

Vol. 1088
No. 5



Tuesday,
30 June 2026

DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 30 Meitheamh 2026

Tuesday, 30 June 2026

Chuaigh an Ceann Comhairle i gceannas ar 2 p.m.

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

An Ceann Comhairle: Before I call Deputy McDonald, I take this opportunity to welcome Councillor Alison Field, who is in the Public Gallery and who became deputy Lord Mayor of Dublin City Council last night.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Tomorrow is an important day that will provide a serious test for the Government. More than 1 million households will be hit with hikes in gas and electricity prices. Customers of Electric Ireland, the country's largest electricity supplier, and Yuno Energy face increased bills. These sharp increases range from 8% to 11% and will heap more pressure on people. The hikes will kick in as households deal with rising rents, increasing food prices and expensive back-to-school costs. That is before we mention the sky-high cost of car insurance and childcare. The bills keep coming. They keep going up and up, and people are fed up with being ripped off.

I want to remind the Taoiseach of something, which is that Irish households already pay the highest electricity prices in the European Union. On average, we pay more than €500 more per year than our European neighbours. As the Taoiseach knows, we already have record numbers of people who are unable to pay their energy bills, with more than 500,000 household accounts in arrears. That is the context and the backdrop. That is what families are facing as these new hikes come at them tomorrow. The hikes will hit hard-working families. These are people who work every hour they can and who do everything they can to build a good life for themselves and their families. No matter what they do, however, there seems to be a constant uphill battle and a constant rip-off. These are the families that are squeezed and squeezed.

Here is the worst of it. The Government has known these hikes were coming for weeks, because the increases were announced at the end of May. It has had more than a month to act and to step in to protect people, but, true to form, it has done nothing at all. Energy has to be affordable for people. We need to get costs under control and end the rip-off. We have to support people while costs are so high. The Taoiseach should rein in the energy companies,

which are making massive profits. He should see to it that energy credits are reinstated, because his job is to take action to ease the pressure on people and families. Why is the Government allowing this scandalous profiteering to go unchecked. Why is it content to sit back and allow more than 1 million households to take the hit? The uncertainty, stress and pressure people are being asked to live with is not right and is not fair. People deserve better.

Ón lá amárach, beidh billí leictreachais agus gáis ag méadú go géar do níos mó ná 1 milliún teaghlach. Cuirfidh sé níos mó brú ar theaghlaigh atá ag streachailt go dona cheana féin. Cad atá an Rialtas chun a dhéanamh faoi seo?

This comes down to choices. The Government should choose to step up, have the backs of households faced with these energy price hikes and take action to rein in the energy companies. It should provide people with the support they need here and now. That means intervening directly and providing the energy credits that households need. Will the Government make these choices?

The Taoiseach: I dtús báire, admhaím go bhfuil deacrachtaí ann agus go bhfuil teaghlaigh faoi bhrú maidir leis an gcostas maireachtála, go háirithe de dheasca an chogaidh san Iaráin. Is léir go raibh drochthionchar ag an gcogadh sin ar phraghsanna. Tá sé sin soiléir. Tá an-chuid déanta ag an Rialtas, áfach, chun an brú sin a ísliú agus chun cabhair agus tacaíocht a thabhairt do dhaoine. Faoi dheireadh na bliana, beidh suas le €1 billiún níos mó curtha ar fáil againn do mhuintir na tíre i gcomparáid leis an méid a chuireamar ar fáil i gcomhthéacs na cáinainseise is déanaí i mí Dheireadh Fómhair seo caite.

Families have been under pressure in respect of the cost-of-living issue. The latter has been exacerbated by significant events in recent years, not least the exit from Covid, the supply chain inflationary crisis and the spiral that followed that, the invasion of Ukraine by Russia and the energy that followed that, the tariff situation relating to the United States and the war in the Middle East between the United States and Iran, which led to the largest ever supply shock in terms of fuel and to consequential increases in fuel prices.

In the first instance, budget 2026 provided a lot of significant supports. First, we had the increase in the core rates. We also had the significant increases in child support payments, which helped families that have children and that are on the lowest incomes. Record allocations were made in respect of those payments, including, for example to the fuel allowance. What was done meant that a lone-parent family with one child saw an increase of nearly 9% or €1,800 in payments from the Department as a result of our budgetary decisions. A two-adult household received increases in payments of up to €2,300 as a result of those decisions. Other measures we took include free hot school meals and free schoolbooks in primary schools. We took a lot of charges out of the health service to facilitate families in particular. These measures were all with a view to helping families deal with the crisis. We reduced VAT and have kept the VAT on electricity charges down to 9%. That will continue out to 2030.

Deputy McDonald said we did nothing. We introduced a special package of between €755 million and €771 million at that stage in order to alleviate the pressures on people and on the transport and food production sectors. We took 32 cent off the price of diesel, 27 cent off petrol and 7.4% off marked gas oil. We also deferred the carbon tax increases until 14 October.

These are substantial measures. We have now taken a decision to extend those and to reduce them on a graduated basis. The cost of that will be about €255 million, so we are looking now at an intervention, above and beyond what was in the budget, of close to €1 billion. That is not doing nothing. That is a significant intervention by any yardstick – probably one of the highest across the European Union. We want to introduce further measures in the forthcoming budget that will alleviate the pressures on families and on workers, particularly in terms of the tax burden on them. We also want to support pensioners, carers and those with disabilities. We want to use our resources in a focused and targeted way in the budget, which we will do.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Hear, hear.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It is not enough simply to agree that households are under incredible pressure. Far from intervening to assist people with their energy bills, the Government took away the very thing that was a support to households when it removed energy credits.

Rather than intervening to assist, it intervened and made things worse. It has failed to rein in the energy companies that are turning huge profits. People work very hard and will pay their way, and everybody realises that this has to happen, but they are simply fed up with being constantly ripped off. They ask themselves why everything here is so much more expensive and why this is the case. Why is it that Irish households and families consistently have to pay more for their energy? I am putting the question to the Taoiseach today that more than 1 million households will be asking themselves tomorrow when they face yet another hike in their electricity and gas prices and bills. They will ask what the Government is doing to put a stop to the gallop of the energy companies. What is the Government doing to step in and assist these households as they struggle, as the Taoiseach has acknowledged?

The Taoiseach: The energy companies were quite quick to put up the prices at the time of the issues in the commodity markets arising from the war between the US and Iran. We will have to see comparable decreases as commodity prices reduce and as this feeds into the Irish market. We have had significant reduction in terms of energy prices but they need to go much further than they have. We have nominally the highest EU electricity prices and about the fifth highest when adjusted for affordability. We have a heavy gas dependency. This is a significant factor in the pricing of our energy. We have grid isolation and small market scales. The fundamental problem we have is an over-reliance on fossil fuels, and on gas as our source, and we need to move more decisively to renewables. Through the warmer home schemes and retrofitting schemes, we are empowering people to deal more effectively on a long-term basis with the costs.

Deputy Holly Cairns: Carmel Cantwell's brother William died in Bessborough mother and baby home. Speaking at a vigil on Sunday she said, "The land itself holds the truth. These buildings, these fields hold stories and secrets and the remains of our family members". That truth now lies buried. If planning permission is granted next week, this Government has a big decision to make: do its State apologies mean anything or are they just performance?

Until this point, every time I have raised it with the Taoiseach, the current Minister and the former Minister, they have all said the same thing, which is that an investigation of the site

would be too big and too expensive. For one, is anything too big when we are talking about the gravity of 829 disappeared babies? Leaving that aside for the moment, no one is asking the Government to go in tomorrow and excavate the entire site at Bessborough. Before that there would need to be geophysical surveys, test excavations and soil samples. The commission of investigation did not do any of that. It did not properly investigate the site. Even leaving that aside, the first thing the Government has to do is CPO land. This was unanimously agreed by Cork City Council and it is the number one ask of survivors for the State to protect the site and to give survivors breathing space and time to discuss what should happen next, without the looming pressure of diggers rolling into the site.

Another argument the Taoiseach puts forward whenever I raise Bessborough is that he cannot intervene in the planning process. Everyone understands and agrees that in normal circumstances the Government should not intervene but does the Taoiseach think these circumstances are normal? A total of 923 children died at Bessborough between 1922 and 1998 when it finally closed, and 1998 is not that long ago. This is the Taoiseach's constituency and he was on the local authority at that time. Burial records exist for only 64 of these children, meaning 829 children are disappeared, presumed dead, but nobody knows. These are not normal circumstances.

Under the European Convention on Human Rights, ECHR, the State has a legal obligation to protect this site for proper forensic investigation and to deliver truth and justice for survivors. The only way to do that is through compulsorily purchasing the land. What survivors want to know is what this Government is going to do if the planning decision is upheld. Is it going to do nothing? Will it sit back while survivors chain themselves to the gates, or is the Government going to do what it should have done a long time ago, which is the bare minimum of compulsorily purchasing the land?

The Taoiseach: First of all, the pain felt by survivors and families connected to Bessborough is profound. It is enduring. Neither I nor the rest of the Government has ever minimised that reality. I would argue that the last Government did more on these issues than any previous Government for a long time. It was not just about performance. I think it is unfair of the Deputy to put that insinuation across in the manner that she has, given the profundity and deep sadness of this issue. The most fundamental pursuit for quite a number of years was unhindered access to all birth records. That was the most significant issue over two decades, and various arguments were used around the constitutional this and that. The last Government and the Attorney General advised that there should be no hindrance to access to information. That has happened and it has been very comprehensive. This is not, therefore, some empty gesture or performance, as the Deputy suggested it was. No one has a monopoly on compassion or concern about this issue.

Equally, I would say that the redress scheme - people could argue its merits or demerits - has been a significant one. About 7,000 people have applied to date. My understanding is that up to 6,000-plus have had positive outcomes so far and the rest are being produced. This is along with many other initiatives undertaken by the last Government, and the former Minister, Roderic O'Gorman, in particular as the Minister responsible at the time for that issue.

The legal position and the law as we currently have them, as the Deputy probably knows, prevent further intervention on the site due to the absence of evidence on burial locations.

Robust safeguards are in place and the Government remains fully committed to survivor engagement, memorialisation and accountability. We still do not know where the children who died are buried, including at Bessborough. As the Deputy said, the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes examined the Bessborough site extensively, including using cartographic and archival research, site surveys and public appeals for information. The commission concluded that, while it was likely some children were buried on the grounds, it found no physical or documentary evidence locating burial sites.

There have been different calls at different times, and there is not unanimity on this among survivors in terms of how the site should be treated or protected. It is a large site of approximately 60 acres at the moment. It was previously over 200 acres, so it has already been partially developed over the decades.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: Excavation without evidence of location at the moment is not lawful nor feasible. I will come back in again.

Deputy Holly Cairns: Can the Taoiseach imagine what it must feel like to not know if your baby, your sibling or your niece or nephew is buried at the site in Bessborough or, potentially, was sold abroad? Like Carmel Cantwell said at the weekend, the truth lies in the grounds. We are talking about some of the worst human rights violations and some of the worst crimes imaginable. We are talking about forced family separation. We are talking about disappeared infants. We are talking about human trafficking. We are then talking about the potential. Can the Taoiseach imagine apartments being built on top of that uninvestigated, potential mass grave of disappeared babies? It is unbelievable.

I asked the Taoiseach if the Government would compulsorily purchase the land, and he stood up and simply did not answer the question. He spoke around the issue for the entire reply, talked about how great the Government's scheme was, which excluded people who spent less than six months in an institution, and talked about the size of the site again.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Holly Cairns: Is there a site that is too big to warrant-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Holly Cairns: -----the investigation of the disappearance of over 800 babies?

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Taoiseach: In my view, the local authority should have purchased the site compulsorily a number of years ago. It chose not to. Governments, by definition, do not just go in and purchase sites compulsorily. There are issues regarding how to protect and treat sites, without necessarily having to purchase it compulsorily.

The history is a bit more complex than was articulated by the Deputy. It is much more so. It is not so simple. I will not say any more than that. I will put it this way to the Deputy: even within the context of the laws that have been passed and in terms of the planning application, she has not specified to me how the Government should intervene with An Coimisiún Pleanála. She must know the law, just like everybody else. It is a great thing to say-----

Deputy Holly Cairns: I said the Government should purchase land compulsorily.

The Taoiseach: Is it not a wonderful thing to say that we should interfere with An Coimisiún Pleanála? Just intervene.

Deputy Holly Cairns: No, I do not find it a wonderful thing to say.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy.

The Taoiseach: Sorry, but it is a very simple thing to say we should intervene in the planning process-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The time is up. I thank the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: -----without any consequence, without even a question of-----

An Ceann Comhairle: We now move to Deputy Ivana Bacik.

The Taoiseach: The Government will await the outcome of the planning appeal next week, and then we will see how to respond to that decision by An Coimisiún Pleanála.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: For most children across the country, this is the first week of the summer holidays, an exciting and positive time. For hundreds of families, however, this is the first week of a final countdown they have long been dreading because, as of this week, far too many children with special educational needs are still officially without school places for this coming September. What a disgrace in a republic that claims to value education.

In desperation, many parents have been forced to go public about their children's situations. One such parent is Labour Councillor Alison Field, who is in the Gallery today. On her Instagram account, one will find posts about her work providing support for people in her Dublin community every day. As of last night, one will also see posts about her work in her new role as Deputy Lord Mayor of Dublin city. I congratulate her, and I hope the Taoiseach will join me in congratulating her and, indeed, his own party colleague, the new Lord Mayor of Dublin, Daryl Barron.

There is another running theme to Ali's social media posts. She has had to use her profile to highlight the ongoing failure of the State to provide her son James with a school place. Recently, James received rejections from two more schools. That brings the family's grand total up to 18. James, a vulnerable child, has been rejected 18 times, refused care and refused an education. In Ali's words, he has been on the Department's books since he was five. He is

12 now. The Department of education has had seven years to provide him with a secondary school place and to plan for this. Now, with mere weeks to go, his mother has again had to resort to social media to plead for answers. The family is banking on one last school, hoping for what Ali describes as a miracle.

Families like Ali's should not need a miracle. What they are asking for is something that most children can take for granted. In a wealthy country in the 21st century, an education should be a given, but so many children have been abandoned by the State. I refer to children like six-year-old Kristian Walsh, who is autistic and non-verbal, and for whom this September will mark his third year without a primary school place. His mother says that most of her days are now spent fighting for a basic right that every child should enjoy.

The Minister, Hildegard Naughton, and the Taoiseach have repeatedly assured parents that every child will have a place. Is that true, though? Parents have heard these promises before. Many have had to become experts in advocacy and public policy because all they are getting are delays, confusion and copy-and-paste refusal letters. Many now say that they have no hope left. What can the Taoiseach say to someone who has lost the hope of providing their child with an education? When he knows there has been a shortage of places and that demand is rising, why are parents and children now entering the summer holidays without any certainty?

Now that schools are closing for the summer, how many children are still without a school place for next year and when is the Government going to treat this as a national emergency? For many parents like Ali and many children like James, this is a personal emergency.

The Taoiseach: The scale of demand for special education places and our response to it over the past six years have been exceptional. I think that balance and perspective are required here. Thousands of children are being provided for every year and additional places are being found.

The Deputy knows herself that when the portal was opened earlier last year, which was a good thing, the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, received applications from about 7,860 children for special placements.

That was more than twice the number who did so ahead of the current school year. Let us acknowledge that. Of those 7,860, 6,000, or 75%, were already enrolled in a school but were seeking special provision in addition to the placement in a given school.

Every child who requires a special school placement and who has notified the NCSE will have a place in September. That is the target. We have already announced 580 new special classes - 378 at primary level and 202 at post-primary - that will open this September. In addition, there are 60 new inclusive special classes, with the latest tranche of five additional classes announced yesterday by the Minister of State, Michael Moynihan. The number of primary special classes has grown by 99%, from approximately 1,319 to 2,629 today. Post-primary special classes have grown by 115%. That is from 517 to 1,122 over the past five years. The number of special needs assistants, SNAs, has increased by 45%. We will have more than 26,000 SNAs working in schools by the end of the year. There will be almost 22,500 special education teachers in place by year end. Sixteen new special schools have opened in the last number of years. Four more were recently announced in Balbriggan, Citywest, Bray and Monasterevin. Special school enrolments are up by 20%. Over 40% of special schools have benefited from new or upgraded buildings. Clearly, the Minister, Hildegard Naughton,

and the Minister of State, Michael Moynihan, and the Ministers and Ministers of State before them have been very active on the issue. We have more to do.

I fully accept the anxiety, stress and trauma that a family, and parents in particular, can experience when they are finding it extremely difficult to get a school place. We have put in place provisions for the NCSE to be more proactive and act as advocates for children in securing an appropriate and suitable place for the child.

Changes occurred prior to this school year. Some 6,000 additional students who were already in school have sought special accommodation. It is fair to say that the Department has been stretched but has moved at pace to provide the additional places, teachers and SNAs to meet the need that was out there.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: We certainly acknowledge that places have been found for many children. Of course that is welcome, but it should not be remarkable or something to boast about. There are still children, parents and families left waiting and left without certainty. I welcome the Taoiseach's commitment - I think he did give a commitment - that every child who needs a school place will have one this year, but parents are losing hope that the Government will fulfil these promises because they have heard this before and there is still no certainty.

After February's debacle, when the NCSE told 200 schools that they would lose SNAs, we thought there might be progress and certainty for special education. We have been here every year. Every year, we have heard from parents that their children, such as Kristian and James, are being left without a place. They and their families are paying a terrible price for this failure. We know that, for every period of time that a child is left without a place, it impacts negatively on their development.

The Government already found hundreds of millions of euro for special education this year. Indeed, it had to bail out the Department of education earlier this year. Parents were told the resources would be there but we still do not know how many children, such as James and Kristian, are left without places. Can the Taoiseach guarantee those places will be available this September?

The Taoiseach: There are about 30,000 students now who are supported across special schools and special classes. The Deputy is correct that we allocated an additional €646 million to education. That is helping in terms of special education provision. Opening the portal early last year led to far more applications than perhaps was anticipated by the Department. The number of applications almost doubled, even though last year we delivered approximately 2,700 new special education places and well over 450 - close to 500 - special classes. This is growing exponentially. The bigger question for all of us in the Dáil and so on is how this evolves over time.

More critical analysis and evaluation is required.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: There are 26,000 SNAs. The number has increased dramatically over the last five to six years.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach. Time is up. Deputy Boyd Barrett.

The Taoiseach: Provision is being provided and resources are being allocated.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: As the Taoiseach knows, Ireland will take over the EU Presidency for six months as of tomorrow and the Taoiseach will host a launch event in Dublin Castle to commence the six months of the Irish EU Presidency. I will be joining a demonstration outside Dublin Castle with anti-war and peace groups, pro-neutrality groups and Palestine solidarity groups, because they and I are concerned that, rather than using the position of the EU Presidency to defend our tradition of neutrality and reflect the views of the majority of Irish people, who want to protect that tradition of neutrality, the Government will cave in to the agenda of Ursula von der Leyen and the European Union to ramp up in an enormous way the militarisation of Europe and the arms industry in Europe, and that it will do this at a time when the European Union is deeply complicit in the horrific genocide Israel is committing against the Palestinian people.

The background to that is a policy document of the EU titled, tellingly, ReArm Europe Plan, which was published in the middle of last year - ReArm Europe. I am sure the Taoiseach is familiar with it, and if he were not that, would be a serious abdication of his responsibilities. It is a document which proposes to dramatically increase arms expenditure in Europe - about double it - from approximately €400 billion per year to €800 billion per year. This is money that could be spent on addressing the cost-of-living crisis, the housing crisis, health and education, but Europe is proposing to double arms expenditure. This is at the same time that Europe is exporting about €800 billion worth of arms and military components to Israel while it commits a genocide against the Palestinian people. My fear is that the Government will use this as a propaganda jamboree to justify what we know it has committed to, which is getting rid of the Irish triple lock, removing obstacles to the deployment of Irish troops where there is no UN mandate, while Europe is pushing for greater militarisation-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: -----greater spending on weapons and arming a genocide in Gaza.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Will the Government stand up for neutrality?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach will respond.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Will it oppose the EU militarisation agenda and complicity with genocide or will it cave in to that agenda?

The Taoiseach: Ireland will assume the Presidency of the European Union. The three fundamental pillars of our Presidency will be competitiveness, values and security.

On competitiveness, we are looking for a capital markets union. We will try to advance that agenda to enable Irish small- and medium-sized companies to get access to a far greater degree of venture capital in Europe. We hope we can establish - Commissioner Michael McGrath is pursuing this - the 28th regime or European Inc., which would basically mean that SMEs would be established on a pan-European basis from day one. We want to deepen the Single Market because Irish workers and people have benefited from it. We also want to simplify regulation to enable economic growth across the European Union.

The European Union has been transformative for Ireland since we voted to join in 1972 and joined in 1973. It has been a transformative experience economically for Ireland and, among most populations across Europe, Ireland has enjoyed probably the highest pro-European Union sentiment on a consistent basis over the years.

Many on the left have opposed the European Union and every treaty to do with it. That is their right and entitlement, but Europe is a far broader story than the one the Deputy painted.

Fundamentally, we will be endeavouring to see if we can help the agenda of making Europe more competitive on the industrial front and technology front to create jobs for people and to protect the jobs Irish people already have. Many of our companies export to the European market. We export a lot of food to the European market. We export a lot of medical devices to the European market. We export a lot of pharmaceuticals to the European market. They are real jobs. Real Irish people depend on those jobs and depend on that market. The Deputy ignores all that and he has consistently ignored it in the context of the European agenda.

Let us come to what he claims is rearming and militarisation. What is happening? What happened in the past five years? Can the Deputy recall? Ukraine was invaded, violently, by Russia and without any provocation. It was a total violation of the UN Charter. What has that created across the eastern flank? How does the Deputy think Finland, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland and Estonia feel? They do not have the geographic isolation we have here; we are far removed. They have a far greater existential fear of Russia than the Deputy or I have, even though we should be concerned in terms of technology and cybersecurity as well as subsea cable and gas connector sabotage.

Deputy Peter Burke: Hear, hear.

The Taoiseach: The world has become much more complex but the Deputy ignores that all the time. There are parts of Europe that feel under existential threat. They do not believe the US will be there for them-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: -----when the time comes and therefore they are-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you. Deputy Boyd Barrett to respond.

The Taoiseach: -----enhancing their military expenditure and defence expenditure. It is because of what happened in terms of Russia's behaviour.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I spent much of last night conversing with a young man from Ukraine who fled here because he did not want to be conscripted into the disastrous Ukrainian-Russian war and is fearful he is going to be sent back there because Zelenskyy is asking that people of his age now be sent back to fight on a front line where tens of thousands are being slaughtered. That disastrous war was, of course, started by Putin but young men like him do not want to fight in it.

The Taoiseach did not refer to the document I mentioned. It states "The moment has come for Europe to re-arm. ... [we need] a massive increase in European defence spending ..." That is what is being urged by Ursula von der Leyen and the EU at the moment, namely, to double arms expenditure from about €400 billion to €800 billion at the same time as Europe is exporting about €800 billion in arms to Israel to commit genocide. We are a neutral country. That is about opposing militarism, war and so on. Is the Taoiseach going to speak up against that? Is he going-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: -----to oppose the militarisation agenda-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: -----oppose the shameful complicity with the genocide-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. The Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: -----and do an about-turn on the question of the triple lock-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to respond now.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: -----which is about dismantling our neutrality?

An Ceann Comhairle: Taoiseach, please.

The Taoiseach: First of all, we will uphold Irish military neutrality. There is no issue with Irish military neutrality. There has been no attempt to undermine Irish military neutrality by Europe or by anybody else, for that matter, and the Deputy should stop scaremongering in respect of it. We are not joining NATO anytime soon. We are not militarily aligned and we have no intention of joining any military group or bloc. That is Irish military neutrality.

Deputy Paul Murphy: That is all it is.

The Taoiseach: Sorry?

An Ceann Comhairle: No.

Deputy Paul Murphy: That is all it is for you. As long as we are not in NATO we are neutral.

The Taoiseach: I am sorry but you do not get to define it.

An Ceann Comhairle: And you do not get to interrupt.

The Taoiseach: You do not get to define it. If you had your way you would not have an army at all. You said that to me one day here during question time when I asked you straight out if you believed we should have a military at all.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I did not. Check the record.

An Ceann Comhairle: A bit of respect, please.

The Taoiseach: Okay. I am glad you maybe accept we might need some sort of military or defence capability. In any event, there is not unanimity across Europe - there is disagreement on Palestine - but Europe remains the biggest donor to Palestine globally. It is the biggest donor to Palestinians in terms of-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: -----supporting Palestinians across the board from the PA to the ordinary Palestinians in terms of the vital essential services they require.

An Ceann Comhairle: Before I move to the Order of Business, I welcome Tina and Killane Shine from Cork who are in the Gallery with Deputy Collins. Everybody I met today was from Cork and you are all very welcome.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: We are the best county, a Cheann Comhairle.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Mary Butler): I move:

Tuesday's business shall be:

- Supplementary Estimates for Public Services [Votes 30 and 31] (back from Committee) (without debate, to moved together and decided by one question and any division claimed to be taken immediately)

- Motion re Thirteenth Report of the Standing Committee of Selection (without debate and any division claimed to be taken immediately)
- Motion re Restoration of Seller's Legal Pack for Property Buyers Bill 2021 (without debate)
- Development (Strategic Gas Reserve) Bill 2026 (Committee and remaining Stages) (to conclude within 2 hours)
- Dublin Airport (Passenger Capacity) Bill 2026 (Committee and remaining Stages) (to conclude within 2 hours)
- Regulation of Artificial Intelligence Bill 2026 (Committee and remaining Stages) (to conclude within 2 hours)

Tuesday's private members' business shall be the Motion re Childcare, selected by Sinn Féin.

Wednesday's business shall be:

- Statements on Ireland's EU Presidency (not to exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes)

Wednesday's private members' business shall be the Motion re Cost of Living, selected by the Independent Technical Group.

Thursday's business shall be:

- Planning and Development (Amendment) Bill 2026 (Second Stage) (to conclude after the first round, not to exceed 3 hours and 34 minutes and any division claimed to be taken immediately prior to Committee Stage)

Thursday evening business shall be the Second Stage of the Animal Health and Welfare (Ban on Hare Coursing) Bill 2020, sponsored by Deputy Paul Murphy.

Proposed Arrangements for this week's business:

In relation to Tuesday's business, it is proposed that:

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders:
 - (a) the time allotted for Government Business shall be extended in accordance with the arrangements for that business, and the Dáil may sit later than 10.48 p.m.;
 - (b) the Order of the Dáil of 23rd June 2026 referring the Dublin Airport (Passenger Capacity) Bill 2026 to the Select Committee on Transport is hereby discharged and Third Stage of the Bill shall be taken in Committee of the whole Dáil;
 - (c) private members' business shall be taken on the conclusion of proceedings of the Regulation of Artificial Intelligence Bill 2026;
 - (d) Questions to the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration pursuant to Standing Order 47(1) shall not be taken, and shall instead be taken on Wednesday, 1st July, 2026, without any change to the allocation of priority Questions to the Minister and not otherwise affecting the current sequence of Ministers or the rota for priority Questions as ordered by the House; and

- (e) topical issues pursuant to Standing Order 39 shall not be taken, and shall instead be taken on Wednesday, 1st July, 2026, and the Dáil shall adjourn on the conclusion of private members' business;
- 2. the following arrangements shall apply to the Motions for Supplementary Estimates for Public Services [Votes 30 and 31]:
 - (a) the motions shall be moved and decided together by one question;
 - (b) the proceedings thereon shall be taken without debate; and
 - (c) any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately;
- 3. the proceedings on the Motion re Thirteenth Report of the Standing Committee of Selection shall be taken without debate and any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately;
- 4. the proceedings on the Motion re Restoration of Seller's Legal Pack for Property Buyers Bill 2021 shall be taken without debate;
- 5. the proceedings on Committee and remaining Stages of the Development (Strategic Gas Reserve) Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 2 hours by one question, which shall be put from the Chair, and which shall, in relation to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment;
- 6. the proceedings on Committee and remaining Stages of the Dublin Airport (Passenger Capacity) Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 2 hours by one question, which shall be put from the Chair, and which shall, in relation to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Transport; and
- 7. the proceedings on Committee and remaining Stages of the Regulation of Artificial Intelligence Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 2 hours by one question, which shall be put from the Chair, and which shall, in relation to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment.

In relation to Wednesday's business, it is proposed that:

- 1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders:
 - (a) the Dáil may sit later than 9.30 p.m. and shall adjourn on conclusion of Parliamentary Questions to the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration;
 - (b) Leaders Questions and Other Members' Questions pursuant to Standing Orders 38 and 38A shall not be taken;
 - (c) there shall be no Questions on Policy or Legislation pursuant to Standing Order 36;
 - (d) on conclusion of private members business, the sitting shall stand suspended until 5.30 p.m. whereupon business shall resume with Topical Issues pursuant to Standing Order 39;

(e) Parliamentary Questions to the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration shall be taken for 96.5 minutes on the conclusion of Statements on Ireland's EU Presidency; and

(f) there shall be no weekly division time pursuant to Standing Order 34; and

2. the Statements on Ireland's EU Presidency shall not exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply:

(a) the statements, not including the Ministerial response, shall be in accordance with the sequence contained in the table immediately below (to be read across);

(b) following the statements, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a statement in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes; and

(c) members may share time.

Mins	25	15	10	10	3
Mins	10	10	3	9	10
Mins	3	9	10	3	5

In relation to Thursday's business, it is proposed that:

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, topical issues may be taken earlier than 7.24 p.m. with consequential effect on the commencement time for Second Stage of the Animal Health and Welfare (Ban on Hare Coursing) Bill 2020, and on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil; and

2. the proceedings on the Second Stage of the Planning and Development (Amendment) Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion at the end of the first speaking round and the following arrangements shall apply:

(a) the first-round speeches, not including the Ministerial response, shall be in accordance with the table below (to be read across);

(b) on conclusion of the first speaking round, or where speeches conclude before the 3 hours and 24 minutes have elapsed and no other member is offering, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a speech in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes, whereupon proceedings shall be brought to a conclusion; Provided that any division claimed on the Second Stage proceedings shall be taken immediately prior to Committee Stage; and

(c) members may share time.

Mins	20	20	20	12	4
Mins	20	12	4	20	12
Mins	4	20	12	4	20

An Ceann Comhairle: Are the proposed arrangements for the week's business agreed to?

Deputy Pearse Doherty: They are not agreed.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Doherty.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Government, in response to the outrage in relation to the cost of excise on petrol and diesel has decided to kick the can down the road.

In doing that, it has made the decision that before the end of the year, it will increase the price of diesel by 34 cent. Everybody knows what they have been paying at the pumps. This will push the price of diesel well above €2. It is simply unacceptable at a time when so many people are feeling the pinch. This cannot go ahead. I ask that there is a full debate in relation to this and that Government sees sense and recognises the pressures people are under at the pumps at this point.

Deputy Jen Cummins: In today's *Irish Independent* we read of the devastating number of women, 1,872, who fled abuse and tried to get a refuge space but could not. The Istanbul Convention states that we should have 500 refuge spaces but we only have 172. Safe Ireland's report outlines that we do not have enough to support women who are fleeing. When a woman has made up her mind to flee abuse, it is the most dangerous time. We need to do more. We need an urgent debate in this House about this topic.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: We have an epidemic of male violence against women in this country. Nearly 1,900 women were turned away from domestic violence refuges in the final six months of last year. The Government is failing these women. We need the Minister to come in and take questions on this issue this week. Women fleeing domestic violence need support and they need safe refuge.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: Two Bills are being guillotined this evening, the airport cap Bill and the liquefied natural gas, LNG, Bill, each of which will have major impacts on our climate targets. Not only are they being guillotined, but Committee Stage and Report Stage of each are being run together so the two Bills can be rushed through this House. There are 58

detailed amendments across the two Bills that will not get proper consideration because of this process. I ask the Chief Whip to please withdraw the use of the guillotine and allow these two Bills to get the consideration they deserve.

Deputy Michael Collins: We need time for a debate on the mandatory retirement age for retained firefighters, who are currently required to retire at 62 despite meeting the same training and medical fitness standards as full-time firefighters. Given that full-time firefighters and other emergency services personnel can now serve until 65, there is a strong case for reviewing this anomaly and bringing the retirement age for retained firefighters into line with their full-time colleagues. I call on the Minister to come before the Dáil to discuss this issue.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Chief Whip to respond.

Deputy Mary Butler: I have noted all the comments made. We have a really busy schedule to get through this week. We have a lot of legislation, so the Order of Business stands.

An Ceann Comhairle: Are the proposed arrangements agreed to?

Deputies: Not agreed.

Question put: "That the proposed arrangements for this week's business be agreed to."

The Dáil divided: Tá, 89; Níl, 70; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Boland, Grace.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brennan, Brian.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Brennan, Shay.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brophy, Colm.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Browne, James.	Cairns, Holly.	
Burke, Colm.	Carthy, Matt.	
Burke, Peter.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Butler, Mary.	Collins, Michael.	
Butterly, Paula.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
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.	Ennis, Daniel.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Clendennen, John.	Farrell, Mairéad.	

Collins, Niall.	Gannon, Gary.	
Connolly, John.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gould, Thomas.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Graves, Ann.	
Cummins, John.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Currie, Emer.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Daly, Martin.	Healy-Rae, Danny.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Healy, Seamus.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Hearne, Rory.	
Dillon, Alan.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Dolan, Albert.	Kenny, Martin.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Lawless, Paul.	
Fleming, Sean.	Lawlor, George.	
Foley, Norma.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	McDonald, Mary Lou.	
Geoghegan, James.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Grealish, Noel.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Harkin, Marian.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Healy-Rae, Michael.	Murphy, Paul.	
Heneghan, Barry.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Heydon, Martin.	Nash, Ged.	
Higgins, Emer.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Keogh, Keira.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Kyne, Seán.	Nolan, Carol.	
Lahart, John.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Lawless, James.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
Lowry, Michael.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
Martin, Micheál.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
Maxwell, David.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McCormack, Tony.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
McEntee, Helen.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
McGuinness, John.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Quaide, Liam.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Rice, Pádraig.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Sheehan, Conor.	
Murphy, Michael.	Stanley, Brian.	
Naughton, Hildegard.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
Neville, Joe.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Brien, Darragh.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
O'Connor, James.		

O'Dea, Willie.		
O'Donnell, Kieran.		
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Feargháil, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Conor Sheehan.

Question declared carried.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Almost 1,900 women were turned away from domestic violence services in the last six months of last year because there was simply nowhere safe for them to go. Almost 1,900 women found the courage to escape abuse only to be told that there was no safe refuge, no home, and no place of safety for them or for their children. SAFE Ireland now says that the housing crisis is the single biggest barrier preventing women and children from escaping abuse. That is an extraordinary indictment of the Taoiseach's Government. What positive action will the Taoiseach now take to guarantee women fleeing domestic violence immediate access to refuge and safe accommodation? How will the Taoiseach ensure that no woman seeking safety is ever again turned away because the State has failed to provide for her and her children?

The Taoiseach: The Government is very conscious of this issue. We are accelerating the delivery of safe accommodation and significantly strengthening capacity nationwide. There are currently about 241 safe accommodation places, with 181 domestic violence refuge units and 60 safe home units. At the end of the year, it is envisaged that there will be 193 domestic violence refuge units completed and 94 safe homes, bringing total safe accommodation to 287. There is a further 50 refuge units under construction. We have allocated resources. It is now an issue of the timelines to getting these buildings constructed and completed. We will continue with this over the next number of months and years.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Tomorrow, in the Taoiseach's home city of Cork, every single solicitor is removing themselves from the legal aid scheme. Imagine that. It is not just Cork. It is Dublin and all over the country. Thousands of cases have had to be adjourned, undoubtedly

leaving so many victims of crime awaiting justice. This flat fee proposal that has been brought in is causing chaos. Solicitors have rightfully said that there has been a level of consultation. The analysis which the Department released is deeply flawed and that will be discussed in the justice committee shortly.

3 o'clock

We now need a more mature approach to this fundamental principle of legal representation and the cost of it. We cannot continue with this chaos that we have seen over the past week.

The Taoiseach: Again, I think that should not happen tomorrow. I do not believe people should withdraw their services and I do not think it is the correct or appropriate action. Department officials have been engaging sensitively with the relevant stakeholders and the Law Society. That includes legal professionals and their representative bodies on the proposed changes. That discussion has been ongoing for quite some time. There is no reduction in resources. If anything, the resources have increased significantly. Discussions are ongoing within the Department and so forth. Again, there is a need for reform. I am sure the Deputy would accept that. That should not affect the ability of legal professionals to engage in criminal legal aid work.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: In 2019, I started working with the INTO to address the issue of the impact of early pregnancy loss and fertility challenges on their women members who told me about their experience of having to come into work after losing a pregnancy before 22 weeks or after going through rounds of IVF and not being able to take time off work. After hearing their stories, I drafted a Bill to provide for 20 days paid leave for early pregnancy loss, up to ten days of leave for reproductive healthcare - leave when it matters most. Our Bill passed all Stages in the Seanad. It was delayed by the Government in the Dáil, pending a report from UCC. Only now is our Bill going to an Oireachtas committee. At the weekend, the Government announced it will move on proposal for reproductive health leave but it will only be providing five days for women suffering the loss of a pregnancy early in term. The Taoiseach delayed further debate on the Labour Party Bill on the basis that the report from UCC would provide important information in drafting amendments. We want to see this Bill become law. The many women and couples who contacted me about this want to see reproductive health leave brought into effect. Will the Taoiseach say when that will be?

The Taoiseach: First, the Government in good faith, in terms of the Deputy's legislation, proposed a timed amendment to do further work. The Minister, Deputy Burke, and his officials have been developing a policy to provide pregnancy loss leave to women in the workplace, particularly women who have suffered a pregnancy loss before 23 weeks. The Minister met with the Oireachtas cross-party group on pregnancy loss in January. He will have heads of a Bill before the summer recess. Obviously, that will have to go to pre-legislative scrutiny in the Oireachtas. The draft heads of Bill are more or less ready. They were submitted to the Attorney General's office. He continues to work with the officials and across government on these proposals. He hopes to bring them to the Government before the summer recess.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The waiting times for driving tests in Laois for a lot of applicants are not improving. A local woman sought a driving test back on 21 May. She had to seek an

invitation. She was told that it would take ten weeks to get onto the waiting list, which would be the end of July. That has now been extended to the end of August, which is 14 weeks. She applied for the waiting time. According to the RSA website this morning, there is another 11.5 weeks on average to wait. That brings it to a total of 25 weeks, if the two periods are counted. The two stages from requesting a test to getting a test is misleading. I am asking the Taoiseach to do two things. This long wait is creating a difficulty, particularly for workers in rural areas like Rathdowney, Clonaslee, Vicarstown, The Swan, Ballinakill, Borris-in-Ossory and all those areas. It also means higher insurance costs. I am asking the Taoiseach, along with the Minister for Transport, to do something about these waiting times, to shorten them and to scrap the two-stage process. It is a misleading process.

The Taoiseach: I will talk to the Minister for Transport and the Road Safety Authority in respect of this. I cannot operationally run the Road Safety Authority. There had been some progress in terms of reducing-----

Deputy Brian Stanley: It is a misleading process.

The Taoiseach: ----- the timelines. I will talk to the Minister and ask him to engage with the Road Safety Authority to continue to work on getting waiting times for driving tests down.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: At present, there are 14,621 gardaí.

There are 621 in training at the moment. The problem is that 180 are resigning outside of retirements. Why does the Taoiseach think this is a problem? It is recurring. We have that amount in training but 180 are resigning every year. That trend has been there over the last two years. Why does the Taoiseach think that is?

The Taoiseach: Sorry, about 14,500?

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Yes.

The Taoiseach: There will always be people who will leave a job or occupation. I think there would have to be a survey done of the 189 specifically to ascertain why they decided to leave An Garda Síochána. The good news is we are oversubscribed in terms of applications and there are very healthy numbers going into Templemore on a regular basis now to qualify to become a member of An Garda Síochána. Those coming out of Templemore are then being allocated in fairly sizable numbers. It began with Dublin two years ago. Cork secured a good few, and also Limerick and across the country. Over time, I think there will be a significant increase because of the resources we put behind recruitment to An Garda Síochána. Equally, on retention, we increased the retirement age significantly.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Young gardaí-----

The Taoiseach: That is a matter that the Garda should evaluate and do a survey to see whether there are underlying reasons.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I raise again the urgent need for improved services for children with additional needs in Cavan and Monaghan. Specifically, I wish to refer today to the need to provide after-school services, including summer camps and Saturday clubs, in County Cavan for children with additional needs.

Enable Ireland is the children's disability network team, CDNT, in County Cavan. Due to staff shortages, it has been under extreme pressure to deliver the services it wants to provide for children with disabilities. I understand from parents that there is a proposal from Cavan CDNT with the HSE or the Department to establish after-school services in County Cavan. Parents also believe that there is the relevant expertise and capacity locally to provide these essential services. This proposal must be progressed and approved without further delay. Parents with children attending such a service in County Monaghan speak in glowing terms of the importance and value of the supports provided in that centre for the progressive development of their children. These supports are vital over the summer months and at other times for the overall development of children with autism and complex needs. That includes their education, communication and daily living skills.

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Smith for raising this matter. I want to acknowledge his strong commitment to ensuring that children and their families in Cavan who need early intervention and therapy services can access that support in a timely way. My understanding is that there is no after-school school support provided by Cavan CDNT, but Enable Ireland apparently advises that it is planning on putting in an application to provide after-school and respite. I need to get underneath the bonnet of that.

Deputy Brendan Smith: Enable Ireland is the CDNT.

An Ceann Comhairle: No, Deputy.

The Taoiseach: In any event, it says here that it is planning to put in an application. I will follow up with the Minister and see if we can get to the bottom of that in terms of getting it progressed.

Deputy Micheál Carrigy: I want to raise a query on behalf of a constituent about sarcoidosis, a disease that affects the lungs, heart and nervous system. We have one of the highest rates of it in the world in Ireland, even higher than cystic fibrosis, but it is not very well known. It is not on the long-term illness list. Not everybody suffers from it long term, but some do. There are extremely high costs associated with it for those who will have it for the rest of their lives. I would ask that the system and the long-term illness specification be looked at and that it be considered that those who suffer in the long term benefit from the long-term illness scheme.

The Taoiseach: The long-term illness scheme is under review at the moment. It has not been added to for a long time because other provision has overtaken the practice of having the long-term illness scheme. The condition that the Deputy raised has very severe and profound impacts on patients. We have taken a variety of other measures to alleviate the cost of medication, for example, long-term medication, for people and so forth. I will alert the Minister for Health that the Deputy has raised the issue and ask her to engage with him on that.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I have been trying to find out for some time the number of members of An Garda Síochána who have criminal convictions. I cannot get anywhere with the Minister or the Garda Commissioner. The latest response I got was that this information was not held centrally and would require a disproportionate amount of time and resources to address. Does the Taoiseach think that is acceptable? I think it is absolutely shocking. The public expects gardaí to undergo rigorous vetting. Will the Taoiseach tell me if the law currently provides sufficient powers to dismiss Garda members convicted of criminal offences? If not, will the Government introduce legislation to address this gap? People will be quite shocked to hear that and to hear that the information is not available to us. That is critical information. Women who are going in to be helped by a member of An Garda Síochána need to be sure that that Garda member is not already convicted of a crime of domestic violence themselves.

The Taoiseach: I did not get the specific question asked, but I agree that there should be a centralised system whereby if a garda is convicted of a criminal offence, that should be collated, recorded and collected by An Garda Síochána just as the Defence Forces are now devising a system to do that in respect of Defence Forces members who may have committed a criminal offence. That level of data and knowledge is required centrally and should be known centrally from a proper management perspective.

Deputy Daniel Ennis: I want to share the story of the scrambler scourge that is plaguing parts of Dublin city. In particular, I share the story of Jayden, a child with additional needs who was on the way to the shop at the Five Lamps to buy bread and was knocked down by a scrambler. Not only was the incident horrible and there was a serious injury, but it was also a hit and run. However, the scrambler came back as part of a group of scramblers, and they circled the family as they were tending to Jayden on the ground. It is horrible stuff, and it shows the sheer sense of lawlessness and the failure to address the scrambler scourge on the ground. When Grace's Law was passed, it was a step forward, but without that legislation being enforced and policed on the ground, it does not matter to these lads. These lads are running amok terrorising parts of Dublin. Deputy McAuliffe spoke of Finglas, the north inner city and Cabra. You are not seeing it in Foxrock. This needs to be policed. Will the Taoiseach support our call for a dedicated policing unit to address the scrambler scourge before we see more people-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

The Taoiseach: First of all, I appreciate the Deputy raising this issue. That incident was shocking, but there are too many shocking incidents in relation to scramblers. I know that Deputy McAuliffe has been working with the Deputy and others to deal with this issue. It does need enforcement. About 1,000 scramblers have been seized over the past number of years, but we need a full-on focus on this. The law is now there. It needs enforcement on a continuous basis, whether through a unit or a proper system operated by the Garda.

This is absolutely unacceptable. These are a major threat to life in Dublin in particular. It is rampant in certain areas and needs to be targeted and dealt with.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I hope the Taoiseach will join me in condemning the awful arson attack on the Muslim prayer hall on Talbot Street on Monday night. I will not comment on the individual circumstances because I know a man has been detained, but representatives of the Muslim community have said that this followed weeks of scaremongering and anti-Muslim targeting of the people in that prayer hall. We know that there are elements that are really whipping up fear over people from Muslim backgrounds, immigrants and so on. As Irish people have suffered racism for generations, it is important that we stand up and oppose any kind of targeting of people because of their religion, ethnic background or race.

The Taoiseach: First of all, I understand that a person has been arrested but I cannot comment, as I do not want to prejudice the outcome of this. We just need to be careful that we do not draw conclusions that might be the wrong conclusions in respect of this specific case. There is a zero-tolerance approach to racism generally, but we have to wait and see what emerges here first before drawing the kinds of implied conclusions that the Deputy is suggesting in respect of this specific incident. We have to await the outcome of the investigation.

Deputy Joe Neville: Today, I raise the issue of personal security on greenways. We have been strong in Ireland about investing in our greenways. We have seen huge benefits and increasing use around Leixlip and Maynooth. There is also a greenway in Sallins and Kildare. I know that in Dungarvan and the rest of the country, greenways have been successful. At the same time, though, we need to make sure that they are safe for vulnerable users like women and children. They are people we should not have to be thinking about in these situations, but all too often, they feel at risk. We can put in place things like CCTV and regular entry and exit points. This is a national security framework for greenways that has not been thought of in this way. It is something we really have to consider in their design. There should be public lighting where possible. We should not necessarily have to be focusing on these issues, but at the same time there are real concerns for people.

The Taoiseach: I think there has been huge expansion of greenways and huge investment by Government. It is an area I am particularly interested in myself. I think it has been transformative over the last five years. The level of investment that has taken place across the length and breadth of the country has created greater socialisation, which enhances security as well. In terms of the initial design, safety and security dimensions should be built in when greenways are being designed by the National Transport Authority, NTA, or Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII. That should be an automatic part of the designing of greenways, walkways and so forth.

Deputy Michael Cahill: I welcome the publication today of the draft national planning statement on rural and Gaeltacht housing, which represents the most significant reform of rural housing policy in over 20 years. As a rural TD for Kerry, I know at first hand the frustration, inconsistency and uncertainty that many families have faced when trying to build a home where they were born and raised. I was glad to engage consistently with the Taoiseach and our Fianna Fáil colleagues, the Ministers, Deputies Browne and Calleary, throughout this landmark policy, ensuring that the voices of rural communities like those in Kerry were heard at every stage. I have repeatedly raised the issue of rural depopulation in this House and called for the

establishment of a dedicated rural depopulation task force. Too many of our young people have felt they had no option but to leave because they could not secure planning permission in their own communities. Today, I am delighted to be in a position where I can say I have helped positively influence these landmark reforms.

Will the Taoiseach confirm the timeline for the completion of the environmental assessment and public consultation, and reassure rural families that the final national planning statement will be in place before the end of this year? How quickly does he envisage the new draft planning statement being incorporated into county development plans?

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Cahill for raising this issue. It is fair to say that he has been a persistent advocate and strong voice for rural Ireland in respect of this issue, particularly advocating for young couples and young people generally to be in a position to build houses in their localities, very often on their land. This will be of significance in helping to sustain rural communities across the western and south-western seaboard, particularly in Kerry, the area the Deputy represents. There are, of course, the Chorca Dhuibhne Gaeltacht and others, which are of significance to him. I think that the Gaeltacht provisions will facilitate one-off housing in those areas, particularly in villages and towns across south Kerry and the Kerry area more generally. This will be significant.

On the timeline, I hope that it will not take too long after the screening.

Deputy Thomas Gould: This Friday is the closing date for objections to the disgraceful plan to demolish the historic old Cork prison site and to build two new prisons in the middle of a residential area in The Glen and surrounding areas. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are determined to strip away our history and destroy working class communities. They are using questionable legislation - a loophole - that means objections must be sent to Longford by post. I posted my objection last Friday and it still has not arrived. It took nearly a week for my objection on environmental grounds to arrive and by the time it had arrived, the closing date had passed.

Will the Taoiseach give a commitment to instruct the Irish Prison Service, IPS, so that any objection that arrives after the closing date of 3 July will be accepted?

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The people of The Glen have enough with one prison. They do not deserve to have three prisons on the northside of Cork city.

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

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Gould for raising the issue. I am not clear as to why, if he posted it last Friday, it did not get there quicker, but in any event, there is a huge challenge with overcrowding at the moment. Colleagues in the Deputy's party have been raising the overcrowding issue with the Minister. The Minister is under huge pressure in terms of capacity constraints in our prisons and the resulting challenge faced by those who work in our prisons and so forth. He is endeavouring to do the very best he can in terms of providing additional

spaces as quickly as he can. It is arising out of that pressure that the use is being made of that site.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Why not a greenfield site?

An Ceann Comhairle: No, it does not work like that, Deputy. I thank the Taoiseach. His time is up. I call Deputy Graves.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The Taoiseach knows The Glen well. It is in the middle of the community.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy knows that the rules are the rules.

Deputy Ann Graves: Ireland's largest summer festival is on this weekend in Newbridge House and Farm in Donabate. Flavours of Fingal is in its 14th year and has been very successful. Between 65,000 and 75,000 people attend over the two days. Part of its success has been down to shuttle buses that bring people to and fro. This year, however, due to cost cutting by Fingal County Council, there is to be no service, which is a real blow to businesses, vendors, etc. Thousands of extra cars on the road mean extra pollution and add to the existing traffic chaos. It clearly questions Fingal's commitment to sustainability and tackling climate change. It makes no sense whatever to have people travelling by car and paying €40 for parking-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. The Taoiseach will respond.

The Taoiseach: First of all, I wish that everyone attending the festival enjoys it. Sixty-five thousand is a huge number. It is obviously a very successful festival. I am not familiar with the council's arrangements but the implication was that the council was providing the transport.

Deputy Ann Graves: It was subsidised.

The Taoiseach: Yes. That is kind of unusual, but in any event that is what happened. Maybe the council was hoping to get it off the ground and that it would then sustain itself. I am not familiar with the background as to why the council pulled back on that aspect of it but I will talk to people to see what can be done there. Normally, Governments do not support transport to festivals.

Deputy Ann Graves: I was hoping the Minister could help.

The Taoiseach: I will talk to the Minister and see what can be done.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I am sure that the Taoiseach will join me in welcoming the Mayfield chit chat group, which is celebrating its second birthday in Leinster House.

An Ceann Comhairle: Its members have been very quiet.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: My ladies from Mayfield. As the Taoiseach is aware, 54% of submissions made to the European Commission from all member states regarding the EU whistleblower directive came from Ireland. That is a huge and unusual amount. We had 15 whistleblowers in Leinster House last week. A number of them outlined that they were still not happy with whistleblower law in this country. They made submissions on that to the Taoiseach.

What training is now given to the Garda Síochána? Have gardaí received training? The previous Minister was not able to explain that to me in terms of the Protected Disclosures Act and the criminal offence of penalising and retaliating.

The Taoiseach: In the aftermath of the Charleton inquiry, for example, there were significant awareness levels in relation to whistleblowing more generally. I will raise the issue with the Minister. Operationally, the Garda Commissioner and, indeed, all workplaces have responsibility for ensuring that any whistleblower who provides a disclosure in accordance with the Act is not penalised. There are very clear strictures in that regard both in the public service and in the private sector. We have fairly robust legislation in place on protected disclosures. It is efficient. That is shown by the fact that so many have engaged with the European issue.

Estimates for Public Services 2026

The Taoiseach: I move the following Supplementary Estimates:

Vote 30 - Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Supplementary Estimate)

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €100,000,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2026, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, including certain services administered by that Office and for payment of certain grants and subsidies and for the payment of certain grants under cash-limited schemes.

Vote 31 — Transport (Supplementary Estimate)

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €120,000,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2026, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Transport, including certain services administered by that Office, for payment of certain grants and certain other services.

Votes put and agreed to.

Thirteenth Report of the Standing Committee of Selection: Motion

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I move:

That Dáil Éireann, pursuant to Standing Order 33, and with effect from 1st July, 2026, approves the Thirteenth Report of the Standing Committee of Selection, copies of which were laid before Dáil Éireann on 26th June, 2026.

Question put and agreed to.

Seller's Legal Pack for Property Buyers Bill 2021: Restoration to Order Paper

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I move:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 205, the Seller's Legal Pack for Property Buyers Bill 2021, which lapsed on the dissolution of the 33rd Dáil, shall be restored at Order for Committee Stage and notice shall be published pursuant to Standing Order 37, and Deputy Barry Heneghan be designated the member in charge of the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Cabinet Committees

1. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [46894/26]
2. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet [46895/26]
3. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [46911/26]
4. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [46912/26]
5. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [46930/26]
6. **Deputy Martin Daly** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [23618/26]
7. **Deputy Michael Cahill** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [23619/26]
8. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [23620/26]

9. **Deputy Louis O'Hara** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [32050/26]

10. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [47366/26]

11. **Deputy Marie Sherlock** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [47939/26]

12. **Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet [48149/26]

13. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [48668/26]

14. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [48682/26]

15. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [49215/26]

16. **Deputy Marie Sherlock** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [49327/26]

17. **Deputy Conor D. McGuinness** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [49328/26]

18. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [49340/26]

19. **Deputy Paul Lawless** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [49357/26]

20. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [49362/26]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 20, inclusive, together.

The Cabinet committee on health last met on 30 April 2026 and is due to meet again shortly. The Cabinet committee oversees implementation of programme for Government commitments in relation to health, receives detailed reports on identified policy areas and considers health reforms, including Sláintecare, the reform of public health and health system preparedness for future health threats. It also receives reports in relation to programme for Government commitments in the areas of mental health and drugs policy. In addition to me, it is attended

by the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance, the Minister for public expenditure, and the Minister for Health.

Sláintecare 2025+, our latest Sláintecare strategy, published in May 2025, aims to forge the way towards accessible, affordable, high-quality healthcare for the people of Ireland when they need it and where they need it. For the fourth year in a row, Ireland has the highest self-perceived health status in the EU, with 80.4% of males and 79.9% of females rating their health as good or very good. Our life expectancy is continuing to increase and is above international averages. Life expectancy in Ireland has increased by two years for males and one year for females since 2015. We are treating more people, with better outcomes than ever before. We continue to reduce mortality rates from cancer, circulatory system diseases and respiratory system diseases, and report positive trends in preventative health. Our overall mortality rate has fallen by 16.1% since 2015. The Government will continue to invest and reform, changing the way health services are delivered this year and into the future.

The Waiting Time Action Plan 2026, published on 30 January, represents the Government's continued commitment to improving access to hospital care. Since the commencement of the multi-annual action plan approach, significant progress has been made in reducing the length of time hospital patients are waiting.

The new regional structures within the HSE have been established, with six new health regions and 20 integrated healthcare areas, IHAs. Health and social care services are planned and delivered around the specific needs of local populations, leading to better co-ordination of care and access to services.

The public-only consultant contract, POCC, is central to the transition towards a more consultant-led public health service and represents a significant structural reform in the delivery of public hospital services. The POCC was introduced to strengthen clinical decision-making capacity within the public system and to improve patient access to timely care. It also aims to ensure access to treatment is based on medical need, not ability to pay, in line with the Sláintecare vision.

I will read the rest of the reply into the record.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: One of the biggest health issues that arose in this country related to Children's Health Ireland, CHI, scoliosis and child surgery. Now we find that four out of the eight groups have withdrawn from the scoping exercise that was to draw up the terms of reference for the inquiry.

It includes the spina bifida and hydrocephalus paediatric advocacy group and many others. Another group has also reportedly left but not yet publicly. The reason for this is 12 unpublished reports to do with CHI since 2017, including the Dixon report. The groups are afraid that the issues in these reports will not be investigated by the inquiry. Parents are being asked to participate in these groups but they are not being given all of the information in order to allow them to participate. How will the inquiry function when half of the groups involved are having nothing to do with it? When will they get the information they are asking for?

Deputy Martin Daly: Once again I want to ask about Roscommon University Hospital and the promised neurorehabilitation unit. It was promised in 2015 with an attached budget of €8

million. It was twice removed from the HSE's capital plan without any discussion and twice put back on after lobbying by me and my office. Now there is a real lack of urgency about providing those places. Neurorehabilitation looks after acquired brain injuries, stroke, traumatic Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis, motor neurone disease, spinal injuries and a host of other things. There is a dearth of beds in the HSE west and north-west region and this is recognised. It is something that is needed and desired and has been promised with a budget but there seems to be lack of urgency by HSE to progress this unit.

Deputy Michael Cahill: I want to raise again the chronic shortage of respite for children with profound disabilities in County Kerry. Families are waiting seven or eight months for one or two nights' break and they are at breaking point. The same applies with regard to adults with profound disabilities in Kerry. The issue of respite for these individuals and their families must be of the very highest priority. There is a wonderful centre at St. Mary's of the Angels in Beaufort that should be developed into a centre of excellence for respite. There is also the excellent St. Francis Special School along with many services located there. I wish to avail of this opportunity to invite the Taoiseach to visit the centre, which is just outside Killarney.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I want to raise with the Taoiseach once again the issue of rare diseases. It is something on which we have made considerable progress in recent months. We had the very effective campaign run by Senator Costello and others on the reimbursement of givinostat. On foot of this, the Minister has also ordered an end-to-end review on drug reimbursement as a whole. These are very much welcome. In relation to comments made by a member of the NCPE over a week ago on RTÉ radio, does the Taoiseach think is appropriate that a member of the NCPE was on the airwaves disagreeing with the Minister's direction, insofar as he admitted he was against an early access scheme? Is there an update on the next drugs group meeting? Ordinarily it is on the second Tuesday of every month. Is there any possibility of bringing the meeting forward?

Deputy Louis O'Hara: There is still no PET scanner operating in the public system in Galway or across the wider western region. We are being told it will be at least 2033 before a PET scanner will be provided for University Hospital Galway. This is completely unacceptable because this imaging technology is vital for monitoring cancer patients for cancer diagnosis. Patients are being forced to travel long distances to access these scans. They are often referred to private operators at significant cost to the State. They cost millions of euro each year. Patients in the west should not have to travel for essential diagnostic services that are available on-site in other major hospitals. We should have equal access to care across the country. We need a PET scanner, and we need the promised new cancer centre at UHG as well as other infrastructural improvements. Will the Taoiseach intervene to expedite the delivery of this critical infrastructure and equipment for the west to ensure there is equality of care for cancer patients across the State?

Deputy Conor Sheehan: Today nurses and midwives are protesting at University Maternity Hospital Limerick. The HSE pay and numbers strategy cut approximately 30 to 35 front-line nursing and midwifery posts, imposing new staff ceilings, recruitment limits and pay spend caps. Many areas of the hospital are running rosters at 50% below safe levels. The neonatal unit is beyond safe capacity while awaiting HSE approval for service expansion. The labour

ward has a daily deficit of midwives. This has been raised repeatedly with management. A HIQA review found the situation to be unsustainable. The HSE must uphold the agreement on staffing from 2015. The neonatal unit expansion must be funded. Safe staffing is needed and the hospital needs to be protected from the HSE pay and numbers strategy.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Endometriosis impacts more than 300,000 women in Ireland, with 30,000 of them being very complex cases. This is a condition that is absolutely crippling for any woman who has it. There have been efforts by the Government to bring in a new framework to deal with endometriosis but access is still very difficult. A treatment abroad scheme was set up but a number of countries are not included in it, namely, Greece, Romania, the UK and France. There were plans to look into expanding it to these countries. I also want to raise the fact that in many instances women have to fund this treatment upfront. This would exclude an awful lot of women from accessing the treatment abroad scheme for endometriosis because it is a considerable amount of money. Will the Taoiseach and the Minister look into this?

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: For people living with Friedreich's ataxia time is something they simply do not have. Every delay means more mobility lost, more speech lost and more independence taken away. Families such as Emily Felix and her family in Kilkenny, Oisín Pollard and his family in Carlow and many others have campaigned with huge dignity and courage for access to Skyclarys, the first treatment approved for this condition but unfortunately they continue to face delay and uncertainty while the disease continues to progress. Will the Taoiseach update the House on what the Government's position is on reimbursing Skyclarys? What message does he have for the young people and families who feel they are being asked to wait while an irreversible disease takes more and more from them every day?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: In the past there was a system of phased dispensing that was paid for by the State. It evolved into patients getting blister packs. In disadvantaged areas and areas of low income many people who had blister packs had the cost covered by the Government. The Government recently brought in changes to the way this is to be paid for. It did this without discussing it with pharmacists on the ground and there was no consultation with doctors or patients. Now there are no payments for phased dispensing or blister packs for those receiving one on a weekly basis. A lot of home help providers do not deal with medication unless it is in a blister pack. All of this adds to the massive increase in the cost of living that families are enduring at the moment. It means people coming into the system will pay between €20 and €30 extra on a monthly basis for this. Will the Taoiseach delay the process that is costing so much money? Will he ensure the process is reviewed? Will he listen to doctors, pharmacists and patients on the ground?

Deputy Paul Lawless: The Taoiseach was in Mayo recently and I hope he enjoyed his trip. There are major issues with the hospital, however. Recently a young man was waiting three days for emergency surgery following breaking his leg. This was a result of a lack of staff. The theatre was ready, as was the consultant. Everything was ready but the nursing staff to facilitate the surgery. This is causing major difficulty. It is happening as a result of an over-

reliance on agency staff. It is very important that we prioritise recruitment in the HSE for staff and pay them the wages they deserve.

The Taoiseach: I thank all Deputies for raising the various issues they have raised. Deputy Coppinger raised the issue of the Children's Health Ireland inquiry. This is a scoping inquiry in the first instance, essentially to scope out the terms of reference and what will be covered by an inquiry, and to look at the statutory format the inquiry will take. I would encourage all groups to participate and engage with Remy Farrell.

In terms of the issues raised concerning unpublished reports, it would be my assessment that any statutory inquiry would get any report it would need. Given the powers that would be given to a statutory inquiry, it would obviously have the power to procure documents in the possession of CHI. In the context of this scoping inquiry, the independent facilitator, Remy Farrell, has written to all involved. He wrote to the Minister for Health last week requesting an extension to conduct his scoping exercise and, in particular, to attempt to further re-engage with stakeholders. The Minister has granted this request until 18 August.

I understand that the facilitator will be engaging with the advocacy groups over the coming days regarding this extension of time and seeking to re-engage with them. He has also been engaging with CHI in respect of those unpublished reports or any particular material that might be in those reports. It is very important that engagement would continue to enable us to get to a position where the Government can have a decision presented to it to establish a statutory inquiry. Otherwise, it could get delayed unnecessarily, in my view. Having had a lot of experience of establishing various inquiries, I urge everyone to engage with the facilitator.

Deputy Martin Daly raised, not for the first time, the issue of the promised rehab unit in Roscommon University Hospital and the lack of urgency attending to it. I will talk to the Minister again and to HSE estates to see if we can progress this, and I will come back to the Deputy. One of the values of Roscommon University Hospital has been the degree to which it can provide a range of services outside of the acute tertiary centres. That makes life far easier for people in the region to access these services. Rehab is so important, particularly for neurological issues or accidents and so on. It can do an awful lot in enabling a person to get back into participating in society and work, depending on the circumstances governing an individual who requires access to a rehab unit of that kind.

Deputy Cahill spoke about the chronic shortage of respite, which is more of a national issue but is an issue in Kerry. We have placed this very high on the agenda of the Cabinet subcommittee on disability. There has been good development of late between the Minister for housing and the Minister for disability, who have come together. The Minister for housing has undertaken to build housing for people with disabilities. This is so we will not be dependent on waiting for the HSE but can get on and instruct every local authority to build a quota of units and to reserve a quota of any new builds in local authority housing to be made available for people generally with disabilities and particularly for those adults with disabilities. Respite is perhaps a separate issue to some degree although we believe housing can have a role there, too, with provisions. I will take the Deputy up on the offer to visit St. Mary of the Angels. I would be interested in doing that. I do think there is an issue with how we are progressing what is called decongregation. We are trying to get new places and allocate resources for new respite and residential places, yet a lot of resources have gone to decongregation, which takes

resources from new places. I think there needs to be a more balanced approach about that, particularly where people are satisfied with the level and quality of care. I made this point to the HSE already at the Cabinet subcommittee, and we are working on that issue.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan spoke about rare diseases. Generally speaking, I am not comfortable with people disagreeing with the Minister in respect of decisions that ultimately get taken in respect of an end-to-end review. Personally, I think it was long required and not before its time. We do need a more fundamental look at rare diseases generally, because more and more companies are producing orphan drugs, as they were once called, to meet the needs of rare diseases. That will create challenges for funding for health services - there is no question about that - but we need to look at this issue in its entirety in terms of how we provide for rare diseases in future.

Much of this is positive. There was a time when companies were not producing drugs for rare diseases. They were going for the blockbuster drugs. Now that they are producing drugs for rare diseases, it is positive for the patients and cohorts involved. It is giving them hope that there is some prospect of moderating the disease or even ultimately getting to a cure. It is only when you are on a journey of medical discovery that you can get medicines that ultimately can achieve significant and transformative results. On the next drugs meeting, it is due in July, but I know the Minister was trying to bring it forward a bit, in particular in consideration of key drugs such as Skyclarys and so forth.

I will raise with the Minister the issue Deputy O'Hara brought up in respect of a PET scanner for University Hospital Galway. I do not have the specifics behind that. A PET scanner is about more than just a machine, of course. It is about the entire team needed to support that machine. That is a critical issue there. These are substantial investments in people, technology and so on. I will get the background to this issue and see where we are in respect of access to it in terms of University Hospital Galway.

Deputy Sheehan raised nurses and midwives and the particular issue in University Maternity Hospital Limerick and the neonatal unit there as well. Again, we have been through a period of significant workforce growth in the health service, with the addition of about 30,257 staff from January 2020 to the end of May 2026. That is about a 30% increase in the number of staff. It includes over 11,000 extra nurses and midwives, which is an increase of over 32%. There are over 5,100 more health and social care professionals, which is an increase of over 40%. Over 4,400 doctors and dentists have been added, which is an increase of over 40% in the last six years. It is quite substantial. We do have to ask questions in terms of how people are being deployed. There is an issue with the use of agencies. The Deputy raised that. There is no question about it. The Minister is very focused on that issue as well, regarding the use of full-time employees instead of agency staff.

Turning to Deputy Whitmore on endometriosis and the new framework, to be fair to the Ministers, previously Stephen Donnelly and now Deputy Carroll MacNeill, there has been progress on this issue but we are not there yet, of course. Is the Deputy talking about the cross-border directive or the treatment abroad service?

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: It is the treatment abroad service. There are a number of countries that are-----

An Ceann Comhairle: We do not really do this.

The Taoiseach: On treatment abroad, that applies to the entirety of the European Union. It is meant to.

An Ceann Comhairle: No. No.

The Taoiseach: Again, I will talk to the Minister in respect of that. Generally speaking, across the board, treatment abroad has not had an issue in terms of its funding. That has never proved to be a problem in the past.

An Ceann Comhairle: There are three more Deputies to go.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: This is a specific treatment scheme for endometriosis.

The Taoiseach: I will come back to the Deputy on it.

Deputy Cleere's question was on Friedreich's ataxia. I think I referenced this earlier. I fully appreciate what the Deputy said. I think he mentioned Emily Felix and Oisín Pollard. I have met quite a number of people as well. It is very distressing, difficult and challenging for the families and for Emily, Oisín and their contemporaries who want access to Skyclarys as quickly as possible. Early on, there were issues in getting the material from the company and so on, but all that has been overcome. I would hope that we will get a decision on that. Obviously, the Minister is trying to progress it as quickly as possible. I will come back to the Deputy after I talk to the Minister on this issue.

I do not think the way Deputy Tóibín presented the issue regarding blister packs was probably as accurate as the real story behind it. I think the Minister has been quite robust and has revealed a lot in terms of her own work on this issue. I will put it this way. There was a different practice in many different areas. There were different patterns of behaviour and different things being done by different pharmacists in that respect. It is not all as the Deputy articulated. We want to help those who need help, and the Minister will continue to target resources. The Minister already had an agreement with the Irish Pharmacy Union, IPU, in respect of this issue.

Regarding Deputy Lawless's question, I had a very good day in Mayo. It is a great hotel. Two pharmaceutical companies are doing very well in Mayo, namely, Vantive and AbbVie in Westport. Huge investment is under way over the next while in Castlebar further education and training college. In terms of the hospital, I do not have the specifics on that individual surgical experience of the person who broke their leg. That three-day period is not good, but I do not know what the background to it is.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach.

Taoiseach's Meetings and Engagements

21. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his recent meeting with US President Donald Trump. [46896/26]

22. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his recent meeting with US President Donald Trump. [46931/26]

23. **Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his St. Patrick's Day visit to the US. [22422/26]

24. **Deputy Malcolm Byrne** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his St. Patrick's Day visit to the US. [22423/26]

25. **Deputy Shane Moynihan** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his St. Patrick's Day visit to the US. [22424/26]

26. **Deputy Martin Daly** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his St. Patrick's Day visit to the US. [45337/26]

27. **Deputy Liam Quaide** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his recent meeting with US President Donald Trump. [48680/26]

28. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his recent meeting with US President Donald Trump. [48683/26]

29. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his recent meeting with US President Donald Trump; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [49216/26]

30. **Deputy Conor D. McGuinness** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his recent meeting with US President Donald Trump. [49329/26]

31. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his St. Patrick's Day visit to the US. [49335/26]

32. **Deputy Paul Lawless** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his recent meeting with US President Donald Trump. [49356/26]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 21 to 32, inclusive, together.

I undertook a four-day programme of engagements in the United States, visiting Philadelphia and Washington DC to celebrate St. Patrick's Day. My programme began in Philadelphia, where I met Irish community and business representatives, as well as Congressman Boyle, with whom I participated in the St. Patrick's Day parade. While there, I laid a wreath at a statue of Commodore John Barry, who founded the US Navy, and visited Independence Hall, where the US Declaration of Independence was signed 250 years ago. I also attended a gala dinner of the Friendly Sons and Daughters of St. Patrick, and I cut the

ribbon on the Irish Diaspora Center's new premises, which carries out excellent work on behalf of the Irish community in Philadelphia and is supported by the Irish Government's immigrant support programme.

In Washington DC, I attended the embassy's St. Patrick's Day reception, which was attended by a large number of people from political, business, diplomatic and community backgrounds. I also attended the Ireland Funds' annual gala dinner. The Secretary of Transportation, Sean P. Duffy, was an honouree at this year's event.

On St. Patrick's Day itself, I met Vice President JD Vance and his wife, Usha, who hosted me and my wife, Mary, for breakfast in his residence. I met President Trump for a bilateral meeting in the Oval Office, where we discussed the contribution of Irish and Irish-American people to the development of the US, current bilateral relations, including our strong economic ties, and global issues. The meeting was also attended by Vice President Vance, Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Secretary of Energy Chris Wright.

I also presented President Trump with the traditional bowl of shamrock to mark St. Patrick's Day at a ceremony and reception in the White House. The attendance included a number of senior representatives of the Administration, including members of the Cabinet, with whom I had the opportunity to engage.

I attended a Friends of Ireland lunch on Capitol Hill, hosted by Speaker Mike Johnson, with whom I also had a bilateral meeting at which we discussed bilateral relations, political developments in the US and international issues. While on Capitol Hill, I also met the Friends of Ireland Caucus, co-chaired by Representatives Richie Neal and Mike Kelly. The meeting was attended by a number of other representatives, including Mary Gay Scanlon of Philadelphia.

While in Washington, I also had a programme of economic engagements, including a breakfast hosted by Enterprise Ireland and a business leaders' lunch hosted by Ireland's enterprise agencies, at which I presented the Research Ireland academic and enterprise medals. I met the Strategic Economic Advisory Panel and discussed recent trade and economic developments. I also attended an event hosted by Stripe.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: We already debated the issue of the Taoiseach's St. Patrick's Day meeting with Donald Trump, a misogynist, homophobe, transphobe, genocider, funder of genocide in Palestine and convicted rapist but-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please. That is in the Deputy's opinion. I ask that-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: That is an actual fact.

An Ceann Comhairle: He is still a world leader.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I am going to go on because I am not having my time cut short.

The Taoiseach now seems to find and be able to separate out reasons why he should do these things. The latest is that he says sport and politics should not mix, and he has said that in

relation to the Irish team playing Israel. Yet four of his MEPs obviously do think sport and politics mix because they have signed a complaint about Gianni Infantino, the FIFA president, and the farce of a World Cup that is being held right now, where a Somali referee was turned away, the Iranian team had to go to Mexico and three other teams were refused entry into the country and had to locate elsewhere because of the travel bans.

The US is descending towards fascism. That is the reality of it. I do not know if the Taoiseach has any regrets about his visit. Nobody has any issue with him meeting the diaspora - we are all in favour of that - but there is an issue with normalising somebody like Donald Trump in the current climate.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: A few weeks ago, we saw the AI company, Claude, switching off its Fable and Mythos models after engagement with the US Government. We are particularly vulnerable in Ireland because many of the public services are aligned with, and using, Microsoft and Copilot, which is AI software. There is a fear that something like what I have mentioned could happen with the likes of Microsoft in the future. I am not saying it will but it could. What we need to be considering from a European perspective, and I ask that the Taoiseach consider this during the EU Presidency, is the development of sovereign AI between the EU, Canada and the UK, with which we have shared values. That is a way we can move forward on artificial intelligence, particularly in a European context.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: As part of his visit, the Taoiseach visited Villanova University, a critical university in terms of Irish athletics. For the past number of years, I have had an intern from Villanova working with me. Part of the success has been around the exchanges that have happened over many years.

There had been a threat to the Fulbright programme. I am glad to say it is back on schedule. Recently, as the Taoiseach knows, the de Chastelain programme allowed for exchanges with Canada. I hope we can continue to build long-term relationships with the likes of the Fulbright and de Chastelain programmes. Would the Taoiseach consider extending some of the programmes to second level schools in the same way as schools in Ireland can exchange with European schools under the Erasmus programme? I refer to extending the possibilities to North America as well.

Deputy Martin Daly: I welcomed the Taoiseach's visit to the US. He represented Ireland's interests extremely well. He reminded America that it is a two-way street in terms of economic collaboration, with Ireland being the fifth largest source of foreign direct investment, FDI, in the US, investing close to \$390 billion in the American economy, with 200,000 people directly employed there, and \$476 billion in FDI coming from the US.

The Taoiseach defended the EU and European values, and he countered the false narrative that Europe was being overrun by migrants. He won respect for his defence of Keir Starmer, who has done so much to restore UK–Ireland relations after a very difficult UK–EU Brexit negotiation process. In saying all that, he also identified the fact that the EU needs to develop indigenous new technologies such as in AI, social media and pharma, and increase competitiveness to enable research and growth to develop self-reliance and resilience.

Deputy Liam Quaide: The Taoiseach originally told us the occupied territories Bill could not be enacted because of legal constraints. More recently, he admitted that the real obstacle, in his eyes, is the fear that American companies might abandon Ireland. This is despite the fact that his own party not only voted for this Bill in 2019 but actually introduced it to the Dáil on behalf of Senator Frances Black. He promised voters during the general election campaign of 2024 that he would enact it.

Is there any level of mass murder, State terror, forced displacement or land theft visited upon Palestinians by the Israeli state that would move him from words of condemnation and appeals for a unified European approach that may never materialise to meaningful trade sanctions and the proper enactment of that 2019 Dáil vote? What exactly is he asking us to believe? Is it that companies operating in Ireland for commercial advantage, access to talent and access to the EU market and tax purposes will forfeit all of that just because Donald Trump might throw a tantrum about Ireland refusing to facilitate illegal settlement trade with a genocidal apartheid state?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The vast majority of data centres in Ireland are owned by American technology multinationals. As the Taoiseach knows, data centres are swallowing up increasing amounts of our electricity. They are putting the grid under enormous pressure. The costs in relation to constraints and bottlenecks are so high now that energy companies have to switch off their turbines and energy users have to pay those energy companies to switch off their turbines. Network stabilisation is now one of the biggest elements of electricity bills.

Data centres' insatiable thirst for gas means that we are always pushed into the marginal pricing that gas increases. The Government's policy is part of that problem. Tomorrow we will see massive hikes in the cost of electricity. Will the Taoiseach ensure that the price of electricity for data centres is increased so domestic users will get a reduction in price? Have data centres played any part in his discussions with Donald Trump or the American regime in terms of foreign direct investment?

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Over the past week or two, we have seen a fast-tracking of the liquefied natural gas, LNG, Bill through the Dáil.

4 o'clock

This is a big mistake. There are still a lot of questions about the rationale for this particular project. I understand that when the Taoiseach met with Donald Trump in the Oval Office, he said, "... I'm hopeful that we'll soon reach a deal to sell American liquefied natural gas - and that'll bring down your deficit a lot - so I think you have to make this deal with us, you better do something." Did those comments by Donald Trump have any impact on the speed at which the Government is putting through the liquefied natural gas, LNG, facility? Have any of the Taoiseach's Ministers or officials had any conversations with US representatives in relation to an LNG deal with the US?

The Taoiseach: Deputy Coppinger put words into my mouth. I did not use those specific words about sport and politics but I did say that I do not think the Irish football team should be disadvantaged by the issue of the Israeli-Ireland game.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It could have been one of the Taoiseach's Ministers.

The Taoiseach: I did not use that phrase so let us be clear about that. I do not want Irish football to be the victim. There are issues with FIFA, as we know. It would not cost FIFA a thought the Irish football team were to be relegated or whatever, and if there were consequences for seedings and if Irish football was set back by potentially a decade. That is an issue.

On the visit, the relationship with Ireland is significant for a number of reasons. In terms of the economic relationship, it is extremely important. It puts a lot of bread on the table. It is very important for Irish jobs. President Trump is the democratically elected President of the United States. Whether the Deputy likes that or not is beside the point. He is democratically elected. Successive taoisigh have visited successive presidents of the United States as a way of symbolising the historic and deep relationship between our two countries. The 250th anniversary coming. America will celebrate the Declaration of Independence. Three of the signatories of that declaration were born in Ireland. Approximately 12 had Irish connections. Our relationship is deep and familial, diasporic, economic, cultural and artistic. Visiting the White House and the President is a symbol of all of that, and is an important moment. All the agencies of the State are engaged that week in particular, right across the United States and right across the world. That has strong outcomes for Ireland in job creation, tourism and investment globally as well as in the United States.

Deputy Ó Cearúil raised a significant issue about the decision about Fable and Mythos and the restriction put on it. There is an issue around sovereign AI. I met representatives of companies in Canada who made that point to me. There are issues about how we deal it because it is not simple. There is a real issue coming down the tracks if that practice were to continue. I discussed it with Prime Minister Carney. It could lead to a two-tiered scenario, which could have negative implications globally. It is a very significant and serious issue.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne is correct about the importance of scholarship programmes between the United States and Ireland. I visited Villanova University. The head of coaching at Villanova is a former schoolmate of mine, Marcus O'Sullivan. He is a world champion from Turner's Cross. He was the year behind me. I saw him as a young guy running in Corca Dhuibhne when we were down there for a month with Coláiste Chríost Rí. I did not realise he subsequently became a world champion but he did. He now heads the coaching operation in Villanova University. I met a chap called Charlie O'Donovan, an ex-Coláiste Chríost Rí youngster, who has run a sub four-minute mile. The Villanova connection with Ireland is long-standing, with Eamonn Coughlan, Ronnie Delaney and all the milers, in particular. It has been phenomenal in its impact on Irish athletics, so it was very good to visit. It is famed in song and story and in athletics, in particular.

On extending it to second level schools, that is a very good idea. I will talk to the ambassador and others to see how we could progress that. I have always looked for legal channels of engagement with the United States. I would never recommend that any young person should go to the United States illegally. It is not a journey that a young person should even contemplate because its lifelong implications can be difficult and challenging. We should open as many legal channels of engagement as possible. I was involved with the former deputy Secretary of State, John Negroponte, in doing the graduate working holiday agreement back in 2008 or 2009. I would certainly look at that second level exchange.

I thank Deputy Martin Daly for his affirmative comments in respect of my visit to the United States. The economic relationship, as the Deputy outlined well, is enormous. Sometimes it almost amuses me the degree to which it is simply dismissed by certain Deputies in the House as something of no value and that should not feature at all in our consideration of what we do on occasions such as 17 March every year. Thumbing your nose at people and ignoring various people elected to office on the basis of their politics, and not taking on board the damage and consequences for Irish people, is another form of irresponsibility. I appreciate the comments that the Deputy has made. We used the occasion, as the Deputy said, to affirm Europe, European values and the European lived experience, which some in the United States continue to decry. Europe is a good place in which to live. It is a very positive place in its diversity, multiculturalism and freedom of speech. We should never be afraid to champion the positives of what Europe has to offer.

On our side, our companies and SMEs are doing well in the United States. Those who engage or scale up in the United States are doing particularly well and many of our companies are exporting and creating jobs in the United States.

Deputy Quaide ignored completely the significant work the Government has been doing over recent years, at a European level and globally, on the question of Palestine and the appalling Israeli war on the people of Palestine. The Government recognised the State of Palestine, along with Spain and then Slovenia. We were the only EU member state, although Spain eventually joined, to participate in the South African case. We joined that case, which went for judgment in the International Court of Justice, ICJ. We have moved resolutions at the United Nations. The Deputy ignored all of that. He asked how much more murder it will take.

Deputy Liam Quaide: How about enacting a Bill that you voted for?

The Taoiseach: I mean no disrespect but what a horrible way to put it.

Deputy Liam Quaide: What about enacting a Bill that you voted for?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy has had his time.

The Taoiseach: It is as if the Deputy has a monopoly on moral rectitude in respect of this. The Irish Government is known internationally for its strong stance in defending Palestinians and self-determination. The occupied territories Bill is the latest issue that has arisen. It will not be of any consequence in actuality and will impact less than €200,000 worth of goods. However, it is symbolic. That is largely its import and impact. That is the reality.

Deputy Liam Quaide: The Taoiseach voted for the Bill and then gutted it.

The Taoiseach: The Minister is bringing the legislation forward. It is going through the House at the moment and I presume it will be passed. It is another advance on ten to 15 decisions we have taken. Ireland was foremost in defending the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, UNRWA, for example, when it was under real threat from some within the previous European Commission at the time. We

intervened to stop the haemorrhaging of funds from UNRWA. We doubled down by doubling our contribution to UNRWA. We have done a fair bit. Most Palestinians accept that, and not only just accept it, they thank us every time we meet them. What is happening is still horrendous. The killing of innocent children and women is shocking. We cannot get agreement at European level. Different member states have different positions, and still do, in respect of the atrocities that are occurring, and continue to occur, in particular with the prevention of humanitarian aid getting into Gaza and the lack of proper implementation even of phase one of the recent peace deal and cessation of violence.

Deputy Tóibín raised data centres. Over the past five years, we have slowed down the development of data centres a lot. Data centres are vital for the digital world in which we live. That is just the reality. We have to develop significant capacity on the energy front to be able to deal with the AI revolution and further growth of any data centres.

The CRU has produced a large energy user policy. It creates a framework to allow for further data centres to be built in circumstances where they use 80% renewable energy. We are some distance away from where we were in the growth of data centres, but they are not the great evil that people, including the Deputy, portray them to be.

I did not have any discussions with President Trump about data centres. America is just ploughing ahead and getting them done in six to nine months. It is a very different scene in, for example, Texas. We have to measure this. Data centres use up a lot of electricity - the Deputy is correct about that - and there are issues, but they are also an important part of the broader technology area and in the growth of investment in the country. They cannot be dismissed. Moratoriums on their own would not be positive, but we have to proceed in a measured way from here on.

For Deputy Whitmore to conflate the LNG Bill with the visit to America-----

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Where he told the Taoiseach to buy LNG.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy is scraping the barrel with that one. Excuse the pun.

The LNG facility is an energy security issue. It was raised under the last Government and documentation exists from the Department warning the last Government that if anything were to happen to gas interconnections with Britain, our economy would be in trouble within ten days. It would be totally irresponsible of any Government not to act on that advice. This is not a climate issue; it is an energy security issue. There is a need for honesty in the House about this matter. People in the Opposition keep saying it is an anti-climate measure, and deliberately so. That is not the case. We are not deliberately doing this to be anti-climate. We are doing it because we will need an alternative storage facility in the event of any disruption to the gas supplies to the country. Deputy Whitmore would be the first Deputy to attack the Government, if anything were to happen, for not attempting to provide for this.

It will take time, even at the pace we are going, to get this facility in place to give us the security we require. We need it. There is no other way out. It has been recommended by officials with responsibility for energy security. That is the context for it.

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Development (Strategic Gas Reserve) Bill 2026: Committee and Remaining Stages

Section 1 agreed to.

SECTION 2

Amendment No. 1 not moved.

Deputy Pa Daly: I move amendment No. 2:

In page 7, between lines 22 and 23, to insert the following:

“ “emergency use only” has the meaning as defined by the N-1 infrastructure standard defined by EU Regulation 2017/1938 only. A Strategic Emergency Gas Reserve under this Act and all future Acts relating to its construction, operation, maintenance and decommissioning cannot be used for management of day-to-day energy demand;”.

What we want to do is provide a definition of "emergency use only" and insist on it. This is a simple-----

Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): That is a different amendment.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I should have said that we are dealing with amendments Nos. 2, 3, 5, 9 and 18.

Deputy Pa Daly: Is it section 2 or amendment No. 2?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: It is section 2, amendments Nos. 1 and 12.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: No. We are dealing with amendment No. 2 to section 2. That is because the relevant Deputy was not here to move amendment No. 1.

Deputy Pa Daly: Amendment No. 12 was grouped with amendment No. 1.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Yes, it was. We can come back to amendment No. 12 when we get to it. At the moment, we are on the grouping that includes amendment No. 2.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Tá brón orm, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That is okay. The Minister is forgiven.

Deputy Pa Daly: Should I move amendment No. 12 then?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: No.

Deputy Pa Daly: Will I continue on amendment No. 2?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Yes. Amendments Nos. 2, 3, 5, 9 and 18 are related and may be discussed together.

Deputy Pa Daly: As I said, this is a simple, but critical amendment. It is because "emergency use only" must and should be clearly defined in law and a strategic gas reserve such as the one proposed should be a measure of last resort and a limited, emergency tool rather than a permanent fossil fuel lock-in. Therefore, we hope that this amendment will put clear legal boundaries on what the reserve is, as defined by the EU's N-1 standard. That matters because, without these definitions, the emergency reserve risks becoming business-as-usual gas infrastructure. Ireland is already reliant on fossil fuels for 81% of its energy. This Bill cannot deepen that dependency.

The amendment proposes that the reserve be a backstop and not a crutch. It cannot be used to address localised network constraints or routine increases in gas demand. It should not be for day-to-day use. It is for emergency use, as outlined when it was proposed initially, and the Bill must not be used to construct infrastructure for business-as-usual operations.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: What we and the Minister need to try to do is bring a level of transparency to this debate and try to engender a level of trust. Trust has been broken between the public and the Government in this regard. When the Minister has talked about all the different elements of this facility, the key thing he mentioned is that it is to be a strategic, State-led, State-owned, State-run non-commercial facility to be used in limited circumstances. These amendments speak to those limited circumstances. It is important that the Bill be explicit regarding in what circumstances this facility can be utilised. That is why I and others tabled amendments.

I will talk about it being a State-owned and State-led facility because that is another very important safeguard. I was surprised to see that is not discussed or mentioned in the Bill the Minister brought forward, despite the fact that in every discussion we have had in this Chamber and committees and any debate, including when the Minister has spoken about it on the radio, the key thing he says is that it will be a State-owned, State-led non-commercial facility. That is the key message he is trying to get across, yet the Bill does not even mention that. There is a major gap here and it brings about a question of trust and transparency and whether the public can really believe the intentions behind this facility.

I tabled a number of amendments to the Bill, including one to deal with the fact the operation of the birds and habitats directive was essentially removed from the Bill. I put in an amendment that called for a review of alternatives to how we can meet the energy security needs through batteries, interconnectors or by forcing companies to have alternative fuels on site.

I also tabled an amendment on analysing the impact that this was going to have on domestic bills. For some reason, all of these amendments were ruled out of order on the basis that they were in conflict with the principle of the Bill, which is incredible. I question why they were ruled out. A Leas-Cheann Comhairle, I have never seen an instance where amendments were ruled out of order - there is no money message here - because they were in conflict with the

principle of the Bill as read a Second Time. I imagine an awful lot of the amendments that go through this House are trying to improve Bills and through that may be in conflict with the Bills' fundamental principles, but I have never seen any amendments being ruled out of order on that basis.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: You can take that up with the Ceann Comhairle's office.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I am taking it up here as well because it is clearly wrong-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: They were ruled out of order. The ruling is made.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: It is clearly wrong to rule out of order amendments that have no money message on this basis. It completely undermines the Opposition's ability to improve, or put safeguards into, this legislation. It is really important that we have safeguards in it and that when Deputies are making decisions in here or when the public is making up its mind about this LNG facility, they are doing it on the basis of full and transparent information. I am aware that the Minister has said that there are energy security risks associated with any potential impact on the interconnectors with Scotland and the gas intake from them, but the security reviews conducted did not look holistically at alternatives. They did not look to see whether they could pull together a plan that would deal with battery storage, alternative fuels and forcing companies to ensure that they had sufficient storage of fuel on site. That is a real flaw and undermines the whole premise of this debate. The information and evidence are not there to support what the Government is trying to do with this Bill.

I will get back to the amendment. It is important as part of that that there be a definition of "emergency" on a statutory basis that outlines exactly when this facility can be used. There is a fear that this facility will become a de facto gas intake facility that will end up being run on a commercial basis or, even if it is done on a non-commercial basis, that it will increase our gas usage. I therefore ask that this amendment be considered.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I echo a lot of the points made already about the temporary nature of this and what we have been promised. I am looking at a briefing from the Department of energy on 4 February. We were given numerous briefings by the Department about this. The Minister tried to avoid pre-legislative scrutiny and our committee had to fight for it. We have a report with 43 recommendations, all of which seem to have been ignored in this Bill. This briefing, which was given to us by the Department as part of our pre-legislative scrutiny, talks about this being "a state-owned gas storage facility" that will be "an emergency reserve" and that it "is not intended for commercial use and will not act as a new entry point for gas into the system". It talks about the reserve only being used "in the event of a major disruption to sub-sea gas pipelines". I do not understand, given everything we were told beforehand, why none of this is in the Bill. What is the Minister afraid of? As Deputy Whitmore has said, it gives rise to a lack of trust for those of us who are trying in good faith to scrutinise this legislation and spending huge amounts of time at the committee and in here putting forward proposals if all of that is simply going to be ignored. If the Minister's belief is that this is to be used in emergency circumstances only, then why not say that explicitly in the Bill? Why not have a definition of what an "emergency" is, as the committee recommended?

Our fear is that this is just going to add to national gas demand. It is going to facilitate the importation or additional gas, not just gas to be used in emergency circumstances. That is why I am very supportive of this amendment and the other amendments on the emergency nature of this facility and the temporary nature of the reserve.

There is a lot of money being invested in this infrastructure. It was €1 billion last time and it will most likely be more at the next estimate. This is long-term fossil fuel infrastructure that is being built.

We want to believe that the Minister that this is only going to be used in emergency circumstances and is not going to be commercially driven but there is nothing in this Bill to give us any confidence in that. That is the problem. That is why we are proposing these amendments and I am supporting them.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: Amendment No. 18 in this grouping is in my name. Before I get into the substantive issue, it is important to again raise the process that is being followed here. This is important legislation and there are fundamental disagreements over the extent to which it will contribute to our country's energy security, but it is being rushed through both Committee and Report Stages in two hours. There is no need for this Bill to be rushed in this way and I think it is unprecedented, certainly in this Dáil, to see this Bill and another one coming in in two hours' time being rushed in this way. This particular Bill is going to lock us into the use of LNG in our energy mix. It will have long-term consequences. The consequences of this Bill will be felt up to 2050. For a Bill that has a 25-year timeline, we are getting two hours of debate. It is important to put that on record.

There is a large set of amendments. This is not filibustering, as these are detailed, researched amendments being put forward by the Opposition. Some of them were drawn up with the advice of environmental groups. Those groups wanted to meet the Minister and engage with him on this Bill but he was not available. This is the ability for legislation to be strengthened and we are not getting that. When Committee and Report Stages are banged in together, it shows a Government not taking the issue seriously. It is important to put that on record. In particular, the idea that a brand new piece of fossil fuel infrastructure would be exempted from the application of the climate Act makes a mockery of our country's statements that we take climate action seriously.

On the grouping, my amendment proposes that section 7(1) state:

The designated strategic gas reserve, including any terminal, infrastructure, or facility developed under this Act, shall remain exclusively in public ownership and under State control and shall not be transferred or outsourced, in whole or in part, to any private commercial entity.

It proposes that section 7(2) state:

The facility shall be operated solely by a designated public body for emergency energy security purposes and shall not be utilized [sic] for commercial trading of gas supplies by any private enterprise.

My amendment is trying to copper-fasten into the Bill the things the Minister has been saying throughout the debate on this legislation, namely, that it will be a publicly owned entity

and will only be used for emergency purposes and have no commercial element to it. That has been said throughout this process but it is not in the Bill anywhere and we are trying to put it in. We are trying to bring in a reasoned amendment on this particular point. It is essential that the facility, if it goes ahead, does not contribute to additional net use of gas in the system. In order to secure that, the facility needs to be highly controlled. How do we do that? We ensure that, in the legislation, the gas that would be stored in this reserve would not be traded or sent out to any other body.

This supply of gas should be solely for emergency purposes and it should only be an extreme emergency. It should be for that doomsday scenario that is spoken about time and again, that is, an attack on the undersea gas pipeline between Scotland and Northern Ireland. We must also ensure that in a case like that, in such a large energy emergency, it is not the large energy users, which seem to get so much precedence in the Department these days, which are going to benefit. They should be asked to cut their consumption in the case of an emergency like that. In order to achieve these objectives, the legislation needs to be changed to clearly articulate that it is State-owned and State-run and that there are clear controls put in for the Commission for Regulation of Utilities. By accepting this amendment, my amendment or some of the similar amendments proposed by other Deputies, the Minister could go at least some of the way to addressing the concerns raised by Opposition Deputies and NGOs that have raised these issues about the operation of the facility. He will actually be guaranteeing the political points he has made throughout this argument, which is that it is going to be publicly controlled. If it is, he should say it. It should be stated in the legislation. If it is not going to add to the overall supply of gas, he should state it, and put it into the legislation. We will listen to the Minister's response to this group of amendments but I cannot see why these basic levels of protection would not be codified within the Bill.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: I am speaking in support of the Sinn Féin amendments. The Minister has failed in his job to guarantee the energy security of our people. He cannot guarantee that the lights will stay on. Now we are in a position where the Government intends to spend €1 billion to facilitate the development of a liquefied natural gas, LNG, terminal, as a so-called strategic gas reserve in County Clare, where I am based. That is wrong for our communities and wrong for energy security and climate obligations. Even the Minister's own energy package is clear that the best way to support energy security and meet climate commitments is to build a renewable-led energy system, not a fossil-led system, and prioritise reductions in gas demand. More gas is not the same as more security.

Dependence on imported fossil fuels is precisely what has left us exposed. Ireland is among the most fossil fuel dependent countries in Europe and we have fallen behind because too many Government plans exist only on paper. We might look at offshore wind. We have an incredible untapped potential. We have 640 GWs, yet how much is being delivered? Absolutely nothing - zero. Instead of harnessing that massive natural resource, the Government is rolling out the red carpet for commercial LNG, disapplying the planning Acts, carving out exemptions from normal conditions and, as we have seen in County Clare, failing to properly engage with local communities. That is not democratic participation. It is bypassing the very people who have to live with the consequences. While hundreds of thousands of people struggle to pay their energy bills, which are the highest in Europe, those with disabilities cannot reliably charge vital machines. This LNG plan will drive bills up even higher. The estimated €60 million annual

running costs will be socialised through an additional levy on household bills. Ordinary people should not be forced to foot the bill for Fianna Fáil's and Fine Gael's energy security failures. The Government should be bringing prices down, not adding new hikes. Any State-led facility must be subject to full democratic oversight and scrutiny, not exemptions or shortcuts. Real energy is energy for homes and businesses delivered by accelerating renewables, modernising the grids, prioritising storage and energy efficiency and insisting on proper community benefit and ownership. It is planning with communities, not against them. It is ending the stop-start short-term fixes and finally delivering the long-term infrastructure this island needs. That is why Sinn Féin supports greater public investment and public ownership in renewables to achieve genuine Irish energy dependence. It is critical for our security and it is the surest way to bring down costs for households and small businesses. We want expanded public local community and domestic ownership so that our vast natural resources become a national wealth for all. Community engagement must be real and respectful, not to stymie progress but to ensure fairness and accountability and that is not what we have seen in County Clare.

The choice is stark. The Government can double down on imported fossil fuels and higher bills or it can choose a renewables-led system, rapid offshore wind delivery and grid upgrades. It can demand side measures that cut bills, partnerships with communities that give people a stake and a say, transparent Government and value for money. Sinn Féin chooses energy sovereignty and common sense. We choose to invest in Ireland's future, not in yesterday's fuels and lower bills over levies.

I am saying clearly that we need to oppose the LNG terminal as a so-called strategic gas reserve, end the exemptions, respect communities in County Clare and across the island, redirect the €1 billion to help accelerate offshore wind and grid resilience and deliver an energy system that is clean secure, affordable and Irish.

Deputy Réada Cronin: Amendments Nos. 2, 5 and 9 are in my name and Deputy Pa Daly's. This Bill is a bit of a Trojan horse - I think most of us in the Opposition see it as that - around getting commercial LNG and more fossil fuel into the system. Amendment No. 2 inserts a provision to make sure this is for emergency use only. Amendment No. 5 attempts to provide a definition for "temporary" in the Bill. The Minister dropped "emergency" from the Title of the Bill and that really shows that the cloak is falling from the eyes here. People used to say, "Build it and they will come". That is certainly what we think this is. Amendment No. 9 seeks to insert a provision for "Temporary emergency use".

This Bill is supposed to be a temporary measure to keep the lights on in an emergency. The only reason we need this Bill is due to the short-sightedness of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael which made sure we were left in this situation where we now need this in an emergency. The Minister can throw his eyes up to heaven but if I had been in government for the past 100 years, I would be embarrassed too, so there you go. We cannot use these kinds of things as an excuse for a day-to-day operation. That is what we are worried about. The signs the Minister has given us so far are certainly making us realise that we cannot be relying on fossil fuels. We were here last week talking about this. I never saw as many Members waiting to speak come in early. They were enjoying the air conditioning in the Chamber. Climate change is real and we have to be ready for it.

We had amendments ruled out of order. I will take it up with the Ceann Comhairle but we did offer alternatives around battery storage. We knew we were facing these energy emergencies and the Government did nothing other than bring forward this Bill, which only ties us into more fossil fuel use.

Our amendment provides clear legal definitions of "temporary". We have to outline what "temporary" is. "Temporary" could mean ten years to one person. We are proposing a ten-year limit on operations with a review every three years and with a clear expiry clause renewed by the Oireachtas. Our amendment No. 9 also seeks plans for maintenance and plans for decommissioning the unit if it is going to be temporary and for emergency use only. We want the Minister to bring a report to the Houses of the Oireachtas every year, so that we can make sure this is temporary. We have to focus on temporary and emergency use of the emergency reserves. They cannot become a permanent feature of our energy supply. We have to prevent the normalisation of the use of fossil fuels to keep the lights on. Our amendments will guarantee that.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I thank the Deputies who put forward their amendments. First, to restate what the Ceann Comhairle said, I have nothing to do with whether amendments are ruled in or out of order. Deputy Whitmore, in particular, made that case, and Deputy Cronin less so. That is a matter for the Ceann Comhairle's office and completely independent of me.

Can we just put in context why we are here? In March 2025, the Government approved the development of a State-led strategic gas reserve. That is critical to securing our energy security as we continue that transition to indigenous clean renewable energy, which we are doing, and this is not instead of that. In the first four or five months of this year we have seen about 50% of our electricity generated through renewable resources, which is good. We want to see that accelerate further.

This legislation is in line with a programme for Government priority. It builds on what was the Energy Security in Ireland to 2030: Energy Security Package report. That genuinely cannot be ignored. That was again approved by the previous Government, of which Deputy O'Gorman was a member, back in November 2023. It is consistent with our climate plan because that speaks to energy security and is a transitional measure, reducing the risk of stranded fossil fuel assets. It is for emergency use only and does not support increased gas demand. The approval of this approach represents a culmination of extensive independent research analysis and engagement, all of which have been published.

There was four weeks of pre-legislative scrutiny done at committee, and a good job was done there.

This reserve will be in the form of a floating storage and regasification unit, which will be owned on behalf of the State by the system operator, Gas Networks Ireland. GNI is written into the legislation. The location of the reserve is written into the legislation, so it certainly is not about commercialisation of LNG in the Irish mix.

This Bill is one of two. This Bill, in particular, provides the process for the direct application to me, as Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment, for the development consent, with specified accelerated timelines for each stage of this bespoke consenting process. That is the case because this is urgent. There is a critical risk, which has been identified independently of

Government, that if there was disruption to the gas supply that we receive - only 20% of our gas is produced domestically and the remainder is imported - or if, God forbid, something was to happen to the imported gas that we receive while we are still using gas within our energy mix, we would have serious difficulties here, not only from an economic perspective but from a societal perspective as well.

We are, right now, dependent on interconnection. We are building further interconnectors on the electricity side. We are building the Celtic interconnector. We are investing heavily in our grid. Renewables are accelerating. Today, I intended the Energy Storage Ireland national conference. We are number three on energy storage. Many people have referred to long-duration battery storage. I agree we need to do more of that. We are actually ranked third in the European Union, behind only Germany and Italy. We have 1.3 GW of installed long-duration battery storage, with a major pipeline of projects to come through.

On the amendments in the grouping, this legislation deals with the consenting process. It does not deal with the operation of it. The operation of it will be by way of separate legislation that will specifically state that this will be State owned, State led and State managed, used *in extremis*, not to increase gas usage in this country whatsoever. It is a risk that has been identified, that cannot be ignored and that needs to be address. We need to ameliorate that risk to our country as we continue to accelerate renewables. We have reached over 8 GW of renewable capacity integrated into our grid, with a significant pipeline of projects.

Offshore renewables were mentioned. Our focus is on getting them into development by the end of this decade. I do not control the planning process. We are expecting two decisions, hopefully this year, in that regard. I do not know whether they will be objected to. I have, by the way, engaged with environmental groups in the environmental pillar on their views in relation to this legislation.

It is necessary. It is urgent. That is why we need a bespoke planning approach to this. It is why the Deputies will see within the legislation that GNI is mentioned. The location of the site itself is mentioned specifically in the legislation. This is not about building gas terminals all over the country - anything but. This is a strategic reserve, State owned and State led, that is required and this legislation deals with the consenting process itself.

With that said, I cannot accept the amendments tabled by the Deputies.

Deputy Pa Daly: Arising out of what the Minister said, if he does not have a problem with it being temporary or emergency, he should accept the amendments.

The Minister mentioned renewable energy and the progress that, he says, has been made with offshore wind. However, in our view and in the view of some Government people also, the Government and previous Governments have been sitting on their hands in relation to offshore wind. We have untapped potential of 540 GW and by 2030, we will find it difficult to match 5 GW.

The Minister also mentioned that he has no control over the planning process but, in fact, while he might not be making the decisions, he would have had the power to appoint more High Court judges and appoint more staff to an coimisiún, and previously to An Bord Pleanála, but that was not done. Most of the delays can be attributed to the lack of staffing in those organisations. This is all important. In the amendments about temporary use, which Deputy

Cronin had moved, it is important that it actually be temporary use. The Government itself has said that it will probably take five years to create it and then it will be in existence for approximately ten years after that. Is that temporary then? Certainly, it is more medium to long term than a short-term solution to a potential problem that has been outlined. We have asked for a definition of temporary, whereby it should not become permanent by default, with a ten-year limit on the operation, regular reviews every three years and a clear expiry clause unless it is renewed by the Oireachtas. Critically, we want a requirement for a decommissioning plan, also within 12 months, because you cannot build infrastructure such as this without planning an off-ramp or out-clause at the end of it. If it is truly an emergency measure, it should not become a permanent feature.

On a broader level, energy security is a fundamental responsibility of Government - keeping the lights on - and this Government has failed in that regard. Instead of delivering a secure, independent, all-island affordable and sustainable energy system, what we have is the first part of a Bill, which is rushed and flawed, repeating the exact same mistakes that have got us here in the first place, with ordinary people asked to pay the price and fork out.

As the Minister himself said, we are exposed to geopolitical conflict. We import 80% of our energy. That was never a pathway to energy security but we are still vulnerable because of the failure to invest over the years in offshore wind, in renewables and in our energy future. As we move towards a united Ireland, we need to have an energy system that is destined to be used by the whole of the island. Rather than fixing these structural failures, this Bill is doubling down, locking us further into fossil fuel dependence. It would never have been suggested a number of years ago that we would have to bring in fracked gas, on which there was a ban, but in the immediate aftermath of the last election, it was trumpeted that the ban on fracked gas had been removed by this Government. That is why we have brought forward our comprehensive set of amendments, not to obstruct but to help and to protect households, the public interest and our energy future. We will get to some of them later when we are talking about the potential increase to household bills.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I have a couple of points on what the Minister said. As part of our pre-legislative scrutiny, we looked at the energy security review that this is all based on. The review was conducted a number of years ago. The international situation has changed markedly since that review was conducted. Even the price of LNG on the markets has increased massively since Trump's war on Iran. We had asked for that review to be updated in light of the most recent massive market instability in the fossil fuel market.

We also believe that review was flawed in terms of the solutions it offered or the potential solutions that it looked at. It seems to have looked at solutions in isolation. We have gone through all of this previously. It looked at this sort of reserve versus an interconnector or the reserve versus a battery, whereas it does not seem to have looked at this strategic LNG reserve versus batteries, interconnectors and wind, or whatever, in a mix like that. We had asked at pre-legislative scrutiny for that to be reviewed prior to this Bill being put forward here, and that just has not been done. Therefore, I do not necessarily accept the Minister's arguments that this is the only way. We all understand that energy security is necessary, just not that this is the only way to achieve that, and that seems to be what the Minister comes back to repeatedly.

Something else the Minister mentioned is that the Bill before us today is about the consenting process and that we will see another Bill in due course in relation to the operations of the reserve, but it seems that is an arbitrary distinction and that there is a lot of overlap, and you would imagine there would be a lot of reference points in this Bill that would relate to the operational aspect of a reserve.

The Minister has used a lot of strong language, which I welcome, in his commitments regarding how this reserve is going to operate. He said it is not going to increase our State's gas use whatsoever and that it is not going to be commercially run but State owned and temporary. Again, however, we have not seen the heads of the Bill yet. At this point, we have to take all this on trust, with nothing else to refer to, including the decommissioning at the end of this process, when the time comes for the State to decide we do not need this any more.

We are taking a lot of things on faith here. As I said, we gave many recommendations to the Minister by the climate committee in its pre-legislative scrutiny that we do not see here or anywhere else. That is why we are taking some of these positions today.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: This is a bespoke piece of legislation and a bespoke consenting process for this particular facility. It is a complete exception to our planning process, so it is not good enough for the Minister to say the Government will deal with the issue of public ownership in the second, subsequent piece of legislation. There is absolutely no reason the public element that has been articulated by the Minister throughout could not be reiterated in this legislation. We are doing something entirely new and novel here, and clarity on the public ownership and operation could absolutely be built into this legislation. This would at least alleviate that concern in advance of the second piece of legislation. I do not think the Minister's point on why he is rejecting amendment No. 18 and other amendments holds water.

On the wider question of the strategic decision that I and others believe the Minister is taking, this will result in us being locked into LNG well into the next decade. It means focus, resources and money. Let us not forget this is costing us €900 million now and no doubt will be more when the time comes. This strategic decision to spend money here means money will be taken away from the energy transition. The Minister regularly speaks about his accelerating renewable electricity task force and all the great things it has been able to do, but I wonder what that task force says the barriers are when he meets with it. Both he and the Minister, Deputy Chambers, come in here and say the barriers are the planning process, the climate Act and this and that, but when we meet the renewable energy organisations, the first thing they all say is there are not enough staff in An Coimisiún Pleanála and that its decision-making time has increased over the past six months. That is what they tell us; maybe they are wrong, but I do not think they are, to be honest.

An Coimisiún Pleanála's size has grown, but it is still not enough. It is still not enough for the level of work it has to do, which is everything from offshore wind to a planning appeal about an extension beside my house. It all ends up in An Coimisiún Pleanála and there is not the capacity or bandwidth to get those decisions done. I do not understand this absolute fixation the Ministers, Deputies O'Brien and Chambers, have about not putting the resources into the one intersecting point of so much of our transport, electricity and infrastructure decisions. Trotting out this line about the Government having doubled it over a certain period is not good

enough. The bodies in industry representing wind, solar and battery storage all say it to us, and I have no doubt they are saying it to the Minister in his electricity task force.

I have no doubt that when the Minister was meeting with the energy storage groups today, they also brought forward the blockages they see, namely, no clear total amount of electricity storage requirement for the country, one of the key things set out in the task force report published in July 2024; and no clear renewable energy support system for battery storage, putting it at a disadvantage when compared with other forms of renewable energy. This also puts Ireland at a disadvantage compared with other member states, where they are putting in place those supports. The people who have planning permission for battery storage here in Ireland but have not built out yet will move. The money will move if other member states are putting in that financial support.

I think it was in April that 18% of the renewable energy in this country was wasted because we did not have the battery storage there. We may be third in Europe but we are still wasting large amounts of renewable energy that can help us make this energy transition and help cut bills for households across this country. That is where the Minister's Department and political focus should be, rather than locking us further into LNG.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: This Bill is an admission of failure. It is an admission of failure on energy policy and energy security. It is an admission of failure of several Governments' inability to plan properly for energy in Ireland.

I had to stop myself for a second and think that, yes, it is 2026 - that is what is written on the Bill - but we have climate goals to 2030 and we have to get to net zero by 2050. Does the Minister know how long it takes to build an LNG terminal and to develop these gasification units? It takes years. I expect the Minister might be at the ribbon cutting ceremony for the LNG terminal when it is commissioned, which might be in 2030, when we are trying to hit climate targets. That is a huge problem. This is a huge step backwards.

When I was born in October 1987, the number of parts per million of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere was 346; it is now 431. We are going in the absolute opposite direction. With one of the first energy bills it has brought forward after the Critical Infrastructure Bill has been passed, this Government has decided on one on gas - not on wind, accelerating solar or ensuring we have alternative or sustainable fuels but instead for us to import fracked gas from other parts of the world. That is a huge admission of failure and a huge problem.

They say one definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again. We have seen what gas prices have done to our economy and what the reliance on fossil fuels has done to our economy, first with the invasion of Ukraine and second with the war in Iran, yet we are going to say we want more gas. Is that the answer here? Is that what the Government's policy is here? I absolutely appreciate there is an energy security issue - 100% - but why would the first Bill we bring forward under climate or critical infrastructure not be on renewables rather than fossil fuels? It does not make any sense, and it certainly does not make sense under these timelines, when Government is trying to hit climate goals by 2030 and get to net zero by 2050. This terminal will be operational by 2050, if the Government goes ahead with it. Of course it will. Why would it not be? The Government is giving no rationale as to how it will hit these climate goals by 2030. In fact, it has already admitted failure, and we are four years out from it.

In some ways, it feels like we have lost our minds here. We have lost a sense of what we are trying to do with climate change and the energy mix. The idea of building gas infrastructure, even emergency gas infrastructure, seems like the direction entirely opposite to where we should be going. I have to agree with my colleague Deputy O'Gorman. The idea that this, probably one of the most significant energy infrastructure interventions in the State that are going to be considered in this Dáil, is being guillotined after two hours and that we are spending two hours debating it at the last three Stages of the Dáil process, is outrageous. It is unconscionable. The Government is also not accepting any of the very well-crafted amendments from colleagues, including my colleague Deputy Whitmore, to ensure it is in public ownership and to determine whether it is actually temporary or emergency.

For many people outside this Chamber, it feels as though we are going in the opposite direction and that climate change is not a priority for this Government. It is going to continue to do the same thing it has always done, which is to rely on fossil fuels, which will not bring us energy security and will not allow us to fulfil our climate goals or live up to the promise of climate action and its great opportunities. If we continue with this, it is going to be absolutely devastating. I implore the Government for its next Bill to please bring forward something that is going to incentivise renewables to be built. We have no operational offshore wind farms in this country. We had more 20 years ago. It is outrageous.

I am very disappointed with this Bill, but I am far more disappointed by the Government's reaction to the very worthwhile amendments from colleagues here and the guillotining of this debate.

5 o'clock

Deputy Paul Murphy: Today is 30 June. It should go down as the day of the bonfire of our climate targets. In this one swift afternoon, we will make real the Minister's softly saying just after Christmas this year that we would not reach our energy targets. What does that look like in reality? It looks like ramming through measures, with no parliamentary oversight, no proper debate and, in the case of the next Bill we will discuss, no economic impact assessment, which will mean we are not coming close to meeting our climate targets because they are being ignored. We now have this climate change legislation. Every time we raised previously, whether we would reach our climate targets, the answer was not to worry because we have legally binding targets and, therefore, we will meet them because it is the law, and we have to meet the law. Now we are just disapplying the law to anything to do with climate. We are disapplying the law from LNG, data centres and Dublin Airport. If anything is actually polluting, we are told the climate targets do not apply to that and not to worry about that. It is a joke.

We are all expecting the world to go along with the idea that we are all following the science and doing what we need to do when the Government is absolutely in hock to fossil fuel companies, the big airlines, Donald Trump and the people who are responsible for destroying our planet and hoping that people just stay asleep. That is what this two-hour debate is about, what the next two-hour debate is about and what I would say the two-hour debate after that, with respect to AI, is about too. It is about avoiding a real airing of the issues here and hoping that people do not notice that this Government is utterly abandoning all climate commitments, in this case basically in order to satisfy Donald Trump.

Who will pay for that? Our children and grandchildren will pay for it. We see the impact of climate change, even in Europe, where people are dying as a result of extreme heat. In a more immediate sense, people will pay with euro from their pockets. This thing will cost €1 billion or more. Who will pay for that? The public will pay by a household levy on energy bills. The public will pay for this LNG development. The Government is locking in fossil fuels. That is the consequence of investing in fossil fuel infrastructure. We should not be investing in any fossil fuel infrastructure at all. It flies in the face of the science. The Government is locking in not just any fossil fuel infrastructure but the dirtiest possible fossil fuel infrastructure because, ultimately, this is about fracked gas coming from the USA.

The Climate Change Advisory Council told the Government that further expansion of fossil fuel infrastructure through an LNG terminal will commit Ireland to further fossil fuel lock-in. It told the Government and it is simply ignoring the council. This is not dealing with the issue of energy security. It is making us reliant on Donald Trump for energy security, or the next US Administration.

The consequence is devastating. I put on the record now the hazards that are present here. I quote Stop Shannon LNG, which stated:

The importing of LNG is associated with hazards such as gas explosions, threatening local communities.

A key risk in LNG facilities is an uncontrolled release of a cryogenic, toxic, or flammable fluid. This can include liquid releases that form a pool on the ground or water and ignite, creating a potentially long-lasting pool fire.

That is on the Minister of State and this Government. The disastrous effects of locking us into fossil fuels and tearing up all of our targets is also on the Government. I think energy security is the Trojan horse. The Government wraps up LNG and says it is energy security. We were not originally told and people will not understand this. The whole terminal has to be emptied six times a year, so a large portion of the gas currently used in this country will end up being fracked gas. It is a Trojan horse. The Government is not excluding commercial developments in this Bill. The original argument was not to worry because it would only be this one emergency reserve, and it would just sit there. That has moved to being something that will sit there and be emptied six times a year, and the Bill is open to it being moved even further. If the Government was serious about the issue of energy security, it would be investing in battery storage, interconnectors, and different forms of renewable energy that work in different weather conditions, including wind, solar, hydro and so on.

What is this about? It is about being friendly to Donald Trump. This is a key ask in terms of the tensions between US imperialism and the EU. He basically had two asks. One was to buy more energy and the second was to buy more of our weapons. This is about appeasing Donald Trump. It is also about a matter related to not the next Bill but the one after that, the AI Bill, which is saying to big tech companies not to worry about all the energy usage, that they have a green light to go and use as much energy as they want for their data centres and that we will burn more and more fossil fuels to facilitate data centres. The idea that we can continue on this track of expanded energy usage, in the best case scenario simply uses up the extra renewable capacity that we are adding, or in the worst case scenario, the vista that is being

opened here for commercial LNG and what is happening in many data centres around the country that we will burn gas. In this case, we will burn fracked gas as a consequence.

I am interested in the Minister of State's response. The main thing is that we can agree or disagree on any of these arguments. That is fine. It is a disgrace not to allow us to debate the Bill, not to have a Committee Stage that can go through it properly, not to give proper time on Report Stage and not to allow us to get through the vast majority of the amendments that we have before us. It is a disgrace and it is a conscious and cynical move by the Government.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to get the opportunity to welcome that Shannon Energy has got approval to bring in and store gas, and to give us another option. We have a duty to the taxpayers and the people in every county, including Kerry, to deliver energy to them at the cheapest rate possible. I have said here to the Minister of State on many occasions that since we closed Bord na Móna, the cost of electricity has gone up each day. The worst mistake that any Government made was to close it down in one go before we were assured that we had enough energy options, such as more wind turbines or whatever it is. We could be deriving more energy from our rivers. We are deprived of and stopped from doing that. The Sweeney's in Kilgarvan generated their own electricity back in the mid-1930s, and the O'Shea's in Kenmare generated it for the town of Kenmare around the same time. We are not allowed to go near a river to do anything like that now. We cannot do anything like that now.

What is happening here in case people do not know is that for the past number of years, we have been buying gas at its dearest price, because it is only coming from one route, from north east of us. That is why we are paying more for electricity. The other reason is that we have an energy regulator that is not accountable. Talking about climate targets, I know and many people know, although they are afraid to say it, that no matter what we do on this Earth, we will not change the weather.

The weather has been changing for centuries. In the 12th and 13th centuries, it changed from warm to cold. In the 15th and 16th centuries, massive amounts of rain fell. In the 1740s, we had a famine. A third of our people were wiped out because it never stopped raining for two years. There were no combustible engines at that time. There were far fewer cattle. In 1896, 12 acres of bog were washed down 12 miles into the lakes of Killarney from Gneevgullia and blocked every bridge on the way down. In the 1890s, there were 11 men in a field in the Clydagh Valley making up hay. Before they knew what they were, they were all washed down the river in a flash and into the lakes of Killarney. Those are true facts. There have been storms and nights of big winds at all those different times. I have the dates. They are facts. There was no human intervention at that time. Humans could not be blamed for the activity that changed the weather. A lot of people would want to realise that.

A report has come out from some scientist in Europe. I do not see the Government coming forward with it. It depicts that a lot of what the climatologists are saying is wrong and that the figures they are going on are totally and absolutely wrong. I will bring that report to the House as soon as it is put into my hands.

I do welcome, after many false dawns, that Shannon LNG will get the green light to move ahead. That will mean a lot for Kerry, especially the northern part of the county. It will also mean a lot for parts of Clare that the Minister of State represents. It will mean a lot of

employment and help to encourage people to stay in Kerry and Clare and, more important than anything else, to stay in our country and to vote confidence in it by staying here.

We need other options for energy. Until we have enough wind power and ways of storing the energy that is created by wind turbines, we need an alternative in the meantime. People are under savage pressure. Members of this House cannot say, on the one hand, that the cost of living has gone up and, on the other, ask what the Government or anyone else is doing about it. The cost of energy is the cause of all the trouble. People on the roads are buying petrol and diesel. People at home are buying home heating oil and gas to keep themselves warm. People are entitled - this generation is as entitled as any to stay warm.

It is a fright to God to think that old people are afraid to put sods of turf on the fire. At the same time, bombs and drones are going off every day and lighting up the skies in the Middle East, Ukraine and Russia. We are telling people here that it is wrong to be burning or cutting turf. We have gone stone mad out of our minds altogether when we are telling the people those kinds of stories.

In case that the Deputies do not know it, people are talking about climate change and all the money that is going into it. We are narrowing roads for the sake of climate change. We are widening footpaths and building cycleways. No one is cycling because after they travel a few hundred yards or a mile on these cycleways, they must go onto an ordinary and narrow road to get to their homes. That does not make any sense. We narrowed a national secondary road a while back. As Councillor Johnny Healy-Rae said at a recent meeting of Kerry County Council, we have made a bohereen out of the national secondary road that starts off in Killarney and goes around the Ring of Kerry. Two vehicles of any kind cannot pass each other on that road now without their wing mirrors striking each other. That is what we have done in the name of climate change. These are the ridiculous things.

I especially want to recognise the fact that Shannon LNG has been given the green light after so many false dawns. Many individuals and companies have put so much money into that over a number of years. Those involved invested €60 million in it. That was money that people were prepared to put into it and that they had worked hard for. They saw that this was a way of helping our country. At least we will have it. If people can come forward with other ideas for creating energy, they should please do so. No one here is stopping them from doing that, but do not make people pay any more for energy than what they are paying for it at present. It is going up by 16% and 18%. Then, just to prove that there is no regulator, some other company dropped it by 12%. There is no law or order in the regulation of the cost of electricity at present. The poor people who go on the road in the mornings are paying a massive amount as a result of carbon tax being added to the cost of fuel. Those people go out on the roads to get to work or to deliver stuff in lorries, whether it is materials for housebuilding or foodstuffs for supermarkets, and it is costing them massive money.

We could be doing a lot better and a lot more in respect of the cost of energy. We have oil off of west Cork and gas off the Kerry coast. We are not being allowed to tap into either. If we bring it from the nearest point, the poor people at home will pay for it. It is time we copped on and listened to other people, because there are things other than climate change that need to be addressed. It is fine if everything else is sorted out, but people are being driven into the ground with the cost of living. No matter how much they earn, they have nothing left for to pay for houses and for the energy to heat them or for the costs related to getting to work.

Deputy Réada Cronin: An Teachta Healy-Rae should correct the record. It was not a bit of rain that caused the Famine. The failure of one crop did not cause the Famine that decimated-----

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I said the 1740-----

Deputy Réada Cronin: ----- our population.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am sorry; I must clarify this.

Deputy Réada Cronin: Shame on you. You are a disgrace.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I said 1740, not 1840. There were two famines. There was the second one that the Deputy is talking about with the potatoes. The 1740 famine was created by rain that never stopped falling for two years. Those are the facts and that is the truth.

Deputy Réada Cronin: Deputy Healy-Rae can support our next amendment, because it is relevant.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: The Deputy can support me when I am right.

Minister of State at the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Timmy Dooley): I am thankful for the opportunity to respond to the strongly held views of many Opposition Members. There is a bit of divergence between some of them, and I must respect that. People's views are strongly held. We might argue over the detail.

What I want to reflect about this Bill that the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and I have brought forward is that it is purely about energy security. Maybe we do not all accept it, but a lot of people in this House and in society generally accept that we need to transition away, for a couple of reasons, from our dependence on imported fossil fuels. There are the climate emissions targets. The latter are recognised as an important aspect of this. I must also reflect on what Deputy Healy-Rae has just said. We might have a difference of opinion about how we get there, but I know what he is talking about in terms of the cost of energy. It is my strongly held view and that of the Government that if we bring more renewables onto the grid from our own resources - from wind and solar within our remit - we will reduce our dependence on imported fossil fuels. That will ultimately reduce the price and benefit everyone across the country.

For those who are looking at it from a different angle in terms of the reduction in carbon dioxide emissions and the impact that is having on climate change, I refer to the fact that this is not going to be gas traded into the marketplace. It is a storage facility that will be there in the event of a rupture or a disruption to the supply through the interconnectors from the North Sea via the UK and Scotland. Principally, it is storage. It will be a State-owned and State-controlled facility. It is not a market initiative. It is not an attempt to use LNG as a price lever to compete with the supplies that are already there. It is not aimed at creating a market tension

that would reduce prices and, therefore, make us more dependent. It is really just about storage. I understand where Members are coming from, but it does not and will not add one extra element of carbon dioxide emissions. In the event of there being a disruption, it will replace gas that would already have been provided into the market.

This is about critical infrastructure and ensuring that our hospitals and other key facilities that are dependent on gas, principally for heat, will be able to remain in operation for whatever length of time it might take to repair the supply line.

I also take the points made by Deputies Murphy and Ahern on why this legislation is being rushed through in an emergency way. We are already making significant headway in relation to our plan-led approach to the capture of wind off our shoreline. We had the recent designation through the designated maritime area plan, DMAP, process off the south-east coast. We had a very successful auction. Where other countries that are attempting to capture wind off their shorelines or in their seas have been unable to get bidders, we had three or four bidders for the auction in December. Some 900 MW have been secured. The process is now going through the final permissions aspect. It is working really well. There are three other suitable locations within that overall designated area. They will go to auction soon. There is interest from other companies in this regard.

The Government is working really hard. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, myself and others are in regular contact with the marketplace to encourage investment and to show that Ireland has a long-term plan in place. We are working on a national DMAP or designation of more suitable sites around our coastline that have the capacity to generate up to 15 GW of electricity out to 2040. That is the kind of approach we are taking. I understand the politics of it, but it is unfair to say that we are ignoring the opportunity regarding renewables. In recognising that it is a slow process, we are derisking it for those investors who are going to come in. We are doing the mapping and collecting the data, and we will be providing it to those entities as part of the auction process.

Unlike what happened with the phase 1 projects, which were effectively developer led, we have moved to take control. That work is already done and we are working through it but it would be foolhardy to just say that because we have a plan to capture effectively 20 GW of wind energy, and some additional solar on shore out to 2040, we can somehow ignore the necessity to store gas as we transition away from the use of fossil fuels. I understand what Deputies Ahern and Murphy said about battery storage. It is there but it will not be sufficient in the short term. They also spoke about other liquid fuels. The Department and the Government are working on a hydrogen strategy, so we are working towards identifying other solutions. The ESB recently published a report which effectively said we cannot get to net zero by 2050 by renewables alone. We have to use liquid fuels, and hydrogen would be the obvious one in that regard. That creates huge opportunities, because we will have a quantum of electricity generated from renewables. Generally, the wind blows better at night when demand is less. Rather than grounding or not utilising that electricity, it can effectively be converted to hydrogen or ammonia in a more stable way. There are opportunities for exports as well as storage in that regard. That is the longer term plan. Work is being done on that.

I accept that there is an investment in infrastructure, but I do not accept the point that we are locking ourselves in. If we had put this out to the marketplace and asked for outside investment in a market-driven initiative where you would be building hard infrastructure, that

accusation would stand up. In this instance, however, I cannot accept it because we are talking about a piece of floating infrastructure. There will be some onshore infrastructure to be built, which will be relatively minor in both overall and cost terms. The big element is the ship and its location. When we get to a point where we do not need that back-up storage and we either have enough batteries in place or are generating enough electricity to be able to look to hydrogen storage, we can move that piece of fossil fuel kit on to another location, dispense with it or sunset it.

Another thing I would like to mention in more general terms, because I think will arise in respect of some of the other amendments, is that this Bill is about getting moving really quickly on the permissions that are necessary to get the infrastructure in place. As stated on Second Stage, the operation will be dealt with in another Bill. What the Deputies' are trying to stitch in here by means of their amendments might be better addressed in the context of that legislation. This Bill is just about permissions. Hopefully, that will give Deputies an understanding of what the Government is doing. We are not in a position to accept the amendments.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I want to bring the Minister of State back to something specific which matters more than the amendment I tabled. During pre-legislative scrutiny, the joint committee made a recommendation which states:

The Minister shall authorise a transparent and publicly available cost-benefit analysis not less than 60 days prior to any decision which shall inform the approval process of the proposed development.

It recommended that this analysis should have regard to the adopted carbon budgets and sectoral ceilings under the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Acts, the most recent climate action plan and the Government-approved electrification pathways. I had the backing of the committee on this. The Minister of State indicated that the Bill is just for planning. Why not put this into the Bill now in order that we, as legislators, can see a cost-benefit analysis done, particularly as the only publicly available one was done in 2023? In the context of a €900 million investment, it would be of much more benefit if we could see how many more GW or MW might possibly be added at multiple ports. We know Belfast is one of the only ports on the island that can handle large-scale offshore renewable energy, ORE. I urge the Minister of State to bring this to the Department. We have not seen that, so it is difficult for us to go in blindfolded. All the committee members received a letter saying that while the Bill before us will provide an expedited planning consent pathway, the next Bill will, as the Minister of State outlined, set out the operation, use and potential cost.

With a €900 million piece of energy infrastructure, we need to know what is in scope and how much could have been done by means of an alternative approach. I am familiar with the argument about energy security and lower cost energy- and the Minister of State can correct me if I am wrong – in the first 24 hours of the Iran-US war, global LNG prices rose by 43%. If we are looking to secure energy, surely having our own low-cost ORE batteries would help. I like the fact that other Deputies mentioned my batteries. I would have loved for all of them to have come to my meeting in the audiovisual room. Some did not attend. Representatives from Energy Storage Ireland were there. They spoke about the difficulties the company is having at the moment. I welcome the announcements by the Department in relation changing

the cost of battery chargers. That is brilliant. Sodium batteries are the best batteries. These will be how we can decentralise our grid. They need to be looked at as part of any cost-benefit analysis. That is not a radical ask, it would hold us to a correct standard.

Will this matter be given the serious consideration it deserves? The members of the climate committee deserve to see this information. It was noted that while it will be taken into consideration, it is not relevant to this Bill. I am not opposed to the Bill in principle, but I would urge that we get a cost-benefit analysis because we are being asked to approve a framework that cedes significant planning and environmental disapplication powers worth hundreds of millions of euro. The estimated cost is €900 million, but other things were estimated at €900 million previously and ended up costing €2.5 billion. In that context, I ask that we take a good approach and that a cost-benefit analysis be carried out. It could strengthen the case. I might welcome this with more open arms if a cost-benefit analysis were done. I asked about this and was informed yesterday that Annex IV C is the most up-to-date analysis which considers the estimated cost of this Bill in comparison with the alternative mitigation options considered.

There was no more detailed cost-benefit analysis publicly available, beyond the one conducted and the preliminary business case. I ask that it is issued to us as legislators as we are making a huge decision on the infrastructure of our country. I would like if that could be taken back to the Department.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I will try to be swift, so we can move on. We have heard the same speech from Deputy Danny Healy-Rae on a number of occasions, effectively denying human-caused climate change by saying we have had storms and extreme weather events in the past. Yes, we have had storms and extreme weather events in the past. That is not evidence against human-created climate change. The evidence is very clear. There is a clear scientific consensus. Deputy Healy-Rae says he has heard that some paper exists that proves the climatologists and climate scientists are all wrong and when he gets his hands on it he will bring it here. He obviously has not read the paper. He knows it exists somewhere out there in the ether, and he trusts it because it tells him what he wants to hear, which is that climate change is not happening. People know themselves. The past 11 years have been the 11 hottest years on record. We know that decade after decade, for six decades now, each has been hotter than the one before it. We know the oceans are heating up and that they are becoming increasingly acidic. We know, and people know from their own experience, that we have more and more extreme weather events. It is not just people's own experience. It is also tracked. You could go on and on but this is the settled scientific consensus.

To be honest, I am less concerned about the climate denialism of Deputy Healy-Rae. He is entitled to his opinion. I think he is wrong, and I think the scientific consensus really says that there is no basis for what he is saying.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: You are entitled to your opinion.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I am less concerned about that. It is fine.

The main thing I have a problem with is that we have a Government that did not really make an effort there to object to the climate denialism but will, on occasion, object to climate

denialism and will say it recognises the science. We have a Government that says climate change is real and accepts that climate change is caused by fossil fuels. It accepts that climate change is a consequence of the greenhouse gas emissions. It says we are going to sign up to legally binding climate targets because we take this seriously and care about the future of our planet, and then it totally ignores it all. That is worse in a way. If Deputy Healy-Rae were in charge and said he did not believe in any of this climate change nonsense, that it had nothing to do with human activity, that we were going to go full steam ahead for fracked gas and were going to drill for fracked gas here and asked what the problem is with more fossil fuel usage, that, in a way, is logically coherent. If fossil fuels are not the problem, then what is the problem? However, the Government accepts that fossil fuels are the problem but nonetheless says full steam ahead for LNG. It nonetheless says full steam ahead with expansion of Dublin Airport and full steam ahead for data centres and AI. I really think that is worse. It knows what it is doing is going to destroy the planet and hurt people in the pocket here and now but nonetheless it is going full steam ahead and will not even allow a proper debate on these issues.

Amendment put:

The Committee divided: Tá, 58; Níl, 94; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Ahern, Ciarán.	Aird, William.	
Bacik, Ivana.	Ardagh, Catherine.	
Bennett, Cathy.	Boland, Grace.	
Boyd Barrett, Richard.	Brabazon, Tom.	
Byrne, Joanna.	Brennan, Brian.	
Cairns, Holly.	Brennan, Shay.	
Conway-Walsh, Rose.	Brophy, Colm.	
Coppinger, Ruth.	Burke, Colm.	
Cronin, Réada.	Burke, Peter.	
Crowe, Seán.	Butler, Mary.	
Cullinane, David.	Butterly, Paula.	
Cummins, Jen.	Buttimer, Jerry.	
Daly, Pa.	Byrne, Malcolm.	
Devine, Máire.	Byrne, Thomas.	
Doherty, Pearse.	Cahill, Michael.	
Donnelly, Paul.	Callaghan, Catherine.	
Ennis, Daniel.	Calleary, Dara.	
Farrelly, Aidan.	Canney, Seán.	
Farrell, Mairéad.	Carrigy, Micheál.	
Gannon, Gary.	Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	
Gibney, Sinéad.	Chambers, Jack.	
Gould, Thomas.	Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	
Graves, Ann.	Clendennen, John.	
Hayes, Eoin.	Collins, Michael.	
Healy, Seamus.	Collins, Niall.	
Hearne, Rory.	Connolly, John.	
Kenny, Eoghan.	Cooney, Joe.	
Kenny, Martin.	Crowe, Cathal.	
Kerrane, Claire.	Cummins, John.	
Lawlor, George.	Currie, Emer.	

Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	Daly, Martin.	
McGettigan, Donna.	Dempsey, Aisling.	
McGuinness, Conor D.	Devlin, Cormac.	
Mitchell, Denise.	Dillon, Alan.	
Murphy, Paul.	Dolan, Albert.	
Mythen, Johnny.	Dooley, Timmy.	
Nash, Ged.	Feighan, Frankie.	
Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	Fleming, Sean.	
O'Callaghan, Cian.	Foley, Norma.	
O'Donoghue, Robert.	Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	
O'Gorman, Roderic.	Geoghegan, James.	
O'Hara, Louis.	Grealish, Noel.	
O'Reilly, Louise.	Harkin, Marian.	
O'Rourke, Darren.	Healy-Rae, Danny.	
Ó Broin, Eoin.	Healy-Rae, Michael.	
Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	Heneghan, Barry.	
Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	Heydon, Martin.	
Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	Higgins, Emer.	
Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	Keogh, Keira.	
Quaide, Liam.	Kyne, Seán.	
Quinlivan, Maurice.	Lahart, John.	
Rice, Pádraig.	Lawless, James.	
Stanley, Brian.	Lawless, Paul.	
Wall, Mark.	Lowry, Michael.	
Ward, Charles.	Maxwell, David.	
Ward, Mark.	McAuliffe, Paul.	
Whitmore, Jennifer.	McCarthy, Noel.	
	McConalogue, Charlie.	
	McCormack, Tony.	
	McEntee, Helen.	
	McGrath, Séamus.	
	McGreehan, Erin.	
	Moran, Kevin Boxer.	
	Moynihan, Aindrias.	
	Moynihan, Michael.	
	Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	
	Murphy, Michael.	
	Naughton, Hildegard.	
	Neville, Joe.	
	Nolan, Carol.	
	O'Brien, Darragh.	
	O'Connell, Maeve.	
	O'Connor, James.	
	O'Dea, Willie.	
	O'Donnell, Kieran.	
	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
	O'Flynn, Ken.	

	O'Meara, Ryan.	
	O'Shea, John Paul.	
	O'Sullivan, Christopher.	
	O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	
	Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	
	Ó Fearghail, Seán.	
	Ó Muirí, Naoise.	
	Richmond, Neale.	
	Roche, Peter.	
	Scanlon, Eamon.	
	Smith, Brendan.	
	Smyth, Niamh.	
	Timmins, Edward.	
	Toole, Gillian.	
	Troy, Robert.	
	Ward, Barry.	

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Pa Daly and Réada Cronin; Níl, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie.

Amendment declared lost.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I move amendment No. 3:

In page 7, between lines 22 and 23, to insert the following:

““emergency” means a situation where the State is experiencing a significant and protracted physical disruption of gas supply, or other catastrophic deterioration of the supply situation, and where—

(c) all relevant market-based measures have been fully implemented, exhausted, and proven insufficient to meet gas demand, and

(d) non-market-based measures must be introduced to safeguard gas supplies to protected customers, in accordance with the criteria for an Emergency Level under Article 11(1)(c) of Regulation (EU) 2017/1938.

For the avoidance of doubt, an emergency does not include localised network constraints, or routine seasonal increases in gas demand where physical supply remains available;”.

Amendment put:

The Committee divided: Tá, 56; Níl, 94; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Ahern, Ciarán.	Aird, William.	
Bacik, Ivana.	Ardagh, Catherine.	
Bennett, Cathy.	Boland, Grace.	
Boyd Barrett, Richard.	Brabazon, Tom.	
Byrne, Joanna.	Brennan, Brian.	
Cairns, Holly.	Brennan, Shay.	
Conway-Walsh, Rose.	Brophy, Colm.	

Coppinger, Ruth.	Burke, Colm.	
Cronin, Réada.	Burke, Peter.	
Crowe, Seán.	Butler, Mary.	
Cullinane, David.	Butterly, Paula.	
Cummins, Jen.	Buttimer, Jerry.	
Daly, Pa.	Byrne, Malcolm.	
Devine, Máire.	Byrne, Thomas.	
Ennis, Daniel.	Cahill, Michael.	
Farrelly, Aidan.	Callaghan, Catherine.	
Farrell, Mairéad.	Calleary, Dara.	
Gannon, Gary.	Canney, Seán.	
Gibney, Sinéad.	Carrigy, Micheál.	
Gould, Thomas.	Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	
Graves, Ann.	Chambers, Jack.	
Hayes, Eoin.	Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	
Healy, Seamus.	Clendennen, John.	
Hearne, Rory.	Collins, Michael.	
Kenny, Eoghan.	Collins, Niall.	
Kenny, Martin.	Connolly, John.	
Kerrane, Claire.	Cooney, Joe.	
Lawlor, George.	Crowe, Cathal.	
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	Cummins, John.	
McGettigan, Donna.	Currie, Emer.	
McGuinness, Conor D.	Daly, Martin.	
Mitchell, Denise.	Dempsey, Aisling.	
Murphy, Paul.	Devlin, Cormac.	
Mythen, Johnny.	Dillon, Alan.	
Nash, Ged.	Dolan, Albert.	
Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	Dooley, Timmy.	
Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	Feighan, Frankie.	
O'Callaghan, Cian.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
O'Donoghue, Robert.	Fleming, Sean.	
O'Gorman, Roderic.	Foley, Norma.	
O'Hara, Louis.	Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	
O'Reilly, Louise.	Geoghegan, James.	
O'Rourke, Darren.	Grealish, Noel.	
Ó Broin, Eoin.	Harkin, Marian.	
Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	Healy-Rae, Danny.	
Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	Healy-Rae, Michael.	
Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	Heneghan, Barry.	
Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	Heydon, Martin.	
Quaide, Liam.	Higgins, Emer.	
Quinlivan, Maurice.	Keogh, Keira.	
Rice, Pádraig.	Kyne, Seán.	
Stanley, Brian.	Lahart, John.	
Wall, Mark.	Lawless, James.	
Ward, Charles.	Lawless, Paul.	
Ward, Mark.	Lowry, Michael.	

Whitmore, Jennifer.	Maxwell, David.	
	McAuliffe, Paul.	
	McCarthy, Noel.	
	McConalogue, Charlie.	
	McCormack, Tony.	
	McEntee, Helen.	
	McGrath, Séamus.	
	McGreehan, Erin.	
	Moran, Kevin Boxer.	
	Moynihan, Aindrias.	
	Moynihan, Michael.	
	Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	
	Murphy, Michael.	
	Naughton, Hildegard.	
	Neville, Joe.	
	Nolan, Carol.	
	O'Brien, Darragh.	
	O'Connell, Maeve.	
	O'Connor, James.	
	O'Dea, Willie.	
	O'Donnell, Kieran.	
	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
	O'Flynn, Ken.	
	O'Meara, Ryan.	
	O'Shea, John Paul.	
	O'Sullivan, Christopher.	
	O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	
	Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	
	Ó Fearghail, Seán.	
	Ó Muirí, Naoise.	
	Richmond, Neale.	
	Roche, Peter.	
	Scanlon, Eamon.	
	Smith, Brendan.	
	Smyth, Niamh.	
	Timmins, Edward.	
	Toole, Gillian.	
	Troy, Robert.	
	Ward, Barry.	

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Jennifer Whitmore and Cian O'Callaghan; Níl, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie.

Amendment declared lost.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Amendments Nos. 4, 16 and 19 are related and will be discussed together.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I move amendment No. 4:

In page 8, after line 39, to insert the following:

" "hydraulically fractured gas" means liquefied natural gas, or natural gas in any other form, that has been produced, in whole or in part, by means of hydraulic fracturing within the meaning of section 5A of the Petroleum and Other Minerals Development Act 1960;"

This amendment is about fracked gas, which is not something we have spoken about yet in the debate. The amendment has been tabled with a view to trying to be constructive and to building more safeguards into the use of this facility. It relates to consenting, in that this is the type of product that will be going through a licensed or designated facility and the Government should be cognisant of what is going through, and the State needs to be cognisant of what is being used, in these facilities. If this facility is going to exist, we want the gas being used in it to be the least destructive gas possible.

We know that LNG, particularly when sourced from the US as we suspect the LNG for this facility is going to be, is usually derived from fracking but this practice is not defined in the Bill before us. This is why I have included a definition of "hydraulically fractured gas" as meaning "liquefied natural gas, or natural gas in any other form, that has been produced, in whole or in part, by means of hydraulic fracturing within the meaning of section 5A of the Petroleum and Other Minerals Development Act 1960". That Act defines hydraulic fracturing and, as we know, an amendment to that Act in 2017 banned the practice of fracking in Ireland, although not the importation of fracked gas. At the time, the Minister of State spoke of Fianna Fáil's well-known opposition to fracking and acknowledged the detrimental environmental impacts.

Unfortunately, a subsequent Government policy statement introducing a de facto ban on the importation of fracked gas was overturned for the purposes of developing this LNG facility. The Government is willingly enabling an incredibly destructive environmental practice so long as others have to deal with the cost. One of the issues we had with the overturning of the ban on the importation of fracked gas was that it was not restricted solely to this facility, which we understand to be a State-led and operated facility. It has essentially created a free-for-all for other commercial operators to import fracked gas as well.

6 o'clock

We know just how destructive fracked gas is. While burning it produces less carbon dioxide than coal, the extraction processes release enormous amounts of methane, a greenhouse gas that is up to 86 times more potent than carbon dioxide over 20 years.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae said earlier to stop talking about climate targets when we are talking about these types of facilities. Okay, but then let us talk about something else. Let us talk about human health and human rights when it comes to fracked gas. We know that North American fracking operations for oil and gas are driving the current surge in global levels of methane. We know that methane has contributed approximately 40% of all global warming to date. We know that fracking is so damaging to the environment. It releases toxic air pollution, contaminates water and results in earthquakes, as well as significant other public health impacts. It is an environmental injustice, with injuries not borne equally by all.

There is a reason we banned it here. It is more than a little hypocritical that we would ban it in our own country and for our people but then allow its importation from other countries from where maybe the effects will not be felt so keenly as they are here. We also know that the liquefaction and transportation of natural gas as liquefied natural gas, LNG, raises its greenhouse gas emissions even further, by another 30%. This is because of the need for evaporative cooling and venting and because flaring is used to control pressure during regasification.

Just today, the UN Secretary General, António Guterres, released a call to action on methane. This all relates back to the imported fracked gas. I am referring to the methane being released. The Secretary General said that methane has been responsible for nearly one third of global warming to date and that it remains significantly underprioritised in climate action and political decision-making. He also said that, "Cutting methane emissions is one of the fastest, cheapest and most effective opportunities to slow global warming in the near term while delivering cleaner air, stronger crop yields, improved health and major economic benefits." The UN wants countries worldwide to make methane more measurable, reportable and verifiable. It is looking for transparency and empirical data in relation to reporting methane emissions and so on.

All this goes back to this being a regressive move by the State to be facilitating the import of this highly damaging fracked gas, which releases so much methane. At the same time, we are disapplying section 15 of the climate Act from all of this. This means there is even less transparency and less counting of the emissions that this facility will generate. We know that the CEOs of LNG companies would not live beside the facilities their companies build. We can talk about jobs and the economic benefits of all these facilities but they do, worldwide, have serious human health and human rights consequences that I do not think this Government is taking seriously enough. This is why I am proposing this amendment.

Deputy Pa Daly: After the last general election, there was almost an unseemly rush to be out to congratulate the Government by some people for its change of mind in relation to fracked gas. It comes down to the basic issue of fairness and a just transition. We have heard about the issues in respect of destroying communities in the United States. Affordability of energy is also fundamental and is something that should be prioritised. Unfortunately, however, it has often been treated as an afterthought by this Government and previous Governments.

When the strategic gas reserve was first announced, it was said that ongoing operational costs would be paid for through the introduction of a new levy or by being integrated into an existing one. In other words, ordinary people will foot the bill, or it is the intention that they will foot the bill, for the Government's failure to guarantee our energy security over many years. Families across the State are already dealing with some of the highest energy prices in Europe. I do not need to go into this topic again today. Ordinary people paying their bills, ordinary householders, did not design this broken system. They should not, therefore, be forced to pay for a solution and a problem that the Government has created.

The amendments that we brought forward, and the subsequent amendments, are clear that the Government must guarantee there is no socialisation of costs into the bills of households or SMEs. There should be a requirement for the regulator to assess the full cost of the impact on households. We have had other legislation giving more power to the regulator to hold energy

companies to account, for example. There should also be an obligation on the Minister to mitigate the costs because energy security cannot come at the expense of affordability, given how tardy the Government has been with offshore and renewable energy over many years. The Government is supposed to be a safety net for people and not the other way around.

This infrastructure, if it is strategic, must be State-led. Unfortunately, this State has less investment in offshore wind in our own waters than the French state and the Norwegian state. There should be more public involvement to move towards energy affordability, because private companies are obviously going to have to make increased profits year after year. If this infrastructure is State-led, publicly owned and operated in the public interest, that could go some way to reducing energy bills. Otherwise, it is hard to guarantee it. Without the guarantee of this being State-led, it could - and we have seen it in the previous amendments - risk opening the door to commercial LNG development and private profit. Energy security is not a commercial venture. Energy security, keeping the lights on, is a fundamental responsibility of the State. While this reserve has been justified as an emergency measure, it is important, as we have seen in the last amendment, that any strategic gas reserve should be for emergency use only. It should also not become permanent by default, and this is why we proposed the ten-year limit. The reserve must not be used to drive further fossil fuel lock-in. As we mentioned earlier, and as was discussed, we use 80% imported fuels.

We also have an amendment to require annual reporting to the Oireachtas. Without this, the infrastructure creates its own momentum. We see that it will take five years to build this facility and that it will be in operation for ten years, at least, so that is 15 years in total, so there is a very big danger of lock-in.

This Bill, as we said previously, is being rushed through without proper scrutiny, and this is unacceptable. Our amendments require independent assessment that this approach is necessary, proportionate and the best available option, and that there be an ongoing biannual review. Crucially, a future assessment of alternatives, including renewables, interconnections, storage and demand-side measures, should also be included in the Bill. The legislation is being rushed through, however, so the reality is that this is unlikely to happen. It is not good enough. Communities are being sidelined, and public consultation and democratic accountability, it seems, have not been used and are not going to happen.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I wish to speak in favour of Deputy Ahern's amendment. It is important that we focus on the issue of the use of LNG through this facility and, as such, into Ireland's energy network. Liquefied natural gas is about two thirds more carbon-emitting than traditional natural gas. We are introducing it into our system now, as a number of speakers have already pointed out, in a context where liquefied natural gas was banned through the ban on fracked gas brought in by the previous Government in 2021. This ban applied to the use of fracked gas in all circumstances, whether by State infrastructure or by private infrastructure. That ban was important. One of the first things this Government did was to remove that ban, which my colleague, Eamon Ryan, introduced. That ban was removed on fracked gas being used by either State infrastructure or private infrastructure. We heard Deputy Danny Healy-Rae celebrating the consequences of the removal of that ban on fracked gas.

Not all LNG used in the world is fracked but the vast majority of the LNG that comes from the US, which the Government has indicated it would regard as its primary supplier for the

facility in Clare, comes from the fracking process, which makes the carbon emissions from LNG even worse. We are tying a new source of energy, LNG, into our energy system. This is a system that was shown not to give security of supply, as demonstrated by the closure of the Ras Laffan gas terminal at the start of the Iran war, and shown not to result in affordability. A 46% increase in the cost of LNG in one day was prompted by that war. LNG is one of the most carbon-intensive versions of gas that exist in the world right now.

We are achieving this in the exact same legislation where we are disapplying the analysis of the climate Act to LNG infrastructure. Section 33, which I and others are opposing, will disapply the tests and analysis under section 15 of the climate Act. To think that the newest piece of fossil fuel infrastructure built in this country will not have basic climate analysis applied to it – climate analysis that almost all parties in this House agreed on only a couple of years ago – shows how far the Government has retreated on the issue of climate. A fundamental gap in this legislation is that a new piece of fossil fuel infrastructure will not have this analysis applied to it.

By creating this exemption, we are actually building a norm. That norm will be seen in the legislation we will be debating in a couple of minutes, which also has the exemption. That norm was seen in the Critical Infrastructure Bill that this House passed a number of weeks ago. Time and again, this Government is exempting some of the biggest fossil fuel-polluting proposals from an analysis under the climate Act. It is killing the climate Act with 100 or 1,000 small exemptions. It is a very deliberate process, a process we have seen repeated many times. For this reason, my party and I cannot support the legislation before us. It does not give us the energy security we deserve. It does not give us the energy affordability that families need, and it dramatically undermines the decarbonisation agenda that the Government should be following.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I reiterate that there is very little between our understandings of the negative or harmful impact that gas, whether it be natural gas, LNG or any form of methane, has on our climate and on the environment. As I set out in response to the other amendments, the Government has made it abundantly clear that we have to pivot away from the use of fossil fuels. We are doing so and have a strategy for doing so. It would be foolhardy in the extreme if, while pivoting away, we failed to recognise that we need a backstop of energy security. Deputy O'Gorman, who performed very well in a previous Government, knows that in November 2023 there was recognition that we had to have an energy security component in place for the future. It was accepted at that stage and we are building on that. I refer to Energy Security in Ireland to 2030.

All sides of the House are fully in agreement that fossil fuels are damaging and bad and that we have got to wean ourselves off them quickly. We are working very hard to capture renewable energy, whether wind or solar, and we are doing it in a plan-led and strategic way so that we can, from climate change and emissions perspectives, rid ourselves of fossil fuels while also putting in place a means of controlling our own energy mix into the future. The State will control it and it will be within our own ambit, so that we will not be dependent on regimes outside the normal zones of Europe.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The time permitted for this debate having expired, I am required to put the following question in accordance with an order of the Dáil of this day: "That

in respect of each of the sections undisposed of, the section is hereby agreed to in Committee, the Title is hereby agreed to in Committee, the Bill is accordingly reported to the House without amendment, Fourth Stage is hereby completed and the Bill is hereby passed."

Question put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 90; Níl, 57; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Brennan, Brian.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Brennan, Shay.	Cairns, Holly.	
Brophy, Colm.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Burke, Colm.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Burke, Peter.	Cronin, Réada.	
Butler, Mary.	Crowe, Seán.	
Butterly, Paula.	Cullinane, David.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Cummins, Jen.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Daly, Pa.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Devine, Máire.	
Cahill, Michael.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Ennis, Daniel.	
Calleary, Dara.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Canney, Seán.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Gannon, Gary.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Chambers, Jack.	Gould, Thomas.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Graves, Ann.	
Clendennen, John.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Collins, Michael.	Healy, Seamus.	
Collins, Niall.	Hearne, Rory.	
Connolly, John.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Cooney, Joe.	Kenny, Martin.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Cummins, John.	Lawlor, George.	
Currie, Emer.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Daly, Martin.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Dolan, Albert.	Murphy, Paul.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Nash, Ged.	
Fleming, Sean.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Foley, Norma.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Geoghegan, James.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
Grealish, Noel.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	

Harkin, Marian.	O'Hara, Louis.	
Healy-Rae, Danny.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
Healy-Rae, Michael.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
Heneghan, Barry.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
Heydon, Martin.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
Higgins, Emer.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Keogh, Keira.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Kyne, Seán.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Lahart, John.	Quaide, Liam.	
Lawless, James.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Lowry, Michael.	Rice, Pádraig.	
Maxwell, David.	Stanley, Brian.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	Wall, Mark.	
McCarthy, Noel.	Ward, Charles.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	Ward, Mark.	
McCormack, Tony.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
McEntee, Helen.		
McGrath, Séamus.		
McGreehan, Erin.		
Moran, Kevin Boxer.		
Moynihan, Aindrias.		
Moynihan, Michael.		
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.		
Murphy, Michael.		
Naughton, Hildegard.		
Neville, Joe.		
Nolan, Carol.		
O'Brien, Darragh.		
O'Connell, Maeve.		
O'Connor, James.		
O'Dea, Willie.		
O'Donnell, Kieran.		
O'Donoghue, Richard.		
O'Flynn, Ken.		
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		

Ward, Barry.		
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Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Réada Cronin and Jennifer Whitmore.

Question declared carried.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Bill will now be sent to the Seanad.

Dublin Airport (Passenger Capacity) Bill 2026: Committee and Remaining Stages

Section 1 agreed to.

SECTION 2

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Amendments Nos. 1, 12 and 13 are related and may be discussed together.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I move amendment No. 1:

In page 6, between lines 29 and 30, to insert the following:

“ “international connectivity” means the range and frequency of scheduled passenger and cargo air services operating to and from Dublin Airport, having regard to—

- (a) the number of direct routes available from Dublin Airport to destinations outside the State,
- (b) the number of carriers operating such routes, and
- (c) the frequency of services on those routes;”.

There are a number of references to international connectivity in this Bill. I raised this on Second Stage last week and the Minister thought it was amusing that I did not understand the definition of "international connectivity". I understand a plain English reading of it but the phrase permeates the Bill and it is used by the Government as a justification for the lifting of this cap. The Government says the Bill is to increase our international connectivity. With 32 million or more flights already leaving the country to international destinations, the question is what is enough international connectivity.

With amendment No. 1, I propose to insert a definition in the Bill. We are told all the time that connectivity is key to our success as a nation and that, as an island nation, we cannot leave ourselves stranded and we need international connectivity. However, it strikes me we already have quite a lot of international connectivity with 30-odd million flights going through Dublin Airport already. If we are going to increase flights on this basis, it is important we have metrics by which we can measure international connectivity and it is important to define it because the level of emissions associated with higher or lower levels of international connectivity should be determined by the metrics used.

This falls under the transport brief but it has a massive climate consequence. It is worth noting that only 5% of the population of the entire world has ever taken a flight. We are in an incredibly privileged position here. This relates to climate justice and our obligations to others in a world where 95% of people on the globe have never been on a plane and the Minister is now proposing potentially to double the number of flights from Dublin Airport. Therefore, throwing around a phrase like "international connectivity" gives the Minister *carte blanche* to continually increase the number of people going through the airport and the number of flights being taken and that is not necessarily a good thing.

We need to talk about demand management in international aviation. There is no such thing as sustainable aviation fuel. It is never going to happen and the airline industry acknowledges that, so we have to try to have some metrics for and control over the number of flights in the country.

Furthermore, this is specifically for Dublin. There is no talk here about balanced regional development. This is all about Dublin Airport. The Minister talks about sustainable development but there is nothing sustainable about not having any cap. It is not as though the Minister is replacing the current cap with another level of cap. This will just be an absolute free for all.

My other amendment in the grouping, amendment No. 12, is to address a provision that essentially gives an open invitation to airlines to bully the Government and talk down Ireland if they perceive there to be some inhibitor of their commercial interests in Dublin. It gives licence to a Minister for Transport to change planning conditions where they are perceived to be potentially damaging to "the international reputation of the State in respect of air transport". It is extremely open-ended, entirely unfalsifiable and there is no objective standard for reputational damage. There is no evidence threshold or definition. The provision could be invoked on the basis of adverse commentary by Michael O'Leary, for example. We are essentially enshrining corporate bullying of the State in this law. That is why I want to delete that line. It gives *carte blanche* to airlines to talk down the country and say they are not happy that it is sufficiently internationally connected, so they will pull all their flights and that Ireland has a terrible reputation for international connectivity or whatever the buzzword is. It will essentially allow airlines to bully the State and Ministers to use that bullying as an excuse to raise the cap again and again, without heed to any of our climate obligations, either our domestic climate targets or international ones.

These emissions do count. Even though we do not count international aviation emissions, they do go somewhere and these actions have consequences whether the Government likes it or not.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The Minister is moving this with undue haste before the summer. It is absolutely wrong that a Bill of this importance is being guillotined after two hours and many of the amendments probably will not get a fair hearing.

I will comment on this grouping of amendments, which talk about connectivity. We made these points on Second Stage. Balanced regional development has gone out the window. We also have a duty to connect the west of Ireland and other airports, such as those in Cork, Shannon, Mayo and so on. The airlines are delighted with this because, potentially, everyone

will fly into Dublin and then be ferried on another plane to an outlying area because most people visit locations in the west of Ireland.

The feeling of many residents in the area is that what is being attempted is to turn Dublin Airport into a European airline hub like Frankfurt, Schiphol, Charles de Gaulle and Heathrow airports. One of the principal reasons residents contest this is the lack of a night-time cap. All the main airline hubs have night-time restrictions. The combined total for the four airports I mentioned is less than that for Dublin Airport on its own and the night-time flight caps are not imposed at all in Dublin Airport. Planes do not make money when parked so the airlines are dying to get rid of the cap.

I spoke to residents earlier today. Turning to the second amendment in this grouping, there are international duties and laws under environmental laws. If airport capacity is being increased, one would imagine that a fund would be set up for things like sound insulation and relocation for those who want to move, as some do. I have been told - I would like the Minister to clarify this - that has not happened and that residents have been forced to go to court because he has not met them about this. That is the very least that needs to be done.

For example, the planning for real process was one of the initiatives that was set up. It was to get an expert planner to discuss it. The residents say they cannot get funding for it and that the Minister will not meet them.

There are people who will be impacted by this increase, should it go ahead tonight, who are willing to relocate. Thornton Hall is an area that has been mentioned. It was not developed in the way anticipated in years gone by, and it could be an area where homes are built to facilitate people who want to move. All of these are very practical things that need to be ironed out with residents if this goes ahead, which, of course, it should not. What about the best insulation and air conditioning? Mechanical ventilation is mentioned, but people are not able to open their windows any more. Think of the effect of the heat we had last week on residents who live near Dublin Airport who cannot open their windows. All those people should have proper air conditioning. Residents are considering a polluter pays fund. The airlines are going to be the polluters, and they should pay for these mitigation measures. This is standard under any international laws.

My area of Dublin West is obviously not the only part affected but Hollystown, Hollywoodrath and Portmarnock are going to have much increased flights. The Minister was on Fingal County Council at the same time as me when decisions were taken by local authorities to allow development at the outer limits of Dublin Airport. It is not that long ago. Now those people are going to find that the noise levels will be even more intolerable when the projected massive increase in passengers goes ahead. The night-time flights will be at least doubled. That is the estimate of many residents. Rather than 60, there will be 120. The aircraft noise competent authority is not fulfilling its brief.

What about all the arguments around us being in the middle of a heat dome? Europe is enduring the hottest temperatures it has ever had. We will probably be in the same situation with high temperatures again next week or the week after, and much more frequently. We should not be passing a Bill like this that increases the number of flights. We should be discouraging people from taking flights. We should be reducing the number of flights in light of the climate crisis. Instead, the Government is marketing Dublin Airport as a hub on a

European scale. That is ludicrous because we do not have the transport infrastructure to facilitate such a thing. We do not have a light rail system. At the very least, the Minister has to commit to meeting residents in an open way and to cater for overall the impact that what is proposed will have on their lives if the Government rams the Bill through tonight. That is the very least that should be done. Residents are not even mentioned in the Bill.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: My amendment No. 13 has been grouped with Deputy Ahern's amendment. I will not dwell on it, but the same point I made about the previous Bill also applies in respect of this one, namely the fact that only two hours have been provided for the Committee and Remaining Stages. Detailed issues have to be addressed, including climate, balanced regional development and the significant impact of noise pollution on people who reside in the vicinity of the airport. These are real issues in respect of which there is disagreement. Maybe if we had time to do this at the select committee, we could have found resolutions in respect of a small number of these issues. However, we have been denied the opportunity to do so on foot of the way this Bill is being rushed through the House. Again, this is the only example in this Dáil of a Bill being rammed through on Committee and Remaining Stages. That is not acceptable, and it does not treat appropriately the issues so many TDs from all parties spoke about during pre-legislative scrutiny. Everyone was saying that it is terrible for the residents, that we are listening to them and that we want to help them. When a Bill is banged through the Dáil in two hours, that is neither listening nor a genuine effort to help.

My amendment is intended to allow a future Minister to amend the passenger cap for pro-climate reasons. The Bill currently allows the Minister to intervene where the passenger cap is judged to cause serious economic or connectivity harm, but there is no equivalent situation should this Minister or a future Minister believe the number of passengers is causing significant environmental or climate harm. The purpose of my amendment is to recognise that there is a power, but it is a power that can be used in different ways. It recognises that there is a climate issue here. The Bill as drafted recognises one set of risks but not the other. It would be a reasonable compromise for the Minister to accept this amendment. In that case, the Bill would not be pro- or anti-cap; it would simply be future-proofed to allow a Minister to consider climate or environmental considerations in the same way as economic interests.

The question of how we deal with the 32 million passenger cap, which was put in as a planning condition initially, is of course central to what we are looking at here. Everybody recognises that flying is essential for an island nation, but how we deal with the situation caused by the 2007 planning application is what is at issue. Last year, just over 36 million passengers went through the airport in breach of the cap. The DAA has brought a planning application using the existing mechanisms in order to bring that up to 40 million. The Minister and his team floated the idea of 60 million passengers going through Dublin Airport in future, which would be equivalent to the numbers JFK Airport saw in 2024 and 2025. That is a huge scale. In this Bill, we are opening the door to any scale of development. It is not a planned or graduated increase; it is the removal of a cap to allow any number of flights to take place. Not even the DAA went that far in the planning application it submitted. That will have climate consequences, which will, no doubt, be addressed in later amendments, but it will also cause significant issues with increased noise in the area of the airport. Later, I will be talking about making reference to the noise abatement objective for Dublin Airport and including that in the Bill as one of the measures to try to provide some degree of reassurance to residents in the area.

The committee heard from the likes of Ryanair. In many situations, Michael O'Leary has said that people knew what they were getting into when they bought houses in Swords, Malahide, Hollywoodrath and Dublin 15. That is an outrageous statement. People buy houses where they can afford to buy them. That is the nature of house purchasing in Ireland right now, and some people, if they could afford Kilmartin Grove or Hollywoodrath, chose to live there, whether that is in private purchase, affordable, social, cost-rental or build-to-rent homes. People do not have huge choice in where they have a home here right now because of the wider issues in our property market and sometimes people have to buy where the price matches their budget. That is an area which is already affected by a high number of flights and which is going to be further affected, especially if the exponential growth permitted under this legislation takes place. What is proposed is going to have a major impact, and it is not acceptable for the owners and beneficiaries of these large airlines to just dismiss people's very real concerns. This impacts my constituency. I have canvassed in the areas to which I refer and have heard the impact of noise on these households. That impact is only going to grow as a result of this Bill.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Others have referred to the speed at which this legislation and the previous Bill on LNG are being fast-tracked through the Dáil. There has not been sufficient time for debate or interrogation. Sufficient time has not been allocated to allow all Members to have input and, potentially, to make the legislation stronger and better, which is really what our job is.

It is interesting to see how quickly the Government can get certain legislation through the system. I wish there was an equal emphasis by the Government on getting other things delivered. Why are we not seeing similar speed, energy and focus to get additional battery storage up and running or the interconnector to France, which has been delayed, put in place? It has been repeated many times, but we have less offshore wind energy now than we did 20 years ago. I was on Brittas beach at the weekend enjoying the weather and looking at the seven pillars out in the Irish Sea. There are no turbines on them because they have been decommissioned.

The Minister spoke about the Government's priorities and where it spends its energy. It seems that this Government is spending its energy on pushing through solutions to problems that are being created because it has not done the work. The reason we are in this position is because it has not looked at the framework. It has not been strategic. Deputy Ahern referred to metrics in the context of his amendment. I absolutely agree with him. There is a similar thread going through this Bill and the previous Bill, and that is the need for robust analysis and strategic management.

We have a similar situation with data centres. Five years ago, I stood in this Chamber and asked for strategic management of data centres because the Government's approach of just rolling out the red carpet was going leave us in trouble. That has proven to be the case. We are there now. It is costing the State and domestic energy users a huge amount of money and is locking us into a very intensive, energy-reliant system. The position with LNG is similar. I do not think we have had a full analysis, review and evidence provided as to why we need an LNG reserve. Are there alternatives? Is there an alternative way to shore up our energy security? I believe there is.

I do not think there has been the necessary holistic analysis of the impact that lifting the cap will have. I do not believe that roads capacity was the correct mechanism to use in order to limit numbers at the airport. I do not believe that was ever the right approach. The question for us now is what is the correct metric to use to assess the airport. I do not think that level of analysis has been carried out. I mention that in one of my amendments. Has there been an economic analysis? Are we looking at regional development? Are we taking account emissions, noise pollution, the impact on residents or on housing in the area? When making long-term decisions of this nature, a level of work should go on behind scenes in the context of carrying out the relevant analysis and gathering the necessary evidence. I just do not think that has happened in this instance, and I do not believe it was done in respect of the previous Bill we discussed either.

I want to speak briefly to my amendment No. 13, which is in this group and which relates to our obligations. The State has obligations. The Minister signed up to them. He has agreed with our national obligations when it comes to climate. In fact, it was the previous Government brought forward the legislation in that regard. The majority of Deputies in the previous Dáil supported that legislation. We all worked hard to make sure it was as strong as possible. We have European Union directives to which we have to adhere. We must also adhere to and be cognisant of international law. In the rush to get these major development investments over the line, the Minister is really just pushing aside all those obligations. Unfortunately, it should not and cannot work that way. We need to take these issues into account, because the Minister is not just making this decision for the next five years and keeping Michael O'Leary happy for the next five or ten years. This is something that will be with us for a long time. When it is done, the Minister needs to make sure that it is done right. There is an onus and an obligation on him to uphold all those directives and laws he has signed up to. It cannot be the case that he just closes his eyes and pretends he never did so or has workarounds, because it really just does not work that way. Essentially, it is stated in our climate objectives state that an authority has to have regard to them. I do not understand why the Minister is trying to override these basic measures and requirements that we have. This is something we will regret in the long term. I also want to raise point with the Minister that we need to be strategic about this. He has to have the analysis carried out. In this instance, he has not done so.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: It has already been said by others, but I am also struck by the pace at which this legislation has progressed and is progressing through the House to a point where it will reach completion this evening. It is fair to say that for the first 18 months of the lifetime of this Government, we have seen very little by way of legislation come through the House. Suddenly, however, we are under dramatic pressure to get this legislation through without any sort of real scrutiny. Providing such scrutiny is why we are all here. That begs the question as to who is writing this type of legislation and who is writing transport policy for this country. There are certain words in the Bill, which just reads like an advert for Ryanair. How does the Minister determine what connectivity is? What the amendment seeks to put in is a definition of that. Instead, we are going to have a situation where a future Minister will have to determine what takes priority and whether it will be connectivity or the climate. I have to hope that future Ministers will understand that an obligation is not a choice. An obligation is something that we must do, and to exempt what is proposed from the provisions of section 15 of the climate Act is quite preposterous.

Last week, I raised with the Minister the fact that the crux of this legislation, in the first instance, is not necessarily to do with climate; rather, it is do with local infrastructure. That remains the case. Yet, here we are knowing more. When we know more, surely we have to do more. In that regard, we now propose to place a level of power that is centralised in a ministerial order. That concerns me, and it should concern everyone watching. We have bodies in place that are statutorily responsible for land use the planning of infrastructure in Ireland. The Minister does not need me to tell him about how abject a failure the strategic housing development policy was in that it bypassed local authorities and went straight to An Coimisiún Pleanála. The Minister is saying he got rid of it-----

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I did.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: -----and now we are looking to do the same thing by bypassing local authorities and An Coimisiún Pleanála, which are the bodies responsible for making very important planning decisions. They will never be perfect and neither will this House. However, their being bypassed is a matter of concern that I want to emphasise on the record of the House.

We are speaking about this in a context where the WHO has recognised that there have been 1,300 excess deaths in Europe in the past month due to the recent heatwave. Every conversation about aviation expansion must surely focus primarily on our future and our climate future. We do not record carbon emissions caused by aviation in our budgets. That is wrong, and it is something we need to really consider. I have spoken to many experts - I am sure the Minister is speaking to the relevant sectoral interests - who told me that putting more exemptions into section 15 of the climate Act will not help the situation. Actually, what it will so is dramatically undermine the importance of the Act. That is why I ultimately believe that we are guillotining this legislation. It is to stymie debate and undermine the pre-legislative scrutiny report, which was so comprehensive. Where are the recommendations made in that regard contemplated in this legislation?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We went over that on Second Stage.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I will finish on this. What we are faced with in the context of this legislation is the potential for future Ministers to end up in court as a result of the State's duties under the climate Act not being fulfilled. I look forward to the Minister's comment on that.

7 o'clock

It is unlawful that what we are trying to do is not only bypass the statutory bodies, but also not fulfil our obligations under domestic law when it comes to the climate Act. That merits further scrutiny, yet in approximately 60 minutes, it will all be done and dusted.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Minister was not here when I spoke earlier on the LNG Bill, so I will make the point to him now. What the Minister is doing tonight is disgraceful. This is, in six hours, a bonfire of our climate commitments. What we are seeing in action is the Minister's abandonment of targets that we were told many times were legally binding and, therefore, we

did not need to worry and the Government would do everything. This is what this means. It is what the Minister has done in terms of LNG. It is what the Minister is doing now.

What the Minister is doing is a disgrace - the content of it - but the way that he is doing it is outrageous. It is utterly outrageous that we are expected to deal with a Bill such as this, the Bill we just dealt with and the next Bill we are dealing with in two hours' time, with Committee Stage and Report Stage all in one go. We will not get to a tiny fraction of the amendments. We will not have any sort of detailed engagement. It is not because we are under much pressure for time, but because the Minister does not want to debate this stuff. The Minister does not want the emperor to be seen, and said, to have no clothes and that, on this issue, the Minister has not even done an economic impact assessment even though he is proposing to disapply the climate obligations. It is such a joke to say that we have these climate obligations that are legally binding and we are never going to do anything that is bad for the environment even while disapplying the climate obligations that are legally binding. It makes them entirely worthless.

Aviation is now doing more climate harm in Ireland than cars. What the Minister is hiding behind is that aviation emissions are not counted in our climate targets, but as has been asked, so what? We are not in this only for where the emissions are counted. The climate keeps the score. The greenhouse gas emissions are counted where it matters in terms of the impact it will have on the world that our children and our children's children will struggle to live in.

Another outrageous feature of what is being proposed is the centralising of decision-making about removing the cap outright into one person, namely, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, the Minister. Unlimited expansion of Dublin Airport is effectively promised here. The Minister has previously referred to 60 million passengers a year, a number almost double the current cap. The Minister has done no evaluation of the climate or environmental implications this will lead to. He has done no evaluation of the economic, social and health costs of just letting Dublin Airport rip at the behest of Michael O'Leary. No climate or biodiversity experts were consulted by the Minister. The excellent group Children's Rights Over Flights tried to meet the Minister. There were numerous requests but no chance to meet him. There was no consideration of children's rights, including their right to a stable climate, even as very young children died from extreme heat in France, and local opposition to the airport for health, noise and environmental reasons was ignored, as was the recommendation of the committee after pre-legislative scrutiny stage "that meaningful engagement is undertaken by the daa with local communities to mitigate the impact of noise from the north runway." No such thing has taken place.

Let the Minister be in no doubt that what is happening is that the profits of the likes of Michael O'Leary, Ryanair and the very big aviation corporations are being put before children's health. To avoid a proper light being shone on that, a proper debate being held on what is going on and a proper discussion of the various amendments we have, the Government just rams it all through, sandwiches it all together and does it in two hours. Presumably, Michael O'Leary would be very happy.

Deputy Pa Daly: I thank Deputy Ahern for tabling this amendment. It makes sense that the Bill should include a definition of "international connectivity" to ensure that the Minister does not have free rein to cite international connectivity as a reason to get rid of the passenger cap

and that there are some guardrails for citing this reason. Section 25 sets out the grounds on which the Minister can decide to revoke a passenger capacity condition, and this amendment would give a definition for one of the grounds on which the Minister can revoke it, since there is currently no definition of "international connectivity". We support the amendment.

Ireland is an island nation. We had a meeting in Cork Airport on Friday morning. While there is great work being carried out at Cork Airport, I am not sure that the long-term plan has been looked at properly by the Government to ensure that there is Luas connectivity, maybe down to Wilton, as well as easy fixes such as a bus lane up to the airport and a widening of the existing road. That needs to be looked at with some haste.

Our connectivity is not optional and our economy, our tourism sector, our diaspora and our ability to attract investment all depend on it. It is the linchpin for hundreds of thousands of jobs and there could be no question that we need a proper aviation strategy. Dublin Airport is fundamental to that, but the passenger cap has been outgrown and is really out of step with reality. Last year, there were 36 million passengers through Dublin Airport when, as everyone knows, the cap was at 32 million. A 4 million difference is not a rounding error. There is something going wrong. The passenger cap is not really realistic any more but we do not want to merely rubber-stamp the decision that is being taken by the Government.

With the cap, we must ensure that there is essential progress but this Bill exposes, if nothing else, the absence of any long-term coherent aviation strategy from the Government. As in Cork Airport, we must plan not only for ten years ahead, but 20 years, 30 years and 40 years and increase capacity in our regional airports, because they are a key to unlocking Ireland's potential. From Kerry to Cork, Shannon, Knock, Waterford, Donegal, Belfast, Derry and beyond, there is unlocked potential.

We must also engage with the fact that local communities have felt ignored, particularly in north County Dublin and Meath, and overlooked for years. Proper community consultation on, for example, night flights does not mean preventing progress. It can enhance proposals and plans. This Bill represents an opportunity to oblige the Minister, and the DAA most importantly, to do a better job. The amendments that we have put forward aim to tackle these issues.

There has been neglect of our national aviation policy. There is no doubt about it. A year later, we are still operating without a policy. Despite parliamentary questions, we still have not obtained clarity from the Government as to when this long-promised update will be delivered. How can we have any confidence in the Government's approach, particularly to the regional airports, with a policy framework that is more than ten years out of date? When we are lifting the passenger cap, the Government must place equal energy, ambition and investment into developing the regional airports because 80% of passengers are processed through Dublin. Cork gets a fraction, even though its numbers have increased by 63% over the past ten years. Shannon, Knock, Kerry and Donegal are all far below their potential and that is as a result of Government inaction. Regional airports are not only transport hubs. They support tourism, create jobs and provide a vital link to our emigrant communities, for example, in London, Manchester, Coventry and Leeds. Communities are also connected to Europe and beyond.

Funding, of course, remains piecemeal and is insufficient. Route development is limited, infrastructure investment is slow and there is no overarching plan tying it all together, which is a missed opportunity.

We propose a new national aviation policy be delivered within six months, one that reflects the realities of modern aviation and sets out a clear path for the future with clear targets for regional airport growth, annual reporting to ensure accountability and a regional aviation impact assessment, so that Dublin's expansion does not come at the expense of the rest of the country. Although the Government has the regional airports programme, it is essential regional airports are not treated as an afterthought but they should be viewed as a key priority. This task force should be specifically focused on growing passenger numbers in Shannon, Cork and Knock, supporting new international routes, such as a transatlantic route out of Cork, which would incentivise airlines to base aircraft outside Dublin and improve transport links to regional airports. If we are serious about balanced regional development, we cannot simply talk about it but we have to plan, invest and deliver it.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: As Deputy Daly has outlined, we support the removal of the cap but there needs to be effective oversight and transparency in terms of the definitions and powers it gives the Minister when coming to the decision to give a ministerial order. This will ensure local communities are engaged with and listened to. This has to strike the right balance between ensuring our international connectivity while protecting local communities and local residents who will have to deal with the consequences of this. At the very least, there should be protections in place for them. We have several amendments submitted in that regard because, of course, there have been ongoing issues with flight paths, noise and much more.

The first amendment here speaks to our international connectivity. Air travel is, of course, essential for us as an island nation, whether that is work, study or opportunities to visit friends and family. It is absolutely critical for us to be part of the wider world. That is why this is an important Bill. However, in many ways, it is frustrating that Government is on the one hand lifting the cap at Dublin Airport while not putting the same efforts into promoting and supporting the use of our regional airports, such as Shannon, Knock and other airports across the country.

It is important to say airports like Shannon and Knock, which are the two most local to me, provide an absolutely fantastic service to people. They want to grow, expand and provide more flights. They are absolutely key to our regional economy in the west of Ireland, in terms of driving tourism into those parts of the country. However, the reality is that well over 80% of the State's air passenger traffic goes through Dublin Airport. That is an absolutely huge imbalance. It represents a policy failure to strike the right balance and to promote and support the use of those regional airports, which would also reduce the level of traffic going through Dublin Airport and support greater growth opportunities in the west of Ireland, particularly given that balanced regional development is something we talk about so much and to which Government often pay lip service. However, this is a prime example of where balanced regional development is not happening, where we are not supporting infrastructural development in the west of Ireland and where Dublin is outpacing the rest of the country significantly.

The investment has to be there from Government to deliver on all this. We need a specific task force put in place to focus on this issue to grow our regional airports and support their use. We have to start taking this issue seriously. It has been over ten years since the national aviation policy was published, and there is still no sign as to when that long-promised policy will be delivered. Without an overarching policy that reflects the developments in aviation and that is going to support balanced regional development in aviation, how can we have any confidence in Government's efforts to get this right?

I make the point regarding public transport and connectivity to our airports. The western rail corridor represents a huge opportunity for connectivity to Knock Airport. However, we have been lacking in even basic things like getting the bus service from Galway to Shannon Airport. These are very basic things we need to get right to improve and to support our regional airports.

There are several gaps and shortfalls in this legislation that need to be addressed, and the amendments are there, particularly in terms of the impact on infrastructure and the environment, which has not been evaluated. How will the Government mitigate the impact of flight paths? What will happen with night-time flights? There should be more extensive debate than just the two hours allocated. Going forward, I urge Government to finally start focusing on balanced regional development in aviation, and to do everything in its power to support regional airports right across the country.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate. I specifically support amendment No. 12 which, along with several other amendments, aims to tighten up this legislation. It is a very frustrating experience for those who are part of this process and who are trying to contribute positively to it and to influence, shape and improve Government legislation. Many people engaged in good faith, not just in these Chambers but also communities and representative and stakeholder groups at pre-legislative scrutiny. I would say very many of them do not see their contributions reflected in the legislation produced. Many of them, myself included, wonder whether the legislation changed a jot based on the pre-legislative scrutiny contributions. Others have made the point regarding the two-hour debate in which we will get through only a fraction of the amendments. In his response the Minister might indicate whether he is going to accept any of the amendments or whether this is another exercise in futility.

I support amendment No. 12 in the name of Deputy Ahern, and I thank him for bringing it forward. It is indicative of the type of change that needs to happen in this legislation. As it stands, the line, "the international reputation of the State in respect of air transport," is vague. It is unclear what counts as a risk to the international reputation of the State, so it could be used freely for any ministerial order. Removing the line ensures the Minister's power is not limitless. Recent controversies within the DAA were allowed to go on for months and years, causing significant reputational damage to the State's aviation sector, yet we did not see the Minister act to bring them to an end. It is an incredibly loose and vague line, is subject to significant challenge and is reflective of a real looseness within this legislation.

Regardless of one's position on the passenger cap, and I live in and represent a constituency that is not far from the airport, many people understand that it was of its time and maybe is not the most logical thing for road capacity. It is also ignored on an annual basis. People

understand the logic of growing the airport in a sustainable way but they also live with what they would see as essentially an airport and airlines that are given free rein, with complete disregard of their neighbours, responsibilities and the types of obligations on individual households and other businesses and they wonder why there is a different set of rules for the DAA and several airlines.

I would have thought this legislation would be a good opportunity to address some of those concerns.

Instead, it looks like the Government wants to quickly lift the passenger cap, give significant powers to the Minister and march on regardless, paying no attention to flight paths that were never intended or provided for but have been questioned since the very second they came into being and that technically, in the words of the DAA not just at this transport committee, but the previous transport committee, are actively under reconsideration, although there is no timeline for that. It is similar with regard to night-time flights, compliance with planning, being a good neighbour, the operation of the Aircraft Noise Competent Authority, ANCA, and its independence, and noise monitoring and mitigation. For me, it is wholly unacceptable that none of that is being addressed in this Bill.

Practically all of the amendments, certainly from us in Sinn Féin, sought to address those weaknesses in the Bill but also concerns in the local community and more widely, including among people with an interest in the sustainable growth of Dublin Airport, in balanced regional development and in the development of the Irish economy. One of the amendments, which came up at a pre-legislative scrutiny hearing that I attended, was a very reasonable ask, one that is literally being done elsewhere. It was for a comprehensive assessment of what lifting the passenger cap at Dublin Airport - increasing the number of flights into and out of Dublin Airport - would mean for the island economy. A steady-state study was done of Schiphol Airport. It would be a logical step to take in advance of lifting the passenger cap. Our specific amendment was that such a comprehensive assessment would look at the wider implications. If the passenger cap is lifted but matters carry on regardless, there is potentially unsustainable development, impacts on the economy and the environment, and a compounding of regional imbalances. A number of others have mentioned that. That is something that I think the Minister needs to take away and consider again. Regardless of his position on the passenger cap and the need to lift it, there is a very strong case, as a matter of good practice, for carrying out a study such as that. The consultancy company that carried out the work relating to Schiphol Airport was CE Delft. The Minister needs to reconsider the idea.

We have proposed an independent assessment of the flight paths at Dublin Airport. The Minister will have heard, and I certainly have heard as a constituency TD in Meath East, that from the minute the north runway opened, there was an unmitigated disaster and a level of incompetence that I just find incredible, where houses were noise-insulated on the basis that planes would be flying over their homes, only to realise that the houses that were insulated were not on a flight path while the houses that were not insulated were on a flight path. That incredible, farcical, ridiculous situation continues.

There are really good people who are committed to the aviation sector who want to see Dublin Airport grow sustainably, who are employed in the aviation sector, and who have literally out how the situation can be improved. We have submitted amendments to call for an independent assessment of the flight paths. Regardless of whether the Minister accepts that

amendment, that needs to happen. There is a wafer-thin commitment from the DAA that that will happen. It needs to happen. The DAA gave that commitment at the last transport committee and again during pre-legislative scrutiny. I call on the Minister to reflect on the amendments that have been submitted here and to understand exactly where they are coming from. They seek to strengthen this legislation. I strongly believe that there is significant room for improvement on this Bill.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I am glad to have the opportunity to speak on this Bill. The imposition of a passenger cap was ludicrous and never worked. It is quite unique in world aviation. The removal of it was always inevitable. On the eve of the last general election, I remember the main party leaders, both Government and Opposition, saying that this would have to happen, with various promises being made in the lead-up to voting day about how this would happen through legislation were they in government.

I want to go through some of the concerns that I expressed at the committee. I am concerned about the imbalance of Dublin Airport in Irish aviation. In the past year, its market share of inbound and outbound traffic has been 86%. It is growing year on year. If one were to start all over again and plot out where there would be airports in Ireland, there would probably not be five airports down the western seaboard and just one on the east. There is an imbalance of where the airports are located and certainly an imbalance these days with respect to where the flights take off and land. I made a point at the Oireachtas transport committee, of which I have been a member in this Dáil and in the previous Dáil, that nearly all Government legislation and policy I have seen over the years makes a preamble reference to the national planning framework and to Project Ireland 2040, and references things at the very outset such as balanced regional development. I do not see that anywhere in this legislation.

Although it is not in the spine of this legislation, I think there need to be addendums and a new national aviation strategy brought in in the autumn, because the current one is outdated and deals with a time, pre-pandemic, when aviation was going well. It has floundered since and recovered since. It has been up and down, boom and bust for aviation. The national aviation plan is not up to date. It does not reflect where aviation is at the moment. It does not reflect the current difficulties that airlines face with respect to fuel crises. It does not reflect the fact that, to this day, only 1% of cargo coming in and out of Ireland moves by air. There are many opportunities. I want to speak for a few moments about some of the opportunities for the other airports of Ireland that I think can be addressed. If they are not in this legislation, there are other ways in which this can be addressed.

I acknowledge the Minister's inputs with regard to Shannon Airport. The Minister has included in the regional airports programme something that we have been advocating for a long time in the mid-west region. Shannon Airport had a very good year last year. It was its best year of the past 16 years. Passenger numbers were 2.3 million. There was 9% growth on the previous flying year. Things are going well there but there is a concern that, with the removal of the cap at Dublin Airport, it becomes somewhat open season and there will be a proliferation of flights to certain hub airports.

If I can illustrate what imbalanced regional development looks like in the aviation realm, tomorrow, starting early in the morning and right up to about 9.30 p.m., 13 direct flights will depart from Dublin Airport heading to Amsterdam Schiphol, which is recognised as one of the

principal and most important European airport hubs. I did not check but I presume an equal number return at various times during the day. Not a single flight from Shannon will go that way. We will have connectivity to Paris-Charles de Gaulle and Frankfurt, but it is minuscule. Some of those flights have been pulled. I booked a trip to Paris for my family for a few days later this year. We were to fly out of Shannon. We got an email to say the flight was being moved to Dublin Airport. This is happening time and time again for people in the mid-west region. It is largely down to airlines trying to rationalise and pare back some of their costs for refuelling and so on, given the crisis that airlines face with overhead costs. It is not good enough because we want a service that operates out of our region. I make a conscious choice every time I book to fly from Shannon. It is a mantra we have.

I am chairman of an all-party Oireachtas group that deals with Shannon Airport. While this House is often defined by division, argument and divergent views, I am glad to say that the 19 Members who sit on that, including TDs, Senators, and Ministers, from Clare, Limerick City, Limerick County, Galway East and Tipperary North work collegially.

We meet in the airport boardroom. We meet with airport management, we deal with stakeholders and we try to represent the Shannon agenda in the Houses of the Oireachtas. The fact is that with Dublin's 84% to 86% market share - it varies year on year - the other national State airports are not being sweated fully. Without cutting a single blade of grass, without digging a new foundation or without laying a new concrete block, Shannon Airport has current capacity, without any changing of configurations, to double its passenger intake. Yet, this cap will allow Dublin to grow. It could put further pressure on the airports along the western seaboard. That would be a concern of ours.

I made the point earlier about Project Ireland 2040 and the national planning framework. In nearly every Government decision, whether it is on the provision of healthcare, housing, water or sanitary services, there is usually a reference to balanced regional development and other hubs outside of the capital. There is not in this legislation. That is why I would like to see it brought forward in the autumn-winter period as part of a new aviation policy. It must speak more to the regions. When we undertook pre-legislative scrutiny at the Oireachtas committee, IDA Ireland come in. It very much supports the Minister's legislation but it too cautioned that there should be strong regional airport growth. It must run in parallel to all of this.

Very often when legislation is brought before this House, the words "miscellaneous provisions" are added on at the end. There have been some major events in Irish aviation over the past four or five months while this legislation was evolving. I believe there was scope for those to be added in by way of miscellaneous provisions. Perhaps the Minister might bring other legislation before the House in due course.

What I want to principally reference is not in this Bill passed tonight but should be of major concern to all who value air safety. A major wind farm application was submitted in County Clare by Ballycar Green Energy. The Irish Aviation Authority and AirNav Ireland were involved. It was unprecedented and I and other TDs raised this issue in the Dáil. They said that the erection of wind turbines in close proximity to a radar would distort the safe working of the radar. That ruling has been made. We now need to get to a point where Shannon Airport's and other airports' primary radar and secondary radar are protected by insisting that all wind energy zonings within a five- to eight-kilometre radius must be removed. It is not safe. It has been deemed that by the aviation regulator and by AirNav Ireland. It is wrong that our wind

energy policy still aligns with something from ten years ago when people, who know about aviation safety, are now saying it is unsafe. That should have been included by way of a miscellaneous provision in this Bill and I hope it can be addressed in the autumn.

The legislation is important and needs to pass. Our national airport cannot be stifled. We must allow passengers to choose where they want to fly from. We must allow free markets to function. There is an imbalance here, and there has been for many years, between Dublin Airport in our capital versus the other airports in the west of Ireland. The national aviation policy needs to address that. The regional airports programme could be bumped up further. We need to reflect on that example I gave that tomorrow, 13 flights will leave Dublin for Amsterdam Schiphol. Not a single one will be flying out from the west of Ireland. That is the type of balance that can be addressed. I suggested it at pre-legislative scrutiny. We could have inserted somewhere into this Bill a provision for slot management. Slot management typically only happens in airports where they are under huge pressure and the number of flights exceed what the airport is able to cater for. The Irish Aviation Authority and the Dublin Airport Authority would start managing slots. I would argue that at the moment, when any airline in the world applies to run a new service into Dublin, it is only viewed through the lens of approval or disapproval. That is the only thing. The Irish Aviation Authority, by statute, is only allowed to appraise it on a "Yes" or "No" basis. We could impose a regional development clause in that. If 13 flights are going to Schiphol, the Irish Aviation Authority should be saying it has exceeded what we probably need as a country and more should be given to the regions. That clause could have been in there and it should be in the new national aviation strategy.

Minister for Transport (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I thank the ten Deputies who have contributed to the debate so far. I will deal with the specific amendments first and a few of the other points. Some Deputies, such as Deputy Coppinger - not to pick her out - could have a look at the Second Stage speech. I outlined a lot of what we were talking about this evening on Second Stage. I will make a comment before I speak directly to the amendment but it is related. I know everyone in this House has an earnest and a well-held view about this. I think all of us agree that Dublin Airport is an important strategic asset for this State. That is the first thing. I will deal with regional as well because our regional airports are critically important for this country. By the way, it is not just those within the Republic. Derry and Belfast airports are on this island and are critically important. I will turn to regional development and the national aviation policy, which I clearly referenced in the Second Stage contribution.

If we take the airport as it operates right now, last year, 36.4 million passengers flew through Dublin Airport. A small percentage, approximately 1.7 million or so, transited through it. They are passenger numbers, not flights. That was said earlier on and I know Deputy Ahern probably misspoke on that. They were passenger numbers as opposed to flights. That is important too.

The ratio of passengers to jobs is about 1 million to 1,000. For every 1 million passengers, there are about 1,000 direct jobs. We have approximately 30,000 plus workers directly on campus and about 130,000 total between direct and indirect. I am speaking to amendment No. 1 to section 2, which is Deputy Ahern's amendment. Others have come into the House in a less constructive way, such as Deputies Murphy and Coppinger and others. We would be having a debate here, and rightly so, as to why we lost 4,000 direct jobs in the airport and 10,000 to 15,000 indirect jobs if we continued to operate it as it is now and did not try to address what is

a legacy issue. To be fair, many Deputies recognised that as a legacy issue. There is an economic imperative here but there is a balanced approach.

There is the good neighbour policy that needs to be operated by DAA, the airport operator. I said that really clearly on Second Stage. I have grown up beside the airport. I represent an airport constituency. I know the benefits of living beside the airport by way of proximity. I know the challenges for members within my community and my constituency and other constituencies like Deputy O'Gorman's. That has to be done in a proper and appropriate way. I said clearly on Second Stage that this has not always been the case by the airport operators. On page 8 of the Bill, someone bemoaned the powers that may be given to the Minister. That might be a well-held view but it states, "The Minister may give a direction in writing to daa for any purpose relating to this Act, including, but not limited to-". I have said it clearly on a couple of things. I have written to the airport and intend for it to do things such as improving and expanding the noise insulation scheme. I do not think Deputy Coppinger knew about ANCA's decision at the time. That decision in relation to aircraft noise has been published for 14 weeks, which would have a significant bearing on the scale and the breadth of the noise insulation scheme.

I have put it on the record of the House here and directly to the DAA that the voluntary purchase scheme needs to be improved upon. There are people who have sold their homes under that scheme. It needs to be improved further. There are people, particularly on the western side, right on the airport campus, whose homes I visited. For others to make any suggestion that I have not met residents' groups is simply untrue. Again, that charge was made by Deputies Murphy and Coppinger. It is not true. Formally, I have had three separate meetings with three groups over the course of the past 12 to 18 months, listening to them directly. I represent residents and constituents who work in the airport as well as those who have issues with noise. I meet them and engage with them all the time, so what they said is simply not true.

There is a responsibility to balance sustainable growth at the airport, supporting the jobs in the airport and supporting the potential to grow further jobs and further routes.

On flight paths, I said very clearly on Second Stage - not on foot of a proposal from anyone else but I welcome the main Opposition party looking at this - that an independent assessment of flight paths will happen. We need it to happen because, as Deputy O'Rourke said, there are people, including in north County Dublin, who saw applications made for certain flight paths that were granted and were not adhered to. I will not say too much because that was a matter for a retention application as well. When you plan forward, you have to try to be very clear with people. Yes, I want the airport to grow. I want the good jobs that are in the airport to be supported and I want the reality of ensuring that happens in a sustainable way.

I think it was Deputy Farrelly who mentioned SHDs and going over the head of local authorities. I agree absolutely - that is why as housing Minister I got rid of SHDs - but this legislation specifically references that we are protecting the existing infrastructure application in there. We are not overriding the application that has still not been heard. I take the Deputy's point and am not dismissing it at all but, in line with the legal advice we had, fundamentally the policy direction that I wanted was to protect that application that is there because it has gone through a number of iterations by way of public consultation right the way through.

It is a complicated decision-making structure between the aircraft noise competent authority, ANCA, and Fingal County Council. I was in this Chamber in the Opposition debating this when it was the subject of a Bill in 2018. I actually supported the Bill but managed to get some changes to it - parts of it were a halfway house – and on foot of that we have commenced the review of where planning should sit for an airport into the future, as a strategic asset, how the noise authority interacts with the local authority and all those different things. There were people in the Fingal area at the time, as I am sure Deputy O’Gorman will know, who were not happy with ANCA sitting within Fingal County Council even though it is an independent organisation. There were people who had concerns about that. I commend ANCA on the work it does. It operates very well and has protected the independence it has had.

I mention that because these were points that were made during debates, genuine concerns that may have been raised, that have not come to pass. That is not to dismiss any of the points that have been made here either, because this is just the first iteration of this. When I say it will protect the existing application, that application, if granted, would supersede any order I would make. Again, that is clearly set down in the legislation. If it is refused, my order stays in place. How do I make the order? This question has been raised by many TDs here, and especially Deputies Ahern and O’Gorman have raised it in relation to environmental considerations. It is clearly set out in the Bill. I will not be doing the assessments. The full environmental impact assessment will be done in line with an EIA directive, which will identify, describe and assess the direct and indirect significant effects of making an order on several factors including climate. That will be independently undertaken prior to the making of the order. An Coimisiún Pleanála will do that and I have set out a timeframe.

Any charge that we are setting aside any environmental considerations is absolutely not true. I will not prejudice the outcome of that assessment, which I will consider fully before making an order. I have made it clear that even though international aviation emissions are outside the scope of the climate action plan, which is a fact, we are taking actions that are aligned with the global approach to decarbonisation in the aviation sector. That is the element in relation to this. We are not setting aside climate obligations, climate assessments or environmental impact assessments. That is not correct. We are protecting the original planning application. That is being done and I have said that very clearly. It does give the Minister of the day the power to seek an application from the DAA for further increases.

I am glad Deputy Murphy is back. I referred to him earlier - not in a derogatory way, I might add - in relation to his comment that the Bill has been rushed or not considered. There were ten weeks of pre-legislative scrutiny. It is a planning condition going back to 2007 and 2008. It is something that has been kicked around for a long time and has never been dealt with. Those pre-legislative scrutiny hearings were open to any Deputy to go and make his or her case or point of view.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: I was there.

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: Yes, Deputy O’Gorman was there. I was not saying he was not but I am saying there are others who have contributed here this evening who did not go to that committee to put forward their case. They are entitled to do it here this evening but I am just stating that. I did say, now that Deputy Murphy is here, that I have met residents. Deputy Coppinger made the charge the last time that I had not done so but I certainly have.

On balanced regional development, national aviation policy has been rightly mentioned. Again, on Second Stage, I tried to be very clear on this. We have commenced work on the new national aviation policy, which is a commitment in the programme for Government. We will issue an issues paper on the new national aviation policy later this year. That will form the basis for stakeholder engagement and look at the balanced regional development of our airports.

All our regional airports are growing and that is good. Cork Airport is growing. Deputy Pa Daly asked what was happening with Cork. There is a €200 million capital investment happening in Cork Airport. I visited it only a few weeks ago. It is a great airport with further potential to grow and I want to see that happen. I was at the 40th anniversary of Ireland West, where I met the team and saw the new infrastructure that is in place, fire services training, new stands and its development plan. Hopefully, Ireland West Airport Knock will hit 1 million passengers by the end of this year. Shannon is growing. It grew by 9% last year. It not only has really good plans in place but there is growth happening. I think there are 41 routes out of Shannon now, which is the highest number it has had in maybe 30 years. Donegal Airport is servicing the north west and we have managed to protect that airport with the PSO changes we made. The Dublin-Derry air route will open in October through PSO funding we secured through the shared island fund. Kerry Airport in Farranfore is continuing to grow. Commitment towards regional growth is why I have changed the regional airports policy to ensure that airports can grow up to 3 million and still receive support from the State to grow. I want to see them grow. There are really good jobs there. Connectivity is important for tourism and for our wider economy as well.

If we were to stick to 32 million and a decision were made tomorrow that the cap currently in place would apply immediately such that we reduced the passenger numbers from 36.4 million to 32 million, we would be losing thousands of jobs in Dublin Airport. Deputy Coppinger would probably be the first to come here on that. She might not be the first but many Deputies would rightly come in here and ask what we were doing to support airport workers. What I am doing to support airport workers is making sure there are good jobs in the airport and making sure people can have good careers in the airport, not just in aviation itself and the airlines but in maintenance, repair and overhaul, MRO, leasing and all the other elements of the aviation sector in which Irish people are at the forefront right the way across the world. The airport has to grow in a sustainable way and it will. We are protecting the application that is before Fingal County Council. We have ensured that is the case with this legislation by specific reference to it.

On future growth, the application right now would raise the cap to 40 million. The assessments that have been done will back up that 40 million. Any future growth would be based on an order that would be made. An application would be made to the Minister for a further increase if that was required in the future but you cannot just grow the airport and passenger numbers without having the infrastructure in place. That is why you need the new stands at the airport and all the various things that underpin the growth of the aviation sector and, indeed, Dublin Airport.

To respond to Deputy Ahern, I was not being facetious the last day and I will not be facetious now either. It is very clear what international connectivity is and that is why I am not accepting either of the amendments he tabled.

I have also clearly covered our obligations with regard to environmental impact assessments and how they will be assessed through An Coimisiún Pleanála, so I do not intend to accept amendment No. 13 either. I think I have covered most of what was there, but I assure people that residents and those living in proximity are at the forefront of my mind in ensuring the airport can grow in a balanced way on the basis that it operates as a good neighbour, which it has not always done. I have reiterated my commitment to ensuring an independent assessment of flight paths. That will happen. We will continue to support and grow the jobs at Dublin Airport and everything else that relates to the other, indirect jobs that flow from smaller and larger Irish companies thousands of people derive their income from. That is an important consideration, I would say, and should be for everyone in this Chamber.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I thank the Minister for his comments and for listening so attentively to what people were saying. On my amendment, the issue I have is how much connectivity is ever going to be enough. We still do not have an answer on that. He mentioned a figure of 40 million passengers being the first application.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: That is the one in with Fingal now.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: The Minister's assumption is that will be the first application. There is no guarantee anywhere here, however, that it is going to be a 40 million cap. There is presumably nothing preventing the DAA from applying for a higher figure. However, that is the Minister's understanding and that is fair enough. Our issue is that there are no limits anywhere in this Bill. There are no parameters for the number of passengers who will be coming through the airport. No real economic assessment has been done here. The Minister stated that there are 1,000 jobs attached to every 1 million passengers, and I ask where he got that figure from and whether it is a figure given to him by the airline industry. At least when it came to the expansion of data centres in this country and the Government's policy on that, it commissioned a report we could scrutinise. The Government acknowledged the need to back up the claims about jobs related to data centres with some hard data. Now, the data is questionable but at least it was put out there by the Government. We have not seen any of that for the claims being made about jobs and the international connectivity of Dublin Airport. Do not get me wrong, we value Dublin Airport. We completely understand that it is a strategic national asset. Part of our concern here relates to balanced regional development. It relates back to what Deputy Crowe was speaking about where flights from Shannon are being run from Dublin rather than Shannon. Will this policy now give rise to Dublin swallowing up everything else? Is international connectivity just a byword for a policy from large international airlines that want to use Dublin Airport as a hub and create an even bigger hub out of Dublin that will not necessarily serve Irish people or passengers but is going to serve these international airlines and passengers who are connecting here to move abroad? I have serious questions about that as well.

As a lawyer, I like definitions. Again, as Deputy Whitmore alluded to, we need some metrics to hold the Minister to account. There are emissions connected to every new additional flight that is going to come from Dublin Airport, and we want to have some accountability here. Huge power is being put in the Minister's hands in this Bill, and we want to put some guardrails and parameters around that. Unfortunately, he is determined to dismantle some of the climate

guardrails the previous Government put in place through the disapplication of section 15 of the climate Act.

The Minister also mentioned that he is not setting aside climate considerations. There are other amendments that relate to this and some of his powers under the Bill. Those powers are contained in section 25 of the Bill, and they are his powers to make an order. I bring this up because the Minister raised it and said he has to consider any conditions that An Coimisiún Pleanála sends to him. That is all true. A process is set out here whereby An Coimisiún Pleanála does an environmental impact assessment, and it can make recommendations and put conditions down that they send to him as a Minister. Under section 25(3), he can decide to include that condition in an order he makes. He can unilaterally decide to vary that condition or he can refuse to include that condition in an order that he makes. That is a massive power for him to simply take as advisory anything that An Coimisiún Pleanála says. I do not accept that he is not setting aside climate considerations here. It is up to him or a future Minister for Transport to say sod whatever An Coimisiún Pleanála said and sod the climate because they will have an explicit power to ignore all of that, and to decide that is what they are going to do. That is a massive flaw in this Bill. If it is the Minister's position that he wants to take climate considerations seriously into account when it comes to our aviation policy, this section 25(3)(c) is a massive problem. We do not have any answers from the Minister on where the savings will come from to counteract the additional emissions coming from Dublin Airport when this airport cap is lifted. We are lifting the Dublin Airport cap, and we still have no other cap. We still have no climate action plan, and we desperately want to see that from the Minister as soon as possible.

Emissions from air travel are massive. I do not know if we all consider just how polluting our flights are. To put this in context, the Minister and certainly the electoral nerds among us will have seen last week that the Electoral Commission produced a report about the Irish obsession with posters during election campaigns. It estimated that the carbon emissions for all the posters used in the general election in 2024 had the equivalent of just two return transatlantic flights. That report interestingly said that Irish people hate posters and want to do away with them. If we did do away with election posters, it would simply have the same environmental impact as two full transatlantic flights. We are seriously increasing our carbon emissions here. There is a world in which I can support something like this, but we would need to see where the limits and the guardrails are, and where in the transport sector or elsewhere those savings will come from so we can comply with our legally binding carbon budgets and our international obligations.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I thank the Minister for his response. I want to come back briefly on two elements. The Minister has said that in advancing this legislation he is not setting aside our climate obligations. Just so it is on the record of the House, section 39 of the Bill is a modification of the application of section 15 of Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015. It is worth looking at what that actually does. Section 39 states:

The Minister and [An Coimisiún Pleanála], in performing their functions under this Act, shall not be subject to the requirements referred to in section 15(1) of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015, having regard to the likely consequences for the economy of the State and for international connectivity if an order is not made by the Minister under *section 25(1)*.

The Minister and the commission are not subject to the requirements under section 15(1) of the climate Act. What are those requirements? There are five requirements set out in law. They are that a relevant body shall, insofar as it is practicable, perform its functions in a manner consistent with the most recently approved climate action plan, the most recently approved long-term climate action strategy, the most recently approved national adaptation framework and approved sectoral adaptation plan, the furtherance of the national climate objective and the objective of mitigating greenhouse gas emissions and adapting to the effects of climate change in the State.

8 o'clock

The word "literally" is overused, but the Minister is literally disapplying climate obligations by means of this particular Bill. Section 39 literally states that, so can we just move away from this idea that the Minister is not doing so. He is, because it says he is in section 39. It is everything from the annual - or what used to be the annual - climate action plans all the way up to the important national climate objective that the State has and that is the centrepiece of the climate action Act, as amended. These are being disapplied when it comes to the crucial decision on lifting the airport cap. They has been disapplied in other areas as well, including in the legislation on the decision relating to LNG that we dealt with earlier. They will possibly be disapplied in relation to many decisions coming through in respect of the critical infrastructure Bill. In some places, what is happening is actually going to make pro-climate critical infrastructure harder to defend in court. I raised that point already. Let us be very clear: the Bill is literally disapplying our climate obligations. That is the purpose of section 39.

I wish to comment on the point about the engagement with the process. The Minister mentioned the pre-legislative scrutiny process, which was lengthy. We got to hear in detail the impact of noise on residents and the attempt by certain US CEOs to bully us into making this particular change. We are looking at the detailed legislation at this point. When the ANCA legislation was going through, the Minister made the point that, following engagement with one of his ministerial colleagues, he was able to secure some amendments and improvements.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The Deputy can table amendments.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: We cannot do that tonight because we have not even had the opportunity to go through good amendments or to address some of the points in detail. After Committee Stage, most fair-minded Ministers would at least look at what the Opposition has said and make some changes or improvements. We do not have that opportunity here. I have a good amendment for the Minister. It is amendment No. 14. He recognised the work ANCA has done and the fact that it recently published a decision. Let us give that decision some teeth. Let us recognise the noise abatement objective for Dublin Airport in this legislation. Let us recognise that it is one of the considerations that An Coimisiún Pleanála should use in the context of the recommendation it will make and in respect of which the Minister will ultimately make a decision. There are good amendments here. We just do not have the time to tease them out and, perhaps, bring forward other amendments. That is the process. We are helpless in terms of that now. There are good amendments here, and some of them should be accepted.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I thank the Minister for his very comprehensive response to the many points made. As Deputy O'Gorman said, we have to be accurate in what we say. This legislation is exempt from section 15 of the climate action Act. It is of critical importance to acknowledge that in the first instance. Otherwise, we are beating around the bush and being quite disingenuous. Speaking of being disingenuous, we should not be dangling the prospect of 4,000 jobs being impacted during the debate on legislation of this nature. I do not think it is accurate to speak about this matter in that context. The Minister has insight from meeting with the DAA and everybody else involved, but, given the tight timeframe, to make a threat of that nature in respect of legislation does not help.

I listened with real interest to a DAA spokesperson commenting on balanced regional development and the importance of other regional airports. He said that airlines simply do not want to use the other airports and that is why the passenger cap needs to go. In that context, I reiterate the point I made in my initial contribution. This is legislation and the policy behind it are being driven by the market. The cost of that is yet to be determined.

The Minister reverted to me about the SHD legislation and how it differs from this Bill. On the face of it, however, it is undemocratic to bypass the local authority in the first instance. The Minister referred to the strategic importance of this piece of infrastructure. When he was a councillor - I was also a councillor in Kildare - he would not have been impressed by the idea that the local authority of which he was a member, in the context of the important function it plays in respect of the planning process, would be bypassed. I have a very fond memory of a colleague of the Minister's who served with me on Kildare County Council declaring a climate emergency. He put down a motion at a meeting of Kildare County Council, banged on the table and stated that we were in a climate emergency and living in that dystopian future that we were told to worry about when it came to severe weather events. That colleague of the Minister is now going to vote in favour of legislation, the consequences of which we simply cannot know because no calculation has been carried out. There is no sense from a numbers perspective what impact this legislation will have. The Minister cannot rebut that because it is factually correct. We have not done the assessment. We have not done the holistic calculation of just how damaging this will be.

There was a situation in Kildare about a month ago whereby the ESB threatened that it was going to flood one community because of excess water in the River Liffey. At the same time, another community 3 km or 4 km away had no water. That is testament to the ever-worsening and ever-more-extreme climate events our country faces and to our place in this world.

It pains me when colleagues declare that we are in a climate emergency at local authority meetings and then the Government bypasses local authorities with its decision-making structures. I wonder what will happen next. What other ministerial powers are going to come about? When we are talking about nuclear energy or other important projects, will it be okay to be undemocratic and not to put these through the formal planning process because of their strategic importance? I am worried. If we get that precedent wrong, it will be the start of a very worrying trend.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I want to press my amendment.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Am I allowed to respond?

An Ceann Comhairle: Not really. If the Deputy is pressing the amendment, that is his prerogative. It is his amendment.

Amendment put:

The Committee divided: Tá, 58; Níl, 88; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Ahern, Ciarán.	Aird, William.	
Bacik, Ivana.	Ardagh, Catherine.	
Bennett, Cathy.	Boland, Grace.	
Byrne, Joanna.	Brabazon, Tom.	
Cairns, Holly.	Brennan, Brian.	
Carthy, Matt.	Brennan, Shay.	
Conway-Walsh, Rose.	Brophy, Colm.	
Coppinger, Ruth.	Browne, James.	
Cronin, Réada.	Burke, Colm.	
Crowe, Seán.	Burke, Peter.	
Cullinane, David.	Butler, Mary.	
Cummins, Jen.	Butterly, Paula.	
Daly, Pa.	Buttimer, Jerry.	
Devine, Máire.	Byrne, Malcolm.	
Donnelly, Paul.	Byrne, Thomas.	
Ennis, Daniel.	Cahill, Michael.	
Farrelly, Aidan.	Callaghan, Catherine.	
Farrell, Mairéad.	Calleary, Dara.	
Fitzmaurice, Michael.	Canney, Seán.	
Gannon, Gary.	Carrigy, Mícheál.	
Gibney, Sinéad.	Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	
Graves, Ann.	Chambers, Jack.	
Hayes, Eoin.	Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	
Healy, Seamus.	Clendennen, John.	
Hearne, Rory.	Collins, Niall.	
Kenny, Eoghan.	Connolly, John.	
Kenny, Martin.	Cooney, Joe.	
Kerrane, Claire.	Crowe, Cathal.	
Lawlor, George.	Currie, Emer.	
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	Daly, Martin.	
McGettigan, Donna.	Dempsey, Aisling.	
McGuinness, Conor D.	Devlin, Cormac.	
Mitchell, Denise.	Dillon, Alan.	
Murphy, Paul.	Dolan, Albert.	
Mythen, Johnny.	Dooley, Timmy.	
Nash, Ged.	Feighan, Frankie.	
Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	Fleming, Sean.	
Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	Foley, Norma.	
O'Callaghan, Cian.	Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	
O'Donoghue, Richard.	Geoghegan, James.	
O'Donoghue, Robert.	Grealish, Noel.	

O'Gorman, Roderic.	Harkin, Marian.	
O'Hara, Louis.	Healy-Rae, Michael.	
O'Reilly, Louise.	Heydon, Martin.	
O'Rourke, Darren.	Higgins, Emer.	
Ó Broin, Eoin.	Keogh, Keira.	
Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	Kyne, Seán.	
Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	Lahart, John.	
Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	Lawless, James.	
Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	Lowry, Michael.	
Quaide, Liam.	Martin, Micheál.	
Quinlivan, Maurice.	Maxwell, David.	
Rice, Pádraig.	McAuliffe, Paul.	
Stanley, Brian.	McCarthy, Noel.	
Wall, Mark.	McConalogue, Charlie.	
Ward, Charles.	McCormack, Tony.	
Ward, Mark.	McEntee, Helen.	
Whitmore, Jennifer.	McGrath, Séamus.	
	McGreehan, Erin.	
	Moran, Kevin Boxer.	
	Moynihan, Aindrias.	
	Moynihan, Michael.	
	Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	
	Murphy, Michael.	
	Naughton, Hildegard.	
	Neville, Joe.	
	Nolan, Carol.	
	O'Brien, Darragh.	
	O'Connell, Maeve.	
	O'Connor, James.	
	O'Dea, Willie.	
	O'Donnell, Kieran.	
	O'Meara, Ryan.	
	O'Shea, John Paul.	
	O'Sullivan, Christopher.	
	O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	
	Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	
	Ó Fearghail, Seán.	
	Ó Muirí, Naoise.	
	Richmond, Neale.	
	Roche, Peter.	
	Scanlon, Eamon.	
	Smith, Brendan.	
	Smyth, Niamh.	
	Timmins, Edward.	
	Toole, Gillian.	
	Troy, Robert.	
	Ward, Barry.	

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Ciarán Ahern and Jennifer Whitmore; Níl, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie.

Amendment declared lost.

Section 2 agreed to.

Sections 3 to 5, inclusive, agreed to.

SECTION 6

Deputy Pa Daly: I move amendment No. 2:

In page 8, between lines 27 and 28, to insert the following:

“(4) The Minister shall, not later than 12 months following commencement, lay before both Houses of the Oireachtas a report reviewing daa’s compliance with the directions of the Minister.”.

This amendment seeks that the Minister should within 12 months following commencement, lay before both Houses of the Oireachtas a report reviewing DAA's compliance with the directions of the Minister because, as we all know, there is a lack of trust in the north County Dublin area in what the DAA has done.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: This amendment proposes that I lay a report before the Houses in relation to the DAA's compliance with any direction I give it under the Bill. I think this provision is unnecessary. Under the Bill, the DAA is required to comply with a direction that I issue. Typically, this will relate to the provision of reports to allow the environmental assessments to be undertaken. If that information is not provided and the assessments cannot be undertaken, no order can be made. As such, it is in the interest of the DAA to comply with a direction I issue. I do not envisage a scenario where the DAA does not comply with a direction I give, so reporting on compliance will be unnecessary.

In addition, it is open to Deputies to seek information by way of parliamentary questions. I again refer the Deputy to the powers of a Minister to give directions to the DAA. That will not be confined. We have discussed at length here too the importance of the DAA being a good neighbour. I think this has improved in the short term but it needs to improve further. In relation to things like flight paths, I have made this very clear. We are going to have an independent assessment of it. Additionally, as was referenced earlier in relation to flights, and the decision, in particular, that ANCA has issued for a 14-week public consultation, I encourage people to engage with it. It is a good piece of work and will feed into the planning application for 40 million passengers currently with Fingal County Council. That is why I was at pains to say earlier that we protect that current application because communities, individuals and other stakeholders have engaged directly with it. It would not be appropriate to set that aside, nor am I actually suggesting that happen. Furthermore, I have actually specifically protected it, and it is referred to in this legislation. In that instance, I am not going to accept this amendment for the reasons I put forward.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: How could the Minister not accept such an amendment? It is as plain as anything that there should be some obligation on the DAA to review how it works. We

only have a minute or so left. I have two very quick things. One concerns a resident who sent this communication last week. I was making the point about the DAA and insulation. This person said that as they typed the message in their back garden, planes were flying directly overhead, every window in the house was open and their four kids under seven were in bed. This person added that their house has not been noise-insulated by the DAA and wanted us to know that the existing insulation scheme has not installed a single air conditioning system for affected residents in order to remove the necessity to open windows during the hottest and loudest months. The message continued by saying the scheme is not fit for purpose and that it is grossly unfair that the costs of expansion and of the airlines doing business are being borne by local residents. Unfortunately, that is the reality. During the hottest months, the flights are the worst.

I also want to ask the Minister about having said earlier that he had met residents.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I have.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I just checked, and residents in the St. Margaret's The Ward Residents Group have asked to meet the Minister in relation to their Planning for Real proposal.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I have met them.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: They said the Minister has not met them since before last summer, so we have two conflicting statements then. I have to believe the residents. They have now gone to court because they have not been able to meet the Minister.

I also want to say something else because the Minister has used the issue of jobs to justify this. Nobody is saying that any jobs should be lost. This is actually about expanding the airport. We actually cannot have unlimited growth all the time. We have to take into account the impact on the environment and climate change and on local residents too. To talk about job losses is just really out of order in that sense.

We are very rushed again. We are not going to get to some of the other very important amendments that have been tabled.

The Minister needs to meet the residents. If he is saying he has met them, then he should agree to meet them. I definitely do believe we should call a vote on this Bill. It is an extremely important one.

Amendment put:

The Committee divided: Tá, 59; Níl, 88; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Ahern, Ciarán.	Aird, William.	
Bacik, Ivana.	Ardagh, Catherine.	
Bennett, Cathy.	Boland, Grace.	
Byrne, Joanna.	Brabazon, Tom.	
Cairns, Holly.	Brennan, Brian.	
Carthy, Matt.	Brennan, Shay.	
Collins, Michael.	Brophy, Colm.	

Conway-Walsh, Rose.	Browne, James.	
Coppinger, Ruth.	Burke, Colm.	
Cronin, Réada.	Burke, Peter.	
Crowe, Seán.	Butler, Mary.	
Cullinane, David.	Butterly, Paula.	
Cummins, Jen.	Buttimer, Jerry.	
Daly, Pa.	Byrne, Malcolm.	
Devine, Máire.	Byrne, Thomas.	
Donnelly, Paul.	Cahill, Michael.	
Ennis, Daniel.	Callaghan, Catherine.	
Farrelly, Aidan.	Calleary, Dara.	
Farrell, Mairéad.	Canney, Seán.	
Fitzmaurice, Michael.	Carrigy, Micheál.	
Gannon, Gary.	Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	
Gibney, Sinéad.	Chambers, Jack.	
Graves, Ann.	Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	
Hayes, Eoin.	Clendennen, John.	
Healy, Seamus.	Collins, Niall.	
Hearne, Rory.	Connolly, John.	
Kenny, Eoghan.	Cooney, Joe.	
Kenny, Martin.	Crowe, Cathal.	
Kerrane, Claire.	Currie, Emer.	
Lawlor, George.	Daly, Martin.	
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	Dempsey, Aisling.	
McGettigan, Donna.	Devlin, Cormac.	
McGuinness, Conor D.	Dillon, Alan.	
Mitchell, Denise.	Dolan, Albert.	
Murphy, Paul.	Dooley, Timmy.	
Mythen, Johnny.	Feighan, Frankie.	
Nash, Ged.	Fleming, Sean.	
Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	Foley, Norma.	
Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	
O'Callaghan, Cian.	Geoghegan, James.	
O'Donoghue, Richard.	Grealish, Noel.	
O'Donoghue, Robert.	Harkin, Marian.	
O'Gorman, Roderic.	Healy-Rae, Michael.	
O'Hara, Louis.	Heydon, Martin.	
O'Reilly, Louise.	Higgins, Emer.	
O'Rourke, Darren.	Keogh, Keira.	
Ó Broin, Eoin.	Kyne, Seán.	
Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	Lahart, John.	
Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	Lawless, James.	
Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	Lowry, Michael.	
Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	Martin, Micheál.	
Quaide, Liam.	Maxwell, David.	
Quinlivan, Maurice.	McAuliffe, Paul.	
Rice, Pádraig.	McCarthy, Noel.	
Stanley, Brian.	McConalogue, Charlie.	

Wall, Mark.	McCormack, Tony.	
Ward, Charles.	McEntee, Helen.	
Ward, Mark.	McGrath, Séamus.	
Whitmore, Jennifer.	McGreehan, Erin.	
	Moran, Kevin Boxer.	
	Moynihan, Aindrias.	
	Moynihan, Michael.	
	Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	
	Murphy, Michael.	
	Naughton, Hildegard.	
	Neville, Joe.	
	Nolan, Carol.	
	O'Brien, Darragh.	
	O'Connell, Maeve.	
	O'Connor, James.	
	O'Dea, Willie.	
	O'Donnell, Kieran.	
	O'Meara, Ryan.	
	O'Shea, John Paul.	
	O'Sullivan, Christopher.	
	O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	
	Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	
	Ó Fearghail, Seán.	
	Ó Muirí, Naoise.	
	Richmond, Neale.	
	Roche, Peter.	
	Scanlon, Eamon.	
	Smith, Brendan.	
	Smyth, Niamh.	
	Timmins, Edward.	
	Toole, Gillian.	
	Troy, Robert.	
	Ward, Barry.	

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Pa Daly and Louis O'Hara; Níl, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie.

Amendment declared lost.

An Ceann Comhairle: The time permitted for this debate having expired, I am required to put the following question in accordance with an order of the Dáil of this day: "That in respect of each of the sections undisposed of, the section is hereby agreed to in Committee, the Title is hereby agreed to in Committee, the Bill is accordingly reported to the House without amendment, Fourth Stage is hereby completed and the Bill is hereby passed."

Question put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 118; Níl, 28; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon

Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Bennett, Cathy.	Cairns, Holly.	
Boland, Grace.	Collins, Michael.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Brennan, Brian.	Cummins, Jen.	
Brennan, Shay.	Ennis, Daniel.	
Brophy, Colm.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Browne, James.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Burke, Colm.	Gannon, Gary.	
Burke, Peter.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Butler, Mary.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Butterly, Paula.	Healy, Seamus.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Hearne, Rory.	
Byrne, Joanna.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Lawlor, George.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Murphy, Paul.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Nash, Ged.	
Calleary, Dara.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Canney, Seán.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
Carthy, Matt.	Quaide, Liam.	
Chambers, Jack.	Rice, Pádraig.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Stanley, Brian.	
Clendennen, John.	Wall, Mark.	
Collins, Niall.	Ward, Charles.	
Connolly, John.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
Conway-Walsh, Rose.		
Cooney, Joe.		
Cronin, Réada.		
Crowe, Cathal.		
Crowe, Seán.		
Cullinane, David.		
Currie, Emer.		
Daly, Martin.		
Daly, Pa.		
Dempsey, Aisling.		
Devine, Máire.		
Devlin, Cormac.		
Dillon, Alan.		
Dolan, Albert.		
Donnelly, Paul.		
Dooley, Timmy.		
Farrell, Mairéad.		
Feighan, Frankie.		
Fleming, Sean.		
Foley, Norma.		

Gallagher, Pat the Cope.		
Geoghegan, James.		
Graves, Ann.		
Grealish, Noel.		
Harkin, Marian.		
Healy-Rae, Michael.		
Heydon, Martin.		
Higgins, Emer.		
Kenny, Martin.		
Keogh, Keira.		
Kerrane, Claire.		
Kyne, Seán.		
Lahart, John.		
Lawless, James.		
Lowry, Michael.		
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.		
Martin, Micheál.		
Maxwell, David.		
McAuliffe, Paul.		
McCarthy, Noel.		
McConalogue, Charlie.		
McCormack, Tony.		
McEntee, Helen.		
McGettigan, Donna.		
McGrath, Séamus.		
McGreehan, Erin.		
McGuinness, Conor D.		
Mitchell, Denise.		
Moran, Kevin Boxer.		
Moynihan, Aindrias.		
Moynihan, Michael.		
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.		
Murphy, Michael.		
Mythen, Johnny.		
Naughton, Hildegard.		
Neville, Joe.		
Newsome Drennan, Natasha.		
Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.		
Nolan, Carol.		
O'Brien, Darragh.		
O'Connell, Maeve.		
O'Connor, James.		
O'Dea, Willie.		
O'Donnell, Kieran.		
O'Hara, Louis.		
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Reilly, Louise.		
O'Rourke, Darren.		

O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Broin, Eoin.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.		
Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Ó Murchú, Ruairí.		
Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.		
Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.		
Quinlivan, Maurice.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		
Ward, Mark.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Ruth Coppinger and Ciarán Ahern.

Question declared carried.

Teachtaireacht ón Seanad - Message from Seanad

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Micheál Carrigy): Seanad Éireann has passed the Criminal Justice (Terrorist Offences) (Amendment) Bill 2025, without amendment.

Regulation of Artificial Intelligence Bill 2026: Committee and Remaining Stages

SECTION 1

Question proposed: "That section 1 stand part of the Bill."

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Niamh Smyth): Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach Gníomhach for his forbearance. I thank the House for facilitating Committee Stage today and for the constructive engagement on the Bill on Second Stage.

The Bill puts in place the regulatory foundation needed to build public trust in artificial intelligence, AI, so that AI develops as a tool for people and supports the wider goal of improving human well-being. With these aims in mind, the Bill is a technical implementing

measure. It does not add to, nor alter, the obligations placed on regulated entities by the EU AI Act. The Bill establishes essential, domestic regulatory architecture for the supervision and enforcement of the AI Act in the State.

We are moving with agility now, as there is also a firm legal deadline. Enforcement of prohibited AI practices posing unacceptable risks, as set out in Article 5 of the AI Act, takes effect on 2 August 2026. Ireland must have the necessary national supervisory and enforcement infrastructure in place by that date. There will be a phased approach to implementation of the AI Act, so we recognise the need to be open to further measures as part of this work.

I also take this opportunity to say that I look forward to receiving the enterprise committee's pre-legislative scrutiny report. The recommendations contained in it will be considered as part of the next phase. All proposed amendments must be considered against this backdrop.

I will briefly address some of the issues raised on Second Stage. I have written directly to some of the Deputies who raised specific questions last week. I hope most of them had an opportunity to consider the correspondence. The important issue of resourcing was raised a number of times, and I fully agree that the resourcing of all competent authorities is vital to ensure the successful implementation of the AI Act in Ireland. For that reason, the Government provided funding in 2026 to support the establishment of the Irish AI office. Relevant competent authorities and market surveillance authorities will continue to be resourced through their existing governance and budgetary arrangements.

The EU AI Act continues to come into effect on a phased basis and will do so from August of this year to December 2028. This period provides an opportunity for competent authorities to further assess operational requirements for them to carry out their roles in the regulation of AI.

Colleagues raised points around the independence of the AI office. I want to be clear: I recognise the importance of this matter. The AI office is to be established as a separate statutory body corporate with its own legal standing. The Regulation of Artificial Intelligence Bill expressly provides in section 9 that the AI office "shall be independent in the performance of its functions". This is reinforced by its status as a stand-alone body; governance by an independent board rather than the Minister; a public appointments process for board members and the CEO; conflict of interest rules; and restrictions on political officeholders serving in the office. While the Minister retains a limited power to issue policy directions, that power is constrained and does not extend to the regulatory co-ordination functions of the office. The office will remain subject to appropriate statutory, funding and accountability controls, while its operational independence in core regulatory functions is protected by the Bill.

Deputies also raised points regarding the powers and role of the AI office and I welcome the opportunity to clarify these. I confirm that the AI office is to be designated as a market surveillance authority and Ireland's single point of contact for the European Commission and other member states, as required by the AI Act. In this role, it will increase organisational efficiency in Ireland to support consistent enforcement of the Act; facilitate co-operation between competent authorities and fundamental rights bodies; and act as Ireland's main interface with the EU and member states for AI regulation. The Irish AI office will act within a distributed regulatory model, under which a range of existing sectoral regulators and market

surveillance authorities are responsible for supervising and enforcing the AI Act within their respective areas of expertise.

I confirm that no Government amendments are being brought forward this evening. I thank Deputies for their co-operation.

Question put and agreed to.

9 o'clock

SECTION 2

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Micheál Carrigy): Amendments Nos. 1, 13 to 16, inclusive, and 20 are related and may be discussed together. Amendment No. 16 is a physical alternative to amendment No. 15.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I move amendment No. 1:

In page 11, between lines 15 and 16, to insert the following:

““Service” means the Public Appointments Service;”.

This first set of amendments speaks to the establishment of the board but first I wish to address the parliamentary scrutiny, or lack thereof, of this legislation, which is so disappointing. It is 11 calendar days since the text of this Bill was published. We have had four Dáil sitting days and seven working days to scrutinise this absolutely crucial Bill. Providing 11 calendar days between publishing the text and enacting the law is not parliamentary scrutiny. That does not give us as members of the Opposition any opportunity to engage properly with this legislation and provide for amendments. It is a disgrace. I have valuable insights and I want to work on the governance of AI. I established a State agency, which is arguably the most independent State agency. I was its inaugural director between 2014 and 2016 and later I led it for four years as chief commissioner. I have knowledge I can contribute to this. I worked in the tech sector for eight years. I have a lot to add. I sit on the AI committee and the culture, communication and sport committee where we regulate the tech sector. I attended the pre-legislative scrutiny at the enterprise committee and I could even see, between those three committees, the gulf in understanding. AI is technical, complex and we have learned a lot on the AI committee but we were not given the opportunity to engage effectively with this Bill. Instead it went through pre-legislative scrutiny at the enterprise committee and now it is being rushed through the Dáil even though the Government has known it is coming down the track for years. I am genuinely disgusted at how this is being handled. It is a travesty of democracy that this is all the opportunity we get to discuss it.

My amendments in this grouping are amendments Nos. 1, 15 and 20. They speak to the Public Appointments Service process for the appointment of the board. A lot of these amendments, especially in the first half of the legislation, are to strengthen the governance of this office to make it more independent. Although the Minister of State said in her statement she appreciates the independence of the office, that this is reinforced by it being a stand-alone body, etc., there are multiple clauses in the Bill that go against that. We will speak later to the fact the Minister gets to appoint the first CEO without any involvement by the Public Appointments Service and the fact the CEO cannot comment on government policy. Besides

that, the appointment of the board itself should strive towards the greatest level of independence. These amendments try to essentially put in place a gold standard through the involvement of the Public Appointments Service, as distinct from the Department, so the office can act on its own.

I am familiar with the State boards process. I have issues with the process as it stands. There is a bang of window-dressing off it at times. Obviously it was moved and developed because there was criticism of the fact that Ministers in the past were cherry-picking appointments at board level across many State agencies. Regardless, it is better at least than direct appointments by the Minister. It is important we use the mechanisms that are available to us in the Public Appointments Service to appoint board members and these amendments set out to do exactly that and to make sure we can do that. Also, rather than the Minister having that oversight, other parts of the amendments in this grouping allow for the Government to do it rather than the Minister, which again allows for that increased independence.

I have been critical from the outset that the entire approach of this Government and officials in Brussels, and indeed the Brussels mindset, is that we regulate AI through the lens of industry and business. That is not good enough because it leaves out the competence we need to deal with the rights and protections that are under threat from AI. If we do all this with an enterprise lens, which is what this legislation does, we do not do that. We do not bake in the competence at the outset that we need to protect our citizens from the harms AI is going to inflict on us, which we see around us already. The algorithms we are all using, which are making us addicted to products and which are prompting chatbots to push people towards suicide, are the harms AI is wreaking on society. To treat it as an enterprise issue and the governance as an enterprise-informed operation and mechanism ignores all that. What we get from Government instead is it saying we have to protect rights. It says that at the end of the sentence after talking about balance and consideration but the issue is it is not doing it. These amendments try to strengthen that independence that will ultimately help with that balance and bring in the competence about rights and protections.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I too wish to state, as I said to the Minister, how concerned I am about the short space of time we have had to really scrutinise something as important as this. The time is just too short for amendments with all the other legislation at this time of year that is piled on together. I take from the Minister of State's opening contribution that she will be taking on board the enterprise committee's pre-legislative scrutiny report and that is a positive thing. I agree with Deputy that we have a dedicated AI committee and it must have a role in making this the best possible legislation we can. There is the difficulty there between splitting the areas of authority and responsibility between those committees. Under any circumstances we would have needed extra time to be able to deal with this Bill in the way we needed to.

The independence of the AI office is critical to all of this and to everything that comes after it. I note that while the Minister of State said it is independent, there are things in the legislation that prompt me to question that independence, especially in relation to the ministerial powers. She has a lot to do to convince us of the independence of the office. I submitted amendment No. 16 because I believe the expertise and knowledge of the new members that will comprise the board must reflect the sections of society for which they will be regulating. That is why I have explicitly included the areas of AI, human rights, equality and law, trade unions and

workers' rights, consumer protection and civil society engagement. Across the proposed seven members of the new board these are areas that should be represented. If those voices are not represented on the board I cannot see how there can be independence and expertise there in terms of the oversight and regulation we need.

Deputy James Geoghegan: As I said on Second Stage of this Bill, I commend the Minister of State on bringing the Bill to these Houses. There are a few things I will mention before I get to the amendments. When the Minister of State said "recommendations contained in [the pre-legislative scrutiny report] will be considered as part of the next phase", what did she mean by the next phase? Is she talking about additional primary or secondary legislation? She might clarify that point. It was also a missed opportunity that the AI committee was not afforded time to scrutinise this Bill. Furthermore, two hours for Committee Stage of this Bill is an insufficient amount of time. I acknowledge the challenges Government has to get very important legislation over the line but if there was more time available and if this debate was ongoing, that should have been afforded.

As the previous speaker said, if it is the case that there are to be next phases and if that is primary or secondary legislation, whatever about the Standing Orders, which I do not dismiss, relating to a permanent committee and a non-permanent committee, we are ready and able in the Oireachtas artificial intelligence committee to afford the level of scrutiny I think the committee on enterprise would actually be quite happy with, if that were delegated to us in whatever form, whether it be a formal or informal way, to allow us more of an opportunity.

My amendments and similar amendments relate to the composition of the board. Put very simply, the AI office is different from Coimisiún na Meán, the Data Protection Commission and the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, which Deputy Gibney was speaking about a moment ago, in the sense that the structure of a commission and commissioners is very different from that of a board. While I acknowledge the distributive model that is being formed under the AI Act and the one we are adopting here in Ireland and that there will be other entities and regulatory bodies that will have responsibility for the areas of regulating AI, ultimately, the technology sector will treat the AI office as part of a kind of three-way sandwich between Coimisiún na Meán and the Data Protection Commissioner. Those three entities will have probably the greatest interplay when it comes to the development of AI products in this jurisdiction.

For those reasons, it is important that the Act would direct the composition of the board. If the Minister of State says that, for whatever reason, the type of composition of the board should not form part of the primary legislation, she might tell the House or give the House some comfort as to the types of experiences, backgrounds and professions that a person who is seeking to be a member of the board of the AI office would have to have. Ultimately, what we want to ensure in terms of a governance structure for the AI office is that it protects fundamental rights, but equally, that the board has an understanding of AI, the development of AI and an interest in the adoption of AI. What we know from this legislation is that the AI office will have a dual function. It will be a regulator but it will also act as a body that will advocate and promote the use of AI. It will regulate independently from the Minister and that is very clear in the legislation in terms of the enforcement of the EU regulations.

On the flip side of that, however, it will have a role for communicating to the general public, and hopefully to small businesses, how AI can support and develop. Therefore, I want to ensure, as I think everyone in this House does, that the board of the AI office would have relevant competencies and a relevant mixture of experiences that could deal with both of those issues. If the Minister of State says it should not form part of the legislation, she might be able to tell the House how that can be assured in the public appointment process that will be brought to bear for the appointments to the board.

Deputy George Lawlor: Like my colleagues, I would have serious concerns about the timescale with regard to this legislation and, as has been said, the notion that we have a dedicated AI committee and yet the only scrutiny, as such, was done by the enterprise committee. I sit on the enterprise committee. The AI committee has done a tremendous amount of work since its establishment and its members are really invested in this legislation, probably to a greater degree than the members of the enterprise committee. The notion that we would have a dedicated AI committee and its members would not be consulted in a meaningful way on this legislation leaves a funny taste. This is really important legislation given the context in which we are living and the almost daily intrusion of AI in all our lives, be it online or otherwise.

The Minister of State talks about the next phase. As Deputy Geoghegan alluded to, in that next phase, whatever it may be, surely there should be some role or function for the AI committee given the expertise it has built up since its establishment. This was established with foresight. People saw the need for an AI committee within these House. It is quite ludicrous, therefore, that when we bring a Bill or piece of legislation on AI before the House, the committee relevant to that legislation is not consulted. That is something we need to examine greatly. While the enterprise committee did have pre-legislative scrutiny and will obviously issue a report, it is a halfway house compared with what it should be in terms of scrutiny by a committee that was set up and established specifically to discuss, investigate and interrogate the whole issue of AI.

The amendment I propose states:

Without prejudice ... the Minister shall, in so far as is practicable, endeavour to ensure that among the members of the Board there is at least one person with demonstrated expertise in one or more of the following:

- (a) fundamental rights law;
- (b) data protection law;
- (c) consumer protection law.

The Bill provides for a board but does not specify any expertise requirements for its membership beyond general competence. The amendment requires the Minister to endeavour to ensure that at least one member has expertise in fundamental rights law, data protection law or consumer protection law. This reflects the subject matter of the AI Act, which operates at the intersection of all three. The AI Act itself requires that national competent authorities have the necessary technical and legal expertise. Given that the office's function includes supervising high-risk AI systems affecting individuals' rights, the absence of any rights expertise requirement is certainly a gap. I do not think it is too big an ask to have the correct

competent people sitting on what will be one of the most important boards to come before this House and, indeed, the country. The notion that we are asking for this is also a bit ludicrous. Given what is at stake and what is contained in it, it is not a huge ask that these three competencies, in particular, would be sought to serve on this board, however they may be appointed. As I said, however, this is indicative of the rushed legislation we see before us. As Deputy Gibney has pointed out, 11 days is simply not good enough. It is not good enough in the context of the decisions we have to make in this regard. Therefore, I urge the Minister to consider the amendment seriously.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I welcome the opportunity to speak on Committee Stage. The point has been made about the process. There are two issues, one of which is the rushed nature of it. It is not that long ago that we were speaking on Second Stage here and the Committee Stage amendments deadline had already passed at that stage. There are 74 amendments. There would have been more. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for the Government to rush through really important legislation. It is not even uncommon today. This is the third piece of legislation in the last number of hours that has been rushed through. That is the aspect about that process and the opportunity for scrutiny. In fairness, both the Government and Opposition are contributing to the legislation, which is not something we always see. There are amendments from Government TDs. It is reasonable to ask what, if any, pre-legislative scrutiny deliberations or recommendations are reflected in the Bill. At this stage, there are 74 amendments here. We will be lucky to get through five or six of them. Is the Minister of State going to accept any of them or is this exercise a *fait accompli*, as was the experience in the previous two Bills? What does that say? In fairness, all of us here are engaging in good faith. We recognise the importance of this legislation and we are trying to improve it. Members from the Opposition and the Minister of State's own Government colleagues are submitting amendments in the same vein, essentially making the same point that we need to strengthen the governance here and look at the expertise, or the range of interests and expertise, of board members.

The question has been asked, where to from here? Obviously, we have a rushed piece of legislation here now. It will go to the Seanad. The Minister of State might indicate in her response whether she has any intention of accepting any amendments or bringing forward amendments herself or whether there is more primary legislation to come. We are dealing with the legislation now. It has been on the horizon for quite some time. The Government should do a far better job in relation to it. The point that has been well made at this stage that the opportunity should have been provided, if the Minister of State and the Government were intent on providing the best piece of legislation, to hear from the AI committee and for scrutiny of the Bill through all of its Stages in these Houses.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: Gabhaim buíochas as an deis labhairt ar an mBille seo inniú. As Chair of the AI committee, I think there is some frustration around it. It is mostly procedural. In fairness, the enterprise committee is the statutory committee and it is for that reason that the scheme of the Bill went there for pre-legislative scrutiny. If there was a way that any future Bills or primary legislation would come to the AI committee, that would be extremely helpful because, as colleagues across the House have said, the AI committee has developed an expertise there.

What is frustrating is that the AI committee members were not informed when the scheme of the Bill was being presented at the enterprise committee for pre-legislative scrutiny. It was only by chance that I was in a committee next door, the environment and energy committee, and saw that it was happening and managed to go in.

The reality of the situation, and particularly this point about rushing through legislation, is that when Government is not passing legislation, it is accused of being a do-nothing Government. When it does pass legislation, it is accused of rushing legislation. There has been talk of the AI Bill for a long time now.

The other reality of the situation that people are failing to recognise is that the AI office needs to be stood up by August. There are timelines here that put pressure on Government and, indeed, on the Minister of State to get this passed.

I thank the Minister of State. On Second Stage here this day last week, I would like to think I was constructive rather than critical. The Minister of State wrote to me responding directly to all of the concerns that I had raised. That is how good legislation should be made, with genuine engagement. There has been genuine engagement with the Minister of State in that regard and it speaks well of her stewardship of the Bill.

I particularly welcome the Minister of State's response on the single point of contact. Colleagues have raised it here. I raised it here on Second Stage and it relates to whether our single point of contact will sit comfortably with Article 72, which provides that the contact point should be a market surveillance authority. I am genuinely pleased that in her reply, the Minister of State confirmed that oifig intleacht shaorga na hÉireann is to be designate as a market surveillance authority through an amendment to the designated regulations that are being finalised. The Minister of State might inform us in her response when those designated regulations will be finalised and whether they could be shared with members of the AI committee and, indeed, with the House. It is a significant and welcome clarification. It gives the office real standing and ensures our framework is firmly aligned with the Act.

I also raised a question of co-ordination between the 15 authorities that will share this work and the role of the co-operation agreements under section 63. I welcome the Minister of State's assurance that the office will be actively responsible for co-ordinating the relevant competent authorities, that it will support joint investigation and enforcement and that it is already building practical protocols through workshops and a co-operation forum. That is reassuring. As Cathaoirleach of the Oireachtas committee on AI, I will follow how that co-ordination works in practice with great interest and see how implementation proceeds. Indeed, we will do that as a committee to ensure that it is working.

On resourcing, I had stressed that Article 73 of the AI Act requires our competent authorities to have adequate technical, financial and human resources. I welcome the Minister of State's agreement that this resourcing is vital, the funding provided in 2026 to establish the office and her assurance that where additional resources are needed, they can be met through the normal Estimates process. The Act comes into force on a phased basis out to December 2028 and that gives us time to get it right. Monitoring resourcing across all the designated authorities as those phases are rolled out is crucial because a framework is only ever as strong as the bodies that deliver it.

I would also ask about the independence of the office, which other colleagues have raised this evening and previously, given that the Minister of State has the power to issue policy directions. I welcome the Minister of State's confirmation that this power is limited and constrained and that it does not extend to the key adjudicative functions, the findings of the adjudicator, the determination of administrative sanctions or the role of the courts. That is an important safeguard.

The Minister of State spoke here already about the area of trust. We need to ensure that trust in this office is built up and that we can trust what is coming out of the office, the chief executive of the office and the board, notwithstanding some of the points that colleagues have made about board composition and expertise.

I believe this Bill will play a significant role in our preparedness for the technological changes we are seeing develop at a rapid pace and want to see it succeed, as I think we all do. The Minister of State has engaged constructively, openly and in good faith and I want to acknowledge that. This is a strong Bill, made stronger by dialogue. As it moves through these final Stages and into the work of implementation, I look forward to continuing to work with the Minister of State and my colleagues on the committee to ensure it delivers for the people we all serve. I commend the Minister of State on bringing the Bill forward.

Finally, on a procedural piece, we received the Bill on Friday and amendments were to be in by Tuesday. That was extremely time-limiting. We should review it in future because a significant piece of legislation takes significant reading to identify where there are issues. If that could be looked at, I would appreciate it.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I commend the Minister of State on bringing the Bill to this Stage. Before I speak to the specific amendments, which are around the governance and the board structure, it is important that there has been general collaboration, both at the AI committee and, even more generally, around what we want to achieve with this transformational technology, because what we are debating and talking about here does not impact on merely one Department. It is impacting on virtually all areas of society.

On the collaborative cross-party approach, we will not agree on every issue but I think we agree in general on the principles and about what we want to achieve as a State. We want to support innovation, deepen our understanding of AI, upskill our citizens to be able to avail of and use it, and put in the necessary guardrails to ensure that we can continue to "trust" our institutions but also know that the institutions have the safeguards in place to protect us.

Given the nature and importance of the discussion, I would share colleagues' concern that there was insufficient time to consider amendments. Given some of the discussion that we are going through here in a two-hour period, I believe it will be relatively short, particularly because we will only get through discussion of the overall board of this body. That is a bit of a problem. I believe we will be constantly legislating for and examining this space, but the Minister of State in her response has to talk about how we as legislators will be able to have an input. I am very aware the technology is moving quickly. I appreciate we have to get the office up and running. I welcome the fact that the recruitment process for the CEO is ongoing and the Minister of State might update the House as to how that is happening.

Specifically on the amendments, when we talk about the board of any organisation, the most important thing is what the purpose of this organisation is and, therefore, who the best people to sit on that board are. I am always cautious about being overly prescriptive about the membership of the board. What is critical is that this AI office best serves our citizens. I strongly support the approach the Minister of State is taking with regard to a distributed regulatory approach. What we need to do, and colleagues have talked about this, is ensure that our regulators are sufficiently skilled to deal with this.

This cannot be another layer - a supra layer - of regulation on top of existing regulation. By that I mean that someone developing a financial product at present just has to go to the Central Bank for regulation, so if it is an AI-enabled product, the Central Bank should have sufficient regulatory power to be able to deal with this. Where there are gaps between those regulators, this office needs to be able to step in. This is where I think the role of the AI office lies. It is a co-ordinating role between our existing regulators. It also has a critical educational role and a role in building public confidence and trust in the use of AI by the State. It is in those very specific objectives that individuals will be appointed to this board, and it is critical they have that level of public trust and understanding.

While I get where colleagues are coming from, I am always cautious about being overly prescriptive. This is about the objectives of the office and whether the board will best be able to support the chief executive and staff in achieving that.

One thing I am concerned about, which is very important, is the issue of a youth advisory panel to ensure young people are heard in this and can influence the governance structure. The Minister of State and I were quite influential during the online safety legislation debate, as was Deputy Carrigy, on ensuring we had a youth advisory panel to work with the online safety commissioner in Coimisiún na Meán. We see it in the Office of the Ombudsman for Children and in other areas. This is critical, particularly for children and young people, who are one of many vulnerable groups, to ensure their voice has input in this.

I would like to hear in the Minister of State's response a commitment to establish a youth advisory panel and an update on the CAO process, and get a clear understanding of what, if this is the board being appointed, the purpose of this organisation is and how those filling it will meet that purpose.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Being honest, I did not intend to speak on these amendments - I was going to wait until later - but when a substantial debate, which should go on for a long period in a committee room, is squeezed into two hours, it invariably turns into Second Stage speeches because it is our last chance to have a say on it. For me, this is the third leg of a bonfire. I know bonfires do not have legs but I am referring to whatever the wooden structures are that go around a serious bonfire. This is the third one we have had in one evening as we burn up our climate targets, the other two being much more obvious, namely, the Bills on LNG and the passenger cap in Dublin Airport. However, this is also part of it.

As regards the section we are dealing with here, the fundamental problem that some of the amendments, and I am assuming the Minister of State will reject them all, attempt to address is the fact that the AI office is not independent and is subordinate to the Department of enterprise. Even the location of the office, subordinate to the Department of enterprise, tells us everything we need to know. This is then fleshed out in the mandate of the AI office and so

on. This tells us what the mindset of the Government is in relation to AI is. It is that this is an enterprise issue that is overwhelmingly viewed through that lens. Its view is that this is a train that is moving or has already moved and we all need to get on board, and given that all the companies seem to be doing it, we need to educate all our young people in using AI. That is the whole mindset. I fundamentally disagree with that, as my colleagues on the committee will know.

In general, from where we are currently standing, AI is a force for bad and not good in the world. It is accelerating genocide, climate change and mental health crises, and it is beginning to accelerate significant job loss and displacement. It is eroding workers' autonomy for those who still have jobs, and it is driving misogyny and hate. I do not deny some discrete, positive applications we have heard about for weather forecasting, healthcare and so on, but, as a whole, any objective look at the current impact of this technology will conclude that it is a negative thing. However, what we are seeing in the structure of this Bill, and we will get to the mandate in section 9 shortly, is green for go and doing everything we can to support and promote AI. It very much sees things through an enterprise frame, which is very problematic.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank all colleagues for their thoughtful contributions and well-placed intentions. I have an array of notes here to help me respond to them as best I can.

Deputies Geoghegan and Ó Cearúil asked questions about the next phase, primary legislation to go with the non-personal data Bill to cover the pre-legislative scrutiny report's recommendations and any amendments needed for the digital omnibus and levy provision for any regulation. The next phase is primary legislation. This legislation is not only critically important but we will need to keep changing it and come back to it many times in future, unlike much of the other legislation that is established and enacted here, for example, planning law, which may be in place for the next 20 years. I cannot imagine that being the case with legislation on AI. I genuinely believe it will develop organically, but we have to start somewhere and this is the somewhere. This is what we are attempting to do tonight. Deputy Ó Cearúil was right that we have a deadline to meet; there is no getting away from that. As regards the Bills and the process, I accept that and will do my best. Unfortunately, I have no authority over the process, as the Bills Office decides that. However, I accept that Deputies feel this is being rushed. I assure them that the next phase is primary legislation, and I will take on board any requests or suggestions. I am happy to work with them on this.

Deputy Gibney said this issue is being viewed entirely through an enterprise lens, and Deputy Paul Murphy said the same thing. I have said numerous times that I am very cognisant of the human-centred aspect. The Deputy might be throwing her eyes up to heaven, but the truth with regard to the AI Act is that fundamental rights are enshrined in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, including rights relating to democracy, the rule of law and environmental protection, which the Deputy called out. Member states must notify the European Commission of the designated authorities to ensure transparency and effective co-operation across the EU. Ireland's fundamental rights authorities include Coimisiún na Meán, the Data Protection Commission, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman, the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, IHREC, and the Office of the Ombudsman for Children, none of which comes under the Department of enterprise. To be fair, there is a broad scope and I certainly do not come at this issue from that narrow prism of enterprise only. While I am a Minister of State in the Department of enterprise and the office

is being created by my Department, I assure Deputies that its autonomy and independence will be absolute in the legislation and there will be an arm's length approach taken to the AI office.

I emphasise that this is a process and not a done deal; it will not be done and dusted tonight. I accept that Deputies would like to have more time. Two committees, the AI and enterprise committees, have responsibility in this regard. The enterprise committee has statutory responsibility for pre-legislative scrutiny. I have no authority over that, but I am always happy to go before the artificial intelligence committee to answer questions and engage in debate and discussion with Deputies. I am waiting on the enterprise committee's pre-legislative scrutiny recommendations and I will be happy to see how we can knit those into the next phase of the legislation. I hope that answers some of the calls that have been made.

The pre-legislative scrutiny process was watched closely by officials. Certain matters have been incorporated, including the carve-outs in section 2 and the inclusion of the requirement for the market surveillance authorities to share the fundamental rights impact analysis reports with the AI office.

However, we stand ready for the report and are eager to take the recommendations in the next phase. I hope that puts to bed concerns that people may have that are raised here tonight.

Deputy Gibney raised the CEO recruitment. I do not pick the CEO. There is a very public, transparent process there, which the Deputy knows full well, I have no doubt. The position was advertised through a Public Appointments Service competition. The competition is at an advanced stage. I can tell the Deputy that, but I do not pick the CEO, so please do not indicate that I do, because I do not. I thank Deputy Gibney for her amendment. However, I do not consider it necessary to introduce a definition of service for the purpose of the Bill. The references to the Public Appointments Service in the Bill are limited in number and are clear and unambiguous in their context. The provisions concerning the appointment of members of the board expressly refer to the Public Appointments Service. There is no difficulty in understanding those references as drafted. As a general principle of legislative drafting, defined terms should only be used when they are necessary to assist the interpretation or operation of legislation. In this instance, introducing a definition of service would not materially improve the readability or operation of the Bill. For those reasons, I do not consider the amendment necessary, and therefore do not propose to accept it.

Regarding amendments Nos. 13, 14, 15, and 16, I thank Deputies Gibney, Lawlor, Conway-Walsh and Geoghegan for their amendments in respect of the board members of the AI office. Deputy Byrne may have raised this too. I recognise the objective behind the amendments, namely, to ensure a highly transparent, merit-based appointments process and a broad range of expertise on the board. I agree with these objectives. Indeed, the Bill already provides for a Public Appointments Service process and requires that both initial and future appointments be made, having regard to the experience and capacity of prospective members in matters connected with the functions of the office. In other words, we will be looking to ensure that the expertise required as technology develops is there.

Many of the procedural requirements proposed in amendment No. 15 are already provided for under the Government's guidelines on appointments to State bodies. Those guidelines require open advertising of vacancies, publication of the criteria for the appointment, and the independent assessment process conducted by the Public Appointments Service. I do not

consider it necessary to prescribe these operational details in primary legislation. However, the existing provisions provide the appropriate degree of flexibility for a newly established organisation. The office is being created in the context of emerging technology and an entirely new regulatory framework across the EU, with access to independent AI experts becoming available through the EU scientific panel. It is important that the appointments process can evolve in response to the practical needs of the organisation as it develops. I do not consider it appropriate at this stage to prescribe in primary legislation detailed requirements in relation to the appointments procedures, selection panels, or particular categories of expertise.

That said, I am sympathetic to the intention. As the office matures and gains operational experience, it is important to keep under review the mix of expertise and experience required for its effective and efficient performance, and to seek to adapt accordingly. In that context, matters such as the board's composition and expertise requirements could be considered in a future phase of the office's development, should experience demonstrate a need for additional statutory measures.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I have tabled a second amendment regarding the chief executive officer. It is clear on page 22 of the Bill, which states, "The Office shall have a chief executive officer". It talks about the Public Appointments Service recruiting the board, then states:

(3) Notwithstanding *subsection (2)*, the Minister may, before the establishment day, designate a person to be the first Chief Executive Officer.

(4) Where, immediately before the establishment day, a person stands designated by the Minister under subsection (3), the person shall, on that day, stand appointed as the first Chief Executive Officer for such period, not exceeding 5 years from the date of his or her appointment, as the Minister may determine.

The Minister then gets to appoint the first chief executive officer. My issue is that this is where the independence starts or does not start when an office like this is established. Once again, I have done this. The Government can outsource this to the Public Appointments Service. It can detach the hiring body from the recruitment process by strengthening the role of the Public Appointments Service in it, and it has chosen not to do that. In fact, it has done the reverse, and it has given the Minister more authority for the appointment of the first chief executive officer. In those first five terms, the Government is going to establish and basically set in stone how that organisation operates. The level of influence of that first CEO is heavy for the future of the organisation. The Minister of State has talked about this not being dusted tonight, but this is legislation. Of course it is organic and we will have to revisit it over the years, of which there is no question, but this is the shot. This is the time we get to do it. We are offering genuine, researched, evidence-based amendments and they are not being heard. The Minister of State is not interested and she is offering a tiny amount of time to discuss complex legislation and a set of complex amendments, which demonstrates to me that she has no interest.

It is great to hear that the Minister of State is sending letters out to everyone. I did not get a letter since Second Stage last week and I raised a number of concerns. I do not know if anybody else in the Opposition got any letters. It is great that Deputies Ó Cearúil, Byrne and Geoghegan all got letters, but I would have liked one too.

Deputy James Geoghegan: I did not get a letter.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Deputy Ó Cearúil got a letter. I did not get a letter. I have received no engagement in this process. My issue is that the Minister of State is not listening. She is not understanding what we are trying to say, and that independence is key. All of the other market surveillance authorities she is mentioning, and the fundamental rights bodies identified through the AI Act and the legislation as part of the structure are all well and good, but the AI office is the authority. By this legislation, it is essentially a part of the Department of enterprise. The Minister can interfere in it. The CEO cannot even come to a committee and comment on Government activities. That is not independent.

Deputy Geoghegan referred to the dual role of this office, which is on one hand supposed to be the regulator and, on the other, supposed to promote AI. That in itself is already a conflict, which I have a difficulty with. The AI office should be distinct. The Data Protection Commission has better independence than this body, which is being set up now. The Minister of State mentioned the Data Protection Commission, which is under the aegis of the Department of justice, and Coimisiún na Meán, under the aegis of the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport, and now we have this one under the aegis of the Department of enterprise. The other two already do not work, because Grok happened and nothing has been done to combat it. We are now creating a third leg to this bonfire. It just makes no sense and it certainly does not strengthen any independence.

Deputy James Geoghegan: To address what Deputy Gibney said, I do not think it is fair to say that the Minister of State is not listening. At the end of the day, the Minister of State is sitting in the Chamber and responding to the amendments that have been made. She may not agree with the amendments but she is listening. I would say that Deputy Gibney should at least acknowledge that when the Minister of State comes before our committee, she listens to us. She may have a different opinion but I do not think that is a fair charge to level against her. The Minister of State referred to another Bill which I did not catch fully. Is it the personal data Bill?

Deputy Niamh Smyth: The non-personal data Bill.

Deputy James Geoghegan: Am I right that at one stage, there was a proposal that that Bill would be included in the Bill now before these House, and a decision was taken to split those Bills? Is it the Minister of State's position now that, when that Bill is brought before these Houses, it may also include amendments to this Bill, based on what was said in the pre-legislative scrutiny? I see lots of nodding going on, which encourages me. In fairness to Deputy Ó Cearúil, he highlighted the deadline for establishing the AI office, which is why the Bill is before us today, to meet that deadline. The EU Presidency starts tomorrow. It gives me some encouragement about when the next Bill, albeit not the AI Bill, comes before these Houses. I ask, specifically with regard to that Bill, that we create some kind of structure, although I do not know how would be created, where the Minister of State could come before the AI committee to have direct discussion of whatever form, be it informal or otherwise, if it is not done within the strictures of how Standing Orders are established.

Then, after the fact, maybe through the Chair and others, we could long at a more long-term structure for the AI committee to have a more formal legislative role. I acknowledge that would require changes to Standing Orders and engagement with the relevant internal committees. Ultimately, there is probably a recognition, even if the Minister of State looks around the Chamber, that most of the Deputies in the Chamber today are members of the AI committee. Even when we heard from members of the enterprise committee, such as Deputy Conway-Walsh, she acknowledged that the AI committee has an essential role and that we are building a level of expertise in this respect. Perhaps the next model could be this next Bill, and thereafter we might come back with a way in which this could be done. I hear what the Minister of State is saying in terms of being prescriptive about who should sit on the board. I understand the board and the Public Appointments Service, when it appoints people to the board, will ultimately reflect the overall goals of the Act.

I disagree with Deputy Gibney. I fundamentally believe that the AI office should have a dual role. We need a statutory agency in this State that has a role in terms of the delivery of AI literacy across the board, at least to provide direction, just in the same way that regulatory divergence is provided in terms of all of the relevant agencies that are going to regulate the implementation of the EU AI Act. It should also be the case that we have a central agency that can at least give pointers to the Department of education, the Department of enterprise, the Minister of State's own Department and the Department of further and higher education. We need that kind of umbrella, overarching view because we know that AI, at a governmental level, will be implemented and is being implemented and adapted through every form of policy in areas like health, education and enterprise. I think it is a good and positive thing that we would have a statutory agency that would have both of those functions. I do not see how it dilutes investigatory and enforcement practices. There are plenty of other examples within this State where an agency has an investigatory role, a regulatory role and an advocacy role. If the Deputy reads the legislation in full, it is quite clear that the two things are very separate, and that in the performance of its regulatory functions in terms of its enforcement activity, it would be entirely independent. On the flip side, when it comes to advocacy, it is right and proper that the Government would have a role in providing some level of direction that would reflect the AI policies that are being implemented at each departmental level and that the AI office could be supported within that.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: It is unfair to say that the Minister of State has not been listening because I think she has. What I would say to Deputy Gibney is that the legislation provides for the formal appointment by the Minister following a process, which is pretty standard. In fairness, I recall this role being advertised on *publicjobs.ie*. LinkedIn actually recommended it to me at one stage. The closing date for this was at the end of March. It would be useful to assure the House, particularly if we are looking at this office being up and running within a month - the Minister of State said that the process is coming toward a conclusion - when we will actually know who the CEO-designate is going to be. The closing date for the process was three months ago. The Minister of State is expecting it to go through *publicjobs.ie*. I appreciate that the Minister of State's signature is the final signature that goes on that and she does not have a role in picking the individual, but Deputy Gibney and others have made the point that whoever takes that role, because they are going to be there for the first five years, will be shaping the direction of the office. In the context of this legislation, it would be useful for the Minister of State to give us a clear indication of when the name of that individual will be known

and the CEO-designate will be appointed. Again, I agree with the overall context of not being overly prescriptive, as time goes on, when we are recruiting for board members. The Minister of State might outline when that recruitment process is going to start on the basis of this legislation. I accept the Minister of State's bona fides. I agree that we should not be overly prescriptive. In her response, the Minister of State might come back to the youth advisory panel issue as well.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I have two points. One is the point that Deputy Gibney made. The Minister of State denied that she gets to appoint the CEO. For now, until the establishment of the board, she has total power in appointing the CEO. That is the truth. That is what is set out in the legislation. Afterwards, she still gets to pick the CEO. She picks the CEO from a shortlist, which is done by the Public Appointments Service, but she does pick them. The Minister of State may feel free to correct me if I am wrong in that. I am not sure her strong rebuttal of Deputy Gibney really holds up.

My second point is that probably the worst thing in this Bill is the inclusion of the mandate of promoting and fostering AI innovation and literacy in the AI office. This is financial regulator stuff, where the financial regulator was promoting finance and simultaneously regulating finance. You cannot be poacher and gamekeeper at the same time. They point in opposite directions. If the Government wants to have a body whose job it is to promote AI literacy and so on, it can knock itself out, but it should not be the same person and office that is supposed to be regulating and ensuring this does not cause harm to society. That is the whole problem here. It will have both the good mandate and the bad mandate set up together in this one office. It is sitting under the auspices of, and not really independent of, the Department of enterprise, which is very much on one side of that equation. That is the fundamental problem. The Minister of State can make the case to have people advocating for fostering AI innovation and literacy and so on, but the idea that the body carrying out that function will also be the regulator is very problematic.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Artificial intelligence has made particular strides and jumps. It is in a place where we never anticipated being, if we are talking about two years ago. What we see across the board in the amendments is that they are about ensuring we have an AI office which has the capacity to be able to deliver whatever delivery looks like. A number of people, including Deputy Conway-Walsh, have said we need a huge level of skill sets. Obviously that includes technical skills, but skills are needed beyond that because artificial intelligence will cross every boundary we can possibly think of. The question around an element of independence is obviously vital, given the history we have with regulation in this State if we think back to the financial crisis, which Deputy Murphy and others have spoken about. I also highlight the other aspect of the issue. We have seen in the public domain that the Minister of State and the Minister, Deputy Lawless, had a roundtable meeting with Meta, OpenAI, Microsoft and a number of others. I think everyone welcomes the fact that conversations are ongoing with stakeholders, but we would also like to think that there will be an element of independence and that we will make determinations on what is best for Ireland, for the Irish people and more widely beyond that.

Nearly every time we speak about artificial intelligence, we talk about the dangers of job displacement, which we have seen recently. Covalen is an example. We have also seen it in

the case of PayPal. As much as the Minister of State will get official denials in this regard, I think it is fairly straightforward. That is not taking away from the huge room for innovation that exists. It is not taking away from the huge realities of how this can have a positive impact on healthcare in everything from diagnostics to organisation. It is vital that we have a system, a framework and an AI office that can drive this on and is able to deal with all of this. It is going to be difficult to deal with the whole issue of regulation and the fact that we want to see maximum utilisation in relation to artificial intelligence. Unfortunately, we have all seen Donald Trump's attempts to curtail technologies within the American sphere that he might not want to necessarily share out without a huge price to be paid, which we may not be willing to pay. We are in the early days. We are talking about a technology that is going to move on.

10 o'clock

It is making sure we also have capacity in that. We are discussing with stakeholders and big tech, some of whom have the ear of the American President and not necessarily in a positive way. I heard the timeline they are looking for will be much faster than what had been planned by the State. I ask that the Government does do everything it can to ensure that it has the best framework for delivering, notwithstanding there will be multiple changes because we can come up with any plan we like but it will change because this is a vastly evolving technology, which will encompass almost every facet of life. That means it is really important that we ensure we play our part in relation to regulation and seeing those dangers. We have seen the dangers related to social media companies in the recent past. This is about stating the protections we want to see, combined with the capacity, are contained in the AI office.

I would also add my voice to what many others have said. As much as we want to see strategies and a framework put in place quickly, nobody appreciates the rushed nature of legislation and the way that a number of Bills have been dealt with recently in this House.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank everybody for their comments. On the AI office CEO appointment, I reassure Deputies that it is an independent process that is coming to a conclusion. I will inform them when that appointment has been made.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Erin McGreehan): Does Deputy Gibney wish to press the amendment?

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: No, I will move to the next one.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Section 2 agreed to.

Sections 3 to 8, inclusive, agreed to.

SECTION 9

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Erin McGreehan): Amendments Nos. 2 to 10, inclusive, are related and will be discussed together.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I move amendment No. 2:

In page 13, line 34, after “foster” to insert “ethical and responsible”.

These are examples of constructive amendments. Amendment No. 2 seeks to bring in a balance where by adding the phrase “ethical and responsible” so that it changes the remit of the office from fostering AI innovation and literacy to fostering ethical and responsible AI innovation and literacy. That is an example of the kind of balance we are looking for and that we have lip service paid to all the time but that has never been demonstrated as a meaningful commitment by this Government.

Amendment No. 3 enhances the publication powers for the AI office. This is an issue with many State agencies that have a regulatory function. They are prohibited from publishing their findings. I cite the example of the Inspector of Prisons and IHREC, which has issues with codes of practice. There are so many ways in which the work of these agencies as regulatory bodies is hampered because the publication powers they have are not adequate. If we actually want a regulator with teeth who will be able to call out issues when it wishes to, we need to provide it with publication power to do so. Again, all it is doing is strengthening independence. If the Government actually wants an independent regulator that is able to deal with the responsibilities that it is trying to give it, then it needs to give it the powers to match. That is what the amendment tries to do. It simply enhances that publication power.

I hope these amendments can be taken in the spirit in which they are intended, which is constructive. These are simple amendments that can enhance this legislation. I am guessing by the tone of this debate so far that none of these amendments will be accepted by the Government. It is not just this debate but the whole evening - we are in the sixth hour of supposed debates - is just theatre for the Government. We get to discuss these amendments and, as Deputy Murphy said, it becomes like Second Stage because we are all just speaking in the knowledge that we will not get to the substantive amendments we want to deal with and engage with.

I put these forward in good faith and I hope the Minister of State will engage with them.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Amendments Nos. 4, 8 and 9 concern small and medium-sized businesses. They aim to expand the statutory functions of the AI office so that it not only regulates AI but also provides guidance, training and technical assistance support for small businesses, particularly SMEs, to comply with the AI Act and to adopt AI responsibly. The AI office should be more than just an enforcement body. It should offer an education and support function to help businesses to understand what is expected of them. These amendments attempt to rebalance the legislation by placing compliance support alongside enforcement. Most businesses that this legislation will impact will be SMEs. They will need clear guidance and accessible training if they are to comply confidently with the new regulatory framework.

Deputy George Lawlor: Amendment No. 5 speaks to the promotion of responsible adoption of AI systems in workplaces and protects the legal rights of employees. A lot of people out there are very fearful of AI and what it will bring to the workplace. The amendment is geared towards the protection of existing employees and ensuring nothing we are doing through the establishment of this office will undermine that. It also calls for monitoring the use of AI systems for the purpose of workforce management, not to hand over AI to management to

undermine existing workers and their rights and obligations under this Act and under artificial intelligence regulations.

We also need to encourage and support the provision of training, reskilling and upskilling opportunities. This is vital in the current climate. There is a lot of fear among the entire population as to where AI is going in relation to the rights of workers and how this might be undermined unless there is strong legislation in place to ensure their rights and opportunities are strengthened.

Amendment No. 7 speaks to our national climate objectives. We have already seen legislation pushed through this evening that abandoned a lot of our climate objectives. This amendment seeks to insert the following subsection:

the need to ensure that the development and adoption of AI systems in the State is consistent with the national climate objective within the meaning of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015, having particular regard to the energy consumption and environmental impact associated with the training, operation and deployment of AI systems.

We all know the impact AI will have on energy and water consumption in particular. We have to be cognisant of that in this legislation. I ask the Minister of State to do that.

Deputy James Geoghegan: To clarify, where amendments are grouped, is the order in which the amendments are proposed that Members are called or do we have to indicate every time?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Erin McGreehan): The Deputy must indicate.

Deputy James Geoghegan: My amendments relate to section 9(1)(c), which sets out the function of the office to “promote and foster AI innovation and literacy” and tries to provide more clarity as to what that will look like and mean.

Perhaps in her reply to the Minister of State might address the two subsequent provisions of the Act, namely, sections 10 and 11. One is about the Minister’s ability to give an order to the AI office and the other is about the ability of the Minister to give a direction to the AI office. As I understand the provision, the Minister would have to lay before the Houses any direction that he or she might give and in respect of those directions, none of those can relate to the actual regulatory enforcement function. It is going back to the promoting and fostering AI innovation and literacy point.

My first question is what the difference is between a direction and an order and how those two elements will interplay. I also ask that as there is a statutory obligation in respect of directions, those directions would be laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas. I ask now, in contemplation of this secondary Bill the Minister of State is promoting, that she might consider an amendment to the personal data Bill she referred to in terms of the amendment of this Act, whereby the relevant committee, that is, the Oireachtas AI committee, would be the committee that would get to view and examine these directions or at least have some form of pre-legislative scrutiny function in respect of those directions. That is down to the knitting and the weeds of what we are doing in the AI committee. We are examining policies across every Department as they relate to AI. Quite clearly, any direction the Minister gives to this AI office

will concern the implementation and adaptation of AI policy across a world of areas from education to health and enterprise.

I acknowledge the logic of Deputy Murphy's point about the Central Bank at one point having a dual function of regulating and of promoting Ireland as a centre for financial services. After the financial crash that dual function was got rid of and the Central Bank solely had a role in respect of the regulating of financial services. However, while there is a logic to the argument, I view these issues as entirely separate. It boils down to two different philosophies present in this House and often in our committee in respect of AI. Ultimately, for Ireland to remain competitive we must examine how AI is being adapted and we must be ahead of others in how that AI adaptation is improving competitiveness. Separately, in an agile way we have to be extremely conscious of how AI is impacting young people in education at primary and secondary level and in further and higher education. We have to be agile in the impact AI is having on future jobs for graduates coming out of college, people trying to enter college and people who are not entering college at all, to know the types of jobs we are going to have in the future. We must be agile in order that we can mandate and direct policy to ensure that we can be responsive to the disruption that AI is causing and will cause and yet harness the benefits it is going to bring. I do not think there is a fair analogy between the two things, which are financial services and AI. AI has enormous risks and potential. It almost sounds clichéd to keep repeating these phrases but as Members of the Oireachtas, we are being brought on a journey in our assessment of how AI is impacting society and the thematic approach we have adopted on the committee. The general public is using AI at some of the highest levels in Europe right now and yet they have equal levels of concern and mistrust. SMEs in Ireland at OECD level apparently are doing reasonably okay. We are a bit higher and yet there is still a low level of adaptation of AI.

There are whole areas of our society and country where we need to bring people on a journey. There needs to be trust and it needs to be done in a coherent way. The AI office in my view is the appropriate body to do it. Where there is this statutory function where the Minister can direct through a direction or order and where there is a role for the Oireachtas in respect of these directions or order, it would be helpful to know, even at this early stage, what kinds of directions the Minister or Minister of State might be contemplating giving the AI office. It obviously has to comport with the goals of AI literacy. Are draft directions already being considered or made? There is also the separate point I am making that if the Minister is accountable to the Houses of the Oireachtas in respect of the directions, a formal statutory role be given to the AI committee and that this be contemplated in the context of any provisions that might be put forward in the personal data Bill the Minister of State referred to earlier.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I am proposing amendment No. 6 but it speaks to the broader set of amendments. It is about what the purpose of the artificial intelligence office is. I might thread the contentions of Deputy Murphy and Deputy Geoghegan. I agree somewhat with Deputy Murphy that if the role of this office and the ecosystem we are creating is a distributive regulatory model, our critical point is about ensuring that the existing regulators are strong enough to manage their own sectors and that this body is a co-ordinating and enabling body. I would be worried if this starts to become a “thou shalt not” regulator because if it does, it will not support that agility in respect of Deputy Geoghegan's point about how we can help support business and enterprise. What it has to do is ensure that if you are an enterprise developing an

AI product or service, you know you have an existing regulator that you deal with and are responsible to it. The role of this office, which is why I proposed this amendment, is that where the gaps may fall with those existing authorities, it will be in a position to identify the gaps and make the decisions. Part of how I see its role is that if an SME wants to look at deploying AI to deliver its goods or services more effectively or efficiently, this office will support and enable it in being able to do it. It will be able to have guided it through the process. It will make sure that the regulators are doing their jobs. It speaks to our vision as to where the office is. I see it as having more of a promotional and enabling role.

I know where Deputy Murphy is coming from on conflicts of interest and I think that could happen. However, I believe it will inhibit innovation if there are essentially two layers of regulation. That is something we certainly want to avoid. A lot of Deputy Gibney's amendments are well intentioned. I support the idea of including ethical and responsible in what we need to do. It is a culture we need to embed. I am one of those who sees the enormous potential of AI but it all depends on how we use it. Having an ethical and responsible framework is critical and we need to embed that in enterprise as much as in healthcare, education and other spaces. I think this speaks to all of the amendments. This office should be an enabling office. It should be able to help all of us as citizens and all enterprises around the country to know how best to responsibly, ethically and safely use AI to deliver better services for our citizens or our customers.

Deputy Paul Murphy: It is appropriate that I speak at this stage because I think that gets to the point. I think the Government agrees with the Deputy that it wants to set up an enabling office. That is the wrong way to go. Fundamentally we need a “thou shalt not” regulating office to try to protect the citizens from the potentially negative impact of AI. I will speak to two of the amendments. I support Deputy Gibney's amendment on adding in the promotion of the responsible use of AI as opposed to the current proposal we have. It is amendment No. 2 and speaks of “ethical and responsible”.

I presume we are going to hear that we are not going to get that, but it is really not too much to ask.

Second, Deputy Lawlor's amendment No. 7 on the climate impact of AI is extremely important. Last week we had Jennie Stephens and Hannah Daly in. It is funny and I have quoted this to a few people who have been in. KPMG has a report whereby it surveys chief executives of companies and asks what they think about AI and 95% of them say that AI is really going to help us deal with climate change. I do not know why we are asking the chief executives. Let us ask climate scientists if AI is going to help us deal with climate change. I have not found one yet that says yes. Everyone says this is really a problem in terms of climate change.

Deputy James Geoghegan: A climate scientist was at the AI committee advocating for AI.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Erin McGreehan): Through the Chair.

Deputy James Geoghegan: Sorry.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Does Deputy Geoghegan mean the weather forecasting guy?

Deputy James Geoghegan: Yes.

Deputy Paul Murphy: His main thing was to say this is not like the large language models, LLMs. I did not disagree with anything he said but I do not think he was making the general case that is being made that somehow AI is going to help us to deal with climate change. If we roll out the argument that a combination of AI and a stable demand for energy is going to promote investment in renewables, and load management and so on will happen at a better scale, I really think it is magical thinking. I do not think we are going to find climate scientists to make that case. Instead, what we heard from Jennie Stephens was that AI is preventing the phase-out of fossil fuels. The rapid deployment of AI has led to a dramatic increase in fossil fuel exploration, extraction and burning. The thing that struck me is that AI is being used to make fossil fuel exploration and extraction more efficient in a sense. Professor Stephens also said, "Tech companies are also collaborating with the fossil fuel industry to develop AI tools used to accelerate fossil fuel exploration and allow fossil fuels to be extracted more quickly and cheaply". She argued "AI promotes climate obstruction" and denial, delay and distraction. I thought this point was very strong: "Tech companies are now deploying many of the same strategies that the fossil fuel industry has used to squash public concern and block climate policy", strategically squashing research, discussion and awareness about the environmental impacts of AI.

We also heard from Professor Hannah Daly about the reality many of us have been pointing out for a long time, which is that all the extra renewables we are adding to the grid are just being sucked up by the data centres over an extended period. For me, it did crystallise something and I felt our guests today were trapped in this a bit. Often, there is just the illusion that somehow adding more renewable capacity, in and of itself, is in some way dealing with climate change but it is not. We can add all the renewables that we want but as long as we keep expanding usage we are not getting any closer to reducing greenhouse gas emissions. The climate does not really care if we have a whole load of renewables happening over here but we are still increasing or sustaining the same level of greenhouse gas burning. The amendment is good because it says that this should be central and that the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act has to apply here. We have had it disapplied on a number of occasions this evening. That is what we are generally doing this evening, but AI has to be consistent with our supposedly legally binding climate targets.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We are all aware of the huge dangers, which I will reiterate. The big one at the minute is the number of people who are worried – not from a technical point of view – about losing their job. If we are talking about an AI office, we must ensure there is significant capacity and that it engages with the State and all of its agencies from the point of view of fostering the skill sets that are required to ensure we can deliver AI solutions to improve workplaces and innovation within companies and everywhere else. A number of the amendments relate to this.

We must make sure that we have an overall eye on the development of artificial intelligence and its dangers. We have seen issues with Grok, etc. We do not know where the new-found dangers will be. The fact is that we are talking about a huge amount of information and how it

is taken from those who provide it, whether willingly and knowingly, and then how it is utilised. That is why it is absolutely vital that we have a framework that is ethical and responsible. I have not heard anyone speak against that. We hardly want it not to be ethical and to be irresponsible.

We all recognise and have spoken about where there are obvious wins from the point of view of artificial intelligence for companies. As much as there are dangers within education, huge wins are obviously possible. It is about ensuring that the AI office has capacity for a framework to provide training, due diligence and instruction where necessary. It might not necessarily be through the AI office. The Acting Chair, Deputy McGreehan, and I spoke before about the use of the likes of Skillnet. We know that this has to be something that is delivered across all the local enterprise offices, LEOs, Enterprise Ireland and the IDA. It is about ensuring that the capacity, ambition and remit is there within the AI office and that we make sure that those within the AI office, as the previous set of amendments proposed, have the skill sets and capacity.

In some respects we have had very little conversation. There has been talk about the need for the AI office to be up and running and the fact that primary legislation is needed, including to deal with issues that might not necessarily be addressed here and now, but I have heard little in relation to the AI strategy, how we develop that, and what sort of timeline we are talking about. I am going to return to the meeting with OpenAI, Microsoft, Meta and Dell. I assume there were many others there. We definitely do not want a scenario and situation where we are being directed by them. I do not think people will give out about the fact that there is a conversation but I assume it is also about making sure there is transparency in relation to that and what we are proposing around the timeline for the AI strategy. I accept that no strategy that we put in play is going to remain static right through. I am interested in seeing that.

I get that, to a degree, we are all talking in generalities because even when we talk specifically to amendments I am fairly sure that we are not going to see any amendments accepted. Could we have some indication of the trajectory of what is being sought by the amendments as regards an ethical and responsible framework, ensuring that the capacity is there within the AI office, that there is a sufficient amount of independence and that we can deliver a strategy that works? We all know the necessity of a feedback loop and the constant change that will occur. While there may be engagement with the likes of the companies the Minister of State met, we must not be directed by them. That piece is vital.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank colleagues very much for their amendments. I will try to go through each and every one. The purpose of section 9(1)(c) is to provide a broad statement of the office's function to promote and foster AI innovation and literacy. The Bill is intended to give effect to the EU AI Act and in doing so it is important that the language used in the Bill remains consistent with the terminology and objectives of the underlying regulation.

Article 1 of the EU AI Act states that its purpose "is to improve the functioning of the internal market and promote the uptake of human-centric and trustworthy artificial intelligence (AI), while ensuring a high level of protection of health, safety, fundamental rights ... and supporting innovation."

The regulation, therefore, already embodies the principle that Deputy Gibney's amendment seeks to advance.

In addition, neither "ethical" nor "responsible" is defined in the AI Act or in the Bill. Introducing these terms in a single provision without definition and without corresponding usage elsewhere in the legislative framework could create uncertainty as to whether a different or additional standard is intended to apply to the office's functions. I consider that the existing reference to promoting and fostering AI innovation and literacy is sufficiently broad and that the wider framework of the AI Act already ensures that innovation is pursued in a manner that is human-centric, trustworthy and protective of fundamental rights. Accordingly, I do not consider the amendment necessary and I do not propose to accept it.

While I appreciate the intention behind the amendment, these concepts are already inherent in the AI Act framework, and the current drafting is clear and consistent with the language of the underlying regulation. Recital 8 of the AI Act states the regulation supports the objective of promoting the European-centric approach to AI and making the Union a global leader in the development of secure, trustworthy and ethical AI, reflecting the conclusions adopted by the European Council in October 2020. The same recital further notes that the regulation ensures the protection of ethical principles, reflecting recommendations made by the European Parliament in its October 2020 resolution on the ethical aspects of artificial intelligence, robotics and related technologies.

Moving to amendment No. 3, the Bill already considers a number of the provisions designed to ensure transparency and accountability in the performance of the office's function, including requirements to prepare a strategy statement and an annual report, both of which must be published. In addition, section 9(4) provides that the office shall have all such powers as are necessary or expedient for the performance of its functions.

Where research, analysis or the publication of reports is required to support the exercise of these functions, the office would already be able to undertake such activities. The proposed amendment would introduce a broad stand-alone function to prepare and publish reports on research undertaken, sponsored, commissioned or assisted by the office. It is not clear what additional legal effect this would have, particularly as the office would already be capable of publishing research or reports in support of the performance of its statutory functions, including but not limited to functions under section 9(1)(c) and 9(1)(d) to promote AI innovation and literacy and to enhance public awareness. I am confident the Bill already provides an appropriate framework and that the amendment is not necessary.

The Government is conscious that the office is being established as a new body and its functions may evolve as the AI regulatory framework becomes more established and operational experience is gained. For this reason, the Bill seeks to provide an appropriate foundation while avoiding unnecessary prescription in the activities the office may already undertake in support of existing functions. I am nonetheless sympathetic to the objective underlining the amendment. The role of research, evidence-gathering and public reporting in supporting effective AI governance will be kept under constant review by the office as it develops and as its work programme matures. Should there be a demonstrated need to place such activities on a more explicit statutory footing in future, this can be considered in light of operational experience. Accordingly, while I appreciate the intention behind the amendment and the value of research in informing AI policy and regulation, I am satisfied the Bill already provides the office with sufficient flexibility in this regard and I do not propose to accept the amendment at this time.

On amendment No. 4, section 9(1)(c) provides that the office shall promote and foster AI innovation and literacy and section 9(1)(d) provides that it shall enhance public awareness of the use of AI systems and the rights and obligations under the artificial intelligence regulation. These functions complement the range of supports that are provided for in the AI Act at EU level, including guidelines, codes of practice and a service desk, which are intended to support and reinforce consistent implementation of harmonised rules across the EU. I am satisfied that these provisions already capture the proposed paragraphs (h), (i) and (j), and reinstating them in granular subparagraphs would result in legislative duplication without adding substantive legal effect.

The Bill, through section 46, provides for the establishment of one or more AI regulatory sandboxes in accordance with Article 57 of the EU AI Act, with priority access to SMEs and start-ups free of charge, as mandated by Article 62 of the regulation. The sandbox function is the primary structural vehicle through which the office will support SME compliance, provide guidance and technical assistance and reduce regulatory barriers to AI adoption. The proposed paragraph (k) duplicates this as it is already embedded in the sandbox and real-world testing framework provided for in Chapter 3 of Part 3. Section 9(1)(f) already requires that the office is to provide advice to the Minister on any matter relating to its functions. The proposed paragraph (j) requiring the office to provide advice and technical assistance to the Minister, competent authorities, businesses and organisations is repetition of the existing function. Section 10 confers on the Minister power to assign additional functions to the office by ministerial order following consultation with the office and relevant Ministers. This ensures that the office's functions can evolve responsibly to align with wider national policy priorities.

While I understand the sentiment behind amendment No. 5, I am satisfied the protections are already guaranteed under the AI Act, which has direct effect in Ireland. Asserting them as part of the AI office would not strengthen them but merely duplicate what is already binding in law. The Act completely prohibits AI systems that infer employees' emotions in the workplace or educational institutions. It also bans biometric categorisations that infer sensitive traits. The AI Act imposes a binding obligation on employers as deployers of high-risk AI systems to inform workers' representatives and affected workers before putting such systems into use in the workplace. Similarly, AI-driven decisions on employment status must have meaningful human oversight. Workers have the right to demand human intervention, obtain an explanation for a decision and contest adverse outcomes.

The AI Act is very clear on its interplay with other EU and national legislation. It explicitly calls out that the harmonised rules laid down in the AI Act should apply across sectors and in line with the new legislative framework, they should be without prejudice to existing Union law, in particular on data protection, consumer protection, fundamental rights, employment, protection of workers and product safety, to which the AI Act is complementary. Recital 9 of the AI states that, in the context of employment and the protection of workers, this regulation should not affect Union law on social policy and national labour law. Further, it states the regulation should not affect the exercise of fundamental rights as recognised by the member states and at Union level. Worker reskilling and upskilling in the context of AI adoption is already a matter of active Government policy, addressed through the national AI strategy, SOLAS, Skillnet Ireland, the National Training Fund and the further and higher education system in its broad mandate. The office will complement this work and work in co-operation with the relevant State actors active in this area.

The point made by Deputy Ó Murchú is correct and it emphasises the cross-party and horizontal impact the Government is having on AI. The meeting he referred to is the round-table conversation the Minister, Deputy Lawless, had on enterprise, with many stakeholders around the table. It was specifically on the gaps we need to fill and whether they are widening or narrowing. Admittedly, there is a widening between SMEs and the bigger companies which have all of these systems in place. We were rightly taking a look at how we can address this with Skillnet Ireland, our ETBs, SOLAS and many other training agencies.

To respond to the point made by Deputy Lawlor, the Bill seeks to provide an appropriate foundation while avoiding unnecessary measures. I am satisfied the AI Act already provides appropriate safeguards in the workplace and I do not propose to accept the amendment at this time.

Turning to amendment No. 6, I agree that it is important that the emerging issues in AI regulation are identified early and that the regulators work together and effectively in responding to new challenges. The office is being established primarily to support the implementation and co-ordination of the AI Act in the State. Its functions include co-ordinating competent authorities, facilitating co-operation and information sharing, supporting enforcement activities and advising the Minister on matters relating to its functions. These functions already place the office in a strong position to identify emerging issues and share information across the regulatory system. The amendment would go further by assigning the office a potentially broad and undefined role in "addressing [areas] where regulation may not be covered by existing authorities". It is unclear what legal or operational action that would entail and how it would interact with the responsibilities of the Oireachtas, the Government, Ministers and sectoral regulators.

The creation of new regulatory frameworks, the allocation of regulatory responsibilities and the identification of legislative gaps are primarily matters for the Government and the Oireachtas. The role of the office is to support effective implementation of the existing framework established by the AI Act and this Bill. That said, I acknowledge the concern underlined in the amendment. As the AI ecosystem evolves, the office's practical experience and engagement with competent authorities will place it in a valuable position to identify emerging regulatory issues and advise the Government accordingly. Indeed, section 9(1)(f) empowers the office to provide advice to the Minister on matters relating to its functions.

Amendment No. 7 is provided for under the EU AI Act, which introduces the provisions concerning energy consumption and transparency. Providers of the general purpose AI models are required to document the known or estimated energy consumption of their models as part of their technical documentation obligations under annex XI of the AI Act. To support this, the European Commission is currently undertaking work to develop a robust and practical framework for the measuring of AI energy consumption and efficiency. Moreover, the Bill requires the office to have regard to the "policies and objectives of the Government and any Minister of the Government insofar as the policies and objectives may affect or relate to the functions of the Office". This provision is broad and captures wide Government policies, including climate.

The AI Act is clear and strong in its emphasis on its application in accordance with the values of the Union enshrined in the charter, facilitating the protection of natural persons, undertakings, democracy, the rule of law and environmental protection in the uptake of

trustworthy AI. The Government is conscious that the functions of the office may evolve over time but it is important to avoid unnecessary duplication in relation to its function. The amendment is therefore unnecessary, and I will not be in a position to accept it.

While I understand the sentiment behind amendments Nos. 8 and 9, I am satisfied that the section, within its broad mandate, places obligations on the office to promote AI innovation, adoption and competitiveness. The Bill also requires that the AI office is established to supervise AI regulatory sandboxes in accordance with Article 57 of the EU AI Act. The sandbox framework is specifically designed to provide a structured environment for innovation and testing and development, practically benefiting SMEs and start-ups that may lack the resources of larger enterprises to navigate compliance independently. The EU AI Act's sandbox provision was deliberately designed with SMEs in mind and the Bill faithfully implements that framework.

In relation to the amendment regarding annual reports, the Bill provides a comprehensive accountability framework that achieves this purpose. Section 38 requires the office to prepare a strategy statement every three years setting out key objectives, outputs and strategies, including a review of previous performance. Section 40 requires that the office submit an annual report on the performance of its functions in such form and including such information as the office considers appropriate or as the Minister directs. I am satisfied that the proposed objectives of the amendment are captured within the core functions of the office. Reasserting them would merely restate what is there, maybe in more elaborate terms. Accordingly, I do not accept the amendments.

Amendment No. 10 would require the office to take such measures as it considers necessary to advance the objectives specified in section 9(1) and to report on those measures in each annual report under section 40. Section 9(1) already confers on the office a comprehensive range of functions directed at precisely these objectives while section 9(4) provides that, "The Office shall have all such powers as are necessary or expedient for the performance of its functions", which already encompass the taking of measures that the proposed section 9(6) would require. Imposing a separate, open-ended obligation to take such measures as is considered necessary to advance those same objectives offers nothing of substance while potentially creating interpretive ambiguity as to the scope of the office's existing powers and duties. As regards the reporting obligation proposed in section 9(7), section 40 already requires the office to prepare an annual report on the performance of its functions, which inherently encompasses reporting on the measures taken in respect of the section 9(1) objectives. A specific and additional reporting requirement is therefore redundant.

I am conscious that the office must be afforded appropriate flexibility and independence in determining how best to advance its statutory objectives, a point expressly recognised in section 9(5). The prescribing of further layers of mandatory consultation and reporting obligations of the kind proposed risks imposing an administrative burden disproportionate to any tangible benefit. Accordingly, I oppose the amendment.

Deputy James Geoghegan: I thank the Minister of State. I ask her to clarify, hopefully before the clock runs out, what is contemplated by an order as distinct from a direction under sections 10 and 11. Does the concept of an order or the concept of a direction, and that level of flexibility afforded to the Minister in this Bill, derive from specific sections of the EU

regulation that we are implementing or is this a domestic measure that we are adding? Is it the Minister of State's intention that an order or a direction would never be taken unless it was an action adopted at an EU-wide level? Does she contemplate orders or directions being issued that relate to domestic policy measures or would this happen only when it is done in concert at an EU level?

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I agree with Deputy Geoghegan on that question. I appreciate the point the Minister of State made in response to my amendment but it is important to clarify what the role will be of the AI office when something falls between the designated competent authorities.

I am conscious that the clock is running down, and my next point speaks to the fact that we did not get to talk to a lot of the other amendments, but I did get to raise, once again, that the Civil Service seems to have chosen to discriminate against county councillors being employed by this body. That is very unfair.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I just had a quick search through the legislation. It has the word "ethics" in it five times and the word "responsible" twice. That is in different contexts but the point is whether "ethical and responsible" is such a novel phrase. I do not think so. The response from the Minister of State, which was essentially "Computer says 'No'", does not stand up regarding the idea of including "ethical and responsible" when, as she can hear, there is plenty of support for such a phrase. It would introduce the balance we are seeking. That is a shame.

I support Deputy Lawlor's amendment because the climate concerns relating to AI are very, very deep, and the text of this existing legislation does not account for it appropriately.

I am very clear that I want to see AI developed in society and I want to see the benefits it can bring to society. The only way that will happen is if we have public trust in the technology and the only way we will get public trust in this technology is with the appropriate regulatory framework. This Bill does not deliver it.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: In response to Deputy Geoghegan, an order is specifically related to adding to the functions while directions are related to policy. We know that national and EU policies are generally aligned. I hope that answers his question.

Amendment put:

The Committee divided: Tá, 57; Níl, 81; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Ahern, Ciarán.	Aird, William.	
Bacik, Ivana.	Ardagh, Catherine.	
Bennett, Cathy.	Boland, Grace.	
Byrne, Joanna.	Brabazon, Tom.	
Cairns, Holly.	Brennan, Brian.	
Carthy, Matt.	Brennan, Shay.	
Collins, Michael.	Brophy, Colm.	
Conway-Walsh, Rose.	Browne, James.	
Coppinger, Ruth.	Burke, Colm.	

Cronin, Réada.	Burke, Peter.	
Crowe, Seán.	Butler, Mary.	
Cullinane, David.	Butterly, Paula.	
Cummins, Jen.	Buttimer, Jerry.	
Daly, Pa.	Byrne, Malcolm.	
Devine, Máire.	Byrne, Thomas.	
Donnelly, Paul.	Cahill, Michael.	
Ennis, Daniel.	Callaghan, Catherine.	
Farrelly, Aidan.	Calleary, Dara.	
Farrell, Mairéad.	Canney, Seán.	
Gannon, Gary.	Carrigy, Micheál.	
Gibney, Sinéad.	Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	
Graves, Ann.	Chambers, Jack.	
Hayes, Eoin.	Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	
Healy, Seamus.	Clendennen, John.	
Hearne, Rory.	Collins, Niall.	
Kenny, Eoghan.	Connolly, John.	
Kenny, Martin.	Cooney, Joe.	
Kerrane, Claire.	Crowe, Cathal.	
Lawlor, George.	Currie, Emer.	
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	Daly, Martin.	
McGettigan, Donna.	Dempsey, Aisling.	
McGuinness, Conor D.	Devlin, Cormac.	
Mitchell, Denise.	Dolan, Albert.	
Murphy, Paul.	Dooley, Timmy.	
Nash, Ged.	Feighan, Frankie.	
Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	Fleming, Sean.	
Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	Foley, Norma.	
O'Callaghan, Cian.	Geoghegan, James.	
O'Donoghue, Robert.	Grealish, Noel.	
O'Flynn, Ken.	Harkin, Marian.	
O'Gorman, Roderic.	Heydon, Martin.	
O'Hara, Louis.	Higgins, Emer.	
O'Reilly, Louise.	Keogh, Keira.	
O'Rourke, Darren.	Kyne, Seán.	
Ó Broin, Eoin.	Lahart, John.	
Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	Lawless, James.	
Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	Lowry, Michael.	
Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	Maxwell, David.	
Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	McAuliffe, Paul.	
Quaide, Liam.	McCarthy, Noel.	
Quinlivan, Maurice.	McConalogue, Charlie.	
Rice, Pádraig.	McCormack, Tony.	
Stanley, Brian.	McEntee, Helen.	
Wall, Mark.	McGreehan, Erin.	
Ward, Charles.	Moran, Kevin Boxer.	
Ward, Mark.	Moynihan, Aindrias.	
Whitmore, Jennifer.	Moynihan, Michael.	

	Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	
	Murphy, Michael.	
	Naughton, Hildegard.	
	Neville, Joe.	
	O'Brien, Darragh.	
	O'Callaghan, Jim.	
	O'Connell, Maeve.	
	O'Connor, James.	
	O'Donnell, Kieran.	
	O'Meara, Ryan.	
	O'Shea, John Paul.	
	O'Sullivan, Christopher.	
	O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	
	Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	
	Ó Muirí, Naoise.	
	Richmond, Neale.	
	Roche, Peter.	
	Scanlon, Eamon.	
	Smith, Brendan.	
	Smyth, Niamh.	
	Timmins, Edward.	
	Toole, Gillian.	
	Troy, Robert.	
	Ward, Barry.	

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Sinéad Gibney and George Lawlor; Níl, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie.

Amendment declared lost.

11 o'clock

An Ceann Comhairle: The time permitted for this debate having expired, I am required to put the following question in accordance with an order of the Dáil of this day: "That in respect of each of the sections undisposed of, the section is hereby agreed to in Committee, Schedules 1 to 4 and the Title are hereby agreed to in Committee, the Bill is accordingly reported to the House without amendment, Fourth Stage is hereby completed and the Bill is hereby passed."

Question put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 81; Níl, 58; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Brennan, Brian.	Cairns, Holly.	
Brennan, Shay.	Carthy, Matt.	
Brophy, Colm.	Collins, Michael.	

Browne, James.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Burke, Colm.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Burke, Peter.	Cronin, Réada.	
Butler, Mary.	Crowe, Seán.	
Butterly, Paula.	Cullinane, David.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Cummins, Jen.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Daly, Pa.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Devine, Máire.	
Cahill, Michael.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Ennis, Daniel.	
Calleary, Dara.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Canney, Seán.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Gannon, Gary.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Chambers, Jack.	Graves, Ann.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Clendennen, John.	Healy, Seamus.	
Collins, Niall.	Hearne, Rory.	
Connolly, John.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Cooney, Joe.	Kenny, Martin.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Currie, Emer.	Lawlor, George.	
Daly, Martin.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Devlin, Cormac.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Dolan, Albert.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Murphy, Paul.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Fleming, Sean.	Nash, Ged.	
Foley, Norma.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Geoghegan, James.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Grealish, Noel.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Harkin, Marian.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
Heydon, Martin.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
Higgins, Emer.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
Keogh, Keira.	O'Hara, Louis.	
Kyne, Seán.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
Lahart, John.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
Lawless, James.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
Lowry, Michael.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
Maxwell, David.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
McCarthy, Noel.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	Quaide, Liam.	
McCormack, Tony.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
McEntee, Helen.	Rice, Pádraig.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Stanley, Brian.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Wall, Mark.	

Moynihan, Aindrias.	Ward, Charles.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Ward, Mark.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
Murphy, Michael.		
Naughton, Hildegard.		
Neville, Joe.		
O'Brien, Darragh.		
O'Callaghan, Jim.		
O'Connell, Maeve.		
O'Connor, James.		
O'Donnell, Kieran.		
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Rose Conway-Walsh and Sinéad Gibney.

Question declared carried.

Childcare Services: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

acknowledges:

- the importance of affordable and accessible childcare for children and parents, neither of which are being achieved for many families across the State; and
- that there is no early years or childcare sector without the Early Years Educators and School-Age Childcare practitioners who work in it;

notes that:

- childcare costs remain far too high and are in excess of €800 per month in many parts of the State;
- access to childcare is now a major labour market issue affecting our economy;
- the need to ensure regulations for childminders are fair, and are aimed at growing the number of childminders, not reducing them, while acknowledging that less than 200 of an estimated 16,000 childminders have registered with Tusla;
- there are between 40,000 and 50,000 children on waiting lists for childcare places, many which do not exist due to severe shortages of childcare places, especially for babies under one year;
- there is no published plan, despite being promised, on how to deliver a €200 per month childcare service to parents;
- continued issues are being experienced by childcare providers with the Core Funding support; and
- the current mechanism for pay increases, via an Employment Regulation Order, is not working for professionals in the sector;

further notes the welcome introduction of State-led childcare facilities; and

calls on the Government to:

- immediately publish a roadmap to deliver €200 a month childcare, with a clear timeframe for the implementation;
- extend the Building Blocks Extension Grant Scheme, to allow for the purchase of existing buildings, not just new, to increase childcare capacity quickly;
- increase pay for Early Years Educators and School-Age Childcare Practitioners from September 2026, and begin work on examining the State taking over wages and associated costs in the sector, as a first step to a public model;
- extend Parent's Leave and Benefit, to ensure a baby can spend their first year with at least one parent;
- ensure the widest possible consultation with childminders on the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) (Childminding Services) Regulations 2024; and
- initiate an immediate and full review of the Core Funding supports, as committed to in the Programme for Government.

I am glad to have the opportunity to bring forward this motion on childcare and the early years sector. There are a number of significant issues in the sector that have been ongoing for some time, not least of which is affordability, but equal and almost more important is accessibility. Cost is totally irrelevant to parents who cannot find a place that will take their child. There are also ongoing issues with the workforce, in particular the educators, who year-on-year - this year, last year and the year before - are at the whim of a joint labour committee, JLC, which might give them 65 cent, €1 or €1.35. Once again this year, no increase will be in place in time for September. That is no way at all to treat these professionals. I met some who

said to me that they find it difficult to do a four-year degree and come out to earn an amount of money per hour that they could earn in the local supermarket. That is no level of respect for these professionals, without whom we would have no childcare sector and would not have to worry about places or cost.

There is an ongoing issue with childminders. I note the Minister's amendment references having extensively consulted childminders on the regulations. I have no doubt those efforts were made, but the situation is serious for childminders and my question is, if they were extensively engaged with, why do we have a situation where well under 200 of them have signed up to the regulations and registered with Tusla to date, with the deadline of September 2027 looming? Approximately 160 of the 13,000 to 15,000 childminders in the State have signed up. There is clearly an issue. No matter how hard the consultation was in terms of its significance, it clearly has not worked. There is a major issue and there is a huge job of work to be done.

I bring forward the six requests in this motion in good faith and because I want to see a better childcare service. There are measures that have come along under the State-led model, which I welcomed, but I would like it to be expanded in the building blocks expansion grant scheme. I have raised this issue with the Minister many times. If we can develop State-led, not-for-profit childcare now under the new State-led model, why can we not expand the building blocks scheme to buy existing buildings instead of focusing solely on new builds and new purchases? That would be a way to build capacity and do so quickly.

I met a community childcare provider recently that has expanded its places and will be able to provide an additional 40 places in its childcare setting. There are 140 children on its waiting list. The provider knows that, as parents see the extension being built, they will hope and expect to get a place for their child, while capacity will not come close to demand.

Affordability continues to be an issue. The cost reduction in the maximum fees payable announced recently puts the cost today closer to €200 per week than €200 per month. It is incredible that we still have no roadmap for how we will get to €200 per month. That should be in place. The plan should be published. It was all the talk of the last general election.

The Minister's amendment also speaks about parent's leave and benefit, maternity leave and the leave available specifically to two-parent families. There is an ongoing anomaly, which I have raised many times, for one-parent families. It would cost a small amount of money. It is wrong that babies who grow up in a one-parent family have less time with their parent than children who grow up in a two-parent family. That should be corrected and it needs to be done. We want to see the extension of parent's leave and benefit to bring parents - in both one-parent and two-parent families - to being able to spend the first year with their children. That is important and we need to make far greater headway on it.

Lastly on the motion's requests, the Government needs to do its homework on the State taking on the wages. We have a crisis in recruitment and retention. In some counties, the turnover is up to 50% and it is actually 50% in some. We have to give respect and recognition to early years educators. Giving them 65 cent or €1.35 here and there and waiting to see what the Labour Court decides is no way to treat professionals in the sector. If we do not make a move as bold as I believe we should by taking on the wages, we will not have the sector, including the workforce. We will not retain them to ensure children see the same face every

day, which is a positive benefit for children's development, but would also ensure we have a strong and resilient childcare sector into the future. That is not there right now as I bring this motion forward.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Our motion recognises a simple truth. Affordable childcare is not a luxury. It is an essential public service, a service families must be able to access. Crucially, childcare providers and early years educators must also be properly supported. In Galway, the reality is very different from the picture painted by the Government. Parents contact me all the time because they cannot secure a childcare place. Many are forced onto lengthy waiting lists even before their children are born. Others are travelling significant distances because there simply is not the capacity in their local communities. That places a huge amount of pressure on parents who are trying to work and keep their families going while they are already struggling with the cost-of-living crisis.

Childcare fees are going up despite the Government giving us assurances that it had a plan, not only to stop this happening, but to reduce prices to €200 per month. That election promise was completely and utterly ignored. As childcare costs spiral out of control, families rightly ask what happened to these promises.

The truth is that providers are also under huge financial pressure. They are battling rising costs, recruitment difficulties and uncertainty about future funding. In recent years, we have had a situation where some providers have reached a point where they simply cannot continue. Every provider that closes means there are fewer places, longer waiting lists and greater pressure on those that remain. There is a knock-on effect on everyone, but I hear particularly from mothers. Many mothers have reached out to me to tell me they simply cannot get back to work. Women are finding it impossible to get access to childcare places within the first year of their child's life, while clearly the maternity entitlement in the State does not match that reality. Many babies just do not have a childcare space.

Many women say the child is on a waiting list without any other option afforded to them while they are looking to get back into work. These women tell me they need immediate action to get the support they need. This can only be achieved by making childcare affordable so it is within the reach of families, but also by creating the spaces necessary to accommodate all the children in a locality.

Deputy David Cullinane: I support the motion and commend an Teachta Kerrane for bringing forward all the solutions, which I hope the Minister takes on board. I want to get to a point where we have the €200 per month childcare promised not just by a lot of parties before the last election but also by Government representatives. That simply has not been delivered. Even if we get to that point though it is not going to be of value to many parents because they cannot get access to childcare in the first place.

I attended a public meeting in Tramore, County Waterford a number of weeks ago. All the Oireachtas Members and local councillors were invited and it is a really good example, and one I ask the Minister to look at, of a town with a growing population that has not seen the investment in childcare facilities it needs. Parent after parent was talking about the impossibility of finding appropriate early education or childcare. It was a real barrier for some parents, especially women, getting back to work or finding full-time employment. There are

new housing developments where the buildings allocated for childcare are empty and childcare providers say there is a real battle to provide services there because the subsidies do not exist or are not good enough. There is bureaucracy and lots of reasons and it is just not cost-effective - that is one of the issues. If we have new housing developments where there is a promise of childcare facilities as part of them but they are not being provided it is a failure of Government and Government policy. What the parents asked me to convey to the Minister is they want her to do a pilot project in Tramore of a State-led childcare facility and look at capital investment. The crucial issue providers and parents also raised with me is staffing. There is huge staff turnover. We cannot get the staff. There are obviously issues with pay. We have been asking the Government to deal with those for a long number of years. It is a major impediment to providing childcare places. Tramore is only one example of many towns, cities and rural areas where childcare is unfortunately non-existent or simply does not have the capacity it should. I am hoping the Minister will listen to what we are saying and take on board the solutions that are in our motion.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Tá cúram leanaí ró-chostasach agus níl dóthain áiteanna ann. For far too many families childcare is no longer just a challenge but a barrier to having children, returning to work or simply making ends meet. I am aware of couples who have delayed starting a family because of the pressures brought about by the combined costs of childcare and housing. That is not their failure but a failure of Government. This is one of the wealthiest states in Europe. There is no excuse for parents still paying over €800 a month per child for childcare while also facing soaring housing, energy and commuting costs. In my constituency, over half of childcare services in Cavan have waiting lists while in Monaghan almost two thirds have. That tells its own story. Families are paying too much yet still cannot get a place.

Before the last general election Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael promised parents they would deliver childcare bills of €200 per month maximum. That promise has disappeared without any plan to deliver it. On the other hand, Sinn Féin has a credible roadmap to reduce childcare costs, expand capacity, improve pay and conditions so providers can recruit and retain staff, reform the funding model and properly support childcare. Deputy Kerrane has set out how these policies can be implemented and we need to take that advice. We need to give parents a real choice. Some want to return to work quickly and others want more time at home with their babies. Extending paid parental leave would recognise caring for our youngest children is valuable work that deserves the support of the State. Families in Cavan, Monaghan and right across Ireland deserve action on childcare, not more broken promises.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank an Teachta Kerrane not just for this motion but for all the work she has done because while the Government completely lacks a roadmap, an Teachta Kerrane has showed it how it can be done in terms of delivering for parents and children.

Access to affordable childcare allowed me to finish college, to work part-time and then to move on to full-time employment. Affordable childcare was a game-changer for my family. The best way to deliver affordable childcare, and the Minister knows this, is by delivering it on a not-for-profit basis yet in my constituency of Dublin Fingal West we see the Government attitude to community childcare laid bare. I represent the youngest constituency in this State. There is a huge need for affordable childcare. Parents are being made to pay huge fees. That is when they can even get a place, because a lot of the children in my constituency are on

waiting lists. Parents heard the Government's promise of €200 per month yet they pay €800 and sometimes more. According to Fingal County Council the review of childcare that was due to take place in 2022 was abandoned. Now it is starting again, at the request of the Minister, to do another review. The Government does not need a review to tell it what is wrong. The statistics are there. All the while those statistics tell us a tale about the Government's attitude to parents, children and early years educators in my area. There are 63,000 kids living in Fingal and 15,000 of them live in disadvantage. There are 800 community or not-for-profit places. For every 100 children in Fingal there are 24 childcare places. Our community centres are full of for-profit childcare providers. There is no space and no interest from this Government in community childcare and the parents, the kids and the early-year educators in my constituency of Dublin Fingal West deserve so much better.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Families who rely on childcare and those who work in the sector are being profoundly let down. I will speak about the families who rely on it first. For many that is €800 or €900 a month if they are relying on it full time. There are also many parents who rely on it for two or three children and for them the costs are crippling. This is true at all stages and we need to get to a place where we have wraparound childcare. This is quite a stressful time for parents because schools have finished. Parents up and down the country are trying to work a patchwork quilt of a few hours with a parent here, a summer camp there and a few hours with a childminder.

It all speaks to our never having got to grips with a public childcare model in this State and that has to be the direction. We need to treat this as a public good and it needs to be publicly provided. That is the direction we need to go in. While I recognise that in the moment we are in subsidies to the sector are necessary it seems the Government's strategy, just as with housing, is to rely on that. It is to constantly build it more into the system and add subsidy after subsidy while ultimately not building the public service we need. People who have to pay childcare fees while renting find there is nearly nothing left. That could be €2,500 just for those two costs alone. The other thing this place needs to get to grips with is it is not just the parents' problem but a problem for all of us. It is a problem for the whole of our society. It is a strategic problem. There are people who are prevented from being able to go out and get a job, keep a full-time job or stay in the workforce because they cannot get childcare. It is a problem for us all because there are people out there who are making the decision to put off having a second, third or perhaps even a first child because they cannot afford it. It is dictating where people live and many other things like that. We have to get to grips with the fact it is a problem for all of us we have to solve for the good of us all.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I commend Deputy Kerrane on bringing forward this motion. I remember five or six years ago Kathleen Funchion, the former TD for Carlow-Kilkenny, began a process of speaking to childcare providers and families around the country about this issue. It was an issue for everyone in every constituency in the country. We were meeting families who could not get childcare and when they could it was extremely expensive. Those working as early-years educators were in the very same position. They could not afford to continue to work in the sector after going to college and qualifying. They loved working with children yet they could not afford to continue to do that. We recognised something needed to be done and Deputy Kerrane continued to develop that policy until we clearly set out a goal that we wanted

to see a wraparound childcare service that would be available for everybody, be affordable and that the State would stand over.

Then, before the most recent election, the Government party came along and said, "This is a good idea", so what did it do? Instead of actually adopting the policy we had, it adopted the announcement and said it was going to provide this. However, there was no plan to do it whatsoever and now we are in the situation where we continue to hear the Government talk about it but actually not deliver it. That is really the problem we have here. We have a situation where many people around the country have been waiting since the Government came into power for this €200 per month for childcare. There is absolutely no sign of it whatsoever. I speak to people in my constituency who are still paying through the nose for a service they can ill afford at the same time as every other cost has gone through the roof, and we still have the situation where the people who work as early years educators cannot get an adequate salary to ensure that they can continue to work in the profession. The Minister needs to recognise that what we are bringing forward tonight is a solution to a problem not just for the people who work in the sector but for thousands of people around the country who are being pushed out of a situation where they cannot go to work because they cannot afford childcare. It really needs to be examined and sorted out.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: What we need is a fit-for-purpose public system. I commend Deputy Kerrane on her work. Unfortunately, we had promises around affordability from the Government and at this point, we have neither affordability nor accessibility. It does not work for childminders. It does not work for childcare providers. It certainly does not work for those who work within it or the parents who are contacting all of us. A constituent wrote to me. She stated:

I am writing to ask for your assistance regarding an urgent childcare issue that is placing my employment at risk.

I am a Clinical Nurse Specialist in Mental Health ... in Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Drogheda. I am passionate about my work and have worked hard to achieve my current position. My partner is an electrician ... and we have both invested years of training and dedication into our careers.

For the past year, I have been continuously contacting crèches throughout County Louth in an effort to secure childcare for our child. Despite my efforts, I have repeatedly been told that waiting lists are extremely long and that no places are available.

The only childcare place that I have been able to secure is in County Armagh. As a result, I am paying over €270 per week for just three days of childcare. ... The arrangement also requires a significant additional daily commute as I live in [north Louth] and work in Drogheda, meaning I am travelling in the opposite direction before then commuting back to work.

Unfortunately, the situation is becoming financially and practically unsustainable. I am now faced with the possibility of having to resign my job that I love simply because I cannot access affordable childcare closer to home.

Given the ongoing challenges facing mental health services and emergency care, I am deeply concerned that a lack of childcare provision could force experienced healthcare

professionals out of the workforce. I am eager to continue serving patients in County Louth and contributing to mental health services, but I need support in finding a viable childcare solution.

I have spoken to the Louth childcare committee and I think it is straightforward. I am sure the Minister may be aware there are currently no childcare places allowed for children full-time or part-time, especially within the age range from zero to three years. That says it all.

Minister for Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Norma Foley): I move amendment No 1:

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

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

- reduce out-of-pocket costs of early learning and childcare for families;
- better align the supply of State-subsidised early learning and childcare with demand; and
- increase the pay and improve the working conditions of Early Years Educators and School-Age Childcare practitioners, as well as develop career pathways and promote careers in the sector, in line with Nurturing Skills, the Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare 2022-2028;

acknowledges the unprecedented growth in State funding in the sector, which has increased from €707 million in 2022, to €1.52 billion this year, an increase of circa 116 per cent;

further welcomes:

- the publication of Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan Phase 1 Report, in December 2025;
- the extensive consultation process that has been designed to inform Phase 2 of Shaping the Future, including an online survey which has received more than 11,000 responses, 56 local consultation events, an art based engagement exercise with children and a national consultation event will also take place later in the year; and
- the commitment to publish Phase 2 of Shaping the Future by the end of 2026, which will deliver a pathway to achieving the Programme for Government commitment to 'Progressively reduce the cost of childcare to €200 per month per child';

acknowledges and welcomes the major achievements of, and new enhancements to, the Together for Better funding model this year, in line with Phase 1 of Shaping the Future, in particular:

- the continued implementation of the National Childcare Scheme (NCS), with approximately 277,000 children set to benefit from subsidies in 2026, including 47,000 children in lower income families who will benefit from increases in the income thresholds of the income-assessed subsidies, and from increases to the multiple child deduction component of the income-assessed subsidy for families with two or more children under the age of 15;

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

— the award-winning Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), which is supporting up to 9,000 children with a disability to access the ECCE programme in 2026, and which has now expanded beyond the ECCE programme, where ECCE children are benefitting from AIM support outside the ECCE programme hours, both in term and out of term, and AIM capitation increasing by 10 per cent to bring rates into line with new rates of pay for Early Years Educators under the updated Employment Regulation Orders (EROs), last October;

— the Equal Start funding model, and set of universal and targeted measures to support access to, and participation in, early learning and childcare for children and their families who experience disadvantage, with the number of settings being designated as priority settings, in receipt of targeted supports, reaching 824 in May 2026; and

— the Core Funding scheme, with the allocation of €393 million in year four of the scheme, September 2025-August 2026, set to rise by at least 23 per cent, or €90 million, in year five September 2026-August 2027, to €483 million, to support a range of important priorities, including:

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

— affordability to support services to sustainably maintain fee management conditions, including new maximum fee caps benefiting parents facing the highest fees across the country, under the new maximum fee caps, the highest possible upfront cost for a typical full day place of 45 hours per week will drop from around €198 per week to €183.70 per week, with universal subsidies under the NCS, higher subsidies are available for many parents, depending on their level of income and the age and number of children in their family; and

— quality through support, with the costs of the new EROs that commenced on 13th October, 2025, through which approximately 67 per cent of staff working in the sector saw an increase in pay, and through additional ringfenced funding of up to €45 million, in year five of the scheme, which is contingent on updated EROs by the independent Joint Labour Committee, with these negotiations underway;

further acknowledges that:

— since Core Funding was introduced, its effectiveness has been subject to ongoing review, and the scheme itself has evolved year-on-year, with changes, including targeted measures and a fee increase assessment process informed by data from previous years, feedback from stakeholders, as well as an independent financial review of sessional services by Frontier Economics; and

— a review of the first year of Core Funding and the development of an evaluation framework for Core Funding is currently underway, and this review, which is being undertaken by the Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service policy analysts, will be completed in the coming months;

further again, acknowledges and welcomes that:

- childminders were extensively consulted with and involved in all aspects of the development of the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) (Childminding Services) Regulations 2024, which were designed to be proportionate and appropriate to the home and family setting in which an estimated 13,000 childminders work;
- an independent external review of the draft Childminding Regulations by Dr Bill Maxwell, the former Chief Executive Officer of Education Scotland, former Chief Inspector in both Scotland and Wales, and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development consultant, confirmed that the approach was proportionate for childminding in Ireland; and
- the independent review of the initial implementation of the Childminding Regulations launched on 19th June, with an open call for submissions, the review will include consultation with childminders and other stakeholders and will provide an important opportunity to learn lessons from initial experiences with the regulations, a consultation survey will follow the call for submissions, in addition to focus groups, stakeholder interviews, and case studies, the scope of the review is broader than initially outlined in the National Action Plan for Childminding 2021-2028, and will now also examine the effectiveness of supports made available to assist with the registration of childminders, as well as examining the barriers to registration and regulatory compliance, including financial and information barriers;

also welcomes the transformed Forward Planning and Delivery Unit, with ground-breaking work underway in that unit to develop a forward planning model, and introduce State-led services to provide high-quality, accessible early learning and childcare, to operate alongside private and community providers where there are shortfalls in capacity, supported by €135 million in capital funding over the period 2026-2030;

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

- a net increase in registered, centre-based services in 2025 of 255, compared with net increases of 30 in 2022, 129 in 2023, 226 in 2024;
- a year-on-year decline in the number of closures, with 138 closures in 2025, compared with 183 in 2022, 167 in 2023, 131 in 2024;
- a net increase of 40 in registered, centre-based services this year to date, January-April 2026;
- a 25 per cent increase in child enrolments between 2022 and 2025, from 197,186 to 247,011 children, against a backdrop of a 12 per cent decline in the under-five population; and
- a 23 per cent increase in staff working in the sector between 2022 and 2025, from 34,359 to 42,130 staff;

furthermore, welcomes:

- the major progress made on family leaves in recent years under the First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028;

- the combined durations of Maternity, Paternity and Parent's Leave and Benefit now equate to 46 weeks' paid leave for a two-parent family, supplemented by an entitlement to 16 weeks of unpaid Maternity Leave, and 26 weeks of unpaid parental leave per parent; and

- the Programme for Government commits to examining the extension of Parent's Leave and Benefit and additional flexibilities; and

also acknowledges that:

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

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

I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion and to contribute to what is an essential and timely debate on early learning and childcare. I would like to acknowledge the importance of this issue not just as a policy matter, but as one that directly affects children and families, educators and practitioners, providers and our wider society and economy.

For the information of the House, I have tabled an amendment to this motion. I do so not to dismiss the concerns sincerely raised but to ensure that this House has a full, balanced and evidence-based understanding of where early learning and childcare stands today and the direction in which we are moving.

While we have seen real and measurable progress in recent years with significant increases in State investment, reductions in out-of-pocket costs for parents, growth in capacity across the sector and improvements in workforce pay, the Government fully acknowledges the challenges that remain in early learning and childcare, particularly in terms of costs and availability of places for many families. However, I emphasise at the outset that this debate should not be framed solely in terms of affordability and accessibility. Quality must also stand as a central and interconnected pillar of early learning and childcare policy. That is why this Government's approach is not just to reduce costs or expand but to build a system that delivers high-quality experiences for every child, supported by a skilled and valued workforce. There are real issues and they are not being dismissed by the Government. They are recognised and they are being addressed: in a structured, multi-annual and evidence-based reform programme through Shaping the Future, the early years action plan.

As Members are aware, phase 1 of this plan was published in December 2025. It sets out concrete actions already being delivered in 2026 across affordability, access and quality. Phase 2, to be published by the end of 2026, will build on this with further medium-term reforms. It will set out a clear pathway to achieving the programme for Government commitment of reducing parental fees to €200 per month over the lifetime of this Government as is committed and reflected in the programme for Government. It will be grounded in evidence, stakeholder

engagement and consultation. More than 11,000 submissions have been received through the consultation process, supported by 56 local consultation events right across the country. That is not the absence of a plan. This is a Government that is developing policy in partnership with children and families, educators and practitioners and providers to ensure it delivers real and sustained change. We must move forward, but we must do so in a way that is durable and supports the entire system.

On the issue of affordability, the motion asserts that costs remain too high and for many families, that is true. However, the motion fails to acknowledge the scale of progress already made. OECD data shows that between 2022 and 2025 o childcare costs for couples on the average wage fell from 23% to 12% of household income, while childcare costs for lone parents on the average wage fell from 23% to 13% of household income. Central Statistics Office, CSO, data show that since September 2022, the consumer price index for childcare has fallen by 37%. That is a remarkable and unprecedented reduction in a context of high inflation, which was achieved through the combined impact of consistent and sustained subsidy increases in the national childcare scheme and fee management measures under core funding. That is putting real money back into the pockets of families. We are not waiting for some future point to deliver affordability. we have already started the process of delivering it.

Budget 2026 builds on this progress by: increasing investment to over €1.5 billion, which he highest ever level of state support; expanding subsidies under the national childcare scheme to benefit hundreds of thousands of children; and introducing further fee caps to reduce the highest costs faced by parents. Under these new fee caps, the maximum cost of a full-time place is falling further, with additional support for families on low income available through increases in income-related subsidies under the national childcare scheme. However, I do know we have much more to do to make our programme for Government commitment of reducing parental fees to €200 per month over the lifetime of Government a reality.

Let me also address important issues on workforce. The motion raises concerns about pay and rightly highlights the importance of the workforce. The Government agrees; there is no early learning and childcare sector without educators and practitioners. That is why we are continuing to support the joint labour committee process, the formal and independent mechanism for setting pay levels. Although the State is not the employer, through budget 2026, up to €45 million in additional ring-fenced core funding has been provided to support further improvements, contingent on new employment regulation orders. This has been an effective approach. Negotiations by the independent joint labour committee are now under way to determine the pays of rate for what will be the fourth set employment regulation orders since 2022. Over the last three sets of employment regulation orders, wages in the sector have increased by 25%. The Government has supported employers in meeting the cost of these wage costs, notwithstanding the fact that employers are private operators and the State is not an employer in this sector.

At the same time, as articulated in phase 1 of Shaping the Future, we are examining through phase 2 of shaping the future where alternative mechanisms may better support long-term improvements in pay and conditions. This reflects a Government that is both acting now and planning ahead. The motion calls for a review of core funding. A review of the scheme is already under way. Since its introduction, we have ensured core funding has involved continuous monitoring, adjustment and refinement. A formal evaluation of its first year is

currently being conducted alongside the development of a robust long-term evaluation framework. This ensures that the scheme remains effective, it evolves based on evidence and feedback and it delivers value for money.

The motion, relying on waiting list data, suggests that capacity is simply not there, despite the clear challenges with these data that I have articulated in this House time and time again. There is no centralised waiting list. Each waiting list is managed at service level and an individual child may well be on multiple waiting lists in different services. In fact, they may remain on one or multiple service lists after taking up a place.

Other data tell a different story. We are seeing strong and sustained growth in capacity across the sector, with a significant increase in registered services year on year, including a net increase of 61 more registered centre-based services between January and May 2026, a continued decline in closures, a 25% increase in child enrolments between 2022 and 2025 and a 23% increase in staff over the same period. This is clear evidence that capacity is growing.

Alongside this, the Government is investing significant capital funding to increase supply. The building blocks extension grant scheme is currently being operated by the Department and will deliver up to 1,500 places this year. A further building blocks extension scheme will operate in 2027.

The motion calls for Government to purchase existing buildings from existing providers. The Government has taken a clear position here. Our priority is increasing capacity. The Department is not offering funding to providers to purchase existing premises that would not increase existing capacity. Instead, the Department recently announced €135 million of capital investment over the coming five years for State-led services to provide additional high quality, accessible early learning and childcare. The process has commenced with investment in buildings in what will be a groundbreaking initiative.

Concerns have been raised about the childminding review. Let me assure the House that childminders have been consulted at every stage of the development and implementation of the national action plan for childminding and in the drafting of the childminding regulations. An independent expert reviewer confirmed that the approach is proportionate and appropriate to the home-based setting. Furthermore, a new review of the initial implementation of the childminding regulations has been launched, and involves: call for submissions, surveys, stakeholder engagement and detailed analysis of barriers to registration. This demonstrates our willingness to listen, to learn and to adapt policy where necessary.

The motion also calls for expanded family leave in the first year of a child's life. Through the Government's First 5 strategy, significant progress has been made. Parents now have access to up to 46 weeks of paid leave in a two-parent household, alongside unpaid leave entitlements. This reflects a strong commitment to supporting families in the earliest stages of a child's life. Further extensions will be considered, in line with programme for Government commitments.

What is being delivered by this Government is not a series of isolated measures, but a coherent reform programme, one that balances urgency with sustainability and ambition with delivery. The Government amendment put forward reflects that reality. It acknowledges the challenges but it also recognises the progress, the direction and the pathway that has been set out. That is the basis on which we should proceed.

Deputy Ann Graves: I acknowledge the work that an Teachta Kerrane has put in on this important motion.

Affordable childcare is a real challenge for families in my constituency, Dublin Fingal East, one of the largest and fastest growing areas. We are seeing large developments being built delivering thousands of much-needed homes but there is little effort being put into planning good quality affordable childcare facilities to meet the needs of families. Those childcare facilities that are being built are not fit for purpose. They are not viable and the costs are way too high.

Purpose-built childcare facilities are lying empty in Portmarnock and Swords. They are too small and cannot accommodate enough children to make them financially viable. In Donabate, a developer looked for a change of use to allow a crèche to be turned into two residential units because there was no uptake. Meanwhile Fingal has the lowest proportion of community-based childcare in the State. The Dublin region average is 33%. The State average is approximately 23%. In Fingal, only 5% or 16 providers operate on a not-for-profit basis. The vast majority of these are in Dublin West.

This is creating a real crisis in Dublin Fingal East, where families, children and childcare providers need to see a radical shift in Government policy. I am contacted every day by parents who are anxious. If they are lucky enough to get a place in a childcare facility, they simply cannot afford it. In some cases, it is akin to a second mortgage.

The introduction of the new maximum caps does not go far enough and many people cannot avail of them. Childcare fees create barriers to using formal childcare facilities, female labour market participation and tackling childcare poverty rates.

Sinn Féin is determined to deliver childcare for €10 a day. We are committed to an early years model of childcare that is affordable, high quality, accessible and inclusive. There are immediate actions that the Government can take by providing a roadmap to deliver €200 a month childcare with a clear implementation timeline and by extending the building blocks extension grant scheme to include existing buildings. Something has to give because families cannot afford childcare.

Deputy Seán Crowe: Childcare is no longer simply a family issue. It is one of the biggest social and economic challenges facing this State.

We heard earlier that parents are paying more than €800 a month in many parts of the country but in Dublin they would be lucky to get change from €1,000 a month. Even then, there are thousands who still cannot secure a childcare place. That is the impossible situation for many families who are trying to work, study and provide the best start in life for their children.

I constantly hear from people I am talking to that they cannot afford to have a child, particularly those who have a mortgage. They are putting off having a child until later in life. The figures even suggest that is the pattern. People just cannot afford it and it is an impossible situation for many families.

Families have heard promise after promise from the Government. They were promised childcare provision at €200 a month but there is still no roadmap. There is certainly no

timeframe to get even close to that place. The core funding, we heard earlier on, must be reviewed so that providers are supported rather than buried in paperwork and bureaucracy. Every week, I get emails from parents where a childcare provider has pulled out of core funding and the costs of that family have skyrocketed.

The Government has made a mess of core funding to the point where it is not viable. Simply saying that childcare must be made cheaper is not enough. There must be investment in capacity, fair pay and, above all, long-term planning. The Government hates to consider any project that will last longer than an election cycle because, God forbid, it will not get the credit.

Sinn Féin's motion sets out practical, achievable measures that will make a real difference for children, parents and childcare professionals. It is time to move beyond announcements and deliver meaningful action.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: One of the best ways we can address the cost-of-living crisis for families with young children is to bring down the cost of childcare and make it more accessible. In my own constituency of Dublin Bay North, we have a lot of new housing estates with young families and the waiting list for childcare places is simply huge. The fact is it is stopping many people from returning to work. The cost for those who manage to secure a place are still way too high. While I welcome the progress that has been made in this area, the reality is that parents are still paying the equivalent of a second mortgage every month.

When it comes to capacity, if it does not have the staff, the Government cannot deliver the places in the system. Therefore, we need to ask why is staff turnover so high and why is recruitment so difficult. It is very clear. SIPTU's report found that 86% of early years educators identified low pay as their biggest issue and two thirds also raised the problem of extra pressure due to staff shortages and stress.

Everybody in this House will agree that the people we entrust to educate and care for our children should feel valued and that starts with fair pay. If we really want to deliver a public childcare system, we need to grasp the nettle here and begin examining where the State could take responsibility for wages and associated costs in the sector. Investing in our young people and their education from an early age benefits society as a whole. We can get this right but affordability, accessibility and workforce issues need to be addressed to make sure we do.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: Childcare is a cornerstone of society. It promotes and nourishes child well-being, gender equality and a sustainable work-family balance. Not many institutions or organisations can claim that. They are the backbone of our economy. If they do not operate tomorrow morning, the economy would collapse and half the workforce would not be able to go to work, yet childcare services are coming under enormous financial and structural pressure.

In most parts of the country, childcare costs are in excess of €800 per month, and in major cities, costs are reaching well over €1,200. Parents and guardians are at their tether, effectively paying a second mortgage for childcare services. Early childcare educators are poorly paid, with staff with bachelor's degrees at levels 7 and 8 not receiving proper pay in recognition of their qualifications. Providers themselves are under severe pressure, with many folding and others barely hanging on. That is why core funding supports must be reviewed to reflect what is happening on the ground.

There are up to 50,000 children on childcare waiting lists, and staff shortages are having an enormous effect on room closures and administration systems, such as rotas and holidays being disrupted, mainly due to low pay. Rural childcare services also play a vital part in rural communities. Those involved personally know the children and their families, and some have been operating for over 20 years, but many are pulling out of the core funding. In fact, childcare providers in the Dáil last week stated that in September, 996 services would be closing and that, by the end of the year, that will reach 1,500. That is a lot of families with nowhere to go.

Childcare at €200 per month must be introduced and core funding needs a full overhaul. If proper funding for childcare services is not put in place now, society and the economy will suffer. Childcare must come first, public good must come first and I ask all TDs to support this motion.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: Families in Louth have heard multiple announcements from local government representatives, but no meaningful action to deliver the Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael election promises of €200 per month childcare in the first 100 days of Government has come. Childcare is not a luxury and it needs to be given priority in investment.

We have more than 29,000 families with children in Louth, and almost 7,000 of those families have a child under the age of four. In sharp contrast, we only have 113 childcare providers, with 46% of these estimated to have a waiting list. We have parents waiting for places that just do not exist. The Government claims that improving access to quality and affordable early learning and school-age childcare is a key priority for Government, but the reality for parents I meet is very different. Natalie told me she does not want to have to choose between her being a mother and working, and she is already significantly disadvantaged in the workplace with regard to income and advancement opportunities. Lisa told me she has no option other than to stay working full-time just to make ends meet, but childcare places locally are a huge barrier to that continuing. Another couple at their wit's end told me they are both teachers who depend entirely on stable, affordable and reliable childcare, and that it is shocking to see dedicated professionals like them being pushed to the breaking point by Government policy failure.

In January, the Minister announced a proposal to purchase buildings that will provide childcare facilities. When I asked what was proposed in these plans for County Louth and what additional supply was proposed for areas of disadvantage in the Drogheda and south Louth areas, the response I received stated that no final decisions had been made on specific projects, but that the Minister looked forward to sharing details of projects as they were agreed. It has been six months and there have been no details or additional places.

Stock responses and soundbites do not help parents sitting and waiting on this. They are an absolute insult to the dedicated professionals who are working and struggling to keep the lights on and doors open. I call on the Minister to get real when it comes to the burden this is having on families. We need to support parents and invest in childcare, both in its provision and in the educators who deliver this service to our communities.

Deputy Daniel Ennis: Affordable and accessible childcare is a vital provision that has fundamental impacts on both our society and economy. A well-functioning early childhood education and care system is key to the future of our children as well as our own success. A

public model of early childhood education and care is the only way we can achieve a system that is affordable, accessible and which addresses the childcare needs of families across this country.

While we work towards that model, we must cap childcare fees at €200 per child per month. This fee cap is something we have heard a lot about this evening, and indeed in the 2024 election, but it is very important we keep reiterating this. It was promised to every parent in the country in the lead-up to this past election, and it was promised to them in the programme for Government. Yet, here we are, still without a clear roadmap or timeframe for when this will happen.

I often talk about how lucky I was and we were to be able to secure a childcare place for my daughter, Ren. It is lucky that I and my partner, Chloe, are able to work and continue our careers. We are lucky to have childcare costs that amount to a second mortgage. This is not the language we should be using or should have to use when it comes to childcare. Being lucky or blessed should not come into it, and it should have no bearing on your access to childcare; it should be a right. The average cost of childcare in this country is €850 per month. However, for many families, it is so much more than that, including my own. In my constituency, one parent got in touch with me to tell me they pay €1,800 per month for one child for childcare. That is absolutely shocking. How is that sustainable?

While the cost of childcare is impacting families across the country, lower income families are always the worst affected. Earlier this month, the Government announced a reduction in the weekly fee cap for childcare services under the core funding model. This reduction was less than €15 per week, a drop from €198 to €183.70. This is far from the €200 per child per month price cap that was promised. It is a bit scary. Price hike after price hike continue to affect families across the country. No parent wants to say they will not pay whatever they can for their child. As a parent, you want to give everything you possibly can for your children. No parent wants their child to go without, but we should not be putting them in that situation. We should not be making parents choose between their careers and their children.

This is not a reflection of the early years educators and school-age childcare practitioners who work tirelessly to provide a fantastic service for our children right across the country; it is a reflection of a broken system. We know this crisis disproportionately affects women, with mothers forced to put their careers on pause or give them up altogether. The national strategy for women and girls published last year put a strong emphasis on how unpaid care creates structural barriers that prevent women's participation in the workforce. A core part of these barriers is the lack of affordable, high-quality, early years and school-age care, as well as uneven pay for parental leave. These are factors that shape women's decisions on returning to work, access to full-time roles and long-term financial security. If our Government is serious about addressing the gender pay gap and improving gender equality as a whole within our society, it needs to start here. We need our Government to recognise that affordable, accessible childcare is fundamentally an equality issue.

Our European counterparts recognise that access to childcare is an equality issue. For instance, in Germany, children over the age of one have a legal entitlement to a childcare place. Portugal's national system of early childhood intervention works on a multi-departmental level to ensure an adequate system of social, education and health supports for young children. Ireland's childcare costs are nearly double that of the OECD average. We are now an outlier in

Europe in terms of how poor our access to early childhood education is and how unaffordable it is.

I welcome the Government's building block scheme and the announcement that it will purchase eight properties for the provision of public childcare. However, this does not go far enough. As a councillor, I asked for an audit to be done of Dublin City Council-owned properties to establish if any such properties may be suitable for future use as childcare facilities. This is something I believe we should be asking of all our councils and their council-owned property across the country. Property should be examined for its availability for community hubs, including childcare facilities, as having access to these facilities in the core of our community is of vital importance.

Core funding also continues to cause issues, and we have all spoken about that tonight. A Montessori in my own constituency in Phibsborough that has served the local community for decades is unsure if it will be able to open its doors next year. The sector is also facing serious challenges in recruitment and retention of staff. It is vital our plan for a public model of childcare includes proper pay and working conditions for staff in early childhood education facilities. Urgent action needs to be taken to address this. The challenges of recruitment and retention of staff in the industry is a major problem.

We need to see a public model of childcare. Childcare should be seen as essential infrastructure rather than a private burden that is placed on parents to deal with. Childcare has consistently been treated as an afterthought by this Government, with a complete lack of thought to the design and implementation of a well-functioning system. We want to see what was promised to us by this Government. We want to see a roadmap for a provision of €200 per month childcare. Families across this country are struggling and we need to support them.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this motion. I am always happy to speak to childcare because, particularly as someone who raised my daughter alone, I know how important childcare is for gender equality and for families across this country who are just gasping for it at this stage.

12 o'clock

The other issue that stands out from my own experience is that having paid for childcare in the early 2000s for my daughter, who was a millennial baby and is an adult woman now, I see that the crisis has not improved and has, in fact, only deepened. It is yet another crisis that has been stood over by successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments. Back then, I was paying the equivalent of a second mortgage for my daughter's childcare, although I could not afford a mortgage at the time.

Today, my area of Dublin Rathdown has the most expensive childcare in the country. Since becoming a TD, countless parents have contacted me at their wits' end trying to find and pay for childcare or worrying about losing their child's place. Childcare providers in Carrickmines, Dundrum and all across my constituency of Dublin Rathdown have pulled out of the Government funding scheme because they just could not make it work with the cost of rent and other overheads. That means parents across Dublin Rathdown are not even able to benefit from the rates under the childcare scheme, which are a far cry from the €200 cap promised in the

general election and the programme for Government. Instead, many are paying more than €2,000 a month to keep their children in crèche, which is, in effect, a second mortgage.

This crisis is pushing parents out of the workforce, adding stress to their lives and pushing down their incomes in what is already a cost-of-living crisis. Even when they can gather the money they need to pay the exorbitant costs, closures and a lack of spaces have meant many parents cannot secure a place for their child. They are caught between a rock and a hard place. Without a public system, this is what we get, namely, a service with not enough capacity and that is hugely expensive.

We in the Social Democrats have been clear about what needs to be done. A public model of childcare must be delivered as a matter of urgency. We must see fees come down and certainty for parents that if they secure a crèche place, they can rely on it being there next year and that they will not be hit with skyrocketing costs. A public model ensures costs are brought down and can be set at a genuinely affordable rate. This is not a radical idea. It is something most European countries have. However, the work does not stop just with costs. We do not just need a more affordable system; we also must invest in capacity. If we rely solely on private operators, we will be unable to ensure we have the capacity planning to provide enough spaces in the system to meet the need in our communities. Childcare is a public good. It is necessary to our society and it provides vital early years education to our children. We need to treat it as such.

Deputy Rory Hearne: I thank Deputy Kerrane and Sinn Féin for bringing forward this really important motion. It is very close to my heart as someone with children going through the early years sector. I thank the early years educators who provide an excellent and caring service and who are absolutely not treated properly. I completely support SIPTU's campaign for proper pay and conditions. I thank the Minister for coming to my constituency of Dublin North-West to visit childcare and early years services and see at first hand the need for investment. I ask her to support the investment in early years provision in Ballymun that is urgently needed.

People have raised the particular issue with me of young people in this country who can and want to have children but are deciding it is not possible because they cannot afford it. Alongside a cost-of-living crisis, we now have a cost-of-having-babies crisis in this country. Young people want to have children but they just cannot afford it. The cost-of-living and cost-of-housing crises have become so bad, our younger generations cannot afford children, or if they have one child, they cannot afford a second. We are one of the richest countries in the world on paper. The Government has record surpluses but it has failed to provide the most basic aspect of a functioning society, namely, the capacity for people to afford to raise children without living in fear and worry about being able to pay for the very basic costs. Barnardos has highlighted that almost half of parents are skipping meals to ensure their children have enough to eat. That is an absolute scandal. The cost of raising children in this country has increased by 60% in the past decade.

Childcare provision is a key area in which the Government has the power to reduce the cost of living. However, it has failed to deliver its promise of a cap on childcare fees of €200 per month. We in the Social Democrats have a plan for making childcare affordable through public affordable childcare provision and early years services. This would reduce the cost for parents, improve workers' pay and deliver childcare for all those awaiting it. Tá costas iomarcach ag

baint le leanaí a bheith againn. Tá cúram leanaí inacmhainne ag teastáil ónár nglúin óg. Tá plean ag na Daonlathaithe Sóisialta chun cúram leanaí a dhéanamh inacmhainne. Cén fáth nach ndéanann an Rialtas é? It is time to deliver public affordable childcare that provides decent employment for workers in the sector.

Deputy Mark Wall: I welcome the Minister to the Chamber for this very important debate. I thank Deputy Kerrane and Sinn Féin for bringing forward the motion on childcare. We are all agreed on the importance of this issue, albeit it is somewhat ironic that we are discussing it after midnight. While it is positive to have this debate, it is the view of my party that the Government must go further to ensure there truly is delivery of public childcare provision. The current system of early childcare education and care is simply not working for providers, educators and, most importantly, working families.

Ireland needs a new and radical plan to fix the childcare system. I have spoken previously in the House about the small and medium independent providers that are the backbone of the sector. They feel they have been left high and dry by the Government. They are barely breaking even, with some on the brink of closure. According to the figures provided by the Department of children itself, there have been nearly 1,000 closures of childcare settings since 2019. Families simply cannot afford any more closures. The Government continues to pour money into a broken system that only benefits large corporations whose sole interest is profit, not providing quality childcare. No one in the Government will acknowledge that we are sleepwalking into a corporate takeover of childcare. If this continues in the next few years, there will be no small and medium providers left. Then the system will implode, just as it has done in Australia. What will the answer be then from the Minister and the Government?

As many contributors have stated, core funding is not the answer to fixing the sector. It simply does not work. Most independent providers cannot afford to stay in core funding and are left with no other choice but to withdraw. The knock-on impact of that is felt by working families as they face a massive increase in childcare fees. The Government cannot continue to pour money into a broken system. Childcare fees are one of the biggest costs facing working families, many of whom are paying close to a second mortgage, as the Minister has heard more than once tonight. All across Ireland, families are having to make difficult choices as to whether they can afford to pay for childcare, assuming they can even find a place.

In my constituency of Kildare South, places like Kilcullen, which I have mentioned in the Chamber previously, have become childcare deserts because of the chronic lack of places. In most cases, it is women who are having to reduce their work hours and, in many cases, having to give up their careers entirely. Childcare has become the modern-day family bar, with women having to choose between having a family and having a career. Critical jobs are being lost because of Government inaction. It is heartbreaking to hear the stories of these mothers, many of whom are having to give up critical employment. This is something the Government must address urgently.

The Government also must acknowledge that reducing childcare fees alone will not provide one additional childcare place. The Government must stabilise the sector by addressing the workforce challenges. The Minister must put forward a real and radical plan to set Ireland on a path towards a public system of early childhood education and care, not a State-led one. Educators are leaving the sector in their droves because the Government has failed to recognise

and value them. Staff no longer feel they can make a career out of working in the sector. I agree that the State should be paying the wages of the educators in the sector. SIPTU has reported that many providers are struggling to retain staff, with an average turnover of 25%. Despite State investment of €45 million in pay from September 2026, no pay deal has been agreed. This year's joint labour committee pay talks only started in June and continue to prove difficult.

Pay proposals were published in July of last year but still ended up being six weeks late by the time they were signed into effect on 13 October, while funding was available from September. SIPTU has been calling on employer representative groups to start pay talks as far back as the start of the year to avoid any delays, but they only finally agreed to start these talks in June. As things stand, it looks like the situation will be delayed even further this year. This means funding not spent on pay will be returned to the Exchequer again, which is totally unacceptable for educators, and will only worsen the recruitment and retention crisis in the sector.

The Government must look at reforming parental leave in Ireland too. We need to ensure that parents are able to stay at home for the first year of their child's life, but we also need to ensure that more dads are involved in the care of their child. The current system does not support this. New dads are only entitled to two weeks of paternity leave at a flat rate of €299. That represents a nearly 75% drop in wages for dads who avail of this leave. That is why the Government must look at the Scandinavian model of parental leave. It must extend parental leave at a minimum for a full year and ensure that there are mandatory quotas in place for both mams and dads.

Ireland needs a plan that works in genuine partnership with independent providers setting professional wages for educators and, most importantly, delivering good quality and affordable childcare for families.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I thank Deputy Kerrane for bringing forward this motion. While I support it, I do not believe it goes far enough. Again, we are skirting around the fundamental issue that is wrong with the early years sector. The truth is that this sector will never be properly fixed as long as we continue to rely on a private provision model. The Minister might point to the €1.6 billion and to the public that seems like a great commitment, but the reality is that this investment has also opened doors to corporate chains and private corporations.

The Minister has allowed these entities to operate school-age childcare in public school buildings rather than using those public assets to expand State provision. A public system would allow the State to build capacity while protecting the small and medium providers that are the backbone of the sector and communities across the country. This sector is not a private luxury. It is infrastructure. It underpins the economy. It is a cost-of-living issue. It enables children and families to thrive. It is a women's equality issue.

Many Members will be my familiar with my parliamentary assistant, who has been campaigning on this since 2019. She helped to organise the sector into a union, fought for the first two pay deals and was instrumental in the Together for Public campaign. Based on her years of work, I believe the sector can be fixed. The solution is straightforward. We need to

build a genuine public system alongside existing providers, expand State capacity, properly value the educators and stop relying on the market to deliver what is essentially a public service.

The early years sector is fixable if the political will is there to do it. Unlike other major infrastructure, this does not have to take decades, nor does it have to cost a fortune. If we get it right, this benefits everybody. Early childhood education and care is a public good and we need to start treating it as such.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I thank Deputy Kerrane and Sinn Féin for bringing forward this motion. The Minister will be well aware that every TD in this House knows that parents are struggling with childcare. In my constituency of Cork North-Central, I meet these parents regularly. They are doing everything right. They are working hard. They are raising their families. They are trying to get on with life, but they are being let down by a childcare system that simply is not working.

This is about far more than the cost of childcare. It is about a shortage of places, a workforce crisis and a failure to treat early years education as the essential public service that it is. Yes, fees have fallen for some families and that is welcome, but what good is affordable childcare if there is no place available? Parents need affordability and availability. Providers need certainty and early years educators deserve decent pay, secure careers and recognition for the skilled professionals that they are. For too long Governments have relied on schemes and subsidies to prop up a system that remains fundamentally broken. We need to stop asking families to navigate a patchwork of supports and start building a childcare system that they can rely on.

The Labour Party believes that childcare is not a luxury, nor is it simply a support for parents. It is an investment in our children, families, economy and future. That means expanding capacity, creating thousands of new childcare places, reducing costs for families and properly valuing the people who educate and care for our youngest children because every child deserves the best possible start in life regardless of their postcode or their parents' income.

We have long accepted that access to primary and secondary education is a public good. It is time that we recognise that high-quality early years education is too. The question that I pose for the Government is no longer whether we can afford to build a universal public childcare system, but whether we can afford another generation of children and families being failed by the one we have.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I thank Sinn Féin and Deputy Kerrane for bringing this important motion forward. For my generation and for young parents like me, or youngish parents anyway, childcare and housing are the crucial issues. Childcare and housing are both issues of accessibility and affordability. Both are also issues that have been left to the private sector for far too long and, in both cases, there is an urgent need for strong, direct State intervention.

In this House last week, I raised issues with the Tánaiste regarding a local childcare provider in Knocklyon. Recently there has been a large number of last-minute room closures. Previous flexibility under a different ownership with summer hours or part-time after-school has disappeared, and parents have been left stranded with no childcare and no notice. Parents have had to take up to 20 annual leave days across May and June to cover room closures. They are

scrambling to get family or friends to help to find and pay childminders, and it is all unbelievably stressful.

The next big fear, of course, is that the childcare provider will pull out of core funding and hike its prices, leaving these parents unprotected by the very welcome fee freeze announced earlier this month. Parents have no option to move elsewhere as childcare places in Dublin South-West are so scarce. Parents are excluded from Government childcare supports and have to somehow suck up the additional fees which can double overnight, as the Minister knows, or otherwise parents, and it is mainly mums, just stop working. This is all due to the for-profit, commercialised model that this Government has promoted.

We in the Labour Party have an ambitious, costed and revolutionary plan for State-provided, universal childcare in Ireland, where we treat it just like primary education, spaces are guaranteed for children, parents have certainty over costs and accessibility, and early years educators have decent terms of employment. Let us be clear: there is no issue with quality in the current system, but we have early years educators who go over and above every day only to be forced to sign on during the summer and we need to properly value these essential workers.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): Is dócha go bhfuil an Teachta Ahern óg go leor.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The whole issue of access to affordable childcare is becoming critical for many parents. Affordability is an issue, and it is putting huge financial pressure, including a whole raft of other increasing costs, on parents. In the case of Laois, the average cost, according to the childcare committee, is €800 per month, but I have come across quotations as high as €1,400 a month.

The shortage of places is the other issue and there are several blackspots across the county. In common with other counties, parents just cannot get access to childcare. According to the local childcare committee again, towns such as Portlaoise, Portarlinton, Mountmellick, Mountrath, Graiguecullen, Rathdowney, Abbeyleix, Durrow, Arles and Ballylinan are short of all-day provision. Some have no all-day provision at all, and Mountrath is losing its ECCE preschool this month, which is unfortunate.

The Government wants a population increase in Laois, and that is fair enough. It wants a population increase in the county of 25% over the next four to five years moving to 35% over the next seven years or so. Laois County Council recently rezoned lands for an additional 8,200 houses to be developed over the next four years, and further increases are planned after that. As matters stand, there are already long waiting lists and a huge shortage of providers, so action is required to meet the growing demand.

Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael promised to reduce monthly fees to €200, but we are a long way from that. There is a planned reduction in September of €14.30 per month, but at that rate it would take 14 or 15 years to actually get to that reduction planned by the Government.

The budget in October must see significant progress on fees, but also improvements in core funding. Progress is also required on staffing pay levels.

I welcome the Government's plan for €135 million over four years to provide directly purchased, State-led buildings and childcare facilities. However, given the existing pressures in Laois and the massive population increase that is planned, at least one of these facilities needs to be put into the county each year over the next four years.

As I said, wages for staff and recruitment need to be addressed. A career in childcare has to be seen as a viable one for young people. It has to be made attractive. We need to reduce the bureaucracy and the volume of administration for the small private providers, while we have them. Overall, the State has to become the provider of childcare. We have to follow what is done in other EU states. We need a State-led system.

Deputy Seamus Healy: The provision of childcare services is an area in which I have had a particular interest and involvement for over 30 years. The Elm Park area childcare committee brought together community activists and parents from this area of Clonmel with the aim of providing a not-for-profit childcare service for the area. Clever Clogs, as we know it, is a community-based facility which provides a not-for-profit, quality childcare service in a purpose-built unit, supported by the local community. It has a local board of management, committee staff and parents. It receives exceptional support from the county childcare committee. As chairperson of the board of management, I express my thanks and appreciation to all those involved in Clever Clogs, particularly the manager and staff of the centre, the parents and my fellow board members.

There are huge challenges currently facing the early-years sector. They include serious deficiencies in capacity; thousands of children on waiting lists; some parents paying up to €800 per month for childcare costs; poor pay and conditions for staff; and serious problems in recruitment and retention of staff. The current situation is untenable in the long term. The only solution is the roll-out of a publicly funded and delivered service. This is increasingly the view of all those operating in the sector and of those observing it, including the citizens' assembly; the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, UNCRC; the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, CEDAW; and Together for Public, an alliance of over 40 organisations, including the National Women's Council of Ireland, trade unions, academics, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, early childcare educators and many other civil society organisations.

Childcare must be seen as a right for all and not as a commercial service. That means having a public childcare service similar to our primary schools. There should be a guaranteed legal right to affordable, accessible and universal early education for every child. There should be better pay and conditions for early educators, who should be paid directly by the State.

Public childcare is also a key issue for equality. We know that where the public system operates, women are much more likely to participate fully in society, whether that be in work, education, the arts or even in politics. The biggest obstacles for lone parents entering the workforce are the high cost and lack of availability of childcare. A public childcare service would certainly help in this regard.

I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this motion, which I support.

Deputy Charles Ward: I thank Sinn Féin and Deputy Kerrane for bringing forward this motion on childcare, which I will be supporting. Ireland is in the grip of a serious childcare crisis which has been allowed to continue for far too long. Parents are not only struggling to afford childcare but they are also struggling to access it at all. Finding a crèche in places has become an enormous challenge for families across the country, but particularly in Donegal where thousands of children are left without a place. The latest figures from Pobal show there were over 2,000 children on a waiting list for childcare places in Donegal, with childcare costing, on average, €180 per week. It is unacceptable that families are competing for just a handful of places.

The Government must finally deliver on its promise of €200 per month childcare and take the decisive action needed to fix this crisis. The Tánaiste must also deliver on his promise to address early-years facilities that are impacted by defective concrete. We know there are over 25 childcare facilities in Donegal impacted by defective concrete. When the Minister was here she talked about urgency. There is absolutely no urgency coming from her regarding defective concrete in buildings with children in those buildings. Not only this, but we are forcing children and early-years educators to go into these buildings every year. This would not be allowed to happen in County Dublin but it is allowed in Donegal.

I have raised this issue time and again but still the Government refuses to do anything about it. These buildings will not be around in ten years' time. Even our President, Catherine Connolly, has taken time out in the past six months of her Presidency to visit many of these community facilities which have been impacted by defective concrete. Yet, not a single Minister has made it their priority to address this. Even the Minister for children has tried to wash her hands of the responsibility. She has refused to answer a question I submitted regarding children impacted by defective concrete. Multiple community playgroups in Donegal face closure because they have been affected by defective concrete. Yet, under the current redress scheme, these childcare facilities do not qualify for demolition. The loss of these vital resources throughout Donegal will have serious consequences. In time, there will be nowhere for these children to go if we do not do anything about it.

The loss of these facilities will have an impact on the population of Donegal. This will be only the beginning of the childcare crisis in Donegal unless the Minister steps up. We have been saying for years that 25 facilities are facing closure because of defective concrete, yet she does nothing about it.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I thank Deputy Kerrane for bringing forward this motion. I will raise two discrete issues that have been raised by childcare providers with me in my constituency of Dublin West. The first is the concern about the time it is taking for Garda vetting of applications from childcare professionals. This vetting procedure has had a new element added to it in recent months, namely, the European criminal records information system, ECRIS. This requires a new set of checks to take place, which is increasing by up to 20% the time taken for a standard application. If the applicant has an EU address, it adds ten days to the application. If it is a UK address, it is an extra 20 days for an application. This is really problematic because, as the Minister of State knows, many childcare providers are operating close to ratio. If they go below ratio, they may well have to shut a room, which creates great disruption for parents. If they are not able to get new childcare staff into the setting quickly, this is a consequence.

Groups such as Early Childhood Ireland and the county and city childcare committees are supplying childcare providers with as much information as they can but this is a big change. I ask the Minister of State and the Minister to examine if additional support can be given by the State. I ask the Minister of State to sit down with the Minister for justice to see if there are any extra resources that could be given to the Garda vetting bureau to see if more can be done here. It is a big issue, and I am sure it is coming up in what the Minister of State is hearing as well. It is a significant extra burden, and while it is probably an important set of checks, if we can alleviate some of that burden for childcare providers, we ought to do so.

When I was Minister for children I was very proud to oversee the first two pay agreements for childcare professionals, guaranteeing them rates of pay backed by dedicated State funding. I very much support the vision of degree-led teaching in our childcare system and the premium paid to staff who have a level 7 or level 8 degree to encourage and support this. However, we have to recognise that many staff have not moved past a level 5 qualification but have years or decades of experience, which makes them the very best of people to care for and educate young children. A provider who is good to their staff may often have a lot of these long-term staff who have not gone beyond a level 5. They are amazing but the way in which the formula is worked out means that the provider in such cases gets less in the core funding allocation than a provider with many more staff who may be younger and will not have as much experience but have a level 6 or a level 7 qualification. This is a dilemma I was not able to solve in my time but I would have loved to have been able to. I believe in degree-led teaching but we also have to recognise the amazing staff who have huge experience and the providers who want to keep them. More could be done there.

Deputy Michael Collins: I thank Sinn Féin for tabling this motion. At this late hour, I thank most of the parties who have stayed in here to debate such an important issue. Last week when I raised these issues with the Taoiseach during Leaders' Questions, he outlined the level of Government investment in childcare, but investment is not the same as sustainability. The Taoiseach answered how much Government is spending; he did not answer whether providers can survive. All around the country and particularly in rural communities, childcare providers are telling us the current funding model places enormous pressure on them. Participation in core funding is not proof that providers are financially secure. Many remain because they have no realistic alternative. The real question is this: how many providers are operating sustainably under the current model?

Government points to growth in childcare services but families deserve to know how many additional early years places have actually been created, separate from school-age children. Growth in after-school services is welcome but it does not help parents who cannot find a place for a baby, toddler or preschool child.

There is also the ongoing unfairness of historic fee freezes. Providers operating under the same conditions can receive very different levels of income because of decisions made years ago. Government has county-average fee data, so why can providers not be brought up to the county average while wider reforms are examined?

Let us not forget what families were told before the last election. Parents were promised childcare costs of no more than €200 per month. That might be one way of getting votes but for many families it has proven to be a promise that has not been delivered. People took the

Government at its word. The sad reality is many children whose parents were promised that support will be well out of early years childcare before meaningful action is taken.

Families cannot keep waiting while Government points to spending figures and future plans. A sustainable childcare sector must be able to do more than keep the lights on. Providers need to be able to pay staff fairly, invest in their services, build for the future and expand where communities need places. This is one of the most serious issues today. A childcare system cannot be judged solely on how much Government spends or even by how much parents save. It must be judged on whether providers remain viable, educators are retained and families can access the early years places they need. That is the question providers and families are asking and it remains unanswered.

It is remiss that we have not thanked all involved in the early years childcare sector. They have been through the most enormous nightmare in recent years. I remember when they were outside the gate and the Minister would not even go out and support them on the day. Sometimes it is about standing with a genuine organisation like this. They were not standing out there for the good of their health; they were out there for to keep the doors open. The parents came out in their hundreds to support them. Unfortunately, we had an uncaring Government then and I think we have an uncaring Government now because the sector is still feeling the pinch.

I sat down with the sector's representatives over the last few weeks. I raised it very specifically at Leaders' Questions last week to the Taoiseach. He is not taking in the reality of the crisis they find themselves in. They are not shutting their doors because they want to but because they are given no choice in the matter. Successive Governments have ignored the crisis they are going through. The current Minister needs to step up to the mark and understand that.

We speak quite a lot about bills. This week Electric Ireland is raising the price of electricity. Providers have to pay these electricity bills from money they do not have. It is a serious crisis and we are not taking it seriously enough. The people have been promised €200 per month. They are not getting anywhere near it and we are not going to keep the promise the Government made at the rate it is going. I think it is in the programme for Government. The Government will not suddenly give a huge amount of money. It needs to look at and speak to the sector. The people who know are the people working on the ground. The Government does not seem to understand that if they are in crisis and closing their businesses, there is something wrong somewhere. They are not doing it just to pass the time. These are very committed people. The people I spoke to have given time, blood, sweat and tears to their jobs. They are giving it up and paying it out. Sometimes if the wife is trying to run the business and is struggling, she is dipping into her husband's income from another sector to keep the doors open. It is astonishing we have let things go that far and that there is so little between profit and loss and between an early years childcare provider surviving and not surviving. The Government must discuss this with them, thrash out the difficulties, get this sorted and nip it in the bud before the next election. It needs to be done. They are willing to sit down. Any time they are sitting down, nobody is listening on the other side. That has been going on for many years.

I ask the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, to show interest in resolving this crisis if she really is interested in doing so. Everybody will then see there is a chance they will only have

to pay €200 per month for childcare. It is all down to the hard struggling parents in this country and the early years childcare providers who have served the country with great distinction.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing this motion to the floor. It is one of the more important motions we have spoken on. It is 36 minutes past midnight in the House. That is a great testament to everybody who has stayed here to contribute to the debate and be part of the debate. Childcare is one of the biggest issues that hits us at the doorsteps, certainly at the last general election. As my colleague just said, I was listening to people who said with great hope that childcare would be €200. Those people feel extremely let-down and disappointed with this Government and duped by this Government, to say the least. That needs to be on the record of the House.

I respect the spirit behind the motion. I do not agree precisely with the measures within it but I plan to support it tonight.

I want to speak of a childcare model that I think Ireland would benefit substantially from replicating. Ireland has among the highest childcare costs in Europe, often well over €1,000 per month per child. I have a case in my constituency where somebody is paying €1,700 per month for a child. It is not unusual and if we went onto the streets of Dublin, Cork or Limerick, we would find similar prices. The Government's response to this has always been to funnel money and subsidies through a formal childcare sector via the national childcare scheme, which assumes every parent wants and needs institutional childcare. Many parents do not. Some would prefer to leave their child with a grandparent, neighbour, friend, uncle or aunt, and some would prefer to have one parent at home, at least while the child is small. The subsidy system only recognises a registered provider, which means the State has already decided for you what counts as acceptable when it comes to the care of your own child.

Finland in 1985 - 40 years ago - looked at that entire model and said it was not working for them. The Finnish childcare model developed in 1985 involved giving parents direct payments of approximately €340 per month if a child is under three and not in municipal childcare. There are supplements for additional children and local municipal top-ups. That means the parent gets to decide how to use the money and whether they stay at home, pay the money to a grandparent, uncle or aunt, hire a private childminder or make other arrangements as they see fit. The money follows the child directly and the family decides on what is best for the child. Almost 60% of the eligible population in Finland have taken this up. Denmark runs a similar system. Norway offers a similar scheme. There is nothing exotic or untested about what I am suggesting. The Finnish model trusts parents; our model in this country does not. In Finland, if a mother is happy to stay at home with the child, the state will support that. If a neighbour, friend or grandparent is willing to take care of a child, the state will support that. If you are a stay-at-home father, the state will equally support that.

In Ireland, we only subsidise institutional care. I seriously believe we need to be looking at that and at different models. The childcare policy in this country tells parents they are not qualified to decide on what is best for their own child. It should be a parent, not a civil servant, who makes that judgement.

My colleague mentioned viability and the situation in this country. I do not believe that. I am seeing crèches closing. I am getting calls on a regular basis, as I am sure are other TDs, - that there are crèches closing in Glanmire, Mayfield, Ballyvolane and Carrignavar. They just

cannot keep the doors open. Then, there are people on the other side of it going into early childcare who are not getting paid a decent salary and cannot make a living out of it. They would love to be because that is their vocation. They would not have signed up for this many years ago but it is their vocation. They cannot afford to work in it and live and sustain a living today. We are just not getting childcare right in this country. It is not as if it is an illusion or a very difficult mathematical equation for us. We have an outdated model that is not working. We need to look at the best standards and practice across northern Europe that have been proven to work over and over again. The model has been working for 40 years in Finland and has 60% uptake. No other country is as expensive as we are for childcare. There is something radically wrong when we have parents who cannot afford to have a child because of childcare costs. That should be the last thing on their minds.

Deputy Aisling Dempsey: Throughout this debate, not one person has argued that we do not need high-quality, accessible and affordable childcare. Everyone, including the Minister of State, agrees that we need it and need it now. The question is not one of need; the question is whether it is possible to deliver nationwide, high-quality, affordable childcare for every family overnight. If we are all honest here, the answer would be "No", unfortunately. That is why in our programme for Government, Fianna Fáil has committed to progressively reducing childcare costs to a maximum €200 per child per month over the lifetime of the Government from 2024 to 2029. That is the commitment and that is the published plan and pathway to €200 per month. However, families are not being asked to wait until 2029 to see any benefit; far from it. We are reducing the maximum fees that parents and guardians can be charged year by year. In 2025, the maximum weekly fee was €295 and from this September, it will fall to €183. That is real progress, real savings for families and real money back in their pockets. Of course, there is more to do. Our commitment is not fulfilled but we are delivering on that commitment step by step and as Fianna Fáil spokesperson on children, I intend to see that work completed.

Government investment in childcare has doubled in recent years and unlike in many other areas of public spending, families and providers can see the positive impacts of that increased investment. We know that recruitment and retention remain major challenges and for too long, early educators and care providers have not been recognised as the professionals they are, yet they care for, educate and nurture our children every day, often spending more waking hours with them than we do ourselves. Tonight is a case in point. The Government and our Minister recognise that. Although childcare is delivered primarily by private providers, the Department has provided ring-fenced funding specifically to support improved pay for staff despite the State not being their employer. The motion suggests that the Government should step in and take over the obligations of the private employer but that is unworkable. It is too much interference. Employers need to agree via the JLC the appropriate pay for their own employees. In saying that, the level of financial support is a clear demonstration of the Government's commitment not just to affordable childcare, but to building a high-quality sustainable childcare system that works for children, parents and those who dedicate their careers to caring for our youngest citizens. We are on the journey to providing a publicly funded State-led childcare model and we should take over private childcare facilities wholesale. We have very fine, educated, excellent private childcare providers out there who should be encouraged to stay within the industry. Running private and public models together gives parents a choice and gives them freedom and that is what we need within the sector.

Core funding has been lambasted in the House tonight and generally as well as not providing enough funding and supports to our early childhood care providers but the facts do not bear that out. Now at the end of its fourth year, funding has almost doubled and is now a staggering €480 million. At the end of last year, the Department undertook an analysis of withdrawals from core funding over the three years of its existence. Some 592 services withdrew from core funding but 415 of them returned, which is a 70% return rate. So far, only eight services have left core funding this year, with three of them already returning. That is 93% of all eligible services taking part in core funding. That speaks for itself.

I commend the Minister on the amount of reform that has been undertaken in childcare, but she is still seeking to extend existing schemes like the access and inclusion model to children aged three years and under. This model currently in operation can be a game-changer for our most vulnerable children. The earlier we get to our children with additional needs, the better their outcome. I thank the Minister and Minister of State for their foresight in this regard at the Department. I will continue in my role as spokesperson on children to advocate for as much funding as possible in the upcoming budget to achieve this and all our important goals in childcare.

Some parts of the motion before the House tonight appear contradictory. In one part, it is claimed that we need more childcare places for children aged under one and in another, the Minister is being asked to provide parental supports to allow parents to stay at home with babies aged under one. I actually agree with both of these policies.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: That is up to the parent if he or she wants that

Deputy Aisling Dempsey: I beg the Deputy's pardon.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: That is up to the parent.

Deputy Aisling Dempsey: The Deputy might let me finish. I actually agree with both policies. I hope to see them progress with relevant Ministers, like the Minister for Social Protection. More places for children aged under one is being addressed under schemes such as building blocks already. I hope we continue to make progress on this over the coming years. Parents should have the freedom to return to work as and when is right for their particular families. Unfortunately, I do not support the motion but despite that, I commend Deputy Kerrane on her work on this and her experience, knowledge and contributions to the children's committee on which we both serve. I thank the Minister of State and the Minister for their work in this area and commend their progress to date.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: Initially when I saw this tabled by the Business Committee last week, I wanted to get in early to speak. I did not realise it would be 12:50 on Wednesday morning.

Deputy Réada Cronin: It is early.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: It is early for some people. On a genuine level, I am actually happy. I listened to people from Independent Ireland just before they exited the Chamber listing villages where, allegedly, closures of childcare facilities have happened in the past while. I think one was actually accurate. The rest of the villages were just thrown into the debate because it sounded good. That is not to say there are not problems in this area; there 100% are. It is not to say there is not a shortfall of places because there are. Trust me: I have been that parent with three kids under five looking for childcare and it is incredibly difficult living in an area like Glanmire, which is suburban. There are lots of young families. Glanmire is the only village that was named out of four or five villages in my constituency where closures actually happened in the past 12 months. I would like to place that on the record because the rest is not factual.

That said, that issue actually had a potential resolution, which I negotiated with the childcare provider and a nearby school and they sought not to proceed with that. Again, as I said, it is inaccurate to suggest that there are wholesale closures in Cork North-Central. It is not true. That said, it is generally recognised that there is a shortfall of 40,000 places nationwide. There is no point in belying that fact. It is true and it is difficult, as I said, particularly for younger children under the age of one. I have experienced it in my constituency where it is difficult to get baby rooms for a whole litany of reasons.

The reason I came in here tonight was to speak specifically about the State-led early learning and childcare capital programme, which the Minister announced a number of months ago. When I initially heard that announcement to €135 million over the lifetime of this Government, I was enthused. I brought a number of projects to the Department. Many of them are still being scrutinised.

None of them has received a final response regarding if they are going delivered this year, next year or in three years' time. I was initially enthused by that announcement. I understand that is part of a programme where we are targeting 800 places by the end of 2027 through that programme.

I wish to speak specifically about one such submission that was made on behalf of the people of Glanmire. This was done without identifying the property by a private building owner who has full planning permission for up to 150 childcare places. He is willing to sell the unit. He is willing to rent. The unit just needs to be kitted out, which would take approximately two to three months. It is something that could be delivered fairly quickly. The building owner is quite open to doing this with the State. When I read through the criteria, I was enthused by it because I know this can be delivered quickly. We are still awaiting an outcome or decision on that.

I want to speak about the area of Glanmire where I live. It has predominantly young families. It is a suburban environment. There are many people moving in from different areas and working in multinationals in nearby Little Island and the city. When I canvassed the doors in the recent local elections, and indeed going back to my election campaign in 2024, I will be honest with the Minister of State, there were issues around migration, the cost of living and the usual issues that we debate frequently in this House, but one of most the prevalent issues was access to childcare for those young families.

I am here at 12.50 a.m. to make the case for Glanmire. It is a very large area in the east part of the city with 20,000 people. I speculate that if we do not see this opened, all we are going to see is more and more people going into the likes of Mayfield and further afield into the city and city centre to access childcare. I am here to make the case. I hope to have a meeting with the Minister in the coming weeks in relation to this application. I am just hopeful that it will be viewed positively because for a relatively little return of that €135 million budget that she has over the next while, we could see real delivery of up to 150 places in the village of Glanmire.

I reference Cork Chamber which we get frequent briefings from. It has asked persistently that childcare would be recognised as essential economic infrastructure. When I look around my own constituency, there are people I know of my own age who are struggling to access childcare place. The necessity and importance that should be placed on childcare is obvious. There are many people either taking reduced working hours or trying to juggle work by working from home and having the demands of childcare placed on that is quite difficult. Again, some credence or scrutiny should be given to that request that it would be recognised as an essential economic infrastructure and resource it if the Government is going to make that commitment.

My final point is in relation to special needs education in the whole area of childcare. There is only a handful of childcare facilities across the country that deals specifically with children whether they are diagnosed or yet to be diagnosed in terms of early intervention and so on. It is pivotal that, particularly the future public funding of capital projects as part of the scheme that I mentioned with the €135 million, a portion of that funding should be ring-fenced specifically to cater for the needs of children with special needs who are struggling to either access childcare, afterschool care or whatever the case may be.

Minister of State at the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Emer Higgins): I welcome the opportunity to conclude this important debate on the Minister's behalf and reflect on the range of perspectives that have been shared across the House. As the Minister set out in her opening remarks, there are three central elements that guide the programme for Government's commitment to early learning and childcare. First, while significant progress has been made, we recognise that challenges remain and are committed to addressing them. Second, meaningful and measurable improvements have already been delivered. Third, that progress has not happened by itself. It is the result of deliberate, structured and evidence-based programmes of reforms being implemented by the Government.

This Government is confident that the commitment that we have made in the programme for Government will be fully realised over the lifetime of this Government. That includes ensuring that parents will pay no more than €200 per month for early learning and childcare. Early learning educators and school-age childcare practitioners will be remunerated at a level that reflects the importance of their work. State-led services will operate alongside private and community services, as well as newly regulated cohorts of childminders. Ireland will close the gap between its level of investment in early learning and childcare and the EU average.

In its motion, the Opposition suggests that there is no progress or plan to deliver quality, affordable or accessible early learning and childcare. We as the Government do not accept this. This evidence is clear. Costs are falling. Investment is rising. Capacity is increasing. A

structured multiyear plan is in place through Shaping the Future. Through the Together for Better funding model, including core funding the national childcare scheme and the ECCE programme, the Government is already delivering tangible financial benefits to hundreds of thousands of families. This year's budget builds on the progress that has been made with State investment in early learning and childcare increasing to €1.52 billion. That represents an increase of more than 116% since 2020. This level of investment is unprecedented, but more importantly, it is about delivering real outcomes. More than 105,000 children will benefit from the ECCE programme this year with participation rates continuing to exceed 96%. Approximately 277,000 children will benefit from the national childcare scheme with growing numbers of families also accessing supports through regulated childminding settings.

As the Minister said at the outset, this debate must go beyond cost and access. It must be about quality outcomes and ensuring that every child who enters an early learning and childcare setting is supported to learn, to develop and to thrive. High-quality early learning and childcare can be transformative for children, supporting their development, reducing inequality and giving them the best possible start to life. Our task to ensure that every child has the opportunity to benefit from it. To realise those benefits fully, we must ensure that every child has the opportunity to experience them. From my perspective as the Minister of State with responsibility for disability, that means ensuring that our early learning and childcare system is genuinely inclusive. For children with disabilities or those with additional needs, access alone is not enough. What matters is meaningful participation, ensuring that every child is fully supported, included and enabled to achieve their full potential alongside their peers.

The Access and Inclusion Model, AIM, programme is central to that approach. Through AIM, a range of targeted supports are available to ensure that children with disabilities or additional needs can access and participate in the ECCE scheme within mainstream early learning and childcare settings. This year, AIM will support approximately 8,400 children with disabilities. It will support them to access and participate in the ECCE programme while improvements to the AIM level 7 application process will reduce the administrative burden, and it will make it easier for services to be accessed. Alongside AIM, the Equal Start initiative helps to ensure that children and families experiencing disadvantage can also access and participate meaningfully in early learning and childcare. The programme now supports more than 800 priority settings nationwide, delivering practical supports to help children thrive and to address the effects of disadvantage from the earliest years. This includes staffing supports, nutrition programmes, such as Bia Blasta, language development initiatives like Early Talk Boost and targeted measures to support the inclusion of Traveller and Roma children.

Taken together, AIM and Equal Start reflect the Government's focus on ensuring that quality provision goes hand in hand with equity and inclusion meeting the needs of every child. However, quality provision depends not only on the supports available to children, but also on the people delivering them every day. No early learning and childcare system can deliver high-quality outcomes without a strong skilled supported workforce. That is why this Government has been clear that improving pay and conditions across the sector remains a key priority. We recognise that the level of pay for early years educators and school-aged childcare practitioners does not yet fully reflect the value and the importance of the work they do for children, families, communities and the wider economy. While the Government is the primary funder of the sector, it is not the employer and cannot directly set wages or conditions for any staff in the sector. Instead, as Members will be aware, the Joint Labour Committee provides the

established mechanism through which employer and employee representatives can negotiate minimum rates of pay, which are then set out in the employment regulation orders, EROs. Through successive EROs, minimum pay rates have increased three times in four years, delivering an average increase of 15%, as was referenced by Deputy O'Gorman who previously served as the Minister in this Department.

Most recently, the October 2025 ERO provided an average pay increase of 10%, benefiting more than 67% of the workforce.

1 o'clock

In recognition of the importance of supporting these improvements, the Government has increased core funding from €393 million to €483 million, alongside an additional €45 million in ring-fenced funding to help services to meet the increased wage costs that will arise from employment regulation orders.

At the same time, through Shaping the Future phase 2, we are examining how pay and conditions can be strengthened further over the medium to long term, reflecting a balanced, sustainable approach that delivers improvements today while building towards lasting reform for the future. In addition, €135 million will be made available between this year and 2030 for the State-led early learning and childcare capital programme, which will provide high-quality, accessible learning and childcare services. This programme will commence this year with investment in buildings, marking a significant milestone for the Department. Capital funding will support the acquisition or fit-out, or both, of buildings as required, with the Department working alongside not-for-profit providers to design, operate and open services.

To access potential sites, a forward planning model has been developed within the Department. This model seeks to identify the nature and volume of different types of early learning and childcare places across the country and how that aligns with the number of children in the corresponding age cohorts at local area level. An extensive data analysis and cleaning exercise has been undertaken to map available publicly subsidised supply. Alongside this, a suite of appraisal criteria tools have been developed to assess potential projects against key performance indicators, KPIs, such as quality, inclusion, accessibility and affordability. The Department is now assessing project options in order to identify which ones are best placed to deliver on the goals of the programme.

Alongside investing in new capacity, we must continue to support the services already at the heart of communities across the funding. That is what core funding is for. It is designed to help to deliver affordability for parents through ensuring no fee increases, maximum fee caps and offering the national childhood scheme and the early childhood care and education programmes to all eligible children. It is designed to deliver quality through investment in the workforce, including improved pay and conditions and support for graduate leadership within services. It is designed to deliver sustainability for providers through substantial and consistent investment in the sector distributed on an equitable basis.

From its introduction, core funding has been subject to continuous evaluation and refinement and to ensuring that the scheme continues to evolve, respond to feedback and deliver value for money. For the fifth programme year, the Minister, Deputy Norma Foley, has announced an additional €20.6 million in new full-year funding, which will support services to maintain key fee-management measures, including the fee freeze and the minimum fee caps,

supporting affordability for parents. This will help to ensure that the benefits of Government investment continue to be passed on to parents and families, while providing stability and sustainability for the sector.

I am conscious there is a number of other points in my speech but there are 44 seconds to go and it is 1.05 a.m. so I am sure people want this to be wrapped. Very quickly, I will mention that phase 2 of the national action plan for childminding is also something the Department is working on really closely with childminders and representative organisations. That will be part of the plan. The first five strategy, which is about families who now have access to up to 46 weeks of paid leave alongside unpaid leave entitlements, represents a significant investment in supporting parents as well. Taken together, these measures also help.

Ultimately, I thank everybody who works in this sector and the entrepreneurs who have invested and stood up businesses that are there to support families throughout the country. For everybody who works in this sector, it is a tough but really important job. It supports families, keeps our economy thriving and, most importantly, supports and educates children.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: It is simply indefensible that more than a decade after the media started referring to the cost of childcare as comparable to a second mortgage, the pace of action from the Minister of State's Government could be so lethargic. In 2024, my colleague and the Sinn Féin spokesperson on children, Deputy Kerrane, published a detailed costed plan outlining how Sinn Féin would deliver childcare capped at €200 per month. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, in advance of the general election in 2024, went on to cog Sinn Féin's homework. The problem is that while the Minister of State's party lifted the intended result in its promise to the electorate, it never showed any workings and it has not since. Now, the Minister of State says it is not about cost.

Despite Fine Gael having pledged to have a plan within 100 days, there are upwards on 50,000 children on waiting lists for childcare places, 50% workforce turnover in some counties and an employment regulation order process for setting pay that is simply not working. There is a dire need for urgency from the Minister of State's Government to finally publish a roadmap for the delivery of the €200 per month that Fine Gael promised in the election in 2024. With so many families continuing to pay over €800 per month, the Government's current policy - putting costs closer to €200 per week than per month - is simply not good enough.

Our early educators deserve better. Families and their children deserve better. I ask the House to endorse Sinn Féin's motion tonight and let us begin the work of actually delivering for early years educators, the people who both need and deserve this. People have been waiting 574 days now for a plan the Tánaiste said he would bring forward in 100. How long is it going to take for this to happen for our parents, children and early years educators?

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The Government announced a €135 million investment in State-led early learning and childcare. It is an initiative that promises to deliver thousands of publicly owned places by 2030. The principle is sound and significant but it has to deliver. I want, tonight, to insist that this promise must be delivered in County Meath.

The Department's own analysis confirms that demand for childcare remains higher than available supply in certain parts of the country. Nowhere is this more acute than in County

Meath. Dunshaughlin is a case in point. The Willows estate in Dunshaughlin now has more than 1,000 homes. When they first started selling houses there almost a decade ago, they did so with the promise of a community with essential services and amenities. Central to this was the provision of a crèche. The land is there, ready and waiting. Private providers have come and gone but still, there is no building or crèche. This is precisely the kind of gap that the State-led scheme is supposed to fill.

Recent responses were repeated by the Minister again tonight. The Minister said that capital funding will be used to acquire or fit out the building, or both, depending on requirements. In the case of the Willows, there is no building to acquire or fit out. I call on the Minister to work with local not-for-profit groups to deliver State-led early years services at the Willows in Dunshaughlin.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: The cost-of-living crisis is impacting families of all backgrounds. The bite is being felt at the petrol pump, at the grocery till, in the utility bills and beyond. For working families, one of the most expensive monthly outlays is childcare fees. Families in Limerick with both parents working full time who are not fortunate enough to have additional family support are paying up to €300 per week on crèche fees. For those availing of a childminder, the fee is closer to €250 per week, which is a significant expense, particularly during a cost-of-living crisis that has stripped families of available income.

These are, of course, families who have been fortunate enough to secure childcare places in the first place. Up to 50,000 children across the State remain on waiting lists for childcare places that do not exist. In one of the most disadvantaged areas of Limerick, Ballinacurra Weston, there are 214 children on a waiting list with no early childcare places from September at Our Lady of Lourdes Community Centre. The staff in the local facility are faced with prospect of having to tell parents that there is no place available for their child.

Childcare is not a luxury for families; it is a necessity that allows parents to go to work. While many parents struggle to find a place for their child, other parents worry that the childcare arrangements could suddenly end because of the difficulty faced in retaining early years educators and school-age childcare practitioners. It is abundantly clear from talking to those in the profession that the current employment regulation order is not working. The State must be prepared to work towards taking responsibility for employment costs and wages where necessary.

Crèches across the State are coming under huge pressure due to the lack of sufficient core funding.

One crèche in a Limerick suburb faced the prospect of closing its kitchen due to the lack of funding, adding to the cost for families who must spend more to provide meals for their children attending the creche. The core funding scheme must be reviewed. It should be done with a view to indexing it to inflation. Crèches and childcare facilities throughout the State are functioning month to month due to increases in the costs they face. I urge parties to support the motion's objectives of increasing the number of early years places and school-age childcare hours in September, the immediate review of the core funding scheme and publication of the details on how the Government is going to deliver €200 per month childcare with a clear timescale on how it will be achieved.

Deputy Réada Cronin: The lack of childcare facilities is truly reaching breaking point. In my own constituency in north Kildare I hear from families who are constantly frustrated in trying to find childcare for their child. In every town in north Kildare the population is growing rapidly but the critical infrastructure for childcare facilities is not being provided. I am dealing with one in Kilcock at the moment. The impact of this failure is devastating, especially for women, who bear the brunt of it. Every day women are forced to make the impossible choice to step away from their careers, ambitions and financial independence. I hear story after story of women who feel that the study and hard work they did to get a good job goes down the drain if they cannot get childcare. It is unacceptable that women are thinking like this in 2026.

During the last general election campaign, Deputy Kerrane outlined a detailed plan of how Sinn Féin would deliver early childcare for €10 a day while increasing the pay and respect for the workers in the sector. The Government, after scoffing at it at first, subsequently promised to deliver it for €200 a month, which is a roundabout way of saying €10 a day, copying the Deputy's homework. However, the Government still did not get it right because it has failed in its promise to deliver €200 per month childcare within the first 100 days of Government. Furthermore, the cost of what it is promising now is more like €200 a week, which is completely unaffordable for many families throughout the State. While affordability is key, accessibility is just as important because that is not there either. It is high time the Government finally delivered on its €200 a month childcare promise and increased the pay and respect for the professionals in early years education and childcare practitioners from September. It is mainly women who work in this sector. The women on both sides of this know that their Government does not seem to care about women. The Government does not need to copy Deputy Kerrane's homework tonight. She is handing it the solution, if only it would take it.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: It is as though we are reading two different motions. Contrary to what both Ministers have said, the motion is not just about affordability and accessibility. In fact, in that first €10 a day childcare plan in 2024, I ensured it was not just about affordability and accessibility, as I have done with this motion. It is about our educators. Mostly, the motion is about paying them what they deserve. It is also about childminders, core funding and parents' leave, issues I have raised repeatedly since I became my party spokesperson on children in 2024.

The Minister cited an omission of high quality. Our educators and school-aged care practitioners are high quality. The problem is that high quality is not being recognised in terms of pay. The Minister said JLC is an effective approach to pay. There has not been one year where the Minister has not had to go out of her way to get the JLC to the table to actually deliver on pay. Most times, they end up in the Labour Court. I cannot fathom how that can be in any way called an effective approach to pay. There are educators who would earn more in a supermarket in many cases. They wait on the whim to see whether they will get 20 cent, 50 cent or 60 cent. That is no way to treat professionals. They are professionals at this level. We have had constant issues with core funding. The Minister said a review is called for in the motion but there is already a review. There is a review into year one. We are looking at costs from four years ago, which are totally irrelevant today, instead of looking at the core funding in its totality. When just 1% of childminders in the State have signed up for the regulations, she cannot say there has been excellent consultation and things are going well. Things are not going well. We need to look at child minders, look at our educators and at our providers. If

we do not get pay right in terms of our educators, we can forget about costs and about childcare places; we will have no childcare sector at all.

Amendment put.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): Tá an vótáil curtha siar go dtí an chéad am vótála seachtainiúil eile. In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is postponed until this week's division time. Gabhaim buíochas leis na Teachtaí go léir.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 1.15 a.m. go dtí 9 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 1 Iúil 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 1.15 a.m. until 9 a.m. on Wednesday, 1 July 2026.