as possible.

Issues like security and defence were also mentioned at the March meeting. It is in the EU's security interest not to have a belligerent Israel and to have a more settled, long-term peace plan, which might not suit the Netanyahu Administration but might suit the Israeli people going forward, as well as the Palestinians, obviously.

The other issues I want to focus on, which did not get discussed in Brussels but which I understand are coming up in the next couple of days, are the multi-annual financial framework and the long-term budget. Getting the framework right definitely has potential to provide some security in uncertain times.

Another area that is relevant concerns energy security and high fossil fuel prices, which are very topical right now. I have mentioned this in this Chamber during the debate on the fuel crisis but I reiterate that we need to see more movement from Europe on long-term energy security.

I have criticised the Government constantly for not investing in long-term offshore wind, tidal and wave energy, storage capacity off the west coast for conversion to hydrogen and battery storage. We could be a massive exporter of energy. I want to try this angle as well: perhaps there needs to be an EU Cohesion Fund that would ramp up our energy production capacity as part of a European energy security network. In this regard, we would get some funding not from private corporations but from member states to have a kind of a *quid pro quo* 50:50 arrangement whereby we would still have enough capacity to sell to gain revenue from data storage companies. Some of the funding would come from Europe directly to build up scale and the energy would then go automatically through the French interconnector or by whatever means are necessary. This is because we need to ramp up our energy security from a national level but also from a European level.

I am not sure whether the Minister of State got to comment on the meeting in May. I might not be in the Chamber to hear his response but I will have a look at the transcript later. I am referring to the meeting in May of the European Political Community that involves 47 member states. It is a wider body that is not on a statutory basis. Could the Minister of State put on the record the level of engagement not just with the EU accession states but also with countries that are not anywhere in the pipeline for EU accession? What enhanced co-operation and economic pooling can we have on a Europe-wide basis, excluding, obviously, the countries that are not involved, which include Russia and Belarus? We are talking about the likes of Armenia, Georgia, Türkiye, Moldova and Ukraine. Some of them are EU accession states, but there is a lot of potential on an EU level for enhanced co-operation.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I thank the Aire Stáit. I commend him on staying in the House for the debate. It is important that Ministers who represent the country abroad hear the differing voices in the House. Statements on the European Council are always a very valuable exercise to allow us to put on the record our views and influence our Ministers when they are representing us abroad.

The change of government in Hungary is welcome. I saw a photograph earlier this week of the Irish Council of State meeting and thought it perfectly captured how strong our republican constitutional democracy is. I am referring to the idea of an elected President using her powers, as outlined in the Constitution, to consider a Bill passed in this House, along with representatives appointed by her and representatives of both Houses of the Oireachtas. The

Constitution dates back to 1937. Sometimes we take for granted how strong our Constitution is. We can see, from places like Hungary, how easily a European country's constitution can be eroded by an authoritarian regime. We have to be very careful of that within the European project. In this regard, Michael McGrath is doing significant work on the rule of law in the EU.

This morning, I was canvassing in Beaumont. While European Council statements might not have been not high on the agenda, international affairs were. Many people I spoke to were incredibly concerned about the impacts and costs of what is happening in the Strait of Hormuz and the Middle East more generally. Whether it is a matter of the price of home heating oil or that of petrol or diesel, they are seeing the real impact of war on economies. War has devastating impacts on those who live in war zones and on global economic growth.

What is very clear – I heard the Taoiseach piece this together – is that Europe is now dealing with the impact of two very significant wars within its geopolitical sphere. The war in Ukraine has had an incredible impact on gas prices. This had a corresponding impact on global supply chains and food costs. Now we see the impact on the cost of oil.

As we look to the coming months, we need to be careful about how we proceed as a country, and the economic bloc of Europe must also be careful. There is no doubt that the increase in oil prices has a significant impact on economic growth. I hate to use the "R" word, but recession is always possible. We need to be very careful about how we proceed.

People on the doors are talking about costs. I distinguish between those who were protesting and those who were blockading. Many who were protesting were among those affected by cost increases. I acknowledge the measures the Government introduced, the first being worth €250 million and the second €750 million. They are essentially tax cuts to try to support people in meeting their costs. However, we should not forget that this also means income forgone that could be used for public services.

As we proceed as a country, we also need to be cautious about what we can do sustainably over the long period of time while always making sure that the strong economic model we have here benefits those people on the ground.

I think Europe has been very strong at times in terms of acting as a bloc. We saw that during Covid and so on. At times when we are divided, the response is very poor. A number of speakers have mentioned the European response to what happened in Gaza. I would always cite that as a time when I was not proud to be European. I was very disappointed in the European response.

There are two elements in terms of how we proceed on this issue. One involves the short-term measures Europe can take. When the package was being put together, we saw how so much of that package was affected by European regulations and rules. We have to look at how we can make European countries agile, nimble and able to respond to what could be an ever-increasing cost of oil. That is the first thing. The European Union needs to treat it as an emergency and needs to empower European nation states to respond to protect their citizens. It is a very obvious but sometimes disputed concept but we do have to transition away from carbon fuels. We are doing a significant amount in this country. What we are doing in terms of retrofitting is incredibly significant. Again, I come back to Beaumont. Every third or fourth door I came across, I found retrofitting that had been done. This often involved older people

who would not otherwise have been able to avail of it but who did because of the changes this Government made in terms of the fuel allowance. As a result, these older people were able to access the warmer homes scheme. We need to do more but the European Union needs to support countries to do so.

When one speaks to many people who are experiencing those costs, one sees how much it impacts them but when one speaks to people who have made that change to an EV - and it is not always easy although it is much more possible now with second-hand cars - one can see that they are not feeling that same pain in terms of their transport costs. There is a lesson there, which is that when we help people transition, it has a direct impact in the short term and the long term. While the European Green Deal has in some ways fallen off at the agenda and there is a big focus on deregulation, and I do not necessarily think that deregulation or simplification as it is often called is necessarily a bad thing, we have to stick to our long-term commitment to climate change measures and the environmental impacts of carbon fuel. The carbon tax can be very controversial. For those who I would describe as being at the populist end of the spectrum, it is very easy to say that we should pay less tax but the reality is tax allows us as a country to do certain things. Whether that is investing in the retrofitting programme or supporting farmers, the carbon tax funds that transition and we have to make that transition in the longer term. Europe needs to help us do that and I would like to see the European bloc do more.

Two wars are ongoing. We have been strongly supportive of Ukraine and rightly so but what is happening in the Straits of Hormuz and the Middle East is having a direct impact and I want to see the European bloc now step up and be part of the global conversation about what happens and about trying to bring an end to a war that is having massive economic impact on all of us here in Ireland and elsewhere.

Deputy Carol Nolan: On 19 March, the European Council adopted conclusions that included the formal launch of the One Europe, One Market agenda. According to the official document, this initiative is designed to boost EU competitiveness, strategic autonomy, economic security and prosperity while preserving the European social model. The priorities set out are ambitious - deepening the four freedoms, removing internal barriers, simplifying rules, improving the recognition of professional qualifications and strengthening consumer and product safeguards.

On energy, the conclusions call for an accelerated transition to renewables and low-carbon sources to reduce price volatility. These objectives may appear constructive yet for Irish agriculture, the reality on the ground tells a completely different story. While the Council speaks of competitiveness and simplification, the European Commission continues to advance the Mercosur trade agreement towards provisional application from 1 May. Ireland voted against this deal in the Council precisely because it will expose our family farms to a flood of lower-standard beef, sugar and agricultural imports from South America. This directly threatens the viability of farming enterprises in my own county of Offaly and indeed across the midlands and the rest of this State. It undermines the very producers the EU claims to support through its Single Market strategy. This disconnect is particularly striking given the Council's emphasis on strengthening Europe's democratic resilience. The conclusions rightly highlight the need to protect democratic discourse and counter disinformation. However, when thousands of Irish and European farmers raise legitimate evidence-based concerns about the impact of Mercosur on food production, rural economies and environmental standards, these concerns are set aside and the institutions proceed regardless. Such an approach erodes public

trust and contradicts the very principles of citizen engagement that the Council claims to uphold.

A similar pattern is evident in the Council's reaffirmation of unwavering support for Ukraine, including continued financial, economic and military assistance. Ireland has already committed hundreds of millions of euros in taxpayers' money to this effort. We must acknowledge the scale of this expenditure at a time when domestic pressures ranging from hospital waiting lists to rural infrastructure deficits remain acute. Irish families and businesses are entitled to expect that their elected representatives will balance international commitments with the immediate needs of its own citizens. I know from speaking to many agricultural contractors that they still need continued support. They are constantly contributing to our economy and as taxpayers, they should get fair play as should our small businesses and our haulage companies, which will also need continued support.

Finally the Council's call for an accelerated low-carbon transition must be examined in the light of recent domestic developments. The Government has announced a suspension or partial suspension of the carbon tax in response to public fury over rising fuel costs. I have consistently opposed the carbon tax. The EU-driven net-zero agenda with its binding 2030 targets and emissions transfer mechanisms continues to impose significant additional costs on households, farms and enterprises through higher fuel, heating and production expenses. The carbon tax suspension does not alter Ireland's commitment to that agenda. It merely delays the full impact while the structural costs remain. This illustrates the broader tension of an ideological commitment to rapid decarbonisation that is not logical, fair or balanced. In practice, this delivers higher living costs without delivering the energy security or competitiveness that the Council seeks. While the One Europe, One Market agenda is presented as a pathway to prosperity, it must be judged by its effects on Irish agriculture, the families bearing the cost of the energy transition and the allocation of taxpayers' public resources. Ireland's national interests require that we defend our farming sector, scrutinise the true cost of net-zero policies and ensure that international spending does not come at the expense of our own domestic priorities.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aidan Farrelly): We now enter a 20-minute question-and-answer session with the Minister of State.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: During my contribution, I addressed the next package of sanctions against Russia, in particular Rosatom, which is the Russian atomic agency.

Is this something the Irish Government is specifically referencing? I know it said it was supportive of it, but is it specifically calling for it?

Second, it is five or six months since the European Council had conclusions on Sudan, as I mentioned earlier. Kaja Kallas made some comments yesterday on the European Council. It is important that the pressure remains. Can the Minister of State comment on any discussions that happened on Sudan, either at the meeting or during bilaterals on the fringes of it?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Regarding Sudan, it is not that Kaja Kallas made comments yesterday. It is that the foreign Ministers discussed the issue of Sudan yesterday at the Foreign Affairs Council, and Kaja Kallas, as the high representative, spoke on behalf of all the

governments. While it was discussed at the European Council recently, although not directly at the last one, it has been on the agenda of foreign Ministers on a regular basis. We share the Deputy's concerns about Sudan, and there is no question about that. The Taoiseach has also expressed them.

Regarding sanctions, today, we got Hungary and Slovakia to remove blocks on the 20th package of sanctions, and that hopefully will be enacted tomorrow. We will then work towards the 21st package of sanctions, and any extra entities or people that need to be included will be considered as part of that. We have achieved a huge amount by getting through 20 packages of sanctions, including significant sanctions on the Russian economy. That work will continue.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Earlier, I referenced three topics: the digital omnibus, the EU-Israel Association Agreement and the ECHR. I welcome Ireland's moves on the EU-Israel Association Agreement but I want to know what more is going to be done. How are we going to keep the pressure on to suspend the agreement and bring Europe's response to the Israeli genocide into line with our actions against Russia?

Second, I wish to ask about the digital omnibus. Last week, in error, I referenced the Fianna Fáil grouping as the EPP. I apologise for that. I sometimes get mixed up between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael; who would have thought it? I would be curious to know about the Renew Europe grouping. When I first spoke to the Minister of State's Renew grouping colleague, Michael McNamara MEP in Brussels about this, he said there was more of a split in the Renew grouping. I want to know what Fianna Fáil's position is on the digital omnibus specifically and whether it is supporting the digital omnibus. Within that, there is a move back towards self-regulation by the tech sector, and the removal of the high-risk systems we are all seeking in relation to tech regulation, particularly in light of the European digital identity wallet.

Finally, and crucially, I want to understand Ireland's position on the ECHR and why, after criticising the UK for attacking the ECHR, we have followed in its footsteps and chosen to commit to the Chisinau process. Why and for what reason? How can we square that with our own human rights record and our ambition to be on the UN Human Rights Council?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: The digital omnibus is something the Government supports. What members of the European Parliament do is a matter for them. Just because they might not support an initial proposal does not mean they will not try to amend it and agree to it at the end. We will leave the European parliamentarians to do that job. They do an excellent job. That is one side of the democratic process, and the governments are on the other side of the democratic process in the European Union in terms of enacting this legislation. We have a very good crop of active MEPs on all of these files at the moment, and they are available to talk to anybody. They engage with us, but they engage with constituents as well.

On the EU-Israel Association Agreement, this is not a decision for Ireland. Ireland made its decision in the sense that the Minister, Deputy McEntee, went to Luxembourg with some other member states to achieve a suspension of this. However, it requires other member states to agree to this, and clearly that agreement was not-----

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I am asking what we are doing.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: What we are doing was announced by the Minister yesterday. We were pushing to have this agreement suspended, but it was not possible to reach an agreement.

With regard to the European Convention on Human Rights and the Council of Europe, that matter is a separate from the European Council. We are strong supporters and strong activists in the Council of Europe, as a government. I am meeting the General Secretary, Mr. Berset, this week. We will continue to support the Council of Europe and all of its work. In relation to any declarations or policy positions that may be made by member states, that has been discussed by the member states.

I reject the earlier comments. I know the Deputy did not say this directly, but the implication given was that, somehow, we want to torture migrants. That is not the case. What is the case is that we want to make sure we have control of our borders, as member states of the Council of Europe. That is a reasonable position for governments to take. We want a firm migration policy, one that is fair to migrants and is human rights-based, but also fair to the citizens of Ireland.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: Welcome changes are happening in Hungary, and the EU's release of funds to Hungary is positive. We need to continue to show our solidarity with Hungary at this time of great change. In the same way, that is obviously related to the importance of showing our solidarity with Ukraine. I have two related questions. First, we need to spell out more clearly why we are continuing to support Ukraine, and why there is the risk that if Ukraine falls to Russia, there is a huge threat to peace in Europe, but there is also the economic threat that brings. We need to counter some of the false narratives that are currently being articulated as to why we are showing that solidarity.

Second, and related to that, the negotiations will be happening around the multi-annual financial framework. A critical part of that for Ireland will be the Common Agricultural Policy. It is not just critical that we look at maintaining farm incomes now, but we have to look at it in the context of an enlarged European Union. I am particularly thinking that as we move towards Ukraine's membership over the next decade, we have to ensure that the MFF and CAP take into account the potential for Ukrainian membership. I would like to know if that formed part of the consideration.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue of Hungary. A new government has been elected, but it has not actually been appointed by the parliament yet. The party has been elected with a massive vote, but even before that, the outgoing government this morning dropped the veto on the €90 billion loan to Ukraine, and dropped the veto together with Slovakia on the 20th sanctions package. We very much welcome this. The approach that we will have to Hungary is, frankly, one that gives value to the votes of the people of Hungary. It is not that we like all of the policies of the Tisza party or anything like that. However, what the Tisza party stands for is the rule of law, liberal democracy and fundamental values. We can have a political debate within that, left and right, but essentially, what they are standing up for is a free media. It is quite shocking that Mr. Magyar was never on television during the campaign. He did not appear on radio until after he was elected. Frankly, I think a lot of the civil servants, diplomats and media are quite relieved that pressure is off them. They did not fully buy into the Orbán system, but it was forced upon them. From an Irish point of view, we will have a generous approach because a successful Hungary benefits us, and it is a country

that should be successful. Irish businesses can benefit from a successful economy in Hungary because we are such an exporting country.

Why do we support Ukraine? We support Ukraine for two broad reasons. One is that it is the morally and legally correct thing to do. They were invaded by Russia and they are standing up for their rights, and I think the Irish people saw that very clearly. It is also the economically correct thing to do for us. The threat from Russia, which we have seen actioned in Ukraine, is also a threat to other countries in that region on the eastern flank of the European Union. If anything were to happen to those countries, we would see a really serious economic shock here, and there is no question about that. We also see Russia very active in the information space and the hybrid warfare space, messing around in terms of what it might do with drones to transport links and various interconnectors, whether of information or energy. It is essential that we continue to support Ukraine.

While we have been generous with regard to Ukraine, the idea that somehow we are making choices between the Irish people and the people of Ukraine, as a government here, is completely wrong. The narrative that Deputy Nolan put forward in this regard is shameful.

She also spoke about the Mercosur agreement. We have accepted that there are issues for beef farmers. That was said all along, and that is why the Government voted against it. The Deputy should also recognise that there are farmers in her constituency in Offaly who supply Tullamore Dew, one of the most important whiskey brands we have. That product is seriously enhanced and protected by the Mercosur agreement, and the Government has acknowledged that. There is a balance that we have taken to oppose it, but it is not totally negative, as she seeks to point out. I compliment Barry Cowen MEP who has been very balanced in his approach and recognises the benefits to the whiskey industry in his county, while also recognising the difficulties for farmers.

With regard to the Common Agricultural Policy, which was also raised by Deputy Byrne, it is our strong policy to protect the policy and to have it strong, separate, robust and suitable for farmers. Again, we can come into the Dáil to talk and, as the Opposition has done, to castigate the Government.

3 o'clock

Recently, the former Deputy, Barry Cowen MEP, and a number of other MEPs came to Mullingar to discuss the negotiations on the CAP and it was a very instructive meeting. My officials in Brussels are available to any MEP who wants to talk about CAP and the negotiations we are in, and I will continue to keep Members informed. Our policy here is to ensure there is a robust CAP that protects rural Ireland and serves the fundamental purposes of the CAP, which is to keep farmers on the land and keep the food supply coming to Europe.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aidan Farrelly): I thank the Minister of State. We are getting through time so let us keep to it. I call Deputy Boyd Barrett.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The failure of the European Union to suspend the EU association agreement with Israel is an absolute disgrace. Does the Minister of State agree it is a disgrace, given that Israel is in the dock for genocide and has instigated murderous and illegal wars against Lebanon and Iran? Does the Minister of State agree? If his excuse is that

Europe will not doing anything but we tried, does he feel Ireland has any responsibility to do anything in the face of the crimes Israel is committing? Specifically, does he think we have any obligations under the Genocide Convention?

On 14 May, I will have a Bill coming before the Dáil. Luckily, it has been selected from the lottery. It is the Sanctions against the State of Israel Bill, which calls for us to impose comprehensive economic, political and diplomatic sanctions on Israel because of our obligations under the Genocide Convention, which requires signatories to act to prevent genocide. Does the Minister of State accept that under the Genocide Convention, regardless of EU hypocrisy, double standards and its refusal to move, we, as signatories of that convention, have a moral and legal obligation to act against the crimes that Israel is committing? It is a simple question.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: The issue with regard to the European Council and the Foreign Affairs Council on the EU-Israel association agreement is as I said it was, namely, that the Irish Government has engaged with member states to try to bring forward a proposal which is sitting there but needs to be supported by a sufficient number of member states. However, we are not able to do that. That is a fact. I would encourage - we are doing this and we encourage everyone else to do it - is engagement with other member states to see why they do not agree with us. They have other reasons for this.

I also reject utterly any suggestions that somehow this Government or politicians in this Government are connected to or complicit, or whatever the phraseology is that the protesters and the Deputy's colleagues in political life use about complicity in genocide. I totally reject that. We have always stood firm on the side of democracy and human rights. To start throwing those allegations around the House is completely wrong. Any sanctions packages we have ever done we have done in recent times at a European level because that is where trade policy is. It is also where one has the most impact. No sanctions have ever been done where the damage to us would be greater than the harm we are seeking to impose to change ways. If he is setting out a policy, as the Deputy is, he has to set out for the people the economic consequences in Ireland of his various proposals.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: So, there is no answer on the Genocide Convention.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aidan Farrelly): The last couple of Deputies will have 30 seconds each to make sure we get everybody in. I call Deputy Healy-Rae.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: The agricultural community is totally and absolutely against Mercosur. It has been referred to the European court. What legal aid do we have or who is representing us at that court? Do we have representation there? We surely should have representation to put forward our case and that of farmers the length and breadth of the country.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Is this on the Mercosur agreement?

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Yes.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: The case has been brought by the European Parliament against the Commission. The practice, and this is a decision for the Commission and the member states which supported it, is to implement the trade provisions of the Mercosur agreement, whenever that happens in the coming period of time, notwithstanding the fact that we voted against it. There are measures to protect farmers, particularly beef farmers in the case of price shocks----

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: That is not the question I asked the Minister of State. Who is representing us? Do we have representation?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aidan Farrelly): This is not a back-and-forth, Deputy.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: The case is between the European Parliament and the European Commission.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Two of my colleagues spoke about the European Single Market. While there have been benefits for industry from the Single Market, consumers in Ireland have not been able to get the full benefit in the areas of industry and financial products. Under our Presidency, what do we intend to do to progress that?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: There is a very exciting agenda ahead of us during our Presidency on what is called the one market approach. I have a copy of it here that was given to member states last night. There is a list of items there. At the last count - it may have changed overnight - there were 42 items in that to help bring the Single Market to reality and to give us greater economic prospects. Some 17 of those were slated to be organised, done or agreed during our Presidency. We will wait and see what the leaders agree. It is a big challenge for us, the European Parliament and everybody to bring these measures in in the timeframe proposed. At the same time, if we were to do so, we would have a transformed economy that would be much more resilient to economic shocks. It would enable greater opportunities for the Deputy's constituents and all of our constituents to prosper and for the Single Market to be brought to a reality. We would be able to trade and buy products and services from across the European Union in a way that we are not at the moment. There is a huge opportunity now and I am happy to update the Dáil as this goes along.

There is also a lot of work going to take place in Brussels between the governments and in the European Parliament, where our MEPs will be working hard on lots of files but especially these ones over the next few months. We will engage with MEPs as well to try to make sure we get this agenda across. The Taoiseach said that this is going to be a Presidency defined by action and I think this agenda gives us plenty of action to carry out, which will result in serious and solid benefits for consumers and citizens right across the Union.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aidan Farrelly): I thank the Minister of State. We have three minutes left and three Deputies identifying. They have 30 seconds each. I call Deputy Ó Murchú.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It is an absolute disgrace that the EU is not suspending the EU-Israel association agreement. We just have to do the bit we can do, and that is the occupied territories Bill. There is genocide, ethnic cleansing and colonisation, whether we are talking about Gaza, the West Bank or now in Lebanon.

The illegal war by the US in Iran has had a detrimental impact on us here. It is not life and death but it is having a huge impact on fuel costs. What conversations are happening in Europe in relation to the energy taxation directive and the idea of having minimum excise duty? We need to give states maximum powers to deal with the issue in front of us. The fear around Mercosur is that provisional application still applies before the court and Parliament make their decision.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: People complain sometimes about EU rules and ask why the EU has rules on certain issues that maybe do not suit us in particular moments. The reality is those rules enable the Single Market to operate. They should be there to enable us to operate on a level playing field. The Taoiseach has already-----

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: These are extraordinary times.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I agree, and I am not saying the Deputy is wrong. I am just setting that out as an objective. We all ask why the EU is looking for this. It is always important to remember that the Single Market is there and the rules are there to facilitate the Single Market to give us as equal a shout as the Germans, French or whoever. That makes it all better for everybody.

The Taoiseach said he wrote to Ursula von der Leyen on some of the issues the Deputy mentioned in regard to looking for an understanding and flexibility in regard to proportionate temporary national measures designed to address the immediate consequences of the current fuel market disruption, while preserving our shared long-term decarbonisation goals. The Taoiseach has done that and we will continue to do that. I have absolutely no doubt that when all the leaders arrive in Cyprus, as they will this weekend, that what is being said in this Parliament is the same as what is being said in their parliaments and every parliament in Europe, particularly on energy costs, and it will be ringing in their ears. I have no doubt they will continue to put pressure on the European Commission to come up with solutions that can be used, adapted or adopted by member states in their own particular circumstances.

Deputy Martin Daly: Will the Minister of State reflect on the election of Péter Magyar as Prime Minister of Hungary, his winning the election and the end of the Orbán regime? Hungary stood out as a sore thumb. I have been trying to understand, for the life of me, why the European Union did not take further sanctions against Hungary, although I know moneys were withheld. The lesson for other jurisdictions - if we followed the policies that were pursued by Orbán, as some of our colleagues on the Opposition benches would do - is that Hungary was the poorest country in the European Union.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I fully agree. Orbán basically wrecked the economy. It shows that the link between adherence to the rule of law and democratic values and a free media is essential for economic growth.

We did not get involved in the election. We did not tell the Hungarian people how to vote. We were very careful about that, even though the temptation was very strong. Over many years, the Taoiseach, Deputy Micheál Martin, and I and various Ministers who have been in government have been very strong in calling out what the Hungarians are doing. That included negotiating the conditionality regulation and working at my Council on rule-of-law issues and holding Hungary to account for some of the things its government had done, which were opposed to the foundational values of the European Union.

All of that had resulted in over €17 billion of funds being withheld from Hungary. I met Hungarian politicians from the cities, which would not be as Orbánist as the rural areas, and they were crying out for the money. They really felt their areas were losing out big time because of this and their economy was losing out. We had to take a hard line, though. The Hungarian people have reacted. They realised that Orbán had taken them to a place where they should not really have been. I say again that Péter Magyar was not allowed on the television, which is incredible. I met Mr. Magyar in Munich at the security conference a couple of months ago. I had a brief conversation with him and wished him the best of luck but I did not encourage anyone to vote for him. He did that himself. Looking back at how he did his campaign over a year and a half, it is an incredible example of coming from almost nothing to getting two thirds of the vote by sheer persistence.

I discussed this with the Taoiseach before I spoke today. Our view is we should be generous to the Hungarian people. We should give them the value for the vote they have taken and work with them very quickly. It will be a task for our EU Presidency to unlock those funds. Obviously, there has to be some conditionality attached to that to make sure Hungary reverses some of what has happened. There is a generosity required and Ireland will benefit because Hungarian people will be spending money and seeking products and services, many of which will come from Ireland, if we are honest about it. This will benefit us too.

Deputy Pa Daly: What representations has the Government made, whether at EU level or to the United States, about the oil blockade of Cuba, which has resulted in a huge humanitarian crisis? Does the Minister of State agree with the call by Mexico, Spain and Brazil that urgent and sincere dialogue should take place to address this?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I would be happy to get an answer for the Deputy but as the Minister of State with responsibility for European Affairs, I just do not have sight of documents about Cuba. I will get my officials to come back to him directly on that point.

Deputy Pa Daly: Is anything happening at European level?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: As I recall, there was nothing at the last European Council meeting but that would be a matter for a more international level.

Deputy Pa Daly: Has the Government itself done anything?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: That is the point. I will get the Minister to come back to the Deputy.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aidan Farrelly): There is no back and forth, Deputy. We are way over time. I invite the Minister of State to make his closing remarks.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Gabhaim buíochas leis na Teachtaí as a gcuid ráiteas agus ceisteanna. Tapóidh mé an deis seo le labhairt go gairid faoi mhíreanna eile ar chlár gnó Chomhairle Eorpach Mhí an Mhárta, lena n-áirítear slándáil agus cosaint na hEorpa, imirce, cruinniú mullaigh an euro, sciath don daonlathas agus cosaint leanaí ar líne.

Tháinig ceannairí le chéile i gcruinniú mullaigh an euro chun machnamh a dhéanamh ar chúrsaí eacnamaíocha agus airgeadais reatha agus tionchar na coinbhleachta leanúnaí sa Mheánoirthear agus i Murascaill na Peirse á chur san áireamh. I measc daoine eile, chuir Uachtarán an Bhainc Ceannais Eorpaigh, Christine Lagarde, agus uachtarán an ghrúpa euro, Kyriakos Pierrakakis, leis an bplé. Ina ráiteas, chuir Kyriakos Pierrakakis béim láidir ar an ngá atá le comhoibriú idirnáisiúnta ollmhór chun aghaidh a thabhairt ar an éagothroime eacnamaíoch agus ar an tábhacht a bhaineann leis an obair leanúnach a dhéantar chun ról idirnáisiúnta an euro a neartú agus an t-aontas coigiltis agus infheistíochta a chur chun cinn. Tharraing Kyriakos Pierrakakis aird ar iarrachtaí an ghrúpa euro chun córas airgeadais na hEorpa a ullmhú don ré dhigiteach, ar a ról comhordaithe chun inbhuanaitheacht fhioscach a chinntiú agus an grúpa ag tacú le tosaíochtaí straitéiseacha agus ar a obair lárnach chun iomaíochas agus acmhainneacht a neartú. D'iarr ceannairí ar an ngrúpa euro monatóireacht a dhéanamh ar fhorbairtí eacnamaíocha agus rioscaí maidir le hinbhuanaitheacht airgeadais agus cur leis an díospóireacht faoin éagothroime ar fud an domhain. Chuir lucht an chruinnithe mullaigh fáilte roimh ghlacadh rathúil an euro sa Bhulgáir ón 1 Eanáir 2026 i leith chomh maith.

Tá an tAontas Eorpach ag gníomhú le níos mó cinnteachta, uaillmhéine agus luais chun dul i ngleic leis na bagairtí atá romhainn go léir, rud a bhí le feiceáil go soiléir le linn na sraithe cibirionsaithe agus ionsaithe hibrídeacha a rinneadh le déanaí, chomh maith le hionraí naimhdeacha in aerspás de chuid bhallstáit an Aontais.

Ag Comhairle Eorpach Mhí an Mhárta, lean ceannairí ar aghaidh lena ndíospóireachtaí faoi ullmhacht na hEorpa ó thaobh cosanta de. Chuir siad fáilte mhór roimh an moladh leagan nua de straitéis slándála na hEorpa a fhorbairt agus d'áitigh siad gur cheart go mbeadh na Ballstáit féin i gceannas ar an bpróiseas.

Chun freagairt éifeachtach a thabhairt ar an iliomad bagairtí atá romhainn go léir mar phobal, ní mór cur chuige ilghnéitheach agus caolchúiseach a chur i bhfeidhm ag an leibhéal náisiúnta agus ag leibhéal an Aontais. Glacfaidh Éire le cur chuige fiúntach agus dearfach i leith fhorbairt na straitéise nuaí. Ní mór go mbeadh Éire páirteach sa phróiseas seo toisc gur cuid den Aontas Eorpach sinn, go gcuireann na bagairtí atá romhainn ár modh maireachtála i mbaoil agus go bhfuil an straitéis fite fuaite inár leas náisiúnta féin. Is ábhar mór imní é an méadú leanúnach ar scála na gníomhaíochta hibridí a dhéantar i gcoinne an Aontais.

Táimid ag plé, ar bhealach gníomhach agus tairbheach, le forbairt beartas an Aontais Eorpaigh arb é is aidhm leo troid i gcoinne bagairtí hibrídeacha agus ár seasmhacht ina gcoinne a neartú. Áirítear leis sin cosaint na gcábalaí fomhuirí agus cosaint bonneagair eile atá rithabhachtach d'fheidhmiú ár ngeilleagar.

Mar gheall ar a cuid feachtas hibrídeach gan stad, is baol mór an Rúis maidir le seasmhacht, daonlathas agus comhtháthú sóisialta ar fud na hEorpa agus níos faide i gcéin.

Maidir leis an daonlathas, phléigh ceannairí an tábhacht a bhaineann le hathléimneacht dhaonlathach a neartú i gcomhthéacs an mhéadaithe ar bhagairtí ar shláine an daonlathais ar fud an Aontais. Táimid ar son dualgas níos láidre a chur ar ardáin ar líne ionas go mbeidís freagrach sa chomhrá in aghaidh bréagaisnéise agus ábhar mídhleathach. Léiríonn sin tiomantas na hÉireann dá chinntiú go gcuirtear an Gníomh um Sheirbhísí Digiteacha i bhfeidhm go héifeachtach agus go gcoinnítear creat rialála digiteach an Aontais ar bun. Leis an nGníomh um Sheirbhísí Digiteacha, ceanglaítear ar ardáin ar líne modhnóireacht a dhéanamh ar ábhar digiteach san Aontas agus an riosca a mhaolú go mbeadh ábhar mídhleathach ar a n-ardáin. Is príomhuirlis é chun tacú le seasmhacht dhaonlathas an Aontais Eorpaigh.

Maidir le himirce, labhróidh mé faoin mhachnamh atá ar bun i réimse na himirce chomh maith. Labhróidh freisin faoi chosaint leanaí ar líne agus an plé a bhí déanta ina leith. Deputy Cathal Crowe asked me about children being stolen from Ukraine and brought to Russia. That was discussed at the European Council as well. I want to put on the record that it was something that was important to us. I am grateful for all of the contributions Members have made in the debate today. I can leave the full script because I did not get through it all.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.19 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 4.19 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.19 p.m. and resumed at 4.19 p.m.

Public Health (Tobacco Products and Nicotine Inhaling Products) (Amendment) Bill 2026: Second Stage

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I am delighted to be here today to introduce the Public Health (Tobacco Products and Nicotine Inhaling Products) (Amendment) Bill to the House. The purpose of the Bill is to reduce the appeal and accessibility of e-cigarettes, vapes and other nicotine products such as pouches to young people. This Bill and the single-use vapes Bill together with the 2023 Act mean that we will have one of the strongest regulatory frameworks in the EU on these products.

According to the current evidence e-cigarettes may be less harmful than tobacco smoking but this does not mean that they are harmless. Our priority with this Bill is to protect the health of our young people and non-smokers by reducing the likelihood that they will take up or continue to use products like vapes. The primary health risk for our children is that the use of nicotine may become an addiction which could lead to tobacco smoking with the absolutely devastating health harms that can cause.

While we may all have heard stories or even known someone who had no difficulties with quitting cigarettes, the evidence tells us that around 90% of people who smoke are addicted to nicotine and find it very difficult to overcome that addiction. This is not the future that we want for our young people or for those who do not already smoke.

The evidence confirms the risk to young people with a report from our Health Research Board finding that adolescents who vape are more likely to subsequently smoke. While it is a very important achievement that smoking rates among children have reduced to 5% from frighteningly higher levels in the past, we all agree that our aim should be to bring this down to 0%. Tackling tobacco head on is necessary to ensure that we reach our smoking-free goal for adults and children. However, regulating nicotine products is also important to ensure that these products do not contribute to an increase in smoking prevalence among our young people.

There are many concerns about the continues. Since July 2014 the World Health Organization has recommended that the sale of e-cigarettes to minors should be banned as there is evidence that nicotine may have long-term consequences for brain development. The figures on the use of vapes by our young people are mixed in the trends they are showing. Our 2022 health behaviour in school-aged children study found that 90% of the 12- to 17-year-old children have used an e-cigarette at least once. This is a decrease from 22% on 2018. In the same survey 13% reported that they had used an e-cigarette in the past 30 days, which is an increase from 9% in 2018. This data shows that the gap between ever using and use in the past 30 days has narrowed, suggesting that more children may be converting from experimentation to regular use.

The 2024 European school survey project on alcohol and other drugs of 15- to 16-year-olds found that 16% were current vape users which is a decrease from 18% in 2019. Some 32% were found to have tried vapes in 2024 which is down from 39% in 2019. Daily use of vapes in 2024 was recorded at 7% which is up from 5% in 2019. While this shows an encouraging reduction in experimentation and current use, it is the increase in daily use which this Bill is designed to address. The European school survey also found that 3% were currently using nicotine pouches. Although this figure is low, it is important that we act now to prevent its increase.

To make nicotine-inhaling products less attractive to our young people, the Bill will restrict the colours and imagery on packaging and on the devices themselves. The Bill will ban the sale of devices resembling or functioning as other products such as toys or games. This is to ensure that the Irish market does not see the evolution of these products into multi-use devices with features that would specifically attract young people. It will also restrict the flavours for sale and will prohibit all flavour descriptors and language other than basic flavour names. This is to eliminate the marketing potential of the use of child-friendly flavour names. The point-of-sale display and advertising of these products in everyday supermarkets and convenience stores will also be prohibited so that our children are not exposed to these products in their everyday life. It will also make it clear that these products are not the same as ordinary grocery goods.

The European schools survey project found that nearly 4% of our 15- to 16- year-olds used nicotine pouches in the last 30 days. Evidence is not yet available on the possible effects of these products, therefore the only harm that is known is that these products contain nicotine.

The Bill creates a new category of products called nicotine consumption products. This category includes pouches and any other product for the recreational consumption of nicotine, other than tobacco, nicotine inhaling products and medical products. By creating this new category, the Bill is future-proofed and any new products for the recreational consumption of nicotine will automatically fall under its provisions.

Current and future nicotine consumption products will be prohibited for sale to persons under the age of 18. In addition, the display of these products at the point of sale in our general stores will be prohibited and advertising of these products in-store will be banned in all retail outlets.

Regulation of the way that current and future nicotine consumption products are sold in our country can be done effectively in national law. The regulation of the products themselves would, of course, be most effective if it was introduced at EU level. A revision of the EU tobacco products directive which is the relevant EU law is long overdue. EU-wide measures on current and future nicotine-inhaling products and nicotine-consumption products would ensure that the measures in each country are supported because the ability to purchase from another member state with different product specifications would no longer exist.

An evaluation report from the European Commission on the directive was recently published. The next step is the publication of a proposal for a revised directive. The Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, and I have repeatedly called for that proposal to be published as soon as possible. I repeat that today. I am asking the European Commission to publish its plan for a revised directive as soon as possible. I also join the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, in promising that Ireland will do all that it can to progress the directive, if the proposal is received during Ireland's Presidency of the EU.

That is really important for us.

This Bill was developed in recognition that most adults who use vapes formerly smoked and that some people who wish to quit smoking have used vapes as part of that attempt to quit. Unfortunately, the benefits of this approach are not showing in our population. Our smoking rates have remained at the same level since 2019 despite increases in our vaping levels. From this data, it does not appear that vaping is substituting for smoking in our population. In addition, one out of six adults who use e-cigarettes has never smoked. Research on our Healthy Ireland survey data also shows us that in 2015 the dual use of cigarettes and e-cigarettes was linked to a high intention to quit and attempts to quit smoking but that by 2023 this link had disappeared in all age groups. The measures in this Bill are designed to reduce our young people's use of these products while ensuring that they remain available for use by adults who smoke. The review section in the Bill and the powers for the Minister for Health to alter the list of prescribed flavours means that we can monitor the effects of the legislation and respond quickly if needed.

This legislation is also proposed at the same time as significant investment in free, safe and effective stop-smoking support. Funding for the HSE quit programme has almost doubled since 2021, to over €20 million in 2025. This includes the roll-out of free stop-smoking medicines to anyone accessing the HSE quit service, with €2.9 million provided in 2025. The HSE has also recruited 48 new stop-smoking advisers and more than doubled the number of clinics in the country since 2022. This combination of medicine and behavioural support is recognised as the most effective way to quit smoking, and we will continue to look at ways to increase access to this life-saving support.

We are also reviewing our national tobacco control policy to determine the best pathway to a truly tobacco-free Ireland.

Before I take the House through the sections of the Bill, I would like to take this opportunity to remind us all of Ireland's obligations under the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. Under Article 5.3 of that convention, Ireland is required to protect its public health policy from the commercial or other vested interests of the tobacco industry.

I will now take the House through the Bill to outline the content of each section.

Part 1 deals with preliminary and general issues and contains sections 1 to 5.

Section 1 is a standard provision for the Title, citation and commencement of the Bill.

Section 2 defines terms including other Acts that are referred to in the Bill.

Section 3 is a standard section that provides for the expenses incurred in the operation of the Bill.

Section 4 provides for the repeal of certain sections of the Public Health (Tobacco) (Amendment) Act 2024, which have been replaced in this Bill.

Section 5 provides for a review of the operation of the provision of this Bill.

Part 2 of the Bill contains sections 6 to 12 and relates to the amendment of the Public Health (Tobacco) Act 2002.

Section 6 amends section 2 of the 2002 Act and sets out the definitions relevant to this Part.

Section 7 amends section 5 of the 2002 Act on penalties to include the new offences created by this Bill.

Section 8 amends section 48 of the 2002 Act to include powers in relation to nicotine consumption products into the existing powers of authorised officers of the national environmental health service. It also provides powers to ascertain details of the supply chain, market information and website ownership in order to align with the existing powers for tobacco and related products under the EU market surveillance regulations.

Section 9 amends section 50 of the 2002 Act to include nicotine consumption products in the protocols for the taking of samples by authorised officers.

Section 10 amends section 54 of the 2002 Act to allow the national environmental health service, the enforcement body under the Bill, to use compliance notices in relation to offences involving nicotine consumption products.

Section 11 amends section 55 of the 2002 Act to allow the national environmental health service to issue prohibition notices in relation to offences involving nicotine consumption products.

Section 12 provides the national environmental health service with powers to act on tobacco products and nicotine inhaling products that are compliant with tobacco control law but are deemed to present a serious risk to health. It includes powers to seize and destroy products as well as remove online content in order to eliminate serious risk. This measure is provided for under the EU tobacco products directive.

Section 13 amends section 56 of the 2002 Act to include the power to issue fixed payment notices for offences in the Bill.

Part 3, on amendments to the Public Health (Tobacco Products and Nicotine Inhaling Products) Act 2023, includes sections 14 to 27.

Section 14 provides for the definitions in this Part.

Section 15 updates the EU law references in relation to the exclusion of medical devices from this tobacco control law.

Section 16 adds nicotine consumption products to the existing standard provision to locate the jurisdiction of an offence.

Section 17 inserts a new section 26A into the 2023 Act to prohibit the point-of-sale display of nicotine inhaling products. A retailer can provide a pictorial price list of the products for sale to a customer and display a sign indicating that the products are for sale to persons over 18, which would be the main thing. The prohibition does not apply to shops that sell nicotine inhaling products only or additionally sell only the following: nicotine consumption products, vapes, vaping substances, or accessories related to the functioning or maintenance of nicotine inhaling products or vapes.

Section 18 makes it an offence to sell nicotine consumption products to a child.

Section 19 amends the definition of advertising in the 2023 Act to provide for the new advertising restrictions in this Bill.

Section 20 prohibits the advertising of nicotine inhaling products and nicotine consumption products in retail premises or on a website that sells these products.

Section 21 inserts new Parts 3A and 3B into the 2023 Act.

Part 3A regulates the appearance of a nicotine inhaling product, including that it must be of a prescribed colour and shall not contain any imagery such as cartoons or graphics. It also provides that a nicotine inhaling product cannot function as a toy or any other product. Similar measures apply to a refill container for a nicotine inhaling product.

Part 3A also regulates the packaging of a nicotine inhaling product, including that it must be of a prescribed colour and not contain any imagery such as cartoons or graphics. Any outside covering of packaging and inner lining are also regulated under this Part.

On flavours, a nicotine inhaling product cannot be sold with a flavour name other than those in the Schedule, which are "unflavoured" and "tobacco" flavour. Those are the two. The Minister for Health may add or remove flavour names to the Schedule, taking into account the impact of the measure and having regard to the objectives of reducing harm from tobacco products and nicotine inhaling products and prioritising the protection of health of our children.

In addition, a nicotine inhaling product with a variant name that implies that it has a particular sensory characteristic or a flavour other than that described in the flavour name cannot be sold.

Part 3B prohibits the point-of-sale display of nicotine consumption products. A retailer can provide a pictorial price list to the customer and display a sign saying that the products are for sale to persons over 18. The prohibition does not apply to shops that sell nicotine consumption products only or sell nicotine consumption products and-or additionally sell only nicotine

inhaling products, vapes, vaping substances, or accessories related to the functioning or maintenance of nicotine inhaling products or vapes.

Section 22 includes nicotine consumption products in the existing test purchasing provisions.

Section 23 includes offences in relation to nicotine consumption products in information that may be published by the national environmental health service.

Section 24 includes offences in this Bill in the section related to penalties.

Section 25 includes nicotine consumption products in provisions in the 2023 Act regarding evidence in court proceedings.

Section 26 amends section 39 of the 2023 Act to deem certain offences in this Bill as "category A" offences, which attract a longer duration of licence suspension and can lead to licence revocation.

Section 27 inserts the Schedule on flavour names into the 2023 Act.

Part 4 relates to miscellaneous amendments and contains sections 28 and 29 of the Bill.

Section 28 amends the Public Health (Tobacco) (Amendment) Act 2024. It is an additional amendment required along with that made at section 22 of this Bill to facilitate the test purchasing of nicotine consumption products. Section 29 amends the EU (Manufacture, Presentation and Sale of Tobacco and Related Products) Regulations 2016 to align the provisions in relation to the prohibition notice in that legislation with those in this Bill. I commend this Bill to the House.

Deputy David Cullinane: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Public Health, Tobacco Products and Nicotine Inhaling Products (Amendment) Bill 2026. This is an important Bill, which is broad in scope and long overdue. For too long, policy in this area has been reactive. New products emerge, marketing tactics change and the law has lagged behind. This Bill marks an important change in approach from the Government, which we in the Opposition have sought for years. This is future-focused legislation rather than the usual catch-up and piecemeal approach we have seen over the past few years.

The purpose of legislation like this should be clear. It should be to reduce smoking and it should be to protect children and young people from nicotine addiction. It should regulate products in a way that is proportionate, practical and grounded in common sense. When I test the Bill against these principles, there is a great deal in it that I can support. However, there is one significant measure that goes too far and gets the balance wrong. That is the total ban on all flavours except tobacco, despite the Bill as drafted allowing for additional flavours.

The Bill does a number of important things. First, it extends regulation beyond traditional tobacco and vaping products to include nicotine consumption products, such as nicotine pouches, including a ban on sales to under-18s. That is the right thing to do and it has taken too long to get here. These products have been developing in a grey area for too long. They carry a high risk of oral and gum diseases and it is beyond time that they should be regulated properly. It is important that nicotine pouches are regulated as tightly as cigarettes and vapes

in terms of packaging, naming and advertising and, obviously, we will tease this out on Committee Stage.

Second, the Bill strengthens controls around nicotine inhaling products or vapes. It tightens the rules on advertising, sale and display. It restricts colours and imagery on devices and packaging and toy-like vapes, and all of this I support. These are serious interventions and they are justified. Third, the Bill strengthens enforcement. It increases fines and penalties for breaches of tobacco control law. It includes provisions dealing with serious risk products, enforcement mechanisms and appeals. It also includes a review clause requiring the operation of the amendments to be reviewed within three years.

However, one part of the Bill does not sit right with me and my colleagues for a number of reasons. This is the Government's proposed ban on all flavours except tobacco. I want to be very clear that I support regulating flavours. I support banning names and marketing tactics targeted at children. The Bill prohibits flavour descriptors and language other than basic flavour names for vapes, and I think this is the right approach. However, strangely, despite allowing for different flavours, only two flavours have been included in the draft Bill, namely, tobacco or unflavoured. In plain language, that means a ban on all vape flavours except tobacco. This is not a minor issue as it goes to the heart of whether this legislation has struck the right balance between protecting children and respecting adults while also keeping sight of the central public health objective. Unfortunately, the Government has gone too far.

The proposed flavour ban is an overreach into the personal decision of adults. It risks being counterproductive and enabling a black market where all of the products that we all want gone, including single-use vapes, the unsafe chemical products and the cheap imports from questionable manufacturers, will actually thrive. It reflects a simplistic view that vaping can be treated as though it is exactly the same as smoking, and that the answer to youth vaping is simply to strip vaping products of any appeal, regardless of the wider consequences. It risks drawing people back into smoking, which is the most serious issue for me and that is a very strong message I have heard from vapers. This is where I have my disagreement with the Government.

Let me be very clear on what I do support. I support the regulation of nicotine consumption products, including nicotine pouches. These products should not sit outside the law. They should be regulated and they should not be sold to children. I support the prohibition on the sale to under-18s. Children should not be able to buy nicotine products, end of story. That should not be controversial. What is controversial is that the Government was far too slow to act in the first place. It took years to ban the sale of vapes to children, or to ban colourful, single-use vapes. I support the restrictions on advertising and on point of sale display and putting these products behind the counter and out of sight in mixed-retail units. I support tighter controls on packaging, imagery, colours and device design, particularly where these things are clearly aimed at attracting children and teenagers. I support measures to stop the production and sale of devices that resemble toys or games or that are effectively gamified nicotine products. This is reprehensible and indefensible and it is, if we are being honest, a blatant attempt to hook children and young people and of course that should be stopped.

I support stronger penalties and stronger enforcement powers. Laws mean very little if they cannot be enforced and we have been here before in different areas in relation to that. Anyone who sells vapes or cigarettes or nicotine products to children or who ignores age restrictions or

breaks display rules or flouts advertising rules should, of course, face real and heavy consequences. I support the broader approach in the Bill because it is intended to future-proof regulation rather than forcing the State to scramble after every new product category that comes onto the market.

Let us be honest about the problem we are trying to solve. There has been a sharp and a deeply worrying rise in vaping among young people, including many who never smoked and were never nicotine dependent before. That trend is real. It is serious and requires intervention but it also requires honesty about how we got here. The Government was far too slow to ban the sale of vapes to under-18s. It was far too slow to tackle aggressive youth-targeted marketing, and children were exposed to brightly coloured packaging, open retail displays and products designed to look like novelty items. We should not now pretend that every problem can be traced back to flavours alone.

This brings me to what I believe should happen instead of what has been proposed by the Government. My position is that the range of flavours should be limited to a small number of standard flavours under purely descriptive names. This is what they have done in New Zealand where vape flavours must be from a list under seven categories. I think the list in New Zealand is a bit too long and I would support a very tight list of a handful of flavours. That is a proportionate alternative. We have to recognise the rights of adults to make decisions for themselves. It also requires acknowledgement of the very significant difference in harm between smoking and vaping, and it addresses the legitimate concern that childish, novelty-based flavouring systems can be used to target young people, because the reality is many adults who vape are also former smokers.

The central public health question should always be whether policy helps move people away from smoking, which remains far more harmful, or whether it makes that transition more difficult. If we reduce vaping to tobacco flavour only, we may well reduce its appeals relative to cigarettes, and I think that is a real risk. If the effect of this measure is to push some people back towards smoking, or to stop some smokers switching in the first place, then that is a serious mistake. This Bill should start with a limited number of flavours and if after all the measures have been implemented we do not see progress, of course, we can always review what is being done.

There is another practical problem with the Government's approach because flavoured vapes and components for mixing liquids at home are readily available online. They will continue to be available online, even if they are banned in this State. We can pass laws but we cannot legislate away the Internet. Therefore, a blanket ban is likely to inconvenience law-abiding adults and legitimate retailers while creating an opening for a black market which means unregulated, low quality and potentially unsafe products. I do not believe that is smart public health policy. A ban is always an easy tool to reach for. It sounds clean and decisive and there are times, of course, when a ban is the right approach. The sale of nicotine products to children should be banned. Aggressive marketing tactics aimed at children should be banned. Devices made to look like toys should be banned but the same logic does not justify banning all flavours except tobacco for adults.

To reduce youth vaping we need effective age verification at the point of sale, backed up by strong penalties for those who break the rules. We need to ban the advertising of these products,

ban child-focused packaging and stamp out the marketing tactics that prey on children and teenagers.

We need to keep these products out of sight, behind the counter where adults who are trying to quit smoking can still access them but where they are not pushed in front of every person who walks into the shop. We need the HSE and enforcement authorities to up their game. The Minister of State should not reach for a blunt instrument where a more proportionate tool is available.

This Bill contains a great deal that is necessary and overdue. I support those measures I outlined earlier but I cannot support the blanket ban on flavours. I have put forward what I believe is a much more proportionate path. That path is to protect children, to respect adults, to make sure that we reduce the incidence of smoking and vaping, and to keep public health policy anchored in common sense.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I sometimes wonder if this Government has the ability not to make a mess of everything. This Bill should be the most uncontroversial legislation to come before this House because there is political unanimity that children should not have access to vaping products, that there should be strong penalties for those who allow children access to such products, and that we should completely ban products that are clearly designed to appeal to children. That is the Bill that should have come before this House. Such robust provisions are required and there would have been political unanimity on them. Of course, as always, Government has made a mess of it by adding a provision that will only damage law-abiding adults, that is, the ban on the use of flavours in vapes.

There is a point that needs to be recognised. I know a lot of people just do not like vaping and they are entitled to that view but, for many people, there has never been a more successful route away from smoking. The figures back that up. Between 2004 and 2019, the number of smokers in this State has reduced drastically. There are a number of different reasons for that but one has been the evolution of vaping products. Some people will say that vaping products are dangerous themselves but nobody will convince me that they are more dangerous than smoking. It is therefore the least worst option for many people. What the Government is now doing in suggesting a ban on all non-tobacco-flavoured vaping products could be one of the only measures that any government has brought forward that actually reverses the trend of reducing smoking rates that we have seen.

I agree with a huge part, probably 90%, of this Bill. I believe that every sane adult in the country will support those measures. I refer to the mechanisms to ensure that children do not have access to nicotine products. The Minister of State has my full support on those. She should bank that and move forward in a united and cohesive way so that would be locked in. She should drop the mechanism that is clearly going to be divisive, that will lead to frustration and that will act to deter people from moving away from smoking or, in some cases, as a rationale to move back to smoking. It is time for Government to stop making a mess of things. It should not make a mess of legislation that should have the full support not only of this House but of every rational adult in the State.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: I can guarantee the Minister of State two things. The first is that every single TD in this Chamber has lost a friend, family member or neighbour as

a direct result of smoking. The second is that every one of us also knows several people who have quit smoking with the help of vaping, friends or family members whose lives have changed. I am almost certain that almost all of them used the very flavoured vapes the Government is now proposing to ban. Banning flavoured vapes would be a complete own goal in our fight to reduce the number of smokers in Ireland. All the Government would succeed in doing is pushing people back into the grip of the tobacco industry or driving them towards unregulated online platforms where there is little to no oversight on safety, age verification or quality control.

Let us look at the figures. The numbers are overwhelming. Some 73% of vapers say that fruit flavours play a key role in helping them stay off cigarettes. Some 49% would actively source flavoured vapes online or from abroad if a ban were introduced. A total of 72% believe that a ban would lead to more young people taking up smoking rather than fewer and 71% believe that banning flavours would push current vapers back towards deadly tobacco products. These are not my opinions but the views of the ordinary people whose interests we are here to represent. I have to ask whether the Minister of State and her Department even looked at what is happening in other jurisdictions that have banned flavoured vapes because it has not been a beaming success. The result has been a boom in illegal trading and an unregulated black market. This measure will not eliminate demand; it will just drive it underground.

Much of this Bill is sound, a positive step and, frankly, long overdue. How it has taken so long to prohibit the use of nicotine products by under-18s is beyond me. The changes around advertising and the restrictions on the colour and styling of these products are positive and welcome steps but banning all flavours is a step too far. It is a complete overreach by this Government into the actions and decisions of consenting adults. What will be next? Are we to ban cider because it tastes of apples and might appeal to teenagers? Will we ban fruit-flavoured alcohol drinks? Tackling colour, style and marketing, as the Government is already doing, will reduce the appeal to young people. That is a sound tactic. However, we should not throw out the very tool that has helped thousands of Irish adults escape a lethal addiction.

Vaping has taken us far in reducing smoking rates but that progress has stalled. The rate is no longer declining as it should. We need to be looking for the next tool to bring down that number. The cost of smoking to our health service in healthcare costs and to our society in thousands of preventable deaths is still staggering.

Deputy Mark Ward: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this legislation on vapes. For too long, we have allowed a wild west situation to arise because of a simple lack of regulation. We all want to see a reduction in smoking rates but we also want to see proper and real regulations on vaping. For too long, mixed retail units selling vapes have been popping up in every town and village across our State. As I have said in the House before, if you walk through Clondalkin village, you will see kids in their school uniforms going into these shops and buying vapes. Kids are attracted to the bright advertising and the fancy lights and go in as they walk by. I welcome the fact that the legislation before us today seeks to address advertising. This Bill should also regulate the names of flavours. There is no argument about that at all.

I will point out that there is a difference between these mixed retail units that are selling vapes and the vape-only shops. At least the vape-only shops self-regulate and have experience in age verification. I can see in my own area that there is no age verification in these mixed

retail units. As I have said, young kids in school uniforms are able to get vapes. At least those shops you see in the bottom of Tesco or in booths operate some sort of self-regulation.

According to research I have here, there are 8,500 adult vapers in Dublin Mid-West. Of those, 7,000 were previously smokers. That is 7,000 fewer smokers than there were before. This legislation on flavours will only push those 7,000 vapers back into smoking. There are people in my own circle of friends and family who no longer smoke but vape. As I would say if they were here in front of me, if I had a choice, I would rather they did neither, but they are adults and are able to make their own decisions. To limit the flavours to tobacco only simply will not work. It risks pushing adults back into smoking. It could also create an illegal black market that organised criminals will exploit for their own gain. It has not worked in other jurisdictions. As I have said, I do not have an issue with restricting the fancy names of flavours but banning flavours is a step too far.

5 o'clock

The range of flavours should be limited to a small number of standard flavours, which should purely fit under descriptive names. As was said by Deputy Cullinane, this was done in New Zealand where the government limited it to seven flavours. Sinn Féin is open to limiting it to less than that if that is what the Minister of State wants, but we cannot just go into this legislation focused on tobacco only.

I am glad that the Government included Sinn Féin's suggestion to prohibit the sale of nicotine consumption products, such as pouches, to those under 18. It is something that we have raised numerous times. We also have to make sure that this legislation is robust enough so that any other new tobacco product that comes online can be included in it. I also ask the Minister of State to reconsider the reduction of flavours for vapes.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: The Labour Party welcomes this Bill but part of me wonders how it has taken long. This Government has moved at a snail's pace on the regulation of vaping and nicotine inhaling products. When we look at what this Bill is trying to do, the Labour Party agrees with most sections. However, we have concerns with the pace at which the Government has moved and the comprehensiveness of this Bill.

The reality is that the sale of nicotine pouches has rocketed from 6 million pouches in 2023 to 29 million in 2024, and what product will come online next year? I had correspondence from someone today about nicotine toothpicks that are coming on stream. There is a concern about to what extent we are hardwiring all future nicotine products into this legislation. I acknowledge there is a proposal relating to this, but we need to strengthen that.

There are two key issues for the Labour Party. The first is regarding the availability of sale. As other colleagues have alluded to, vapes are freely available in many locations with very poor or no age verification, particularly in supermarkets. There is also an argument to be had about the role of vape shops. There is certainly an argument to be had about the number of vape shops but that is a separate zoning argument relating to desirability. The standards are probably higher in some vape shops relative to others. When we look at the discussions taking place in Australia where the sale of vapes is only through pharmacies now, we need to look at the whole discussion about where vapes can be purchased. We would favour much tighter legislation on the sale of vapes.

In terms of the discussion on flavours, I am quite struck that the WHO has made the point that flavours are fuelling a new wave of addiction. It is particularly telling in the arguments about the extent to which we need to restrict vape flavours. The range of flavours has hugely increased the attractiveness of vaping over the past number of years but the figures regarding smoking cessation speak for themselves. The decrease in tobacco cigarette use has slowed in recent years almost in perfect parallel with the rise in vaping. There is an argument that if we start banning flavours, we will see an increase in smoking, but we are already seeing that. In the UK in particular, there are certainly studies that show that if 17-year-old children do not already vape, the probability of them taking up smoking is 1.5% but for those who do vape the figure rises to a staggering 33%. A 17-year-old who vapes is as likely to start smoking as their peers in the 1970s. We have to look at the role of flavours in that. The Labour Party has a huge concern about the range of flavours that are available. Sinn Féin commented on differentiating between adults and children, but of course the reality is that if it is available for adults, children will get their hands on it. We will be supporting the sections on the flavours.

Ultimately, my biggest issue in all of this relates to how we are co-ordinating at an EU level because Ireland, as a small country, is up against big tobacco and big business. In terms of the priorities for the Government coming into the Presidency for the second six months of this year, public health and vaping as a public health issue need to be on that agenda because while the research is not conclusive at this point in time, there are significant concerns within the medical world about the potential physical and mental health impacts of vaping. That is why we favour strong regulations around vaping at this point in time and are hugely aware about who exactly is very much driving demand in this country. It is big tobacco and big business, and we need to co-ordinate at a European level to ensure that people are not lured back into smoking or into vaping unnecessarily.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I welcome this long overdue legislation to further regulate vapes and to finally regulate nicotine pouches. As has repeatedly been the case with these new nicotine pouches, regulation arrives too late. The use of vapes and nicotine pouches has surged with a new generation increasingly dependent on nicotine.

The Minister of Health and her predecessors have not shown the level of urgency required with a piecemeal approach to regulation that is consistently behind the curve. It took the previous Minister of Health, Stephen Donnelly, until the very end of 2023 to ban the sale of vapes to under 18s.

While welcome, this was hardly bold policymaking. At the time, most people assumed that the sale of vapes to under 18s had already been prohibited and understandably so, and even the bare minimum interventions failed to include nicotine pouches. Only now is that finally addressed in this legislation, two and a half years later. This is despite the fact that my colleague, Deputy Whitmore, has been raising this with Government for years.

In 2024, two years ago, a European School Survey Project found that 4% of 15- to 16-year-olds in Ireland were using nicotine pouches with 8% having used them at some point. Why has there been such reluctance to act decisively? For years, we have had more than just compelling anecdotal evidence, we have had the data.

When it comes to banning disposables, the pace of change has even been slower. It took the Government until December last year to finally introduce that legislation, and although it

has passed all Stages in the Dáil, we are still waiting for it to pass through the Seanad. I appreciate that a six-month notification process must be followed and that the delay is out of the Government's hands but the process should have commenced years ago, not just last December. Stephen Donnelly talked about his intentions to ban disposable vapes as far back as November 2023. He eventually secured Government approval to move forward with the ban in September 2024, and that was after two rounds of public consultations, one run by the Department of Health and the other by the then Department of Environment, Climate and Communications.

Why is there always such hesitation when it comes to progressing vape regulation? There is strong talk but no substance for action even though we know that children are being targeted by the tobacco industry. When it is passed, the Bill before us will finally deal with the tobacco industry's concerted efforts to manufacture vapes that appeal to children. This is welcome, although again long overdue.

We know from Central Statistics Office data that 7% of adults in Ireland vape daily, most of whom are current smokers or ex-smokers. The real concern, however, is that vaping rates among children are much higher at double that of the general population. A WHO study of school going children in Ireland found that 13% of 12- to 17-year-olds are currently vapers having vaped in the previous 30 days. Another study conducted by the European School Survey Project on alcohol and other drugs found that 16% of 15- to 16-year-olds in Ireland currently vape. When young adults, many of whom started vaping in their teens, are included, the number is even worse. According to the most recent Healthy Ireland survey, 17% of 15- to 24-year-olds report daily or occasional vape use.

This should not be news to anyone. Just look at any of our cities, towns or villages. This Government and its predecessor have sleepwalked us into a youth vaping crisis with its lacklustre approach to regulation. While available evidence indicates that vaping is safer than smoking, the long-term impacts are yet to be understood. We do know that vaping is not risk-free. According to the HSE, the short-term impacts of vaping include nicotine dependence, sleep problems, mental health difficulties, such as anxiety, damage to heart, lung and blood vessels and exposure to toxins.

Children are thought to be at even more risk, with the HSE citing particular concerns around attention and learning, mood, impulse control and anxiety. Vaping causes real harm. It is, therefore, welcome that the Bill provides for a ban on vapes that resemble toys and games because the manufacturing of vapes designed to appeal to children must be one of the tobacco industry's most despicable moves of late.

It must be repeated again and again that a considerable share of the vape market in Ireland and globally is controlled by the tobacco industry. These companies recognised the shift away from cigarettes and moved quickly to exploit it, adopting their business model to recruit a new generation of nicotine dependent customers to feed their profits. The products and branding may have changed, but the companies have not. Marlboro and PJ Carroll have already diversified into vape products. The disposable brands that have captured the Irish market, namely Elf Bar and Lost Mary, are produced by ambiguous Chinese companies. According to the Irish Heart Foundation, evidence indicates that China's vape market is now overseen by the state's national tobacco corporation and the state tobacco monopoly administration. It does not

end with vaping. Big tobacco is also driving the surge in nicotine pouch use, another product being aggressively and cynically marketed to young people.

Last August, the Irish Cancer Society reported that big tobacco took centre stage at several festivals and concerts across the country, heavily promoting highly addictive nicotine pouches at festivals like Electric Picnic and Altogether Now. It is unsurprising that the tobacco industry has turned to vapes and other novel nicotine products to safeguard its profits. Not only do vapes mitigate against falling cigarette sales, they offer tobacco companies other significant benefits, including larger profits through lower taxation, the opportunity to circumvent tobacco legislation, such as marketing flavoured brands, preventing the loss of customers who quit cigarettes by getting them to switch to vapes and attracting new customers who would not have started smoking cigarettes in the first place. Thankfully, the Bill and other measures will call a halt to many of the benefits for big tobacco, at least domestically.

The most sinister and under-reported benefit for tobacco companies has been the opportunity to have a seat at the table again through funding research and the promotion of vapes as harm reduction products. I fear this argument is a Trojan horse, allowing the tobacco industry back into the conversation and giving it access to policymakers, albeit not directly. As I have said, the evidence indicates vaping is less harmful than cigarettes. The harm reduction argument is made when it comes to those trying to commit smoking, but the tobacco industry is not genuinely interested in harm reduction. It is only interested in creating addiction.

That is why all of us need to examine the harm reduction argument critically, consider who is making it and, critically, who is funding it. We must not just accept this at face value. The connection between Philip Morris International, the producers of Marlboro, and the Foundation for a Smoke-Free World has been exposed in recent years. The Foundation for a Smoke-Free World, which has since rebranded, was said to have the stated aim of ending smoking in this generation. In 2023, the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners described the foundation as nothing more than a fig leaf for Philip Morris's real business, namely nicotine addiction.

Between 2019 and 2021, the world's largest tobacco company contributed over €160 million to the Foundation for a Smoke-Free World. During this period, less than 1% of the foundation's revenue came from other sources. As of 2023, the foundation has financed more than 70 academic papers on topics including vapes and rates of smoking cessation. In 2024, the UK Royal College of Physicians said tobacco company funded research accounted for a significant proportion of the science on new nicotine products and harm reduction approaches. It went on to raise serious concerns about the quality and veracity of that research. That is something we all need to be cautious about and careful of when making these arguments. We need to know exactly who is funding much of the research that is being put out there.

I would like to make a few points on the provisions of the Bill. I welcome the advertising ban on vape and nicotine pouches, the restrictions on displays and the introduction of plain packaging for vapes. The packaging and display of these products should be treated in the same way as tobacco, namely out of sight and in closed containers behind shop counters. Pick-and-mix style displays of vapes has gone on for too long. I am, however, concerned that the plain packaging rules and flavour name restrictions will not apply to nicotine pouches. That seems short-sighted. Why is the Minister repeating the mistakes of the past? Inevitably, we will be back in the House rehashing this debate in a couple of years.

On the question of flavours, I am glad the regulation is finally being advanced. This was recommended by the health committee as far back as 2022, when the committee had a Sinn Féin Chair, and had cross-party support. There can be no justification for the array of flavours currently available, most of which are clearly designed to entice children. However, the approach taken would regulate flavour names rather than the flavours themselves. According to the Library and Research Service, the understanding is that this approach would be easier to implement rather than one which restricts certain ingredients or sensory attributes. I would be interested in hearing more from the Minister of State on the reasons for this approach and the research carried out by the Department to support this view. This may well be the best approach, in particular from an enforcement point of view, but it would be beneficial if she could provide Members with a briefing note, in particular in advance of Committee Stage.

I would also appreciate if she could provide further information regarding the decision to restrict flavour names to just two options, namely tobacco and unflavoured. Specifically, I would like to know whether the Department considered the inclusion of menthol or mint, as flagged in previous debates, and what the update is on that. This is where the line should be drawn. The suggestion that was made on the floor of the House that banning vapes is like banning cider because it tastes like apples is a ridiculous argument and one that should not be entertained.

Finally, I would like to again restate the support of the Social Democrats for the Bill. We have long called for measures to address the alarming increase in vapes and nicotine pouch use, in particular among children and young people. It has been clear for some time that we need to address the normalisation of these products and treat them in a similar manner to cigarettes. I have no doubt that the new restrictions will be unpopular with many, but history will look favourably on these important public health measures. I commend the Bill.

Deputy Jen Cummins: We welcome the Bill. I am speaking as someone who has children, although they are not all children any more, and has worked with young people over the past 20 or 30 years. Anything we can do to ensure we continue to address addiction to nicotine is most welcome.

First there were cigarettes and there was a big debate about how we could reduce their use. Harm reduction came along and we had vapes. We now have nicotine pouches. The big business that is the nicotine industry is delighted with itself in marketing these products to keep people addicted to them for as long as it can. An untold amount of people's health is affected by nicotine in this country and around the world. We can see the effects of that every day.

I have spoken about this issue a couple of times in the Chamber. I have spoken about teenagers, who will always go against the tide and have the ability to rebel. I was definitely one such teenager and I have known quite a few in my time as a youth worker and through my involvement as a school completion programme, and as a parent. The way vapes are advertised and marketed to young people is genius. The companies make them appealing. If I were that age, I would definitely have been vaping and would have thought it looked great. That is what makes vaping even more evil. Companies are targeting young people. They know exactly what they are doing. Vapes can be matched to what people are wearing. Given the taste of vapes, it is no wonder that people are addicted to them. When I listened to the debate in my office, I was a little concerned that people would push back against the ban on flavours. When

I speak to young people, they tell me vapes are only watermelon, lime or whatever - I am sure they do not think lime is great. They are flavours that are nice and therefore they do not see the harm in them. There are harms. Nicotine is an addictive substance.

My parliamentary assistant came to work and walked along Grafton Street. She was offered a free packet of nicotine pouches - I will not name the company. It made me wonder why they are being handed out. As previous Deputies have said, they are being handed out everywhere, including at concerts. This is how companies are promoting the next product they can get people addicted to.

First it was cigarettes, then vapes and now it is the pouches. I am sure companies are thinking of the next product after this. It is not good enough. While we cannot pre-empt what that next product will be with this legislation, we need to pre-empt being lobbied by these companies, which do nothing except create detrimental health outcomes for young people and adults.

I will be glad when disposable vapes are banned. They are a detriment to the person using them. With regard to the rechargeable vapes, there is a little black wire in each one. How many of those wires are hanging around the place? In 2019, this Chamber said we were in a climate emergency. We were the second country in the world to do that. Having disposable vapes with tiny wires in them for recharging does not help in any way towards mitigating against the global climate disaster that is upon us.

I will give a warning to those who are going to email after this: please do not lobby me because the answer is “No”. I am not interested. I am speaking on behalf of mothers around the country who contacted me asking for something to be done so their children are not targeted in this way. Some Deputies will talk about adults but, having worked with children and young people, I will always put them first. This legislation must be about protecting them now and into the future. I ask lobbyists not to contact me. I am not interested in their products that will harm young people and adults. Please do not send me emails. I received emails the last few times I have spoken in this Chamber about vapes and I am not interested.

The last time I spoke on this issue, parents contacted me who were very thankful I used my voice to speak about what they too are saying. Young people are using the little money they have to go into shops to be sold those vapes. Although these products are not supposed to be sold to people under 18, they are being sold. They should not be sold but they are. I recall talking to a beautician who said that she can see young people coming in and their skin is in bits. She said she knows who is and is not vaping because of their skin. I could go on with the examples forever. I am speaking quite emotively because I feel so passionately about this. We would not allow this to happen in any other way to our children and young people. We have banned alcohol, rightly, for those under 18 and whatever way nicotine was allowed is also banned now. We need to clamp down hard. On the last occasion I spoke on this issue, I was delighted to read in the newspaper just before I entered the Chamber that people were prosecuted for it. Long may that last because it is not supposed to be done and it should not happen. I thank the Minister of State for bringing this Bill forward.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this positive legislation. Well done to the Minister of State for leading it in her Department. She has hit the ground running. I will make a few points. First, regulating nicotine products is essential. This is reminiscent of the time of the smoking ban, led at the time by the then Minister for Health and current

Taoiseach. There were protests at that time. It could have been around the time of the 2009 local elections in which I was a candidate. The Minister of State may have been a candidate then as well. It was hot on the doors and it became apparent very quickly that it was a popular measure. People realised they could go to their coffee spot, restaurant or bar and have an enjoyable evening without going home reeking of tobacco for the next few days and having to fling their jacket on the clothes line to freshen it up again. That was a positive measure.

Of course, products have changed utterly since then. I only recently became aware of nicotine pouches; maybe I have been living in a cave. I thought they were little packets of loose tobacco, but they are not. A lot of kids are bringing them into schools, certainly at secondary level. The sooner we curb that, the better. I am glad there are some strict age restrictions built into this legislation. That is certainly a good thing.

One issue I mentioned privately to the Minister of State over recent months is how some of these products are sold on the high street in mixed retail units. When I am out and about with my children, they are drawn to the American candy stores. While there are American candy, phone cases and phone chargers in those stores, there is also a whole wall of vape juices, vapes and disposable vapes. It is immoral to have those positioned alongside sweets and candy, which are very much marketed for young people, particularly candy that has come from overseas intended to lure children into the shop in the first place. I know this measure is in the legislation. The sooner it is prohibited, the better.

Some people who work in the retail sphere say that limiting flavours should not happen, but I think it should. It has become a novel thing. Tobacco was tobacco for centuries. I think it was Sir Walter Raleigh who brought it to these shores, although I am open to correction in that regard. It has been the same product for years. The only difference is how it was rolled into cigarettes or sold over generations. Vapes have changed utterly in the past seven or eight years, however. People first told us they were a wonderful way to wean smokers of cigarettes, but they very quickly took over, with all these liquids and fruit-flavoured vapes. The vape off them is vile.

While I began by saying that people cannot smoke in public places, there is no cut and dried rule when it comes to vaping in public spaces. I get the train to the Dáil every week. People cannot vape on the train because *Iarnród Éireann* has rules around it. In other spaces, however, people can vape. I recently received an email from a constituent who was shocked to see people vaping at a bingo event. They presumed it all came under the one Act but it does not. We need to go further in this regard. I do not believe such a provision is in this legislation. We need to go further and ban vaping in public spaces. It is quite disgusting for people to have a plume of awful, rotten vape blown across their face just as they are about to tuck into a lovely meal. It is passive so it cannot be avoided. People slugging drinks all night can be avoided, but a vape cannot be avoided and it goes into people's lungs.

Some of the retailers have also made the point that counterfeit vape juices are being sold online. They are being brought over the Border and coming from other jurisdictions. Retailers are finding it quite difficult. They are willing to adhere to the laws that are coming down the tracks but they make the point that people occasionally call to their shops and tell retailers they have the product they need, but they must pay cash for it. We need to watch that sphere, as well as the online space. We need to watch how these products come in from overseas in larger quantities than they should. Our Customs and Excise people need to be more watchful of that.

In my remaining time, I will raise another issue that I think falls within the remit of this debate. I hope the Leas-Cheann Comhairle will allow it. The Minister of State and I have had many chats about foetal alcohol spectrum disorder, FASD, in the past. It is also something we should be concerned about from a public health point of view. At the moment, all of the good people working with FASD Ireland, which happens to be headquartered in my constituency of Clare, are in Canada, where there is a world conference. Ireland is an outlier nation because we are one of the few nations that does not recognise FASD. Yet, there is a belief among practitioners and people who are experts in the field of FASD that Ireland could be among the most prevalent nations for this particular disorder. Of course, it is linked to the consumption of alcohol at the time a mother is pregnant. We thought it was just linear like that but now it has been proven scientifically that if the male is also consuming alcohol at the time of egg fertilisation and sexual intercourse, it can impact how the embryo develops from its early stage. It is something we need to recognise as a disability. We continue to be outliers in this country. I hope we can change the *status quo* in that regard. It is a little taboo because by diagnosing a child, adolescent or adult with FASD, we are basically saying that, at a certain time, the mother or father were on the bottle and, as a consequence, the child now has FASD. It is taboo but as a nation we have to be more mature about alcohol and many other issues. We need to own up to it. I thank the Minister of State for everything she is doing. Hopefully, some of my suggestions can be taken on board tonight.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I am pleased to support the Bill, which will prohibit the sale of nicotine consumption products and the advertisement of nicotine inhaling products, particularly in retail outlets. It will deal with the point-of-sale display in mixed retail outlets. The colour and imagery of nicotine inhaling products will be restricted and the sale of the devices or the functioning of other products, such as toys and games, will be prohibited, as will all flavour descriptors and language other than the basic flavour names. The flavours in nicotine inhaling products will be limited to tobacco, or be unflavoured. I say all of that because, for many years, each different generation has been targeted by the nicotine industry, for want of a better word.

Vaping and nicotine pouches are the latest version of that attempt by the nicotine industry to target young people. I am entirely supportive of the measures in the Bill. I commend the Minister of State on her efforts to help curb the continued marketisation of tobacco and nicotine inhaling products, especially towards the younger cohort. This is a clear public health issue. It is one that my colleagues in Fianna Fáil have been consistent in addressing. My colleague mentioned the workplace and indoor smoking ban in 2004. There has been a consistent approach since then to tackle both the tobacco and nicotine industry.

I welcome that this Bill will prohibit the sale of nicotine products, such as nicotine pouches. As my colleague said, it is something that I had not aware of until recently. Many parents with teenagers know too well the dangers of these products, particularly regarding their ease of access and how easily they can be consumed. Every generation has gone through some sort of targeting by tobacco and nicotine industry.

I recognise that vaping is one element dealt in this Bill and that nicotine pouches and the related products follow very closely behind it. I commend the Minister of State on including them in the Bill. These products are currently advertised through mixed retail outlets. In effect, this has created another draw factor at the till in many local or small specialised shops.

Essentially, what is happening is it is attracting people who would not smoke or consider tobacco. That is not an accident; it is by design. It is marketing. They are trying to increase their market share. We are preventing an industry from doing that. It can be uncomfortable using the language of "preventing an industry" because often I would be somebody who would support businesses, job creation and so on but we are dealing here with the sale of an addictive product. We know from studying addiction that addiction changes the reward systems in one's brain. While the first time one consumes an addictive product, it is a free chose. It is something that one considers. After that, each time the addiction and the patterns of addiction limits one's own personal choices. That is something that I am very strongly supportive of in terms of the issue of illegal drugs. It has its application here in the sale of nicotine products.

I wish to speak to a number of issues. In a similar way to single use vape products, the colours and imagery as well as their often playful or jovial depictions are another way for the industry to lure and attract people in. I look forward on Committee Stage to further examining the approach the Minister of State has taken which is essentially to limit the descriptor. It would be quite difficult to quantify or describe the products or flavour. I imagine environmental health will have a significant role in terms of monitoring how the legislation is implemented. I note the Minister of State has limited it to two descriptors - those being tobacco flavour or unflavoured. I note the comments from other people regarding the word "menthol". In essence if the vape is not menthol and unflavoured, then it should not have a descriptor that is not correct. There is an argument that it is used to prevent people from smoking tobacco. That is incredibly true and it has a role.

In evidence we have seen that while cigarette usage has flatlined, the consumption of vaping products has increased. If these were solely an alternative or diversion from tobacco, we would see tobacco consumption decrease and vaping increase. That is not what we are seeing. We are seeing new people taking up these products. The Minister of State's measures here are a way to prevent young people being targeted by an industry that for decades has sought to sell them a product that is addictive. I commend her on the work that she is doing.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this debate. We can all agree that the hallmark, and the calling card, of big tobacco and big tobacco companies is their deep pockets and their seemingly endless supply of marketing budgets. It is for that reason that I distrust a significant amount of what is termed as "evidence" that has been emailed to me this week in relation to vaping and vaping products, with people who are in the pocket of big tobacco telling me how harmless they are. When someone is telling me that over and over again, that makes me pause. That said, we could all say the same thing about alcohol but we have agreed as a State that 18 years old is where the cut off is and after that point, you make your own decisions. There has to be an element of us being sensible about this. I say that as a former very committed smoker. I can say with my hand on my heart that I enjoyed every single one of them. It was torture to give up smoking but I am glad that I did every single day. It will be 20 years next January. I am glad that I did but that does not take away from the fact that I absolutely enjoyed every single one. When I had access to them as a young child - I should not have had access to them - they were single cigarettes that I could buy with a packet of matches. That is probably evidence of how old I am. Anything that acts an entry for children into that world of smoking, nicotine and tobacco consumption needs to be closed off. I can safely say that as a 12- and 13-year-old had I not been able to buy a single cigarette in the shop

for 8 pence or 10 pence, then I definitely would not have been in a position to smoke. When we say that these products are not for over 18s, we need be very clear about the damage that these products can do.

That said, there are many people in my own family and community who tell me that being able to use the vape was a significant element in them being able to give up smoking. That cannot be ignored. That does not mean that we say the vapes are the be all and end all. I agree that we need to regulate where they are used. I do not like someone blowing vape smoke into my face. I do not know what is in it. If they want to take it, that is fine but I do not like it. We need to have a bit more regulation around it. When we are on a train, bus or plane, etc., it is very obvious as there are signs up. However, in some areas there is a bit of a grey area. We need to make sure that is regulated for the benefit of everybody.

In the run in to this debate, I was contacted by many parents. It is really hard to fathom this. Their big worry is that their children will start with vapes because of easy accessibility. The intention is to do reduce that. The concern is that they will move from vapes into cigarette smoking. When I see adults with a vape, I know they are not going back to traditional cigarettes. They are trying to put a bit of distance between them and traditional cigarettes but idea that children will start vaping and then move on to smoking cigarettes is a big concern for parents. They want to make sure their children are protected from these harmful intoxicants, because that is what they are, but that there is work done to ensure they do not regress to being cigarette smokers.

Deputy Martin Daly: As both a doctor and TD, I wish to be very clear about what we are dealing with here. This is not a minor trend. This is the early stage of a new addiction epidemic. In Ireland today, one in three students has tried vaping and one in six is a current user. Among the under-25s, 11% are regularly e-cigarettes users, which is the highest of any age group. Most worrying of all, the majority of young people who vape have never smoked previously. The idea that vaping is simply helping people quit smoking does not hold up in reality. For many young people, it is the starting point.

We are also seeing an explosive growth in newer nicotine products. Nicotine pouch sales in Ireland increased almost five-fold in a single year from 6 million to 29 million units. That represents a 442% increase in revenue with one brand alone taking nearly half the market. These are not niche products. They are scaling rapidly, largely outside the regulatory framework that governs tobacco.

I cannot stress enough that nicotine is not harmless. It raises heart rate and blood pressure. It disrupts brain development in adolescents, affecting concentration, learning and impulse control. It is linked to anxiety, sleep disturbance and long-term dependency.

Vaping itself is not risk free. Emerging evidence shows clear associations with cardiovascular disease, chronic lung conditions and asthma. We are seeing measurable damage to blood vessels and inflammatory responses that we do not fully understand. People who both vape and smoke are at even greater risk, so while vaping may be less harmful than smoking, it is not safe, particularly not for young people.

We also need to be honest about how we got here. This did not happen by accident. Products were deliberately designed to appeal to children, with bright colours, sweet flavours and

packaging that mimic sweets, desserts and even toys. Research shows that young people recognise this themselves - that vaping products are more appealing than cigarettes because they look and feel like treats. When we add to that the lower cost, the easy concealment and the constant online promotion, it is no surprise that the uptake is rising.

This legislation is a direct response to that reality. It will ban the sale of nicotine products to under-18s, remove advertising and the point-of-sale displays, restrict packaging and imagery, and limit flavours that are clearly designed to attract young users. It also addresses new and emerging products like nicotine pouches so that we are not constantly trying to play catch-up with the tobacco industry. That matters because one of the biggest mistakes in public health is allowing industry innovation to outpace regulation. We have seen that previously with tobacco and we know the consequences.

In Ireland today, smoking still kills about 100 people every week and leads to more than 1,000 hospitalisations. Half of all long-term smokers will die from tobacco-related diseases. We have spent decades trying to reduce those numbers. We cannot allow a new pathway to nicotine addiction to undo that progress. This is not about banning everything; it is about protecting children from products designed to hook them. It is about ensuring that what looks harmless or appealing is not allowed to quietly cause long-term harm. It is about being proactive not reactive. I commend the Minister on that. From both a medical and public policy perspective, this legislation is necessary, proportionate and overdue. I support it fully.

Deputy Martin Kenny: This Bill is very welcome. It is very clear. The intention of it is something that I fully and totally support. It is very clear from a public policy perspective that we must do everything we can to protect children from nicotine addiction. That is what is intended here. It is set out very clearly.

Last year, girls going to the debs were trying to get vapes to match the colour of their dresses. That is the mentality we have to try to deal with. I welcome the proposals within this legislation to deal with the colour of vapes and the fact that they almost look like little toys. They are attractive in particular to younger people and children. We have a body of work to do to ensure the vast majority of people understand the danger. Of course there are people who smoke and who use vapes to get off smoking. We must recognise and acknowledge that vapes have a role to play as a means of progressing that. That is generally in the adult population - hopefully.

We recognise the work that has been done to try to bring this Bill forward and to make it as proportionate as possible to deal with these issues.

The flavours are another issue involved in it as well. I refer to bubblegum flavour and other such flavours. Again, that is to make it more attractive to children. That is something that badly needs to be addressed and banned. The notion of banning all flavours, in particular for adults, is something I would encourage the Minister to re-examine and to consider from an adult perspective. That is something that needs to be considered because we do not want a situation where we bring in something to deal with children's health that may, in effect, mean that adults would probably prefer to smoke cigarettes rather than using vapes, when we know that vapes are not as dangerous. There is a little bit of work to be done there. I welcome anything that can be done in respect of that.

The reality is that addiction to whatever substance it may be is a huge problem for society. Often it is nicotine. A lot of children are drinking too much as well. We have issues with alcohol use. Alcohol has been a huge problem in Irish society, not just for decades but for generations. In this country we seem to have a set of people who have particularly addictive personalities. That is something we all recognise and understand. It is something that seems to be in the Irish psyche. The more education and awareness people have, and the earlier we realise that it is a trait in Irish society that we have to deal with, the better we can deal with it. For that reason, this legislation is very welcome. It moves us in the right direction.

The tobacco companies are the ones behind all of this, including the marketing efforts. The vaping industry is part of their industry. The way they market, coerce and control all of that is something that has to be tightly regulated and dealt with. For that reason, the legislation we are bringing forward is most welcome. Nicotine pouches are something we recognise as having huge problems and issues down the road and they need to be dealt with urgently. I again welcome their inclusion in this legislation.

We have a distance to go in regard to making sure that we get the balance right and that we do not annoy, isolate or put people off, in particular adults who may choose to use vapes as a means of getting away from smoking. That is something that needs to be considered. I encourage the Minister to take that on board as the Bill progresses and to see if slight changes or variations could be made to make sure that does not happen.

Deputy Colm Burke: I welcome this Bill, which is to protect public health. Regulating access to e-cigarettes and nicotine products is essential. There is evidence on the risk of nicotine pouches - nicotine addiction, gum problems, mouth ulcers, dry mouth and hiccups, nausea and stomach problems, and nicotine poisoning.

When we look at the growth in the market, the sales of nicotine pouches by P.J. Carroll and Co. grew by 480% between 2023 and 2024. That is 6 million to 29 million units for VELO brand pouches. That is a 480% increase in just one year.

At European level, the first year of monitoring by the EU Monitor was 2018. It identified 292 million units sold. By 2021 it was 6.8 billion units of nicotine pouches - a 2,000% increase, and it has obviously increased dramatically since this then.

This Bill is a measured and necessary response to a market that has changed faster than our laws. It proposes to ban the sale of nicotine pouches to under-18s; restrict the advertising display of nicotine-inhaling products in retail units; tighten rules on colours and imagery on devices and packaging; prohibit products that resemble toys or games; and limit flavour descriptors, with flavours in nicotine-inhaling products to be limited to tobacco. These are sensible steps aimed at one clear goal: making addictive nicotine products less visible, less attractive and less accessible to children and young people.

We should also see the Bill as part of a wider direction of travel. In Ireland it sits alongside the Public Health (Single-Use Vapes) Bill 2025, which is already moving through the Oireachtas, and is intended to ban the sale of disposable vapes. Together, these measures represent a more coherent public health approach, one that recognises both the health harms of nicotine addiction and the very deliberate ways in which novel products are marketed to young people.

As we are not acting in isolation, on 21 April 2026 the UK's Tobacco and Vapes Bill cleared Parliament. That legislation includes a so-called smoke-free generation measure preventing the sale of tobacco to people born on or after 1 January 2009, while also strengthening the regulation of vapes and other nicotine products.

That Bill represents a significant moment and it shows that these questions are now being confronted across these islands with greater seriousness and urgency.

At European level, the direction of travel is the same. On 1 April 2026, the European Commission published its evaluation of the EU tobacco control framework, covering both the tobacco products directive and the tobacco advertising directive. The Commission's conclusion was twofold: first, that EU tobacco legislation has made a real contribution to reducing smoking and protecting public health; and, second, that the current framework is no longer fully keeping pace with a rapidly changing market, particularly considering the growth of novel tobacco and nicotine products and their appeal among younger consumers.

The message from Brussels is clear. The framework needs to be updated, and a further review of the EU rules is now firmly on the horizon. That matters for Ireland because we are not simply responding to a domestic challenge. We are legislating in step with a broader European reassessment of how tobacco and nicotine products should be regulated in the years ahead.

From 1 July to 31 December 2026, Ireland will hold the Presidency of the Council of the European Union. That gives us a real opportunity not just to participate in the associated conversation but also to shape it and put child protection, prevention, product regulation and public health ambition at the centre of the European agenda. Ireland has often been at its best when prepared to lead on public health rather than wait for others. Our Presidency offers the chance to re-establish this country as a European global leader in tobacco control and to show that strong regulation, evidence-based policy and the protection of the next generation are not obstacles to progress but part of what responsible leadership looks like.

This Bill matters not only because of what it does today but also because of the signal it sends about Ireland. We want to be ambitious in public health, serious about prevention and determined to protect the next generation from addiction.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: I am delighted to debate the Public Health (Tobacco Products and Nicotine Inhaling Products) (Amendment) Bill 2026. I firmly believe this legislation has the potential to have a transformative impact on our younger people, much like when An Taoiseach, Micheál Martin, led the way in introducing the smoking ban in the early noughties. This is regarded to this day as one of the most significant and effective pieces of public health legislation in the history of the State.

As a father of four young daughters, I am acutely aware of both the detrimental impact of these products and, more importantly, their very real lure and appeal for them. We are dealing with a generation that is being exposed not just to nicotine but also to a carefully crafted image of it, with colours and flavours and designed to appear harmless, even fashionable. This Bill seeks to directly confront that reality.

Through measures that restrict the colours and imagery used on nicotine inhaling products, devices and packaging, and by limiting flavours in these products to tobacco, with flexibility

to adjust through regulation, we are taking decisive steps to remove the appeal that has drawn so many young people in. These are not cosmetic changes. They are targeted public health interventions designed to disrupt the pipeline into nicotine addiction.

As legislators, but first and foremost as parents, we have a responsibility to act when we see a public health threat emerging. That is precisely what we are witnessing. The industry is increasingly aggressive and actively targeting our children and other younger people through marketing strategies that rely on bright colours, appealing flavours and sleek modern designs. Let us be very clear: this is not accidental. It is absolutely deliberate. The Government is right to respond strongly through this Bill to protect our young people, not just from current harms but also from future ones.

It is important that we continue to reinforce clear public health messaging. The best way to stop smoking is to contact a GP or pharmacist. Vaping is not recommended by the HSE as a method of smoking cessation. The evidence consistently shows that licensed medicines remain the safest and most effective way to quit smoking. Furthermore, emerging research indicates that long-term use of e-cigarettes can significantly impair the function of blood vessels, increasing the risk of cardiovascular disease, which should concern us all.

I commend the ongoing work of the Irish Heart Foundation. Its efforts in raising awareness of the dangers of vaping, particularly among younger people, have been invaluable. The briefings it has provided in Leinster House have been both informative and sobering. Its advocacy plays a crucial role in ensuring that we, as policymakers, remain informed, responsive and grounded by evidence.

The industry is fast-moving and aggressive, and one about which we must remain vigilant. A new product now emerging on the market is known as snus. For those unfamiliar with it, snus is a nicotine pouch placed between the lip and gum. While it may appear less harmful on the surface, it can contain very high levels of nicotine, posing serious risks and potentially leading to addiction and other health complications. As this product is relatively new to the market, we are still learning about its full impact. However, early indicators are deeply concerning. Reports from last November showed that tobacco firm PJ Carroll saw sales of nicotine pouches in Ireland increase almost five-fold, rising from 6 million to 29 million units. That is not just growth; that is an extraordinarily alarming surge. It underlines the urgency with which we must respond.

We now have clear and, unfortunately, growing evidence that the younger population is becoming increasingly dependent on nicotine. In Ireland, approximately 11% of under-25s are regular users of e-cigarettes, the highest usage rate of any age group. There are multiple factors driving this: the widespread perception that vaping is less harmful than smoking, the lower cost per use compared to traditional cigarettes, and the appeal of flavoured products that mask the harshness typically associated with tobacco. The absence of the traditional smell of smoke also makes these products easier to conceal, further increasing their attractiveness among younger users. This is not a marginal issue. It is a generational one, and it demands a comprehensive, sustained response.

I join colleagues across this House in encouraging people, including those in my constituency, which covers Carlow and Kilkenny, to seek support if they are trying to quit. The HSE Quit Service offers vital assistance to adults who smoke or vape. For younger people, the

HSE Quit4Youth programme provides a dedicated seven-week support structure designed for them to stop.

The Government is showing strong leadership through the measures contained in this Bill. I am particularly proud that Fianna Fáil continues to play a leading role in advancing public health policy, just as it did with the smoking ban many years ago. I look forward to the day when I can reflect, not only as a politician but also as a father, on the positive and lasting impact this legislation will have had. I want to see a future where my daughters and all young people across Ireland grow up in an environment where the pull of nicotine addiction has been significantly reduced, where informed choices are the norm and where public health is protected with the seriousness it deserves. This Bill is a step towards that future, and it is a step worth taking.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: We largely support this Bill. For far too long, vaping products have been on display at shop counters, on streets and even on stand-alone stands in shopping centres, very clearly targeting teenagers and young people. It is very welcome that this Bill closes the loophole that allows the sale of nicotine pouches to under-18s, and it regulates the advertising of nicotine products in retail outlets, similar to what is already in place for cigarettes.

It is good to see that this legislation is also future-proofed against any new nicotine products that may come on the market. All that is very welcome.

On the banning or restricting of vape flavours, I do not believe an outright ban is helpful. This Bill currently allows for only two flavours: unflavoured and tobacco. I note, however, that it states the Minister can add flavours to, or remove them from, the list.

I worry that if we are too restrictive on this, two things will happen.

6 o'clock

The first is that the outlets will simply sell nicotine vape fluid in one packet and the flavour additive in another and people will go off and mix them at home. The second is more concerning, namely, that if flavour additives are banned, we could have a situation where additives are purchased online or on the black market. That raises serious concerns about what is in them, whether they are safe to consume, the levels of various chemicals and so on.

We have seen how the system in New Zealand appears to work well. Under this system, there is a fairly broad but approved list of flavours maintained by the ministry of health. It is said that in New Zealand, there are about 57 flavours - I am not suggesting that there be 57 flavours - and they are very basic with simple words describing the product, for example mint, vanilla and so on. That would be the preferred model because it would allow adults to make personal decisions but it would also get rid of the flavour names and the packaging that is seen to target young children. Other measures include regulating the packaging, stopping advertising and taking the products off public display. We have seen that it can work in New Zealand so we should be trying that here. Overall, I welcome this legislation but I would caution the Minister of State against being too restrictive with regard to flavoured vape products.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Thankfully, I have never smoked a cigarette in my life. With regard to tobacco products and nicotine inhaling products, I would support measures that would protect children by placing restrictions on both the advertising and display of such products, including how they are presented on the packaging of the products.

Addiction to nicotine is a costly addiction, both in terms of a person's health and the price of the product as well as the cost to the health service of dealing with the health consequences of this addiction. The cost of cigarette smoking to the Irish health service is over €460 million annually, with total societal costs exceeding €10.7 billion, which includes lost productivity with almost 100 people dying weekly from tobacco-related illnesses. These statistics are staggering. According to the Royal College of Surgeons, a 20-year-old male who is a cigarette smoker is expected to spend an extra €28,000 in healthcare costs over his lifetime. Cigarette smoking-related illnesses result in the hospitalisation of around 1,000 people every week.

While using vapes is not necessarily a great solution to weaning people off cigarettes, it is better than people being on cigarettes. Vape use does involve health concerns and people coming off cigarettes should also engage with the HSE's programmes assisting people to quit smoking. Selling vapes to a minor is a criminal offence that could result in fines or imprisonment. The licensing of and restrictions on the sale of the vapes will go a long way towards preventing minors from accessing these products.

However, restricting flavoured vapes also impacts adults and is not productive. Adults should be allowed to make a decision on such matters themselves. I have many people who have given up smoking and have had to take up vapes. It is the lesser of two evils. We know that vapes are not healthy but we need to look at the Minister of State's definition with regard to flavours because there are a lot of flavours out there like menthol and others that seem to be acceptable. People make choices. They did it with cigarettes. They used to take John Player, Major and things like that, so people are very good at making these decisions about what is good for them.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I welcome this Bill. I have been critical of the Government in lots of areas but I have to say that this legislation is a positive further step in protecting the health of all our citizens but especially our children. It would be remiss of me not to be a bit critical and say that I am not sure if it is enough in itself because we are dealing with what I would call a subversive and well-resourced industry. We think back to the Philip Morris days in the 1950s. The industry is still finding clever ways to sneak in and get people to buy its drugs so it will try to find loopholes around whatever laws we have as it did before in marketing colourful and dangerously addictive nicotine products directly to young people and diversifying them to tie in with modern lifestyles. I am reminded of the old ads in the 1950s where smoking was seen as glamorous, cigarettes were fitted into movies and it was stylistic. The industry is doing that with the flavours as well, not just with tobacco but also with vapes, which we are trying to make progress on. It reminds me of alcopops in the nineties and noughties when companies were trying to get young people into these types of products by making them more consumable, for want of a better term, so we will have to keep up. We have to make sure the industry does not start creeping ahead again. It will have to be monitored constantly.

There are some good elements in the Bill. Section 18 contains a prohibition on the sale of all nicotine consumption products, such as pouches and gels, to anyone under the age of 18 and expands enforcement powers. If we can inspect the supply chain and target any type of advertising and website marketing these nicotine products to minors, it is a good thing. Maybe I am not 100% sure and maybe I rushed through the legislation too quickly or did not read it thoroughly enough, but will the Minister of State outline whether this Bill will also target influencers and the social media side of things because that constitutes advertising as well?

Section 20 contains an outright ban on advertising and point-of-sale display of e-cigarettes and pouches in what is called the mixed retail environment. Some of these outlets will not like this but it is critical. Any sort of restrictions on imagery and clamping down on flavour descriptions are great. It is complementary to the Public Health (Single-Use Vapes) Bill 2025, which we debated in this Chamber a while back. Again, it attempts to strip away the attractiveness and visibility of nicotine products in the same way the single-use vapes Bill targets the equipment by banning cheap disposable vapes. The industry found workarounds in the UK with regard to that, so we must constantly be on our toes.

A shortcoming of this Bill is the fact that, as far as I can gather, menthol and mint flavours are still available. Is that the case? No. It is good to get some clarification on that. I did not want to be just making that statement as if I knew it. It is good that this has been dealt with.

The other risk is that when we move away from so-called nicotine products, and I am not trying to pass the buck and start looking at another line of argument, companies and different supply chains, for want of a better term, will probably try to find zero nicotine-type chemicals as workarounds. They will always find something. We have had debates about nitrous oxide canisters in this Chamber. There are other types of chemicals and drugs that people will be encouraged to get. The Department should be ready to see what is starting to trickle in in other countries where the legislation has been tightened up and start working on legislation to deal with that if it is not covered under existing legislation.

I do not think the other two listed colleagues are coming to the House, so Deputy Ward will be able to speak shortly.

As I have said previously, this legislation is not worth the paper it is printed on without resourcing the enforcement. We have better enforcement in the Bill, but unless we resource the enforcers and ensure that action is taken, it is pointless. We require quite a lot of money in additional annual funding. I hope that we can claw back some of that funding and resourcing through proper fines. We have very inadequate fines in many areas, litter being a case in point. I hope the fines that are being looked at for breaches of this legislation will be sufficiently robust. Hopefully, we will get the income to pay for some of the enforcement in the short to medium term, so environmental health officers and anyone else doing test purchases and so on will be able to go in and catch the people who breach the legislation.

I thank the Minister of State for bringing forward the Bill. I look forward to further discussion on it.

Deputy Barry Ward: Cuirim fáilte roimh an mBille seo. Tá sé thar a bheith tábhachtach. Tá gá leis na rudaí atá sa Bhille.

This is welcome legislation. I want to particularly paraphrase what my colleague, the Sligo county councillor, Fergal Nealon, said in the media this week. He talked about psychedelic nicotine pushers. He was talking about shops in Sligo town that his own child was trying to get him to go into, even though they were vape shops. He said that the windows are designed essentially like a cartoon shop, a Disney shop or something like that. It is 100% deliberate, I presume, but they certainly attract children who are into that kind of shopfront. The products in the window include toys placed next to these nicotine dispensing vapes. The point he is making is this: why on earth, if someone is selling these products, which are not supposed to be available to children, market them in this way if not to target that audience? It is not legal, which is an important point. One of the important aspects of this Bill is that we are going to attack the situation where we have an abuse of process, in essence, by certain shops throughout the country, which are definitely targeting younger audiences. They should not be. That should be shut down.

I absolutely reject the argument made by some other speakers that this is actually about choice or eliminating choice, and that adults should be able to make choices about what they buy and consume in terms of the flavours, colours and whatever else. On the one hand, I do not have a problem with that, and the notion that adults can make that choice is a good thing. The difficulty is not that adults cannot make that choice. The difficulty is that this space is being invaded by these psychedelic nicotine pushers to inveigle their way not to the adults, but the children. At the moment, the figures show that 13% of 12- to 17-year-olds in this country are using vapes. They were not previously smokers. They are children who have been persuaded by marketing and advertising to use these products. All of the data suggests that they will go on not to avoid smoking, but to become smokers because these companies are forcing a situation where they become addicted to nicotine, and that habit will only grow from there.

In contrast, only 7% of adults in Ireland are using vapes, as I understand it. They are former smokers or reformed smokers. I accept the role that vapes may play for smokers in reducing their dependency on a much more carcinogenic product, as far as we know, and getting them off cigarettes. That is fine. What this Bill has to be about is plugging the loopholes in the law that allow the traders in vapes to target younger audiences, to catch that captive audience, get them addicted to nicotine and then secure a market for life. We are where we were 70 years ago when it came to cigarettes but there is an opportunity for this legislation to get in and stop this from happening now.

Plugging those loopholes is a very important thing. The Minister of State will be aware of what are called “big puff” vape devices. This is exactly the way in which these companies are getting around the regulations. The 2016 EU regulations make clear the limitations. They ensure that cartridges and tanks cannot exceed a volume of 2 ml, and attachments or refillable containers cannot exceed 10 ml. However, these big puff devices are circumventing that legislation. They are allowing the putting together of a product where people can clip on multiple different devices, which means the device is much more potent, but certainly much more voluminous than is allowed. They are getting through a loophole.

Can the Minister of State assure me that the legislation is going to put in place plugs for all of those loopholes? We need to make sure there is not a situation in a year or two years’ time where we have put in place this legislation, and we are trying to protect children in particular,

but there is then a situation where people find a vehicle to circumvent it. That is a difficult ask but the whole point is to try to see the future and see around every corner. What is really important is that we avoid situations like that. Is there anything in this legislation, for example, that is going to deal with big puff devices? These big puff devices also circumvent the legislation we passed just weeks ago on single-use devices, because although they are technically not covered by that legislation, as I understand it, they are frequently discarded afterwards, so they create the same environmental impact as single-use devices. The big thing about the big puff devices is that because they are selling in greater volume, they do so at a lower unit price, so there is a financial incentive for people to use the big puff devices instead of the standard ones.

To come back to where I started, the big thing about this Bill is that we currently have a situation where there are what I would consider to be irresponsible retailers. I know we do not criticise people, and I will not name anyone, but every Member has in his or her constituency a vape shop like this on a main street somewhere that is clearly designed in a way that we would not expect to be consistent with cigarettes or with vapes that are aimed at adults. What we have are shops that are clearly targeted at a different audience. It is not acceptable. We know from other exposés that have been done by the media that children are getting into these vape shops. They are buying products they should not have access to. We know that 13% of the underage teenagers in the country are vaping. Let us stop that. Let us make sure we have a situation where we say it is not okay to target them with a product that is potentially carcinogenic, certainly bad for them and is definitely going to encourage them to smoke. It is not okay to target that at kids. We have to stop it. We have to make sure they act responsibly.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I welcome the Bill. I have raised the issue with the Minister of State on a number of occasions. I was in Arklow this morning. I met with the student councils of three second level school: Arklow CBS, Glenart College and St. Mary's. I allowed the students to ask any questions they wanted to ask. One of the early questions that was asked was what the Government was doing to protect young people against tobacco and vaping credits. This is not the first time I have been asked this by a young person. Young people have been asking about this for a number of years because they can see it among their peer groups. They can see how they are being targeted and exploited, in many cases by the big tobacco companies of the past, which have taken over the nicotine inhaling device companies.

Even though the sale to under-18s was banned, the Department's own inspections in the first two years after the ban found that 20% of retail outlets were still found to be selling to those under the age of 18. We know there are still retailers who will try at every opportunity to get around this to be able to sell this product to young people.

With other harmful products that are sold to young people, we take much stronger action. If a bar had a reputation for selling alcohol to young people, the Garda could object to its licence, and it potentially faced closure. If we are in a situation where a restaurant or somewhere that is preparing food does not take food safety particularly seriously, and the Food Safety Authority of Ireland inspectors go in, it could face closure. I would like the criminal enforcement within this Bill to be a lot stronger. It should not be a case of a fine or imprisonment where we see repeat offences. We should be moving towards guaranteeing that somebody who sells on a regular basis should face a custodial sentence. However, we need to go further. It is about hitting these premises in their pockets. The authority should be there to

force the closure of some of these premises that breach the rules, whether it is selling to under-18s, or if they breach any of these marketing rules, which we welcome.

I do not doubt that for some of those who are smoking, as a device to help with the cessation of smoking, it is helpful. That raises the question: why not make it available on prescription? In all other cases where we talk about something to help somebody come off an addiction or whatever, we will make things available on prescription. It is still far too easy for young people to access what is incredibly dangerous.

I welcome this Bill. I know the Minister of State has worked really hard on it. I know I have been critical about the pace at which this has been moving but I know she is determined to introduce it. However, the evidence is there that there are still people who are avoiding the law in this regard and I do not think the consequences are strong enough within this legislation. What I would like the Minister of State to consider doing is that on Committee Stage, particularly where repeat offenders are convicted, we would see a stronger requirement of prison, quite frankly, and further, that we move to a situation where we can provide for the forced closure of these premises. It strikes me as bizarre that you can close a pub, yet you cannot close one of these shops for pushing these really dangerous products on young people. We do not know yet, other than some of the early evidence from listening to consultants working in the area, the impact it is having on young people's chests, lungs and hearts. A lot of that is going to manifest itself down the line.

I would also say that in any of the process around this discussion, and I know the Minister of State is very committed to it, it is always important to engage with young people themselves, and to talk to Comhairle na nÓg, the National Youth Council and the Irish Second-Level Students' Union. The Minister of State and I know that every single young persons' organisation and youth group engaged with this project wants to see this legislation brought in as quickly as possible and wants it to be tough.

I will be supporting it but I would ask the Minister of State, on Committee Stage, to try to strengthen some of those provisions.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I think everyone in here wants to see a reduction in the number of people actually smoking. I do not think anyone is against that. Do we know, individually, the point of view of people who have used vapes? I get that the jury is out but I refer to some element of harm reduction and the point of view of them getting themselves off it. That has to be facilitated. We should be absolutely united in ensuring we are banning products that are targeted specifically at children and adolescents.

At times, we have seen an overproliferation of vape shops. I could say the same of Dundalk and I know it is an issue that has come up at Louth County Council a number of times. It is a very particular issue. I will accept that like many types of retailers, there are very good ones and very bad ones. We have seen circumstances of kids outside, who are in and out all the time. It is very obvious that they are not over 18, whether you were checking IDs or not. I agree with an awful lot of what has been said previously. It has to be possible. We have to make it easier, from the point of view of enforcement, that this would not happen.

We obviously support the idea of regulation of nicotine consumption products and particularly the likes of nicotine pouches. We do not necessarily see the logic of a ban on all

flavours except tobacco. While I accept it in regard to anything that is targeted specifically at kids, we have seen what has been done in New Zealand, where you have vape flavour names that are boring and a couple of standard flavours. I think that is something we can all get on board with. There is a significant amount of work to do in relation to this and we really need to clamp down on anybody who is selling vapes with hexahydrocannabinol, HHC, or tetrahydrocannabinol, THC, which are having a detrimental impact on an awful lot of our young people out there.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I too welcome the opportunity to speak on this legislation. At its core, I believe the Bill is about something we can all agree on. It is protecting public health. From speaking to my constituents and knowing someone who has vaped, nicotine is addictive. It is very addictive and I do not think anyone should be able to walk into a shop when they are paying their bills and see a giant green package that says "double apple", "triple mango" or "Red Bull". It is just attracting children. That packaging was deliberately designed by a graphic designer to be as attractive as possible. The entire vape itself, the way it sits in your hand, was done that way.

I do have questions. To seek clarification, is it specifically just tobacco, or will menthol be allowed as well? No menthol. A lot of constituents raised that with me. There are adults who would like to have the option of menthol. I do agree that we should not be able to get a super sweet cherry cola vape but there are smokers who smoke menthol cigarettes who have told me that if they cannot get menthol flavour, they will go back to smoking menthol cigarettes. I know you cannot get the filters but you could easily go abroad and get some of the flavours. We have seen a rise in vaping, particularly in young people, and that is completely wrong. We need to get rid of the bright packaging, the sweet flavours and the aggressive marketing.

This industry, the tobacco industry, is not one that has just been born. It is well established and it knows how to get around legislation, just like the ever-evolving head shop debacle we had, where they could change molecules or make a single change in the chain of it to get ahead of legislation. I too have heard other Deputies ask whether they would be able to bring out non-nicotine vapes. How would that be brought in by the legislation? The concern is valid and parents are finding children as young as ten or 11 with vapes in their schoolbags. They are contacting me and pushing for this so I do think there should be a much harsher penalty for anyone found selling to anyone under the 18.

It is important we are honest about the debate because as adults, people who, as I mentioned, cannot get menthol-flavoured tips in Ireland can go to the UK and get menthol-flavoured tips and bring them back. In the same sense, if someone wants to get a flavour of menthol vape, they can or will find ways around it.

Again, the bright double cherry or energy blast flavours are designed for children. Menthol and tobacco flavour could be used as a crutch for adults. It is also important, at the same time, to listen to all of the adults who contacted my office. They are real people and they are not trying to start a new habit; they are continuously maintaining and ending one. Many of them are worried and have told me that if this is brought in, they will go and get menthol flavour for themselves or worse, go back towards smoking.

I welcome all the work that has gone into this Bill. I want to raise those concerns, particularly from my constituents. When it happens, the control the HSE would hope to

maintain is through the licensed retailers, if we were to bring in strict regulations on menthol and tobacco, but I understand that if you bring in menthol, then you might be bringing in menthol-flavoured apple and there is a loophole there. I understand there are ways around it.

We need to work together to protect young people in particular, and that is the main point of the Bill that I support. There is an idea among young people that vaping has no harm, when we can see complete studies of popcorn lung, multiple studies of people with lungs or half lungs collapsed developing at a young age, with vapes being found in their baggage at the age of 11. I will support the Bill and if we get the balance right, we will improve public health but if we get it wrong, we need to look at clear examples of other countries where a black market opened and people were able to get it from other sides. I welcome this, I will engage constructively on it and I fully support its intent.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): I thank everyone who spoke today in the Chamber. We can see the passion on this and the urgency of the Bill. A lot of issues were raised. I only have ten minutes.

The issue of flavours was the big thing. As for why we are banning all flavours except tobacco, this is what is most likely to reduce the appeal to our younger people. Today is about children and young people. In balancing this protection of young people with the help for adults who smoke, which came up today, we have found that vaping is not being substituted for smoking at a population level in adults.

Dual use of tobacco and e-cigarettes is no longer associated with an intention to quit smoking among adults and one in six adults who vape have never smoked. They have never smoked. There is no evidence that e-cigarette flavours increase the likelihood of quitting tobacco.

If I do not get through a lot of the questions, I will definitely come back with an answer for, or meet with, Deputies. I know they are saying we are forgetting about people who are smoking but we are continually increasing investment in State support to stop smoking, which includes free stop smoking medicine, such as nicotine replacement therapy, NRT, for anyone who wants to use them, more than doubling the number of clinics and expanding the We Can Quit peer-led programme. The HSE has now also recruited 48 new stop smoking advisers. We are trying to be very proactive in what we do.

Another big issue that came up was pouches. Under the Bill, retailers cannot sell pouches to anyone under 18. The pouches will also be behind the shutters which can be pulled down, which is what we want to do. We want to make sure the vapes cannot be seen. The pouches will be part of that. Toothpicks were brought up by a colleague along with snuffs. Anything with nicotine is included in this Bill. That is part of a really good initiative for anything new. We all know it is changing all of the time. From toothpicks to snuffs to pouches, it is constantly changing. In this Bill, that is what we are doing. Anything to do with nicotine is in this Bill.

I cannot highlight this enough to anyone. If people are selling to anyone under 18, they are breaking the law. They cannot sell vapes to anyone under 18. I cannot say this enough. It is so important not to be selling them. I want to compliment the team accompanying me who have worked so hard. I know from speaking to schools and parents I have been talking to myself, this is a priority for them. They see this with kids in schools where they see them vaping. One TD brought up a story about someone who was going to a debs and they wanted

to get a vape to match their dress. This has to stop. We have to make sure we are protecting our children and the future for them.

I know other countries were talked about but the most relevant evidence for Ireland comes from the Netherlands. I was in the Netherlands recently and it put a ban on all flavours, except tobacco, which led to an overall decrease in both the vaping and the smoking and, seemingly, it is working really well.

The other initiative I want to talk about is the resources. Enforcement of tobacco and nicotine inhaling products legislation was highlighted as a priority. In 2026, as part of the HSE's national service plan, 30 additional whole-time equivalents have been allocated to the national environmental health service recruitment of these posts. They are expected in mid-2026. Enforcement came up a lot in the debate. It is important that we are able to enforce this as best we can within our health and well-being unit. We represent the health and well-being side. I am sure all Deputies are aware of the new licence fee coming out. This new licence fee will launch in the first weekend in August, I think. Anyone selling cigarettes or vapes will pay a licence fee. That means the HSE will have a list of who has licences, who does not and it will be easier for us to monitor this as well. That is another issue we really need to address.

Another issue that was raised was the vaping prevention campaign. An allocation of €300,000 was provided in budget 2025 to develop and run a youth vaping prevention media campaign, which was really successful. We spoke to all of the different groups. We made sure we went to schools. We spoke to parents. We had loads of media coverage on it, which was important in making sure we were able to get that information out there. This year, another €200,000 was allocated to this budget. The campaign provides evidence-based messaging to young people and information and supports to parents and guardians concerned about vaping.

The first phase was in 2025 and the second phase of the campaign is aimed at children and young people. It was launched in March and it was great. I launched it. For this campaign, we had influencers and content creators at the launch to reach young people through social media. We felt this time it was really important. We needed to target our young people and for us to do that, we used the influencers. That was a really positive move. Social media is a part of our young people's lives now. Social media is out there and we know that. That is why we worked really hard on that. As part of the campaign, a letter was sent to schools encouraging teachers and parents to learn more about vaping and to download the resources from the HSE. Since then, over 8,000 leaflets have been sent out. We also made leaflets explaining what we were doing about vaping and nicotine. That was really positive.

It is hoped that this campaign will also contribute to the continued decline in tobacco use among our young people, given the association between vaping and subsequent smoking in adolescents. I believe every Member wants this Bill to go through as quickly as possible. This Bill is about our young people but it is about when you are on a main street, for example, and you go into a shop, you see all of those colours, flavours and packaging, we are saying we are here to support you and work with you. Flavours are a concern but the unflavoured ones, other than tobacco, have worked in the Netherlands and it has legislated for this. It has really been successful.

Ireland is really leading the way in this, too. We work extremely hard with our EU counterparts, which is important. That is an issue we are addressing for the European

Presidency and to have a workshop or work with them on legislation to see what we can do. I do not know if that will happen. The Minister has also been very positive on this. Ireland is leading the way on this. I know we need to do more. I know there will be amendments. I have listened to the concerns about looking at other flavours. This is about our young people and we feel tobacco and non-flavoured is the way to go. This is about saying, "Do not vape", and asking people not to vape. Vaping has been targeted so much at our young people and it has been a huge concern.

I wrote down everyone's questions. I will get back to Members but if they want to email myself or the Department with any particular questions they have, we would be more than willing to answer them. I thank all of the Deputies. I am hoping to get this Bill through as soon as possible. We work with the EU and provisions are going through the EU as well so we are waiting on that. On disposable vapes, we are waiting for word on that in June. With this particular Bill, it should only take three months so we are hoping to have that back to us by July. The urgency of this Bill is today's. We want to get this Bill through the House as soon as possible. I believe everybody here wants the same and that this Bill is needed. I cannot say this enough; all of us working together will get the Bill through as soon as possible. This is about our young people and their future.

Question put and declared carried.

Public Health (Tobacco Products and Nicotine Inhaling Products) (Amendment) Bill 2026: Referral to Select Committee

Minister for Justice (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Health pursuant to Standing Orders 103(2)(b) and 188(1).

Question put and agreed to.

Vehicle Registration Data Exchange with the United Kingdom: Motion

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the exercise by the State of the option or discretion under Protocol No. 21 on the position of the United Kingdom and Ireland in respect of the area of freedom, security and justice annexed to the Treaty on European Union and to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, to take part in the adoption and application of the following proposed measure:

Proposal for a Council Decision on the position to be taken on behalf of the European Union vis-à-vis the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland regarding the determination under Article 540(2) of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community, of the one part, and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, of the other part, of the date from

which personal data under Article 537 of that Agreement may be supplied by Member States to the United Kingdom,

a copy of which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 27th February, 2026.

Today I am seeking the approval of Dáil Éireann to opt in to a Commission proposal for a Council decision to allow member states of the European Union to resume the automated searching and matching of vehicle registration data, VRD, to the United Kingdom.

This proposal comes within Title V legal basis and as a result it triggers Ireland's right or discretion to opt in under Protocol 21 annexed to the Lisbon treaty. I am seeking the support of the House for an Article 2 opt-in, which must be completed by 30 April of this year.

I must emphasise that this is not a new capability. Under the Prüm decisions, by which Ireland is bound, participating EU member states can search and exchange DNA, fingerprints and vehicle registration data with other member states via automated means for the purpose of preventing and investigating criminal offences.

Following the UK's withdrawal from the European Union, the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement was signed and concluded. It includes provisions on VRD exchange which required the United Kingdom to undergo an evaluation process before the exchange of VRD could be resumed with all member states, including Ireland. This evaluation process has now been successfully concluded.

The unilateral declaration presented as an annex to the proposal will determine the date from which member states may resume the supply of vehicle registration data to the United Kingdom. The date will be determined once the Council decision is adopted and the desire from all parties is to see this resumed as soon as possible.

Vehicle registration data includes the personal data of drivers, owners and operators of vehicles, and details of those vehicles such as make, model, colour, licence plate and chassis number. In Ireland, these details may be supplied to other participating states from the National Driver and Vehicle File.

The relevant national legislation is the Vehicle Registration Data (Automated Searching and Exchange) Act 2018, which designated the Minister for Transport as the national contact point. I understand the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, will amend the 2018 Act by way of statutory instrument to include reference to the trade and co-operation agreement. His Department is engaging with the Office of Parliamentary Counsel in this regard.

The proposed Council decision has a Title V legal basis in the area of police co-operation. Its publication by the Commission on 30 January 2026 therefore triggered the three-month window for Ireland to exercise an opt-in under Article 3 of Protocol 21 annexed to the Lisbon treaty. This window ends on 30 April 2026.

Legal advice from the Attorney General has confirmed that a Protocol 21 opt-in is required to satisfy Article 29.4.7° of the Bunreacht na hÉireann and to guard against a risk of legal challenges to criminal proceedings where VRD is utilised in the future. Ireland successfully negotiated additional recital language to better reflect our Protocol 21 rights and our sovereignty in the area of freedom, security and justice.

This proposal will promote enhanced police co-operation between Ireland and the UK. Our shared border and ferry transport links mean it is imperative that the competent authorities in both jurisdictions have access to this information-exchange mechanism. In operational and policy terms, it is considered desirable for Ireland to exercise an Article 3 opt-in to these proposals so that we can again supply vehicle registration data to the United Kingdom and receive data in return.

I commend this proposal to the House and seek the approval of the motion to participate in this Council decision.

Deputy Matt Carthy: We are discussing another Protocol 21 opt-in but this time it relates to the Council decision that would allow member states to resume the exchange of vehicle registration data with Britain for the prevention and investigation of criminal offences. It is important to note that the State already participates in automated searching and matching of vehicle registration data with EU member states under the Prüm decisions and, therefore, did so with Britain prior to Brexit. The Prüm decisions is a framework for EU countries to automatically exchange DNA, fingerprints and vehicle registration data and to co-operate in policing, counterterrorism and tackling cross-border crime. Vehicle registration data includes personal information about drivers, owners and operators of vehicles as well as details of the vehicles themselves - for example, make, colour, model, licence plate and chassis numbers.

Sinn Féin does not oppose this motion because it relates to the prevention and investigation of serious criminal offences and co-operation in this area to crack down on serious criminality that operates on an international or cross-border basis is clearly important. However, it is important that this House is clear about the safeguards that are required when transferring personal data to Britain which now operates outside of the EU and, therefore, is not subject to the same laws in terms of data. I ask the justice Minister to assure the Oireachtas that robust protections will be in place to ensure that this data is not misused, retained longer than necessary or shared with third parties. Since Britain is now a third party under EU law, the standard of protection has to be equivalent to EU GDPR regulations.

It is important that we remember the original purpose of the Prüm framework. It was designed for serious criminal offences and not just for routine enforcement. It is essential that this data is used strictly for the prevention and investigation of serious crimes. We cannot allow these types of data-sharing arrangements to drift by degrees into the type of surveillance I think many people would be rightfully fearful of.

Separately and outside of any EU framework, we have to acknowledge the policing challenges that arise in this country as a result of the fact that we are a partitioned nation and that part of our country operates outside of the EU. That affects the ability for the policing of communities and roads policing is one of the areas most affected. I represent a Border constituency. Time and again we have seen the Border used to evade prosecution for road traffic offences. Obviously, in the short term North-South co-operation is essential but the reality is that the solution to that particular issue is the simplest solution of all: it is to get rid of the Border on this island and to work towards the reunification of our country.

I make a general point on the opt-ins that fall under the areas of freedom, security and justice. I have made this point on many occasions. Protocol 21 was attached to the Lisbon treaty and it was put in place recognising the concerns of the Irish people in respect of

sovereignty and the wish of the Irish people that decisions relating to these matters should be made at a domestic national level where that is possible. However, we have seen a drift particularly with this Government and under this Minister where increasingly Protocol 21 regulations opt-ins are being brought before the Dáil with limited debate. I do not believe there is the consent or even the knowledge of the Irish people in respect of decisions that could have far-reaching consequences. In this case we are talking about something that I think will be broadly supported by everybody in this House but not all cases are as clear-cut as that. I am fearful about the lack of actual debate on and rationale behind some of the decisions that have been made.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: As Deputy Carthy set out, Sinn Féin is not opposing this. I recognise the importance of the item before us in terms of targeting serious criminality. However, we have to be very clear that Britain is now a third country and has been since Brexit. It is very important that there are strong measures when it comes to data protection and that the regime that will underpin the sharing of data here is as strong as if not stronger than the general data protection regulation that is in force within the European Union.

I share the concern and the criticism, or certainly the analysis, outlined by Deputy Carthy with regard to the real increase in the number of Protocol No. 21 opt-ins, which have become a feature of this Government. It seems to be undoing, maybe, some of the limited protections that were appended to the Lisbon treaty several years ago by stealth, without adequate levels of scrutiny and without adequate levels of debate. It might not be the case in this particular instrument that has come before us but there is a need for greater scrutiny and greater transparency when these opt-ins are proposed, debated and scrutinised in this House and in the Oireachtas as a whole.

This relates to serious criminality but there is another issue I want to use this opportunity to highlight and it is about road safety. As Deputy Carthy said, the nature of partition complicates policing on this island. We have a porous Border, and rightly so. The only thing that would improve it would be if we were to take it away altogether, and that is another day's work. Road safety concerns and the policing of road safety are a particular issue not only in the northern third of our country but also in the south east, where I am a representative, because of our links with Wales, in particular. The N25 is widely regarded as the most dangerous stretch of national primary road in the State. It is also a European route and one of the most dangerous ones in the European Union. The N24, which connects Rosslare onwards with Limerick and skirts Waterford, is also a very dangerous stretch of road. Both roads have not had their share of investment and safety improvements. What is making that situation all the worse is the sheer volume of traffic on both those roads comprising vehicles generally registered and regulated in Britain. There needs to be a good piece of work done by both the Minister's Department and the Department of Transport to get to the bottom of that issue and to make sure there is serious co-operation between authorities in Britain and authorities here when it comes to policing our roads and pursuing those who flout the rules of the road in Ireland, regardless of the jurisdiction in which they are registered.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I welcome this. As regards An Garda Síochána doing its policing duty, obviously, it will be very welcome. As regards the whole initiative of ANPR and number-plate recognition and the sharing of data, hopefully this will help, obviously, given the fact that we

have a Border on this island. There is also the amount of traffic coming from Britain into Ireland and *vice versa*. It will particularly help in relation to serious crime. As we know, it is trans-border. On both islands, this will create a co-operation that is desperately needed.

From a policing point of view, I have read the Minister's statement as regards the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, bringing in the statutory instrument. Could the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, provide the timelines for when this will actually take effect? If he were to have any information on that, it would be interesting.

Second, obviously, we need to be very careful as regards the use of data here because this data will identify people and so on. We need to be very careful to make sure the standards that are maintained here meet with our national standards and EU standards, given the fact that we are dealing with a third country, outside the EU, in the United Kingdom. As I have raised here in the Dáil and in committees on numerous occasions, I am not convinced that An Garda Síochána has been in any way exemplary when it comes to the retention of data, whether the issue has related to DNA, fingerprints or many other areas. My concerns there would lead me to want to know when this will be brought in and to get an assurance about the manner in which this data will be retained, the duration of its retention and how it will be used. That should obviously be done to the standard that is required under national legislation and legislation at a European level to maintain those standards.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am afraid our next speaker has not arrived, so I call on the Minister to make concluding remarks.

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I thank Deputies Carthy, McGuinness and Kelly for their contributions.

Deputies Carthy and McGuinness expressed a concern about the use of Protocol 21 and a concern that this was in some way interfering with Ireland's sovereignty or autonomy. When it came to the Lisbon treaty, we agreed, and we got input into it, Protocol 21. That was for the benefit of Ireland. We wanted to leave outside of the agreement of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union issues in the area of justice, legal affairs and police co-operation because we wanted to do our own thing. The reason we included Articles 3 and 4 is that we recognised there would be many occasions when we would want to opt in and be part of the agreements put forward by the European Union. This is a prime example of one where we should exercise the option to opt in under Protocol 21, Article 3. Here we have a situation in respect of an agreement between the European Union and the United Kingdom for the purpose of sharing vehicle registration data. It is obvious to me that we would want to be part of that. In fairness to Deputy Carthy, he recognises that as well. This is clearly one where we should opt in. Every time a decision is made whether or not to opt in, it is not done haphazardly; it is done through the exercise of a sovereign decision-making process within the Irish State. We come to the Houses of the Oireachtas, the Government puts forward a proposal to opt in under Protocol 21, Article 3 or Article 4, and the elected representatives of the Irish people have an opportunity to vote on it, and we do so. As there is greater harmonisation throughout the European Union in the areas of law and police co-operation, I think we will see more cases of Ireland wanting to opt in because it is to our advantage. If there are proposals that we do not want to opt into, we will not go near them and I will not propose them.

Deputies Kelly and Carthy mentioned the issue about data. Obviously, it is extremely important if we are sharing data of Irish citizens that it is protected. The only reason the data that is provided to the UK under the EU-UK agreement can be used is for the purpose of what is set out in the agreement, and that is for the purpose of investigating serious criminal activity pursuant to the vehicle registration data provisions. I do not want Deputies to believe that this data can be used for ulterior or parallel purposes. It can be used only for the purposes for which the agreement is entered into.

Deputy Kelly also asked about the timelines. As I said, the relevant national legislation in Ireland is the Vehicle Registration Data (Automated Searching and Exchange Act) 2018. That has the Minister for Transport, currently Deputy O'Brien, designated as the national contact point. We will amend the provisions of the 2018 legislation by way of statutory instrument to include reference to the trade and co-operation agreement between the UK and the EU. I cannot give the Deputy a specific timeline but it is not a very lengthy amending statutory instrument. The Minister is engaging with the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel and the Attorney General's office, which will draft the necessary statutory instrument. Certainly, I would like to see that done very promptly. It is not something that should take a considerable time.

I heard what Deputy McGuinness said about road safety in the area of the south east and the sheer volume of traffic. Obviously, the Irish economy is very open. We export and import very significant amounts - more is exported, if the truth be told - and that will result in a lot of traffic coming from the UK and from France. Obviously, Rosslare has got much busier since Brexit because of direct links between France and Ireland but I hear what the Deputy says about the road safety issue. As the country gets busier, there will be more people on our roads and we need to ensure that road safety is prioritised. You yourself, a Cheann Comhairle, will know from the south east of the country that gardaí are out there in terms of roads policing. Gardaí are out there in terms of roads policing. It is a hugely important part of An Garda Síochána's function. We need to ensure that we keep the rules of the road enforced but there is also an obligation on everyone to slow down.

Question put and agreed to.

7 o'clock

An Ceann Comhairle: As we are so far ahead of time, it might be a good idea to suspend the House for about three minutes.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 7 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 7.03 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 7 p.m. and resumed at 7.03 p.m.

Message from Select Committee

An Ceann Comhairle: The Select Committee on Infrastructure and National Development Plan Delivery has completed its consideration of the Critical Infrastructure Bill 2026 and has made no amendments thereto.

Health Information Bill 2024: From the Seanad

The Dáil went into Committee to consider amendments from the Seanad.

An Ceann Comhairle: Seanad amendments Nos. 1 and 2 are related and may be discussed together.

Seanad amendment No. 1:

Section 2: In page 6, between lines 31 and 32, to insert the following:

"(d) information that relates to—

- (i) the provision of health services, including planning for such provision, and
- (ii) the evaluation of health services,".

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I thank Deputies for attending this evening and for their continued support of the Bill. The Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, brought forward a small number of amendments on Committee Stage in the Seanad to strengthen a number of important provisions, the details of which I can set out briefly. Seanad amendments Nos. 1 and 2 relate to the power of the HSE under the Bill to request health information for important public interest purposes beyond treatment and care.

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 2:

Section 2: In page 6, line 32, to delete “(b) or (c)” and substitute “(b), (c) or (d)”.

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 3:

Section 12: In page 13, between lines 32 and 33, to insert the following:

"(6) A person who uses, or seeks to have disclosed, a personal public service number in accordance with this Act does not commit an offence under section 262(9) of the Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005."

Deputy Mary Butler: Our health system needs a robust and proven identifier in order that health information can, effectively and reliably, be associated with the right individual. This is essential for care and treatment as well as patient safety. As part of this, the Bill aims to enhance patient safety through stronger identification processes, including best-practice use of the personal public service number and eircode to uniquely identify patients.

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 4:

Section 17: In page 18, to delete lines 11 to 13 and substitute the following:

"(ii) the development of policy and regulatory activities in order to improve, promote and protect the health and welfare of the public, including integrated service planning,

performance management and the efficient and effective use of resources in the area of health, or".

Deputy Mary Butler: Seanad amendment No. 4 relates to the power of the HSE to use the electronic health record for specified public interest purposes. As the Minister outlined on Second Stage in the Seanad, there are a number of critical building blocks on the path to the full digitalisation of health records. One is the patient app, which now has over 157,000 users.

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 5:

Section 21: In page 20, line 13, after "groups," to insert "the Health Information and Quality Authority,".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

An Ceann Comhairle: Seanad amendments Nos. 6 and 7 are related and may be discussed together.

Seanad amendment No. 6:

Section 22: In page 21, lines 8 to 11, to delete all words from and including "—" in line 8 down to and including "(b)" in line 11.

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 7:

Section 22: In page 21, to delete lines 17 to 19 and substitute the following:

"(b) the development of policy and regulatory activities in order to improve, promote and protect the health and welfare of the public, including integrated service planning, performance management and the efficient and effective use of resources in the area of health, or".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Deputy Mary Butler: This Bill, which will establish a legal duty to share information, represents a significant opportunity to move towards a more connected health service that fully embraces the potential of quality electronic health data collected in the health system every day. In so doing, it will lay the foundations for a much more innovative and efficient health service which, above all, centres on the patient.

I thank all Deputies for their engagement and for their contributions to the debate on and support in respect of this significant legislation. I look forward to its enactment.

Seanad amendments reported.

An Ceann Comhairle: Agreement to the Seanad amendments is reported to the House. A message will now be sent to Seanad Éireann acquainting it accordingly.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 7.08 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 7.11 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 7.08 p.m. and resumed at 7.11 p.m.

Dublin Central By-election: Issue of Writ

Deputy Emer Currie: I move:

That the Ceann Comhairle direct the Clerk of the Dáil to issue her Writ for the election of a Member to fill the vacancy which has occurred in the membership of the present Dáil consequent on the resignation of Deputy Paschal Donohoe, a Member for the constituency of Dublin Central.

Question put and agreed to.

Galway West By-election: Issue of Writ

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I move:

That the Ceann Comhairle direct the Clerk of the Dáil to issue her Writ for the election of a Member to fill the vacancy which has occurred in the membership of the present Dáil consequent on the election as President of Deputy Catherine Connolly, a Member for the constituency of Galway West.

Get the posters up.

Question put and agreed to.

Earth Day: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]

The following motion was moved by Deputy Roderic O'Gorman on Wednesday, 22 April 2026:

That Dáil Éireann:

recognises that the triple planetary crises of climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss are an existential threat to humanity;

notes that the 22nd of April, is Earth Day, where people around the world are called to stand in defence of the only home we share;

declared a climate and biodiversity emergency, becoming the second national parliament in the world to do so, and in so doing recognised the importance of Ireland responding to these crises in 2019;

further recognises that:

— to address this challenge, the Government has committed to achieving a climate neutral economy by no later than 2050 and, through carbon budgets and the Climate

Action Plan, to reduce by 51 per cent the annual greenhouse gas emissions reported for 2030 compared to 2018;

— these commitments are underpinned by the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015, amended and strengthened in 2021, which acts as a foundation for the State's climate policy, and provides the legal basis for Ireland's climate ambitions;

— biodiversity targets are driven by Ireland's 4th National Biodiversity Action Plan 2023-2030 (NBAP), which aims to meet international commitments, including 30 per cent protected land and marine areas by 2030, this plan is on a statutory footing, and public bodies have a duty to contribute to these targets;

— achievement of these ambitions requires a Whole-of-Government approach to the decarbonisation of the energy system, the provision of electrified public transport at scale, the retrofitting of Ireland's building stock, and the development of new renewable energy sources;

— the ongoing crisis in the Middle East has demonstrated that the objective of affordable, secure and decarbonised energy cannot be met through importation of fossil fuels, which are carbon intensive and subject to rapid price shocks;

— in confronting the fact that 29 per cent of Irish households are in energy poverty and hundreds of thousands of electricity and gas customers are in arrears, we must ensure that in moving to a net-zero Ireland we adhere to the principles of the Just Transition Commission, and must reach those furthest behind first;

— energy crises disproportionately impact the most marginalised, including one parent families, carers, disabled people, members of the Traveller community, and older people are driven by an energy system that is too reliant on expensive imported fossil fuels; and

— climate change and its consequences are and will continue to have profound effects on human health and the wellbeing of future generations;

notes, with concern that:

— the Minister for Climate, Energy, and the Environment has indicated that the Government will miss its 2030 emissions reduction target by half, and has provided no emergency plan to reverse this trajectory;

— the Environmental Protection Agency, in preparing its latest emissions projections, found that the Government had not included any significant new policies or measures in the Climate Action Plan 2025, to close the gap in meeting 2030 climate targets;

— relevant Government Ministers have not yet fulfilled their duties under the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Acts to attend the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Climate, Environment and Energy, and outline corrective measures to meet sectoral emissions ceilings;

- the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council and the Climate Change Advisory Council published a joint peer-reviewed analysis in 2025, indicating a potential €8-€26 billion in compliance costs for Ireland through missing climate targets;
- the Government has proposed legislation that will fundamentally undermine the functioning of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act, by exempting carbon intensive projects from scrutiny under that Act;
- the Government intends to increase Ireland's reliance on fossil fuels through the creation of a State-owned Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) terminal which will be reliant on imported gas and subject to geopolitical price shocks far beyond the State's control;
- the enabling legislation for a State-owned LNG terminal, the Strategic Gas Emergency Reserve Bill 2025, seeks to pre-empt scrutiny of this project under Section 15 of Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act, suggesting that the Government understands that it is not compliant with Ireland's climate targets;
- an LNG terminal will lead to locked-in fossil fuel industry expansion that does not align with Ireland's binding climate obligations;
- a similar provision in the Dublin Airport (Passenger Cap) Bill 2026 suggests that the Government is placing the interests of airlines ahead of the need for a healthy environment and climate action;
- the newly published Critical Infrastructure Bill 2026 will allow the wholesale exclusion of carbon intensive projects from scrutiny under the Climate Action Act;
- despite a target of 5 gigawatts (GW) of new offshore wind energy by 2030 under the Climate Action Plan, no new offshore wind projects have been delivered, and the projects currently planned amount to less than 5 GW;
- the Government is due to fall well short of its retrofitting targets of 500,000 residential retrofits and the deployment of 400,000 heat pumps by 2030;
- the National Development Plan Review 2025 has reversed the previous Government's policy of providing a ratio of 2:1 investment in public transport over new roads, which will undermine plans to improve public transport and reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the transport sector;
- rapid growth in the number of data centres in Ireland has created significant induced demand for electricity, which will eliminate the net positive effect of new renewables projects and lead to increased energy prices for ordinary households;
- the Government has raided the €3.15 billion Climate and Nature Fund to plug holes in its infrastructure budget;
- the Marine Protected Areas Bill has yet to be published;
- the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, has disbanded its climate division;
- funding for farmers to implement the NBAP is wholly inadequate;

— the Final Report for Phase 2 of the National Land Use Review has been with the Minister for Climate, Energy, and the Environment, the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the Minister of State at Housing, Local Government and Heritage almost a year and is still not published;

— the Government has not fully met its legal obligations under the Climate Act as emissions limits do not account for the Land Use, Land Use Change, and Forestry sector;

— the Government has not yet addressed the recommendations of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Climate, Environment and Energy regarding the preparation and delivery of Carbon Budgets 3 and 4 (2031-2040); and

— the Climate Action Plan 2026 has been significantly delayed and is still not yet published; and

calls on the Government to:

— re-commit to the legally binding target of 51 per cent emissions reduction by 2030;

— remove any provisions from draft legislation that limits the effectiveness of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act;

— implement the recommendations of the Independent Advisory Committee on nature restoration and to adequately fund Ireland's Nature Restoration Plan; and

— protect vulnerable households from the ongoing fossil fuel price crisis through new targeted supports and safeguards, by speeding up access to home energy upgrades, and by ensuring that Ireland develops its own secure and clean renewable energy.

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

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

"affirms that, the Government:

— is fully committed to delivering on Ireland's climate ambition across all sectors, and to progress climate action in a planned and coherent way in pursuit of the National Climate Objective of a climate neutral economy by 2050, in a way that ensures that sustainability, affordability, competitiveness and energy security are all central to our future climate planning; and

— is acutely aware of the impact on households and businesses of the recent increases in fuel prices, and is progressing both immediate and longer-term measures to support households with these costs;

notes that:

— work is ongoing across the Government to deliver on climate commitments and accelerate climate mitigation efforts every day, supported by unprecedented Government funding across the National Development Plan (NDP), which will fund major upgrades to deliver carbon emission reductions, including major public

transport projects, more efficient public buildings, and supports an €18.9 billion investment into the Irish electricity grid;

— this Government is committed to the delivery of major public transport projects, the NDP Sectoral Investment Plan for Transport, published in November, provided €10.1 billion for public transport, as well as an additional €2 billion from the Infrastructure, Climate and Nature Fund to progress MetroLink, giving a total of €12.1 billion for public transport, this compares to an allocation of approximately €8.7 billion for roads capital investment;

— the unprecedented €505 million worth of practical measures introduced by the Government on 12th April, included:

— further reductions in excise duty on diesel, petrol and marked gas oil (green diesel) in addition to a deferral of the planned increase in carbon tax, scheduled 1st May until October 2026; and

— reductions in excise duty, including the National Oil Reserves Agency levy reduction with effect from midnight on 14th April and will run until 31st July, 2026;

— Government will also be establishing a new road transporters' support scheme, as well as supports for coach operators providing local link services, at a cost of €40 million per month for three months;

— a comprehensive €100 million Fuel Subsidy Support Scheme to assist farmers, agricultural contractors and fishers will be put in place;

— this package of supports is in addition to the measures announced in March, which included:

— an expansion of the diesel rebate scheme, backdating it to January, to help sectors of the economy most impacted by the rise of fuel costs; and

— an extension of the fuel allowance season to help the most vulnerable with the cost of home heating;

— the Government has established the National Energy Affordability Taskforce, to identify and implement additional measures that will enhance energy affordability for households and businesses while delivering key renewable commitments and protecting security of supply and economic stability;

— the Environmental Protection Agency's most recent emissions reporting confirms progress in delivering on climate action and records that Ireland has recorded overall greenhouse gas emission reductions for a third consecutive year, with a decrease of 6.8 per cent in 2023 followed by a further 2 per cent reduction in 2024, this is despite the concurrent increase of approximately 1.5 million people, more than one million new homes and over one million extra vehicles on our roads;

— Ireland is a world leader in electricity generation from renewables which has increased fivefold since 2005, and that in February 2026 wind energy provided a record 50 per cent of the State's electricity;

— Ireland has now reached a record circa 8 gigawatts (GW) of renewable generation capacity, up from 4.8 GW in 2020, and renewable energy provided half of Ireland's energy in March 2026;

— the Government is committed to 5 GW of installed offshore wind capacity, with 5 Phase One projects all currently being progressed through the planning system, and the Government is also aiming for 20 GW of offshore wind by 2040 to help power a new green industrial revolution;

— the Offshore Renewable Electricity Support Scheme Tonn Nua site, offshore wind auction was successfully concluded in November 2025; and

— the 2025 Zero-Emission Vehicle Intelligence target for electrical vehicle sales of 195,000 was surpassed in October 2025, and Electric Vehicle sales are now at over 227,000;

— the Climate Action Plan 2025 and its predecessor, Climate Action Plan 2024, provide a strong framework for continued delivery of climate action across all sectors each and every day, including measures and actions that are multi-annual in nature and effect, and the Government is committed to supporting their implementation;

— projected costs of compliance with the European Union (EU) climate and energy targets have not been confirmed at this point in time and that there are several routes to compliance available within the overarching EU framework, and the Government's focus is on implementing the measures at hand;

— the Critical Infrastructure Bill 2026 is a targeted piece of legislation that allows the Government to designate certain critical projects or programmes as critical infrastructure, including:

— grid infrastructure which is vital for Ireland's climate, societal and economic objectives, it does not seek to undermine the functioning of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act;

— climate considerations will continue to be fully integrated into decision-making processes, including through the planning system and national policy framework, even where limited and exceptional provisions apply;

— the Government's position on the need for a State-operated Strategic Gas Emergency Reserve, in the form Liquefied Natural Gas, has been clear - it is a priority project of a strategic nature required to mitigate the major consequences for our society and our economy that would arise if Ireland was to experience an interruption to our gas supplies via subsea interconnection;

— the proposed Dublin Airport (Passenger Cap) Bill 2026 will enable the sustainable development of Dublin Airport, with full regard to environmental constraints, legal obligations, and the independent regulatory role of the Irish Aviation Authority, while supporting national connectivity and economic resilience;

— the National Residential Retrofit Plan 2026, announced on 27th January, introduced a number of new and expanded measures to make energy upgrades more affordable, and accessible to many more homeowners;

— in Budget 2026, the Government provided a record allocation of €640 million, targeting 73,000 home energy upgrades this year, this includes a record €340 million for the Warmer Homes Scheme which provides fully funded upgrades for those in energy poverty and will target 11,500 upgrades this year;

— capital expenditure of over €1.7 billion has delivered over 257,500 home energy upgrades from 2019 to end Q1 2026, and there are already over 170,000 heat pumps in existing homes and businesses across the country;

— the 4th National Biodiversity Action Plan, which was published in January 2024, strives for a 'whole-of-Government, whole-of-society' approach to the governance and conservation of biodiversity;

— the finalisation of the Report for Phase 2 of the National Land Use Review is advancing with a view to publishing later this year;

— work is ongoing on the general scheme of the Bill to amend the Maritime Area Planning Act 2021, to provide for marine protected area designation through the National Designated Maritime Area Plan (DMAP) process with a view to bringing forward proposals this year; and

— the MPA LIFE Ireland project (2024-2033) has been working at a practical level to help deliver Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) in Ireland in line with the DMAP process and the principles of public participation, co-design, co-development and co-delivery, this nine-year €25 million project co-funded by the EU will focus on the social, economic and ecological dimensions of MPA designation."

- (Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan)

An Ceann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to the motion regarding Earth Day. On Wednesday, 22 April 2026, on the question, "That the amendment to the motion be agreed to", a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 81; Níl, 64; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Boland, Grace.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brennan, Brian.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Brennan, Shay.	Brady, John.	
Brophy, Colm.	Buckley, Pat.	
Browne, James.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Burke, Colm.	Carthy, Matt.	
Burke, Peter.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Butler, Mary.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Butterly, Paula.	Coppinger, Ruth.	

Buttimer, Jerry.	Cronin, Réada.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Crowe, Seán.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Cullinane, David.	
Cahill, Michael.	Cummins, Jen.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Daly, Pa.	
Calleary, Dara.	Devine, Máire.	
Canney, Seán.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Chambers, Jack.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Clendennen, John.	Gannon, Gary.	
Collins, Niall.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Connolly, John.	Gould, Thomas.	
Cooney, Joe.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Cummins, John.	Healy, Seamus.	
Currie, Emer.	Hearne, Rory.	
Daly, Martin.	Kelly, Alan.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Dillon, Alan.	Kenny, Martin.	
Dolan, Albert.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Lawless, Paul.	
Fleming, Sean.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Foley, Norma.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Geoghegan, James.	Murphy, Paul.	
Grealish, Noel.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Harkin, Marian.	Nash, Ged.	
Heneghan, Barry.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Heydon, Martin.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Higgins, Emer.	Nolan, Carol.	
Keogh, Keira.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Lawless, James.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
Maxwell, David.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
McGuinness, John.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Quaide, Liam.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Rice, Pádraig.	
Murphy, Michael.	Sheehan, Conor.	
Naughton, Hildegard.	Sherlock, Marie.	

Neville, Joe.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Connor, James.	Ward, Charles.	
O'Dea, Willie.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.		
O'Donovan, Patrick.		
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Roderic O'Gorman and Ciarán Ahern.

Amendment declared carried.

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

The Dáil divided: Tá, 82; Níl, 63; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Boland, Grace.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brennan, Brian.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Brennan, Shay.	Brady, John.	
Brophy, Colm.	Buckley, Pat.	
Browne, James.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Burke, Colm.	Carthy, Matt.	
Burke, Peter.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Butler, Mary.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Butterly, Paula.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Cronin, Réada.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Crowe, Seán.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Cullinane, David.	
Cahill, Michael.	Cummins, Jen.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Daly, Pa.	
Calleary, Dara.	Devine, Máire.	

Canney, Seán.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Chambers, Jack.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Clendennen, John.	Gannon, Gary.	
Collins, Niall.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Connolly, John.	Gould, Thomas.	
Cooney, Joe.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Cummins, John.	Healy, Seamus.	
Currie, Emer.	Hearne, Rory.	
Daly, Martin.	Kelly, Alan.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Dillon, Alan.	Kenny, Martin.	
Dolan, Albert.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Lawless, Paul.	
Fleming, Sean.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Foley, Norma.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Geoghegan, James.	Murphy, Paul.	
Grealish, Noel.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Harkin, Marian.	Nash, Ged.	
Heneghan, Barry.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Heydon, Martin.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Higgins, Emer.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Keogh, Keira.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
Lawless, James.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
Maxwell, David.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
McGuinness, John.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Quaide, Liam.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Rice, Pádraig.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Sheehan, Conor.	
Murphy, Michael.	Sherlock, Marie.	
Naughton, Hildegard.	Smith, Duncan.	
Neville, Joe.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
Nolan, Carol.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Ward, Charles.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Connor, James.		
O'Dea, Willie.		

O'Donnell, Kieran.		
O'Donovan, Patrick.		
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Roderic O'Gorman and Ciarán Ahern.

Question declared carried.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 7.33 p.m. go dtí 8.47 a.m., Déardaoin, an 23 Aibreán 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 7.33 p.m. until 8.47 a.m. on Thursday, 23 April 2026.