



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—*Neamhcheartaithe*
(OFFICIAL REPORT—*Unrevised*)

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SEANAD ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 5 Aibreán 2022

Tuesday, 5 April 2022

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach i gceannas ar 2.30 p.m.

*Machnamh agus Paidir.
Reflection and Prayer.*

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad

An Cathaoirleach: I have notice from Senator Victor Boyhan that, on the motion for the Commencement of the House today, he proposes to raise the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to make a statement on the introduction of a retirement scheme for dairy farmers.

I have also received notice from Senator Fiona O'Loughlin of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to make a statement on the regeneration of St Patrick's Park, Rathangan, County Kildare.

I have also received notice from Senator Seán Kyne of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to make a statement on engagement with Galway city and county councils on delivery of affordable housing.

I have also received notice from Senator John McGahon of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Transport to include commercial bus operators in the youth adult travel card scheme.

I have also received notice from Senator Aisling Dolan of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to make a statement on the number of marts in the country with access to high-speed broadband.

I have also received notice from Senator Malcolm Byrne of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to make a statement on the report from the European Commission Directorate Gen-

eral for Structural Reform on the future of higher education funding in Ireland.

I have also received notice from Senator Tim Lombard of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to make a statement on funding available for safety measures at Ardgroom Pier and for small piers in County Cork.

The matters raised by the Senators are suitable for discussion. I have selected the matters of Senators Boyhan, O'Loughlin, Kyne and McGahon and they will be taken now. The other Senators may give notice on another day of the matters that they wish to raise.

Nithe i dtosach suíonna - Commencement Matters

Agriculture Schemes

Senator Victor Boyhan: This is a very important Commencement matter and I thank the Minister for coming to the House to brief us on it. There has been a lot of discussion. From looking at some parliamentary questions last year, I note this issue or variations on some sort of scheme or incentivised scheme for retirement have been raised. I have read the Minister's various responses and I think things have evolved somewhat since. There has been recent coverage in the *Irish Farmers' Journal* and many provincial newspapers of the suggestion that the Minister is considering a retirement scheme for dairy farmers. What I am looking for today is some clarity on this.

As someone who has attended the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine, the Minister will be conscious of this matter and I thank him for his attendance before that committee. As Minister, he takes a significant and active interest in it. I also want to use this opportunity to thank him and acknowledge his engagement with farmers on the ground. I have been at a number of marts he has attended. To get into the ring and engage in a meaningful, very focused and simple way with farmers in the best public space they know - the mart - has been very impressive. There has been significant feedback about the fact the Minister actually went there. When you go into the, dare I say it, circle, you do not know what is going to hit you. The Minister was brave enough to do it and bring his message to the people directly involved in agriculture, and I acknowledge that.

The Minister will know that Macra na Feirme and, in particular, its president, John Keane, who is a very dynamic individual, have continued to highlight the importance of the challenges around retirement and the need to bring young farmers into play. In any scheme for the dairy sector, we must be conscious of a number of things. They include the challenges around the environment, and they are challenges. No final decision has been made. There are many ways of dealing with the environment and how it interacts with the farming community and its incomes. We must move people at a certain pace that best fits their set of circumstances. Macra na Feirme has continued to highlight the need to secure transitional issues around farming and a younger generation in farming, which is a challenge. I am deeply concerned about the current percentage of about 6% of farmers under the age of 35. What does this tell us? This is an enormous challenge for us. However, there are new ways of doing agriculture and new methods.

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There is diversification in agriculture. Alongside all of that must be incentives, ongoing learning, knowledge and engagement of different practices, here and internationally. Teagasc has a major role in that. The level of qualification of our young farmers is very impressive. Many farmers are engaging with the green certificate and many are not deriving all their income from agriculture. They have off-farm incomes. It is part of a new model, although it is not ideal for everyone. There are different horses for different courses.

This is the complexity, the diversity and challenge around agriculture for farm families, rural development and income. At the same time people must not feel they are being pushed off the land. An older generation may be able to transfer knowledge and experience. For those people what we are talking about is not just their farm or place of work; it is their home, their community, their language and their lifestyle. We must understand all these complexities when we speak about rural communities and agriculture.

I am asking the Minister to share with us his ideas on the proposed dairy farmer retirement scheme, how it is progressing, the timelines and how he would like to see it rolled out. I thank the Minister.

An Cathaoirleach: Before the Minister responds I welcome to the Gallery Senator Eileen Flynn, who has a group from Cork with her. They are the Cork young women's group from the Traveller community, ably led by Ms Mags O'Sullivan. I welcome them here today and I hope they enjoy their day in Leinster House.

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I echo the Cathaoirleach's welcome to our guests. I thank Senator Boyhan for raising this important topic.

Generational renewal and ensuring that there is an avenue for the next generation to not only enter our great agriculture, food and farming sector but also to flourish is a core element of my strategy as Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine. Despite the many challenges we face, I am convinced that there are bright and exciting opportunities both inside and outside the farm gate. I can assure the Senator and everyone here that generational renewal is at the centre of all our policies in the Department.

The challenge of generational renewal is widely recognised at national and EU level, and farmers at both ends of their careers take a keen interest in this area, unsurprisingly. There are challenges both for younger farmers becoming established and older farmers having concerns about future income, taxation, succession and the retirement process itself.

The new Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, cites generational renewal as one of its nine key objectives. It is also prominent in Food Vision 2030, the new stakeholder-led, ten-year strategy with generational renewal as a key priority. Food Vision 2030 proposes a number of actions, including maintaining the strong level of current support, the promotion of land mobility and succession planning, and increased education and promotion of the diversity of careers in the agrifood sector. This reflects the need for skilled and innovative young farmers to respond to societal demands for quality food and environmental public goods. Supporting younger and older farmers therefore remains a key policy objective.

Given this, there are a range of measures in place at present, both in the existing CAP and at national level, that support younger farmers and facilitate generational renewal. Under the current CAP, this includes the young farmers scheme, the national reserve, the targeted agricul-

tural modernisation schemes, TAMS, II young farmer capital investment scheme and support to establish collaborative farming arrangements. Further assistance is available from national supports, including through taxation measures such as the agricultural relief from capital acquisitions tax, stamp duty exemptions, stock relief and long-term leasing relief, as well as the availability of tax credits via succession farm partnerships. Such interventions, as the Senator knows, are available to all sectors, including dairy, providing vital supports to young farmers in setting up their enterprises and older farmers wishing to retire. They are absolutely crucial.

Ireland's draft CAP strategic plan proposals reaffirm our commitment to generational renewal. Under these proposals, Ireland will implement the complementary income support for young farmers, dedicating some 3% of the direct payments to help young farmers establish their farming businesses. This allocation of approximately €35 million per year will see qualifying young farmers benefit on a per hectare basis, which will be more advantageous to young farmers than the current system, which was linked to payment entitlements. The proposed rate will significantly increase from approximately €70 per hectare in the current programme to over €170 per hectare, with a maximum payment area of 50 ha and payment on all eligible hectares, even those without corresponding entitlements.

The national reserve will also be utilised to fund at a minimum the mandatory categories of young farmers and new entrants to farming. In addition, a higher grant rate for qualified young farmers is proposed under the capital investment measure. The CAP strategic plan will also continue to provide support for collaborative farming and will propose innovative ways to advise older farmers on succession and their retirement options, which will, very importantly, increase the availability of land for younger farmers.

I recently established the food vision dairy group, to which referred Senator Boyhan referred, which brings together key stakeholders to advance the actions for the dairy sector identified in the strategy. The group has been engaged in constructive dialogue, with discussions on a variety of issues, including the calculation of the current emissions inventory, pathways to reductions in nitrous oxide emissions and the challenge facing the dairy sector in stabilising and then reducing emissions. While nothing is off the table, similarly there are no defined concrete proposals. I expect that an interim report from the group will be submitted to me shortly and I look forward to that.

My key focus is that the farming and agrifood sector remain strong and sustainable into the future. Our farm families and their businesses are world-class as matters stand, and I want to ensure there is a viable future for the sector for many generations to come.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I thank the Minister. The key word I used in starting this debate was "retirement". The Minister's focus was more on young farmers and I welcome that.

There are two sides to this, first, those coming into farming and encouraging them to stay and, second, those who may wish to diversify, get out of dairy or reduce their input in dairy, which is important. What is critical here, and I know the Minister also believes this, is that we collectively ensure that farming enterprises are retained and encouraged, albeit with diversification. That is the key message. We hear so much about cutting the national dairy herd and dampening down or changing. We need to talk about broad diversification. We want to keep people on the land, keep our rural communities and viable family farms, add, expand, co-operate and use all sorts of synergies. The reality of new farming for many people is that there will be off-farm income. In some cases, that is by choice and it is to be encouraged. There is noth-

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ing wrong with that. For some reason, people have a view that such farmers are lesser farmers. Who is a farmer? Farming is a resource. It is historic, tied up with family and it diverse. Let us not push people off the land. This is about encouraging people and sustaining rural communities and agriculture. I thank the Minister for attending in person and giving a comprehensive overview.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank Senator Boyhan for raising this matter and for his ongoing and active interest in all matters agricultural, both in the Seanad and on the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine, at which he is a consistent and effective contributor.

The issue of generational renewal and retirement is very important. The Senator referred to my tour of the marts when I visited at least one mart in every single county. Every farmer in the country had an opportunity to engage directly with me, whatever the question was, whether constructive, critical or suggestive, and to receive a response. One of the issues that arose as part of that engagement was generational renewal and one of the suggestions that came forward was to introduce an early retirement scheme, similar to what we had in the past. I decided ultimately not to go down that road. When we did it before it was found that it did not necessarily achieve its key objective of directing funding towards young farmers and getting young people into farming. Instead, it funded farmers who were under 65 years of age to leave early. A large number of farmers aged over 65 years who are entitled to the pension are staying on.

I want to get young people into farming. When we have a certain defined pot of money, is it better to give funding to people to retire early or is it better to target it at the young farmers we wish to encourage? The approach I have taken throughout the CAP has been to try to direct this funding towards young farmers. We have increased funding and improved all of the existing schemes. As we go forward, the key policy objective will be to bring about generational renewal and get young farmers into the industry to sustain it. Farming is a very exciting sector, more so now than it ever was. It is not just about producing food, which is central to what we do and continues to be a core mission, but also about other aspects. For example, how do we produce food sustainably and in a way that contributes to reversing the biodiversity decline that we have seen worldwide in recent years? Farmers have a central role to play in that, while continuing to do what they do so well, namely, producing food.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive reply.

Regeneration Projects

Acting Chairperson (Senator Victor Boyhan): I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Burke, for coming to the House. It seems he is permanently here. He is always welcome. It is great he takes the time and trouble to be here with us. We all appreciate it. I want to put that on the record. I call on Senator O'Loughlin.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I thank the Minister of State for being here to take this Commencement matter. I invite him to come to Rathangan, which is not so far away and only about an hour from Mullingar, to see our lovely town and have a look at what is happening in St. Patrick's Park. There is a wonderful community living in Rathangan and a great community in St. Patrick's Park, but that has not always been the case. Some 15 to 20 years ago, there was some awful antisocial behaviour in the area that was only being perpetrated by two or three families.

The majority of people who lived, and continue to live, in St. Patrick's Park are decent, law-abiding people who contribute to the whole social fabric of the area. Neighbouring fields were set alight and cars were set on fire and abandoned. Indeed, it got to the stage where the area featured on RTÉ's "Dirty Old Towns". The Minister of State may remember that. There was a sense among the people living there that they were being abandoned by the local authority, the local community and the national Government to endure what these two or three families were doing.

In 2011, it was decided that there would be a regeneration project for the area. It was a very big project. The area was one of the only ones chosen for such a project in the country, alongside an area in County Limerick. Plans were put in place. The reason the regeneration was sanctioned was because it was based on a design analysis of the estate that demonstrated issues were caused by the layout of the estate, including the lack of passive surveillance and insecure back garden walls with unsupervised rear access. There was a proposal to put a new build in place to deliver an estate that would be a pleasure to live in and that was clean, safe and secure for all residents, yet here we are 11 years later. Phase 1 of the project considered the refurbishment of 37 existing houses that did not need to come down. That was completed in 2019. That was a good news story. Unfortunately, at this time, a number of houses on the estate have been left derelict. It is very difficult for people to live beside them. A number of residents left their houses and were housed elsewhere. They did not want to leave their community, but they left on the understanding St. Patrick's Park was going to be a better place and this was what was necessitated.

It is an urgent issue. I have raised the matter as a councillor, as a Deputy and as a Senator. Local councillor, Anne Connolly, has been raising the issue on a consistent basis with Kildare County Council. I know that by raising this matter today, I will be subjected to a lot of negative and bad social media abuse by one particular resident. He is going to start the same rumour and innuendo as he did previously. My message to him is that I will report it to the Garda, as I have done with every other threat that has been made against me by this individual. There will be 15 new houses added to the estate. What I am saying to the Minister of State is that while I acknowledge we are in a very difficult housing situation, I cannot understand how it is taking so long to get to the point where we can complete the St. Patrick's Park project and have a lovely, viable place for the residents living there and the new residents who will come to live there.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): I thank the Senator for raising this important matter and for the opportunity to provide an update on behalf of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. The Department provides funding to local authorities to support a broad range of housing programmes, including the delivery of new social homes through build, acquisition and leasing of new social housing, remediation of existing social housing stock and the regeneration of other areas of disadvantage.

Through the significant funding made available under Housing for All, we are supporting Kildare County Council in the major refurbishment and new build social housing scheme at St. Patrick's Park, Rathangan, through capital funding provided for under the remedial works scheme. This funding is focused on full estate remediation works, rather than individual houses.

In St. Patrick's Park, phase 1 was completed in October 2019, as the Senator referenced, under the management of the council and saw the refurbishment of 34 homes. Since then, the council, following public consultation workshops with the residents, has developed phases 2

and 3. I understand that this involves the demolition of 15 existing homes, construction of seven new homes, refurbishment of 25 and a range of site and landscaping works. This part of the works has recently received pre-planning funding approval from our Department.

A design team has been appointed and is progressing the scheme with the intention, as I understand from the council, to consult the residents further and seek Part 8 planning approval in mid-2022. This should enable Kildare County Council to complete the tendering process in 2022 if approved by the councillors, with the potential for the works to begin subsequently. I understand the council plans to carry out the works on a phased basis to minimise disruption to existing residents. If this progress can be maintained, it could see final completion of the redevelopment of St. Patrick's Park for mid-2025. A regeneration project moves through a number of phases throughout its life: the initial master-planning stage; demolition works; enabling works; refurbishment and consolidation works; and construction. The need for planning approval by councillors and for consultation with residents is important in such projects and this is led by the county council.

Projects involving the improvement of existing housing and the addition of high-quality new replacement housing constitute a valuable part of what we are supporting for the local authorities under Housing for All. Local authorities have scope to use capital funding to deliver new social homes in town centres through projects focused on vacancy and renewal. This commitment to using all opportunities, including social housing budgets, as part of tackling vacancy, is a critical part of Housing for All. Addressing vacancy and maximising the use of existing housing stock is a key concern of this Government.

While the redevelopment of St. Patrick's Park is a complex project, it is being advanced by Kildare County Council so that improved conditions are delivered for the residents. Further information can be obtained directly from the county council in terms of its implementation and management of the programme. I have absolutely assured it of our full support in this regard.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I thank the Minister of State for the update. I appreciate that a regeneration project has to move through a number of phases. However, it certainly should not take 11 years just to have completed phase 1. Many of the gaps were when Kildare County Council would come back to the Department in terms of plans, drawings, etc., and the Department would then take an inordinately huge amount of time and would come back and look for more changes.

I appreciate the Department is under much pressure, but there has to be a better way. From what the Minister of State said, it seems like in three years' time we should be close to having the regeneration completed, which is good. However, there are families living there. There were children who were born 15 years ago who will be moving out by the time the regeneration is complete. They have spent all of their lives, basically, living beside houses that are derelict, etc. We need to have a better system. I appreciate the update and I sincerely hope that I will not have to raise this again.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Senator for her query on this very important project. I will raise it with the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, as well to ensure it gets maximum attention in the Department. As the Senator pointed out, a decade is a long timescale for any project. However, we are assured the Part 8 portion will be ready midway through this year and the timescale for the completion of the project is mid-2025. We reaffirmed those deadlines with the Department. If there is any delay on the projections given, we will revert back to the Senator.

3 o'clock

Housing Provision

Senator Seán Kyne: I thank the Cathaoirleach's office for choosing this Commencement matter. I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Burke, to the House and thank him for visiting County Galway last Thursday to engage proactively with the director of housing services, Mr. Liam Hanrahan, and the housing team to discuss a number of projects in the county and to visit a number of those in Moycullen, Roundstone and Clifden.

I have always been of the view that all types of houses are needed in all communities in Galway city and County Galway, including private houses to buy, affordable, social and private-rental housing and approved housing bodies. We find a situation, however, where there has been considerable work done on delivery of social housing. As the Minister of State heard last Thursday, there has been close to a 50% reduction in the waiting list in County Galway since 2016. This has been because of initiatives such as Rebuilding Ireland, some projects of which the Minister of State saw at first hand on Thursday.

However, there are challenges with regard to affordable housing and the ability of individuals and couples to purchase homes. They are over the threshold to qualify for the social housing list and, unfortunately, cannot receive a mortgage at a level to be able to purchase a home. That is the squeezed middle, if you like. Developments are happening in many areas within Galway city and County Galway, especially on the outskirts of the city in places such as Moycullen, Barna, Claregalway and Oranmore, but there is dire need for assistance with affordable housing.

We have also seen developments that have planning permission and are ready to go in areas which have not progressed, because, one would have to presume, developers do not have the equity to commence those projects. That is where the advance purchase arrangements are very important. They give that certainty to developers that they will be paid in advance for the delivery of these homes and will have the upfront equity to be able to put in place the infrastructure and development costs for homes.

It is a very important issue, as we know, because the costs to develop any home are increasing because of a variety of situations such as construction inflation. Labour, fuel and materials costs are all increasing and putting challenges on a set budget that any developer or local authority has. The delivery of affordable housing in Galway city and County Galway is very important.

Will the Minister of State elaborate on the engagement between both local authorities and his Department on the delivery of affordable homes? We know there has to be this engagement. The Department has to be able to continue to keep the pressure on local authorities in terms of delivery of units and they also have to engage with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to ensure there is funding, assistance and guidance for the delivery of affordable housing, whether it is on land the council owns directly or that it has identified through advertising expressions of interest from interested parties for projects. Perhaps the Minister of State might elaborate on engagement with both local authorities regarding affordable housing in both Galway city and county..

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Senator Kyne for his Commencement matter, which is key

and very important in terms of raising the priority of affordable housing within the Department and in the context of Galway city and County Galway. The Housing for All strategy sets out a very strong target of 54,000 affordable home interventions between now and 2030. As the Senator quite rightly pointed out, Galway has to take its share of this projection.

Delivery of affordable housing, in accordance with the scheme set out in the Affordable Housing Act 2021 and the funding being made available, will be underpinned by the local authorities' housing delivery action plans, including those of Galway City Council and Galway County Council, which were submitted to the Minister, Deputy O'Brien in December 2021. Preparation of the plans allowed each local authority to assess the level of demand with affordability constraint in its area, based on the housing need and demand assessment, and plan provision accordingly. The plans are currently being revised and updated by local authorities in light of ongoing engagement and clarifications, and I expect that they will be ready for publication by local authorities before the end of the summer. They will also provide a comprehensive overview of projected delivery of affordable housing in Galway, how many units are needed and where they are needed. I had the opportunity to raise this matter with Galway County Council last week when we visited its offices in Prospect Hill with Senator Kyne. I understand there is a significant pipeline of works currently under way. I point to the urgency for affordable housing to be a key component in that context because, as the Senator said, a healthy society must be reflected by a diversity of housing, with affordable housing being a key element along with private housing.

Funding is made available to assist local authorities and approved housing bodies to deliver affordable housing for purchase and rent through the affordable housing fund, AHF, previously known as the serviced sites fund, and the cost rental equity loan. The serviced sites fund is supporting affordable housing development at Merlin Woods in Galway city which, according to Galway City Council, will deliver approximately 85 affordable homes to purchase by 2024. My departmental officials recently met with Galway County Council's director of housing and council colleagues to discuss the progress of plans for a number of affordable purchase schemes in Galway county. I understand that Galway County Council intends to make applications to my Department for AHF funding to support these schemes in the coming months. The schemes are currently at various planning stages and, all going well, it is hoped affordable homes could be available for purchase from 2023.

The first home scheme will be delivered via a strategic partnership between the State and participating mortgage lenders. I can confirm that all parties are working with a view to deploying the scheme by the end of the second quarter of this year. It will improve access to newly-built homes, below the median price point, by using a shared equity model to bridge the gap between mortgage finance and the cost of new homes. This measure, targeted at first-time or fresh-start buyers, will allow purchasers to exit the rental market, help to build developer confidence in realisable consumer demand and contribute to the recovery of our construction sector.

Furthermore, the Land Development Agency is progressing two major projects in Galway city as part of its initial tranche of State lands. These include site locations on Dyke Road and Sandy Road, Galway. Overall projected delivery from these sites is for over 1,500 homes, with the first 170 to be achieved by 2026 on Dyke Road. To date, a preliminary design has been completed for the site and engagement with Galway City Council is ongoing. With regard to the development located at Sandy Road, a design team has been commissioned to prepare a framework for the Sandy Road regeneration. Stakeholder engagement is under way and a public consultation will be undertaken.

Other measures to allow buyers to access newly-constructed housing affordably, such as the help-to-buy scheme and the local authority home loan, formerly the Rebuilding Ireland home loan, are also available to eligible purchasers nationally to make home ownership more affordable.

Senator Seán Kyne: I thank the Minister of State for his response. Certainly, the delivery of the housing delivery action plans by the summer is very important. The Minister of State spoke about the engagement he, his officials and, I am sure, the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, have had with officials in Galway city and county councils. I know from my engagement with them that there are plans, whether it be regarding the council-owned lands in Claregalway, where there is a mixture of affordable and social, or in respect of private developments in Moycullen, Barna, Oranmore and other areas that they are looking at. It is important that these plans are progressed.

The Minister of State mentioned the Land Development Agency and its plans for Sandy Road and Dyke Road, but it will still be a long time before the first of these houses will be delivered for purchase. That is worrying because these are two strategic sites in the heart of the city but the Minister of State is talking about 2026 before the first delivery of some of those homes. We need the Land Development Agency to step up to the mark and to deliver more quickly than it is doing both in Galway city and across the country. This is supposed to be a game changer with regard to State-owned lands and we need quicker progress and delivery on this.

Deputy Peter Burke: I understand the urgency on the ground for affordable housing and also private housing. People must have a clear pathway to get the chance to own the keys to their new home for the first time. From 2023, Galway County Council will have a number of options for affordable housing. The 85 units in Merlin Woods in Galway City Council will be important to underwrite that capacity. We will prioritise it as much as we can.

With regard to the engagement, other funds like Croí Cónaithe will make it easier to bring derelict properties back into use. That will be tailor-made for County Galway, so that the areas the Senator referenced, such as Clifden, Moycullen, Letterfrack and Roundstone, will get an opportunity as well under that scheme, which is very important.

I understand the urgency of affordable housing and we will be prioritising this. The plans are now being looked at within the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien's division within the Department in order to have them operationalised this year. Hopefully, people will be able to see a clear pathway to how to get to keys to their home for the first time.

Public Transport

Acting Chairperson (Senator Victor Boyhan): I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton.

Senator John McGahon: I am here today to welcome a really progressive and ambitious project that we are embarking upon, which is the youth travel scheme. For those who do not realise it, the youth travel card is providing 50% free cost of travel to those aged between the ages of 17 and 23. The reason I am standing in the Seanad today to raise this in the Commencement debate follows on from a very important meeting I had yesterday with Paddy Matthews, who is the founder and managing director of Matthews Coaches, which operates buses from Dundalk,

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Drogheda and Bettystown. If I have to declare an interest in one sense, I was a commuter with Matthews Coaches for seven or eight years to Leinster House, when I worked here as a member of staff. It is a wonderful service that provides so much for people in my community. It was a service that started 20 years ago, when there were no direct services between Dundalk and Dublin and Drogheda and Dublin. It provides a valuable resource for the people of my county.

The problem is that the introduction of the 50% levy is not scheduled to take place on 9 May for the commercial bus operators alongside all of the public service operators. It will be included at a later date, and that has been confirmed in the past 24 hours by the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, so we know that. What I am coming to the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, and the Government about is that we need to bring clarity as soon as possible for those in the private bus sector and to be able to say to them that the 50% will be available for them at a certain date.

I googled the figures before I came into the House. At the minute, a return ticket on a Matthews Coaches bus from Dundalk to Dublin works out at about €17 whereas a return ticket on Bus Éireann works out at about €11. If we were to take the 50% off for Bus Éireann which will come in on 9 May, 50% of €11 is €5.50, so why on earth would I get a bus for €17 return when I can take one at €5.50 on Bus Éireann? Granted, the Bus Éireann 100X bus provides a different service and takes longer to get to Dublin because it goes via other villages and via Dublin Airport, but that is a substantial price discrepancy. That will be the case even when the 50% discount is introduced for private buses, given 50% of €17 is €8.50, so Bus Éireann will still be cheaper.

The problem is that what we are introducing now is a massive discrepancy between public and private operators. We are coming out of a pandemic in the last two and a half years where bus passenger numbers have been down massively. Before this pandemic, Matthews Coaches would have carried about 7,000 people a day but it is operating at 51% to 56% of that today. For it to be able to get any sort of profit or run a manageable service, it needs to get back to about 70% of pre-pandemic levels. It accepts it will never get back to 100% because of remote working and because of the way things are, but it needs to get back to a certain sustainable level. I am not saying we are doing this as a Government - this is just a grey area that has come along. However, we are completely undercutting people who are involved in the private bus sector around the country as a result.

Competition is key. We need to provide competition in an open market to provide the best outcome for consumers, but this is not open competition. It is providing a substantial financial advantage to public sector bus operators compared to the private sector. What I am looking for from the Minister of State today is clarity that the Government will introduce the 50% discount and provide a timeline for when it will come in. That clarity and certainty will be very important for those who are involved as private operators in the bus sector.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): I thank Senator McGahon for his question. I welcome the opportunity to discuss this important topic. I am answering on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, so I will be relaying the Senator's comments to him.

I understand that the Senator's question is on the inclusion of the commercial bus sector in the young adult card initiative. It has always been the intention of the Minister to include commercial bus operators in this exciting fares initiative. I want to be very clear that licensed bus

and coach operators are an integral part of the overall public transport system, particularly in areas around the country that are not covered by existing public service bus and rail services.

In recognition of the important role that these operators play, the Government has continued to provide temporary financial supports throughout the Covid-19 pandemic for certain licensed commercial services with a view to protecting capacity across the public transport sector throughout the crisis.

In acknowledgement of the continuing difficulties facing the sector, I am pleased to inform the Senator that the Minister recently approved an extension of the supports up to 30 June 2022. To date, during this challenging time, over €60 million has been provided to support the commercial bus operators.

On the Senator's specific question regarding the young adult card — which recognises the importance of incentivising more young people to use public transport — the Minister was delighted to secure €25 million in funding for the scheme's introduction as part of budget 2022. The exciting initiative will entitle anyone between the ages of 19 and 23 to discounted travel costs and to increase the level of discount over and above the current student discount level to an average of 50% across all services, including city, intercity and rural services.

Mature students in full-time education will also be included in the scheme, as will eligible visitors to Ireland within the young adult age cohort. The discount will initially be made available on all subsidised public service obligation, PSO, bus, rail and Luas services. I expect to launch the young adult card on PSO services next month. It will be broadened to include commercial operators at a later date, with an expectation to launch before the end of the year. It is clear that the young adult card will be of great benefit to the cohort of users in question. Not only will it promote a modal shift in the transport sector but it should also contribute towards reduced reliance on private transport, with the associated benefit of transport-emissions savings.

The National Transport Authority has commenced work on the implementation of the new fares structure for young adults and its deployment. It is technically more challenging to roll out the young adult card on the commercial bus network than on the Leap-enabled PSO network. As such, it will take longer to make the fare discount available to commercial bus operators.

The NTA is in detailed discussions with transport operators and my Department regarding the range of issues that need to be addressed. To assist with this process, the NTA has established a working group to consider options and develop a plan to implement the young adult card on commercial buses in as timely a manner as possible, taking account of current ticketing capabilities to ensure a viable scheme is implemented.

The working group includes three representatives from the Coach Tourism and Transport Council of Ireland, two further representatives from the commercial sector and a representative from the Department of Transport. The industry experience of the working group will likely expedite the process of deploying the young adult card to the wider commercial bus sector. I will relay the Senator's comments to the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan.

Senator John McGahon: I thank the Minister of State for the clarity. The commercial bus operator sector is central in providing an effective and inclusive public transport system. We need to have private operators along with public sector operators. Commuters from my town who get the Matthews bus to Dublin will be discriminated against between 9 May and whenever the Government decides to introduce the 50% reduction for people who avail of private

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transport. This is the crux of the issue that I want to get to. I accept that the Government is going to do this and am very appreciative of that. I am looking for clarity from the Government. I appreciate the Minister of State going back to the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, about it. I am looking for clarity as soon as possible so that certainty can be given to private bus operators that the 50% will be included with them by whatever date. The longer it goes on, more passengers are going to stop taking private buses and go with the cheaper option of public bus companies. It is about making sure there is a fair playing field for commuters and those in public and private bus operating sectors also.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I hear the sense of urgency around getting this over the line. I reassure the Senator that both the NTA and the Department of Transport have been engaging directly with commercial bus operators to help inform policy decisions in respect of the transport sector. On the working group I mentioned earlier, the Department of Transport has been liaising with the Coach Tourism and Transport Council of Ireland, CTTC, since May 2020. To date, 22 meetings have taken place and a further meeting is scheduled to take place later this month. More recently, on 25 March, the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, met with the CTTC to discuss its concerns regarding the sector. As outlined earlier, it is his intention to include commercial operators as part of the youth adult card initiative. The NTA is working closely with operators in order to achieve this as quickly as possible. I will certainly relay the concerns the Senator has highlighted to the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 3.22 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 3.35 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 3.22 p.m. and resumed at 3.35 p.m.

Election of Member

An Cathaoirleach: I have to announce that the following Member has been elected to fill the casual vacancy in the membership of the Seanad to which a resolution of Seanad Éireann on 10 November 2021 has reference:

University of Dublin Panel: Tom Clonan.

I invite Senator Tom Clonan to enter the Chamber for which he struggled so long and hard to get elected to.

Senator Tom Clonan was introduced to the Cathaoirleach and then took his seat.

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome the Senator to the House, and also welcome his family and supporters. I welcome his wife, Aideen, and Darach, Eoghan, Ailbhe and Rossa. Family members and supporters have helped him on this long campaign and journey. The family dog, Leahy, played a prominent role in the campaign as well. Tom is well known to many of us through his campaigning as a security expert in his great work over 20 years championing the issues in our security forces which had to be exposed. Often, somebody who champions those causes is vilified, but ultimately Tom has been proven correct and has been honoured by the Defence Forces and recognised for his work on making sure that our Defence Forces are open to everybody and are safe for everyone to be a member of. He is also well known as a campaigner on behalf of his son Eoghan and all persons with disabilities, and making sure that we have an

Ireland in which everybody is treated equally, regardless of his or her circumstances. We look forward to working with Tom in the House. Senator David Norris came in specially today. I will call on the father of the House after I call on the Deputy Leader. Tom can then respond to Senator Norris.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

Senator Lisa Chambers: I join with the Cathaoirleach in welcoming Tom Clonan to the Chamber. It is an exciting day for all of us in the Seanad to have a new Member of the House. Senator Clonan is most welcome, as are his friends and family who are here to support him. It is a fantastic day for all of them, who I am sure were very involved in the campaign to get Tom elected. I can tell him that we all watched with great interest as the results came in. It is great to see a competitive contest. He has earned his position here and I have no doubt he will bring a wealth of experience and knowledge to the debate in the House. I look forward to working with him. I say that in my capacity as Deputy Leader. I am sure all of the group leaders will, in turn, share their thoughts on the floor of the House.

The Order of Business is No. 1, motion re arrangements for the sitting the House on Wednesday, 6 April 2022, to be taken on the conclusion of the Order of Business, without debate; No. 2, motion regarding approval of carbon budgets pursuant to section 6B(7) of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Acts 2015-2021, to be taken at 4.45 p.m. and to conclude at 6 p.m., with the time provided for the opening remarks of the Minister not to exceed eight minutes, all Senators not to exceed five minutes, and the Minister to be given not less than eight minutes to reply to the debate; and No. 3, statements on tourism, to be taken at 7 p.m. and to conclude at 8.15 p.m., with the time provided for the opening remarks of the Minister not to exceed ten minutes, group spokespersons not to exceed five minutes and the Minister to be given not less than seven minutes to reply to the debate.

An Cathaoirleach: I will break slightly with precedent, as I said, and call on the father of the House.

Senator David Norris: I thank the Cathaoirleach. I have learned to expect special treatment from him and he is very kind indeed in facilitating me. I am absolutely delighted to welcome my good friend. I understand we share a distant connection to Leinster House through the late and lamentable General Sir John Maxwell. Tom has had a very distinguished career as a military analyst, and that is something that we could do with in this House, in particular at the moment with the problematic situation in Ukraine. Tom has a distinguished record in reporting from various critical scenes such as Bosnia, Lebanon and so on. I know of his great understanding in those areas.

I also welcome his wife, Aideen, to the House. It is a proud day for her and the rest of the family who are here. Of course, we must not exclude Eoghan, who was the campaign manager, and a very effective one. Some people talk about being wheelchair bound. There is nothing bound about Eoghan, as his success in campaigning in this election has shown.

Tom is a passionate campaigner for the rights of people with disabilities. As regards his education, he has more degrees than I do. He has a BEd from Trinity College Dublin. Good old

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Trinity. There is a constituency for you. He had a distinguished career in the Army and helped to highlight the issue of bullying in the armed forces which was known about but unacknowledged. He brought it to the foreground, which was extremely important. He lectures in media studies and so on at Technological University Dublin.

We are privileged to have a person such as Tom Clonan here with us. I welcome him to the House and look forward to taking part in many debates with him. He will add lustre to the House.

An Cathaoirleach: I know Senator Clonan is anxious to respond to such a glowing tribute. Senator Norris, as father of the House, has seen many Senators in more than four decades. To get such a glowing tribute is indeed testimony to Senator Clonan's hard work through the years on various campaigns, in particular the issue of bullying and harassment in the Defence Forces, as Senator Norris mentioned. The Defence Forces are a better place as a result of his work. I invite Senator Clonan to respond to the great words from Senator Norris.

Senator Tom Clonan: I thank the Cathaoirleach. First, I wish to thank my cousin, Senator Norris, and remind him that we had a secret pact never to mention General Sir John Maxwell. We said we would claim one another, but would not claim him.

Senator David Norris: I do not give a damn. When one gets to my age, it does not matter any more.

Senator Tom Clonan: The Senator has left me with the smoking gun. I thank Senators for their very kind welcome. We are exceptionally honoured and humble to be here. I am very grateful for the extraordinary community of Trinity College Dublin graduates. I am privileged to be a member of that community. I grew up in Finglas, went to the Christian Brothers and was very fortunate to go to Trinity College Dublin. The ethical and intellectual formation I got in my studies there and the debates during that wonderful time in the 1980s when I was 19 or 20 years old really was part of the reason I pursued the research I did while I was an Army officer and some of the other directions I have taken in my life, so I am very grateful to Trinity as a university and an institution, but also to that community of support without which I would not be here.

I am struck by the painting behind the Cathaoirleach. My grandmother, Máiréad Begley, was born in Killorglin in 1900. She came to Dublin in 1916 to become a primary school teacher. She was radicalised by the events of that year, particularly the execution of the leaders of the 1916 Rising, so she joined Cumann na mBan. In 1919, she qualified as a teacher and got a job in Scoil Bhríde, which was then located on St. Stephen's Green. It was Ireland's first Gaelscoil, set up by Louise Gavan Duffy. My grandmother taught there from 1919 until 1965. In 1919, she became involved with the south Dublin brigade of the Irish Republican Army, IRA. She participated in firebombing police stations located all across south County Dublin and in Wicklow, including in Blackrock, Cabinteely, Dún Laoghaire, Bray, Greystones, Dundrum and Blessington. They were all attacked by my grandmother and her friends. Therefore, I like to think she was a typical woman, multitasking by being a schoolteacher by day and an arsonist and freedom fighter at night.

(Interruptions).

Senator Tom Clonan: Granny came to live with us when she retired. I was born in 1966. Granny, my nana, kind of spoiled me. She used to call me "an gamhain breac", the speckled

calf, because of my freckles. She was the only adult I knew who would allow me to drink as I wished, including seeing how much lemonade I could drink before I felt sick. What a granny.

I grew up in a matriarchal household with my grandmother, my mum and my three sisters. Therefore, I knew that women had played a very active role in the liberation of the State and in the formation of this Republic. I joined the Defence Forces and served here at home before the ceasefires in what we called aid-to-the-civil-power operations, and then in Lebanon in the Middle East during a violent deployment during which hundreds of Lebanese men, women and children were massacred in the Irish area of operations. I witnessed that at first hand. As I speak, I am conscious that this is happening in Ukraine, in Chernihiv, Mariupol and Kharkiv. I hope I can bring some of my experience and an awareness of the importance of peacebuilding, negotiation, back channels and always keeping the communication lines open to try to end the killing and the violence. We must ensure we do everything in our power to avoid escalation, because unique risks are involved with the conflict in Ukraine.

I am proud to see my wife, Aileen, here. Again, I would not be here without her. I would also not be here without the wonderful supportive community I have, including Eddie Barron, Roger Galligan, John and Emma Somers, David and Helle Moyna and Polly McCourt. This wonderful family and community of support rallied behind me in the election attempt in 2016, when Senator Ruane certainly taught me a few lessons, and again in 2020, when I think she doubled her first preference votes.

Senator Lynn Ruane: I will be aiming to make it a triple now.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Seriously.

Senator Tom Clonan: One of the wonderful features of that election contest was that I made so many new friends, and I count Senator Ruane among them. In many ways, she reminds me of my grandmother, because she has the same pioneering spirit. I admire the work she is doing in respect of the drug task force in Tallaght and her new blog. I admire all the work she does.

Aileen and I have four kids. Eoghan, who is busy - allegedly - studying for his assignments in Dublin Business School, was my campaign manager in this election cycle, along with my youngest son, Rossa, who is a teenager, aged only 13. They worked really hard on the campaign videos. I noticed my speeches only attracted seven or eight viewers each day on the different platforms, and at least two of those were accounted for by me looking at myself. Anytime Leahy the dog appeared, though, we got many thousands of views-----

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: That was me.

Senator Tom Clonan: -----so I think that helped us to connect.

Eoghan was diagnosed with a neuromuscular disease at 18 months old. He had a normal delivery and hit all his developmental milestones, but then at 18 months we had this awful moment where he was diagnosed with a rare neuromuscular disease called Pelizaeus-Merzbacher disease. Eoghan is a wheelchair user and partially sighted. Like all families with a member with additional needs, we went through the looking glass and into this parallel republic, where it is necessary to fight tooth and nail for exceptionally poor services and resources. It is not the fault of the clinicians or of our wonderful specialists. Ireland, sadly, is one of the worst places in the EU to have a disability, on every measure, including social isolation, poverty, homeless-

ness, suboptimal medical outcomes and unhappiness, and this is for shame. We should be the best country in the EU in which to have additional needs. This was the particular motivation for me to run. It comes from the very heart of my family and that experience. I am here to do three things. I am here to learn from Members, who have been exceptionally kind to me in the past 48 hours as I have tried to find my way around the Houses like a lost sheep. People have been exceptionally kind. I am also here to make friends because I know there is a wonderful coalition of the willing across all parties who want to improve the existential circumstances in which people with additional needs find themselves - our most wonderful and precious citizens. In the time remaining to me and mindful of Senator Ruane's growing first preference cohort, I want to use whatever time I have in the Seanad to do something constructive and positive. I thank my family and good friends who are here today for welcoming me. Most of all, I thank all of the wonderful Trinity College graduates and the provost, Linda Doyle, who gave me such a great welcome. For all of this, I am very grateful. I am here to serve.

Senator Malcolm Byrne: On behalf of the Fianna Fáil group, I welcome and thank Senator Clonan for his very generous words coming into this House, that is, that he wants to work with everyone. I can assure him that there is that spirit of collegiality within this House. Senator Clonan has been a tireless campaigner on disability issues and we want to work with him to ensure that all citizens in this State are treated equally. I appreciate that he is joining two excellent Senators from Trinity College, although I will say that this will not prevent us from seeking to enact the seventh amendment, move to extend the Seanad franchise much more broadly and engage in Seanad reform. However, I look forward to working with him, as do my colleagues.

Déanaim comhghairdeas le Raidió na Gaeltachta ar 50 bliain de chraoltóireacht. Is seirbhís an-tábhachtach sa tír seo í Raidió na Gaeltachta. The Government announced the basic income scheme for artists today. This is something about which a number of Senators have spoken. It is particularly welcome as a three-year pilot. I know the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media has been to the fore in arguing for this but I was very happy to see the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and the Minister talk about how this could be a real game changer for our artists and arts workers. Obviously we must see the detail of the scheme and I hope the Leader will facilitate statements or a debate around that. This country is rightly proud of its artistic tradition and its artists. Imaginative schemes like this can be transformative. I believe it has the potential to be one of the most creative and imaginative schemes since Charles Haughey introduced the tax exemption for artists during the 1960s. After two very difficult years for our arts community, we need to be able to continue to recognise the contribution it makes and support it, particularly during the fallow periods.

The other issue I wish to raise is the latest report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, IPCC, where it made it very clear that it is now or never in terms of the action we need to take. We will increasingly see populist rhetoric around not facing up to dealing with our obligations on the climate. We cannot get away from the fact that climate change remains the biggest existential threat we face. We cannot ignore the findings of the IPCC report. I ask that we have a full debate on this issue. I know it is an issue we have spoken about previously but in terms of European energy security, it once again strengthens the case that it is better for us to have Irish wind rather than Russian oil or gas.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Ar mo shon féin agus ar son pháirtí Fhine Gael, déanaim comhghairdeas leis an Seanadóir nua, Tom Clonan. Cuirim fíorfháilte roimh a bhean chéile, Aileen, a chlann agus a chairde agus déanaim comhghairdeas leo. Is lá iontach, lá ceiliúrtha agus lá bródúil é seo. Cuirim fíorfháilte roimh an Seanadóir.

On my behalf and that of the Fine Gael Party, I congratulate our new Senator, Tom Clonan, and welcome him here. I pay tribute to him on his victory in the Seanad by-election and congratulate all the candidates on a competitive by-election, as noted by Senator Chambers. I pay tribute to Tom's family and friends, who are here today. We can all learn from his social media videos and he will see plagiarism at its best in the next general and Seanad elections. We look forward to working with him during his tenure in Seanad Éireann. Today is an important day for the Clonan family and I hope they enjoy and savour it. We have all had the pleasure of a first day in Seanad Éireann and the collegiality he experiences today will continue. We look forward to working with Senator Clonan.

I might end the collegiality at this point by asking that the Deputy Leader invites the Ministers for Health and Public Expenditure before us to explain how it is that the position of the public health strategy leadership professorship in Trinity College Dublin, TCD, is being funded by the taxpayer and the State. I congratulate the outgoing Chief Medical Officer and I take no issue with his appointment to the job or him personally. This afternoon in the Dáil the Taoiseach said he had "no hand, act or part" in the secondment of Dr. Tony Holohan to the position in TCD. Who had such an input? How did it happen and why? How is it the Taoiseach, as Head of Government, had no hand, act or part in that process? Who did? Who said it is okay for the outgoing Chief Medical Officer - I will not personalise the matter - to go on secondment to Trinity College and for this to be paid for by the taxpayer via the Department of Health? Who signed off on that and why?

We need a debate on the role of the Chief Medical Officer after this appointment. Will it be an acting Chief Medical Officer position? Will it be for a particular period? Will the post be advertised and will the new person in the role be the Chief Medical Officer of the country? This is recognising that we have just come from the teeth of a pandemic. Again, I pay tribute to the current Chief Medical Officer for his work, the advice he gave to the Government and the tremendous job he did. My remarks should not be taken as personal in any shape or form. I hope we can have this debate as a matter of urgency.

Senator Michael McDowell: To begin with, I associate myself with the warm words of welcome from a number of my colleagues to Senator Tom Clonan on his election. I assure him that what has been said is true and this is a collegiate place. As far as I am concerned, I have never seen a lack of friendship among anybody in this House against anybody else, no matter how deeply divided people have been on matters. It is a quality of Seanad Éireann I am sure Senator Clonan, as a professed peacemaker, will enjoy hugely.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Hear, hear.

Senator Maria Byrne: Hear, hear.

Senator Michael McDowell: I was struck by the fact Senator Norris revealed the terrible truth about Sir John Maxwell. Sir John Maxwell has something in common with my background and he tried to get my grandfather, Eoin MacNeill, executed for calling off the 1916 Rising. I now realise Senator Norris has been concealing this from me for a long time. Poor Eoin MacNeill, for his trouble, was the subject of a slightly drunken rant by Lord Wimborne, the Lord Lieutenant in the Viceregal Lodge, as it was then, saying he would hang MacNeill. That was on the Wednesday of the 1916 Rising. This was in addition to the fact that four days before, Countess Markievicz had when she discovered he was calling it off decided to go to Rathfarnham to shoot him with a revolver. He got it from all sides.

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I have something in common with Senator Clonan. Before he was born or close to before he was born, I was an officer too in the Defence Forces, although a non-commissioned officer in the FCA. I have something else in common with him in that until recently his family had the benefit of an assistance dog called Duke and I am the proprietor of the second Duke. Duke has, in fact, resisted being kidnapped by Frances Fitzgerald on the Triangle in Ranelagh. All of this was recorded in Miriam Lord's column in *The Irish Times*.

4 o'clock

All of these links enable me to say in total sincerity that I have the greatest pleasure in being in Senator Clonan's presence here today and to offer him the co-operation of the Seanad Independent Group in every possible way. I welcome him here among us.

Senator Boyhan will be dealing with the question of the sitting tomorrow but I want to comment on what is happening in Ukraine. Every democratic house everywhere across Europe must make it 100% clear to the Government and the diplomatic representatives of the Russian Federation that what is happening is evil, must end and must be resisted-----

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Hear, hear.

Senator Malcolm Byrne: Hear, hear.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Hear, hear.

Senator Michael McDowell: -----and that the Ukrainian people deserve every support in fighting for their freedom, independence and their country's integrity.

Senator Róisín Garvey: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach. First, I welcome Senator Clonan to the House. I congratulate his family and friends because behind every politician who is successful in an election, there is a great team of tired and enthusiastic people who sometimes have more faith in you than you have in yourself. Well done to his house and to the team behind him.

I have some experience of working with modal shift and behavioural change in infrastructure around people with disabilities, having worked with schools for 14 years where I often came across that issue and sometimes encountered a lack of awareness. I would love to work with the Senator on that. Perhaps we could work on things with Engineers Ireland because design is a very significant issue. I look forward to working with Senator Clonan on that and on many other things. I welcome him to the House.

I will use the final few minutes of my time to raise again an issue that ties in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, IPCC, report, the war in Ukraine and the challenges of living in rural Ireland. The solar panel Bill, which the Green Party brought forward over a year ago now, has been delayed over and over again. Finally, it looks like everything that needs to be done has been done. The ecology reports have been completed, the i's have been dotted and the t's have been crossed. This Bill would enable communities, community groups, schools and farmers to put photovoltaic solar panels on their roofs without planning permission. We already have companies offering 17.5 cent a unit to farmers as soon as they can start selling them energy.

This Bill is very important because it does many different things in many ways. It can save the Department of Education money on its bills for schools as they will be able to sell energy

during the summer. It will get us off the addiction to fossil fuels which we have had for too long, and which we have been calling to move away from for many years. It has always been a priority for the Green Party to look at our fossil fuel addiction, to leave everything we can in the ground, to become self-sufficient and to become net exporters of energy. For people living in rural areas, especially for farmers who have many sheds with roofs, this will get rid of the limit to what they can put up and eliminate the need to apply for planning permission. It will help them to make another income. We all know that farmers, especially small rural farmers, unlike the big farmers - I always make this distinction - need other incomes because their farming is marginal and they can barely survive on what they are earning. Most of them have second and third jobs. It is very important that this Bill is brought to pass. I hope the whole House will support me on this because it will enable community groups and community halls, farmers, rural dwellers and anyone who has a bit of a roof anywhere to get photovoltaic panels up on their roofs without the cumbersome bureaucracy that we had created for years to make this prohibitive. People can then own their own energy because there is nothing better than owning your own energy and becoming aware of how much you use. For too long, we have been removed from the source of our energy and the amount we use. This is partly because we have not been producing it ourselves. It would be great if we could see this Bill brought forward. I encourage the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, to make it one of his top priorities to get away from this overdependence on fossil fuels. At the moment, we are fuelling Putin's war which is a disgusting thing.

I remind the House that tomorrow, when the President of Ukraine makes his address to the joint sitting of the Houses, it is hoped that most people will wear the Ukrainian colours to show him, even if it is only a token gesture, that we are behind him, as stated by Senator McDowell. Senator Clonan may not yet have received the memo on this but he may have some blue and yellow in his house. The Bill I have mentioned is very important for many people in many ways.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Ba mhaith liom fáilte is fiche a chur roimh an Seanadóir nuathofa, an Seanadóir Clonan, agus é anseo linn inniu. I look forward to working with Senator Clonan and learning from him. He gave us a great insight into his character, his experience and his intentions in the Seanad, and all of them are admirable. I hope people will not judge me disrespectful if I say I found myself a bit more invested in and enthralled by the election count for the Trinity College by-election than I did for my own count. I can only imagine what it was like for the Senator having to go through all that.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Senator Ó Donnghaile has a safe seat.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Well, you never know. Is there any such thing? I wish Senator Clonan well agus go n-éirí go geal leis.

First, I wish to note the remarks of the Minister of State with responsibility for overseas development aid and the diaspora published in the *Irish Independent* today. It might surprise people that I read the *Irish Independent*, but there you go. The Minister of State said the Government will commit to holding the referendum on presidential election voting rights before 2024. While I welcome the assertion, I would like to think it will happen before 2024, given it is a programme for Government commitment. What we need, and what I would like, is for the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, or the Minister for Foreign Affairs, who has lead responsibility for taking this legislation through the Houses, to come before us after the Easter recess and outline the timeframe involved in the legislation. We cannot wait any longer. We cannot keep

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travelling the world on St. Patrick's Day and lauding our global diaspora, telling them how important they are. We cannot commit to telling citizens in the North they will no longer be left behind and then, when we have the opportunity to do something tangible that would assert and affirm their citizenship, not actually do it. It is commendable the Government is committed to this. It has been committed to it and has made announcements around it for a very long time. What we need now is for the definitive timeline to be laid before us and, if necessary, to initiate the legislation in this House. I am sure we would be happy to help it along the way.

I want to finish by raising the following. A few weeks ago, our colleagues in Fine Gael brought a very commendable motion before us in relation to the Passport Office, which I supported. It outlined a number of asks of Government. In March 2022, more than 100,000 applications were made to the Passport Office. In February 2022, in excess of 150,000 applications were made to the office. The month prior to that, more than 137,000 applications were made. There is a huge backlog. It seems to me all the Department has done up until now is to tell people to check earlier before they book holidays. I am sure it is the same across the Chamber, but there are people contacting me who applied for passports, particularly for young children, in November 2021 that are still being tracked. The Deputy Leader is aware of that herself. That is the reality. This is now becoming a supply and demand issue. When people apply for a passport, they pay a fee. It is not a nominal fee. It is a fairly significant amount of money. That is going in. It is time the Government invested. The staff are doing a fantastic job. They can only operate in the confines in which they find themselves. We need greater investment and greater service delivery. Only the Government can deliver that. I encourage colleagues in government, and I say it sincerely, to keep at their colleagues on this issue, if they have not done so already. It needs to be sorted.

Senator Mark Wall: On behalf of the Labour Party, I welcome Senator Clonan and his family to the House. I sincerely thank him for his work on the Defence Forces, in particular, over recent years. It is going to be very important in this House as we get to debate, we hope, the report of the Commission on the Defence Forces, which we have been promised for a few weeks. I thank Senator Clonan for his work on that. I look forward to working with him on it. I also thank the Senator for his work on disability matters.

It is with that that I raise the issue of the Family Carers Ireland report that was published yesterday, entitled Care at Home - Costs of Care Arising from Disability. The report found the minimum essential standard of living cost for a two-parent household caring for an adolescent with a profound intellectual disability is €244 per week higher than for a family of a similar size with an adolescent without those additional needs. It is very worrying indeed.

Another issue raised in the report was the cost of adapting a house. I raised the issue last week in a Commencement matter with the Minister of State only to be told the review is still ongoing. I am dealing with a number of families who need their houses adapted to look after their loved ones at home. Unfortunately, they cannot do it at the moment, considering the amount that is allowed under the grant. I ask again that the review be carried out a lot quicker than is happening at the moment. All these people want to do is to look after their loved ones in their homes. At the moment, unfortunately, they are not in a position to do so with the limits on this particular grant.

It is as Catherine Cox, the head of communications and policy at Family Carers Ireland, stated:

With everything they have contributed throughout the pandemic, it is simply wrong that family carers are now left struggling to put food on the table or heat their homes. They deserve so much better.

To ensure family carers are supported during this extremely difficult time, we are calling on the Government to provide additional and targeted financial support for family carers, particularly for those on the lowest incomes.

Perhaps we could have a debate with the Minister on carers. I know we had one last year, but it is timely that we look for a similar debate again as quickly as possible, given that particular report.

I also welcome the recent announcement of the Government on the Circular Economy, Waste Management (Amendment) and Minerals Development (Amendment) Bill. Senator Byrne and I have introduced similar Bills on CCTV cameras. This weekend, my local community will have a clean-up, and I am sure that will be replicated in local communities throughout the State. I have said before in this House that those clean-ups are costing this State something in the region of €90 million. One can just imagine where we could spend that money better on community facilities, such as playing pitches, community playgrounds etc. We need to get that Bill enacted. I know Senator Byrne is pushing it and I will be pushing it from this side of the House. We need to see it happening in order that we can use CCTV cameras to fight against the attack that is on our cities, towns and especially our rural areas. It is something that needs to happen. As I said, I wish all those communities well this weekend and throughout the month of April with all their clean-ups. I thank them most sincerely.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: First, I join in the very warm congratulations to Senator Clonan. There were so many incredibly strong candidates and we watched such an interesting debate. Senator Clonan arrived into this House at a very timely moment because we have a special committee for the duration of this Oireachtas where we are particularly tasked with examining the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. I am very confident Senator Clonan will be able to bring constructive and important insights and perspectives into that debate. That is a very important task that cuts across everything, from participation in culture – full participation was one of the issues mentioned today - to independent living and home adaptation. So many of the issues we have spoken about today on the Order of Business affect people with a disability as well, but they face additional obstacles and challenges in respect of it. That is the task we face in ensuring the UN convention is fully implemented. I warmly look forward to the contribution our new Senator will make in that, as well as on many other issues.

Unfortunately, on this first Order of Business, I hate potentially to have to divide the House, but I need to propose an amendment to the Order of Business. With much disappointment I have to propose an amendment to the Order of Business, that No. 2 on the Order Paper, the motion regarding carbon budgets, would not be taken today but would be taken at a later point pending the publication of the public consultation on the carbon budgets.

In December, the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications launched this public consultation and called on the public for input on the carbon budgets. In the briefing we received, we were told the Minister, in making his decisions and proposals on the carbon budgets, would be informed by the climate committee report and the public consultation. Yet, what is put before the House today is the many-paged technical report the Climate Change Advisory

Council, CCAC, published in October last year, with no sign of there having been consideration of any of the detailed proposals put forward by the climate committee, and, indeed, absolutely no evidence of the public consultation and how, for example, the Minister has weighed up or considered the public consultation.

When the Minister came to the House on 15 February, he said he wanted to inspire people. We have had many opinions about what individuals should be doing in terms of climate change. I do not criticise that, because there are many things we can do. Much of the advice in respect of energy and driving at an environmentally friendly speed is sensible. However, the public also needs to see that the Government takes it extremely seriously and that, for example, the Minister has weighed up their concerns and ideas. I know that many in the public, for example, looked for stronger carbon budgets, because the ones as proposed for this next period of time are at 5.7% reductions per year, far short of the 7% required. Indeed, again, the Minister is of course empowered, in putting forward the carbon budgets, to consider new scientific information. Just yesterday, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, IPCC, informed us that we have 30 months in which to act. In that context, the Minister should publish the public consultation, show respect to the public and its rights under the Aarhus Convention on environmental decision-making and review the proposed budgets in light of the very worrying scientific information. My colleague will second my proposal in due course.

An Cathaoirleach: Just to be clear, the Senator wants to amend the Order of Business to provide that No. 2 will not be taken today.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: Yes, I propose that No. 2 not be taken today, pending the appropriate publications.

An Cathaoirleach: We cannot put conditionality in an amendment.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I propose that No. 2 not be taken today.

An Cathaoirleach: The Deputy Leader will have listened to the Senator's proposals on the other matter.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I add my voice to the congratulations to Senator Clonan. I have followed his work closely and I admire it. I respect him greatly and congratulate all his family and supporters. Senator Clonan will find the friendship he talks about. He will also find a collaboration, which is very important. I certainly notice that more in this House than in the Lower House. I look forward to working with him on the areas of disability and defence, in particular. They are close to my heart, as I know they are close to his.

I raise an issue in the area of mental health that concerns all of us, including practitioners, those who are in need of mental health interventions and those who are working in the area. Successive HSE and Government reports have identified that there is a significant shortfall in the number of psychologists being trained to meet our needs. While there is a crisis now, a bigger crisis is coming down the line.

A 2021 HSE report stated that we needed an estimated 321 psychologists in the mental health services alone. That is without talking of the extra demand needed in education. We must have a plan for increasing the number of training places and associated funding to meet future demands. There is a huge disparity in funding for psychology trainees. Currently, trainee clinical psychologists have 60% of their fees paid and receive a student salary, and rightly so.

However, counselling and educational trainee psychologists have to pay fees of approximately €14,000 per year and complete three years of unpaid work throughout the duration of their studies. Many are not able to enter the profession because of the cost. We need to see parity of esteem and support for the two types of psychology. I would like the Minister to come to the House to address this matter and put a plan in place.

Senator Barry Ward: I join the congratulations that have been extended to Senator Clonan. It is great to have another Blackrock person here because there are now only four of us, as far as I know. We can never have enough Blackrock people.

(Interruptions).

Senator Barry Ward: Senator Clonan has been a friend of mine for a long time. One will meet him, Aideen and Duke around Blackrock and Dún Laoghaire, whether it is on the pier or wherever else. What is very important is what has been spoken about in the context of the competitive and involved nature of the campaign we had for the seat. It is very important and shows the level of interest and commitment from all the people who put their names on the ballot paper. It is not easy to do that. Most people will never do it in their lifetimes. Senator Clonan has done it at least twice that I am aware of. I have done it a number of times, unsuccessfully. It is tremendously important we acknowledge the work done by people who do not get elected, as well as that of the successful candidates. I extend my congratulations and welcome to Senator Clonan.

Déanaim comhghairdeas le Raidió na Gaeltachta as an leathchéad atá á cheiliúradh againn an bhliain seo. Ó 1972, bhí Raidió na Gaeltachta ann ar son phobal labhartha na Gaeilge chomh maith le muintir na Gaeltachta. Feicim sa leabhar a bhfuairamar uaidh go bhfuil grianghraf an tSeanadóir Kyne ann, freisin. Má léimid an méid atá istigh ann, tá a fhios againn go bhfuil Raidió na Gaeltachta i gcónaí ag obair go dian ar son phobal labhartha na Gaeilge ar fud na tíre. Is seirbhís an-tábhachtach ar fad é. Tá mé ag súil le labhairt le “Tús Áite” anocht. Déanaim comhghairdeas le Raidió na Gaeltachta ar son an leathchéid agus táimid ag tnúth le leathchéad eile uaidh.

Senator Victor Boyhan: Before I leave the Chamber, I wish to congratulate Senator Clonan on his election.

An Cathaoirleach: You are not allowed to refer to Members leaving the Chamber.

Senator Victor Boyhan: Indeed, I met him many times because I was his county councillor in Booterstown in the Dún Laoghaire constituency. I also met his family. He is very welcome. I do not give advice. One should come in here every day and enjoy it. Every day one comes in here is a better day than going outside. I do not know Senator Clonan very well, but from what I have read about him he has an amazing track record. I congratulate him on his success in representing Trinity College. On behalf of the Seanad Independent Group, which I lead,-----

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: For the moment.

Senator Victor Boyhan: -----he is very welcome. We look forward to working and collaborating well with him.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: He is looking to start wars everywhere.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I will need a few extra minutes.

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An Cathaoirleach: The leader of the Opposition without interruption.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: It is from his own crowd.

Senator Victor Boyhan: We are dealing with the Order of Business and I want to speak on an important aspect of that. Senators McDowell and Norris and I tabled an amendment regarding President Zelensky's address tomorrow. I believe we made our point. The Seanad can shine a light on many issues and we did so last night. The national media covered it. Our main concern was about the continuous and horrific images of civilians lying dead on the streets of Bucha. It is a matter for us and, personally, I believe it was important that we send a strong message to the Russian ambassador that he is not welcome in our parliamentary house of democracy. That is my view and I believe it is worth saying. I and my colleagues who tabled the amendment wanted to make it very clear that we did not believe it was right or appropriate to invite the ambassador of Russia to our House, the people's house and the house of democracy in this country. I want to put it on the record that, considering all matters equal and what has happened, while the ambassador has not declined the invitation, he has not accepted it. We will await what happens but I am now pretty confident the ambassador will not arrive to the lawns of Leinster House tomorrow morning.

Senator Timmy Dooley: I want to be associated with the remarks of welcome to Senator Clonan. I have had the pleasure of meeting him on a number of occasions both here and in other parts of the city and, indeed, on various radio programmes. I have always found him to be a respectful, insightful and interesting man, and I always felt that if he made it into the Oireachtas he would have something to offer. His skill set, not just in the disability sector, and I rarely met him without him being in the company of his son, Eoghan, will be very helpful in shaping policy and debate in this House. I also believe his military experience and the way he shone a light on the internal machinations, as it were, of military life are very important, especially at a time we as a society and a country are having a debate about our military neutrality. He will bring a particular insight that will be helpful in that regard.

At approximately 1 p.m. yesterday, Dublin Airport Authority issued a tweet effectively telling customers that if they are travelling at peak times they should expect delays of approximately three and a half hours. An addendum advised that if people happened to be bringing a car, they should add another half an hour. For the premier airport in the State to find itself in that situation is appalling, and there is a reason for it finding itself there. It has engaged in predatory practices in attracting airlines and passengers to dominate the entire sector. Airports such as Shannon have been left to wither on the vine. There was massive growth in passenger traffic prior to 2019. Dublin got the bulk of it and Cork, Mayo and Kerry got little bits of it. Shannon got precious little. From the time that Shannon was separated from Dublin, it engaged in predatory practices, it reduced landing charges and it grabbed it all. In the middle of the pandemic, it let people go, with voluntary redundancies, again to improve its capital position. Until such time as we have a legislative basis for managing our aviation sector, the carry-on in Dublin will continue. It is hugely damaging to our tourism industry for people to be told they will have to wait. Can anyone imagine getting a flight to Donegal to be told they need to rock into Dublin Airport four hours in advance? They would have rowed a boat to London quicker than they would get there now with the carry-on.

An Cathaoirleach: Thank you. I am conscious of time.

Senator Timmy Dooley: I want to conclude on this. It amazes me that the board and senior

management have not resigned at this stage. It is appalling what they have allowed to happen.

An Cathaoirleach: We have the next business in about 24 minutes and we have many speakers to come in. If we want to get everybody in, everybody has to stick to their time. If people run over, I simply will not be able to bring everyone in. I call Senator Martin Conway.

Senator Martin Conway: I want to be associated with the welcome to Senator Tom Clonan. It is great to have another voice articulating the needs and the many challenges that people with disabilities in this country face. I wish him well and look forward to working with him.

In terms of the Ukrainian crisis, I am very concerned about people with disabilities trying to escape Ukraine. We should have statements in the House with the Minister of State with responsibility for disability, Deputy Rabbitte, on what the Government's response specifically is to people from Ukraine with disabilities who are seeking sanctuary in this country. They have their permission to remain so they have the full rights that every other citizen in this country has. As time moves on, as more people from Ukraine are coming here and as the system is getting used to it, particular difficulties and challenges are emerging. I do not believe that the State response is strong enough or quick enough in embracing this, particularly in terms of education. There are some areas where it is happening very quickly but there are other parts of the country where it is happening particularly slowly. We need to have a rolling engagement on Ukraine. Once we come back after Easter, we need to have this on the agenda every week so we can interrogate various aspects of the Government response.

An Cathaoirleach: I call Senator Marie Sherlock. I know things ran over time but we also started late. In order to facilitate everybody, which I would rather do, I will bring everyone in for one minute, if that is okay.

Senator Marie Sherlock: For one minute or two minutes?

An Cathaoirleach: One minute.

Senator Lynn Ruane: A Chathaoirligh-----

An Cathaoirleach: Okay. In that case, we will bring in those who are here. Senator Sherlock has two minutes.

Senator Marie Sherlock: I want to be associated with the comments welcoming and congratulating Seanadóir Tom Clonan.

The results of the International Panel on Climate Change report, which was published yesterday, are scarily stark and the message is clear. We cannot long-finger what needs to be done. Of course, while we have ambitious targets and we need to acknowledge them, there are real questions with regard to the urgency in meeting those targets. In particular when I look at this city of Dublin, we have to ask about the urgency in encouraging people to start walking and cycling in the city. We have a draft transport strategy for the city which envisages it will take 20 years to 2042 to have over 50% of the population walking, cycling or travelling by bus. That is not good enough.

Communities where I live, like Cabra, Phibsborough and North Strand, are crying out for segregated continuous cycle lanes. While there has been some progress in recent years, the overall pace of progress is way too pedestrian. We also need to see an urgency with regard to retrofitting houses, not only because of the cost of living crisis, but because people want to play

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their part. Again, in the areas that I am most familiar with, 22% of the houses have a BER rating of F or G. Many of these households are low or middle income and they cannot even put together the 20% that would be needed to meet the State grants to try to undertake attic insulation. We have to do better.

Ten days ago, I stood with the family, friends and community of Terence Wheelock, who died in a Garda station 16 years ago. There was a GSOC investigation in 2014. There were inconsistencies, inaccuracies and more questions than answers in its report. The family needs an independent inquiry. In this regard, I appeal to the Government, including the Minister for Justice, and An Garda Síochána. For Terence's family, community and the wider public in Dublin's north inner city, we need to build trust with the Garda. It is vital that we stop the sore of distrust and ensure the family and community get an independent inquiry, not only for Terence but also for those growing up in the community who want to see justice for his name.

An Cathaoirleach: When a new Senator comes in, the Order of Business runs a little longer and we give more time. However, I do not want people's schedules to be put out of sync. The Deputy Leader will not be called until 4.45 p.m., at which time we are likely to have a vote, thus postponing the business of the day. I will not be able to call on everyone today unless everyone takes only a minute or 30 seconds each. However, I do not believe that is of any use to Senators. I call Senator Paul Daly.

Senator Paul Daly: Considering the Cathaoirleach's words, I will be as brief as possible. I want to be associated with the congratulations to Senator Clonan. I look forward to working with him.

I would like the Minister for Foreign Affairs to come to the House to debate seasonal work permits. At a recent meeting with the Association of Farm & Forestry Contractors in Ireland, its representatives highlighted to us again the difficulties contractors have in recruiting people to operate machinery, particularly during the silage season. When the Irish season is over, and because of the seasonal differences globally, many Irish drivers go to Australia, New Zealand or South Africa, where they can continue to do the same work. They get visas without any problem. Unfortunately, young drivers from the southern hemisphere who wish to come to Ireland can do so for only one season. They are not afforded the opportunity to avail of a visa or work permit for seasons thereafter. This needs to be addressed. If addressed, it could solve a major problem in the sector. I ask the Deputy Leader to invite the Minister for Foreign Affairs to discuss this issue and the many other issues associated with seasonal work permits that arise annually, particularly in the agriculture sector.

Senator Micheál Carrigy: I, too, want to be associated with the welcome for Senator Clonan.

I welcome the announcement today by the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media of the basic income for artists. Members of the relevant Oireachtas joint committee prioritised this for the arts scene.

Last Thursday, I attended the opening of the co:worx working hub in Edgeworthstown, County Longford. I pay tribute to the committee involved. Four years ago, the Ulster Bank branch closed, leaving no financial institution in the town. The ATM facility is gone. A local group approached me, other public representatives and the local authority with a view to purchasing the former Ulster Bank property. Longford County Council did so and now we have

a state-of-the-art co-working hub with a link to the Technological University of the Shannon, Athlone. It is an ideal example of a negative turned into a positive. It is important to put on the record my gratitude to the committee for the work it has done.

Planning permission was recently turned down for the development of a primary care centre in Edgeworthstown, a town of over 2,000 people. Such a centre is important infrastructurally to any town, particularly a growing town such as Edgeworthstown. Permission was turned down due to a lack of capacity in the sewage treatment plant. I contacted Irish Water and was informed that there is some capacity at the plant. Therefore, I ask that when the application is resubmitted, planning permission be granted subject to joining the public scheme. Infrastructure like that in question must not be turned down when people are prepared to invest money to develop it in a growing town.

An Cathaoirleach: I call on Senator Ruane because she has to second the amendment and was here from the very start. However, I will give everybody else one minute if they stick to it. If they do not, I will not be able to accommodate everybody. If the Deputy Leader, who has to respond, did so now, we would still be late. Senator Ruane has two minutes.

Senator Lynn Ruane: I formally second Senator Higgins's amendment. Senator Clonan is no longer present; however, as the only woman left on the Trinity panel, I welcome him. He mentioned matriarchs, so I will now claim to be the matriarch of the Trinity panel. The real travesty is that there has only ever been one Senator from Killinarden in the Chamber, never mind Blackrock.

I wish to speak to a very sad and important case. I do not know specifically how to have a debate on it but it is obviously part of a wider discussion on mental health. In all my long years of working in the addiction and homeless sector, I have been advocating and fighting for dual diagnosis in terms of service and care. Many people who have experienced extremely serious mental health conditions have ended up homeless because of them. While they are on the streets, people are often refused care based on their homeless status. It is not always said outright; sometimes the service will say it is not taking people in just to release them back onto the street. It means they do not get the care they need while they are there.

When I began to volunteer again in the homeless sector at the beginning of the first lockdown when we were not meeting in the Chamber, I met a young woman called Cherie Flynn. I have the permission of her family to use her name. I was very saddened to receive an email in the last few weeks to say Cherie had passed away. She was admitted for involuntary care into a psychiatric unit, which is not easily got. When I worked in the homeless sector there were so many people who were released from involuntary or voluntary care only to take their lives immediately afterwards or within a day or two of leaving care. Cherie was granted involuntary care although it took a lot of pushing for that to be done. She really thought there were demons chasing her and expressed suicidal ideation. She was a young woman living on the streets. Her family wanted to love and care for her but due to her mental health issues, she was not able to live in the home. After her involuntary care order was made, almost instantly it was revoked in the psychiatric unit. Cherie left and took her life by throwing herself off the Jervis Street shopping centre car park. We have to stop this happening. It is discrimination against homeless people and their ability to access real, adequate care. We should have statements on mental health specific to psychiatric care.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: Yesterday, I was asked to support Senators McDowell

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and Boyhan on the invitation to the Russian ambassador to the House tomorrow. I rejected it because I thought the ambassador should be here as the embodiment of Russia. I have changed my opinion because I have been contacted by a number of people, some of them in the diplomatic corps. They say the ambassador should not be here. He would take away from the event and become the focus of attention. I will be supporting that amendment today with Senators McDowell and Boyhan.

The Minister of State with responsibility for transport called for the Defence Forces to be put into Dublin Airport to solve the security problem. Are the Defence Forces the only people in this country who can stop floods and fires and fill every goddamn gap there is? Any time there is a bit of a problem, we throw the Defence Forces at it. They are the poorest paid people, the most abused and lacking in respect in this country. It has to stop.

Senator Vincent P. Martin: I concur with Senator Craughwell. It was disappointing to think the Russian ambassador was being invited in the first instance and to be afforded that additional privilege. I am so happy a diplomatic storm has been averted by him having the good sense not to turn up where he is not welcome.

I would like to associate myself with the warm welcoming comments by Members of the House to the victorious Senator Tom Clonan. As my colleague, Senator Garvey, said, he can be assured of the total co-operation of the Green Party. In the spirit of the House I can safely say he will get this from every quarter and none. It was an electrifying, interesting and invigorating count. It amplified the need for simple reform, like a six-seater single constituency, which does not need a referendum or the substantive Bill Senator McDowell is bringing through the House. We really should consider those to help the Seanad.

Senator Aisling Dolan: I welcome Senator Clonan to the House. I acknowledge the fundraising efforts for Ukraine all across our towns and villages. We had a coffee morning in Ballinasloe that raised €600 over three hours for families in Ukraine. Groups are putting on plays and all of the funds are going directly to the Irish Red Cross's Ukraine campaign. It was devastating to see what has happened in Bucha on last night's "Prime Time". It is very hard to speak on it but there is a national volunteer effort in Ireland to welcome families and that effort, co-ordinated through groups in the education and training boards and through our counties, will be crucial in supporting those families when they get here.

Senator Erin McGreehan: I also congratulate our new Senator, Tom Clonan. I look forward to working with him in the coming years. I welcome the Government's announcement of a basic level of income for artists but I want to link that to what was in the news today with regard to our carers and how they deserve a basic level of income. No carer should be at risk of poverty because he or she is a carer. Everyone deserves some sort of financial security. A basic level of income for our carers is one way to provide that security and to help our carers. We cannot quantify the invaluable contribution they make to this country but we can start by giving them a basic level of income.

Senator Paul Gavan: The Cathaoirleach will be glad to know that I will be very brief. I warmly congratulate Senator Clonan. What a wonderful first speech he has made this morning. It is great to have him among us. I look forward to working with him.

We are taking Report and Final Stages of the Safe Access to Termination of Pregnancy Services Bill 2021 on Thursday. I appeal to Senators of all parties to come out for the photocall at

12.30 p.m. on Thursday. Completing the progress of this Bill will be very important and very significant. Of course, that is in the gift of the Government. I am very mindful of what the Deputy Leader said on Second Stage of this Bill, which was that she did not mind which Bill got through as long as a Bill got through and we got this done. On Thursday, we will have the opportunity to get legislation on safe access zones done. It is regrettable that the Government does not yet have a Bill and cannot give us a timeline for one. That means that this is the only Bill on safe access zones. I appeal to colleagues from across the Chamber to get together on Thursday to get this done and not to keep women waiting.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Hear, hear.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly: To first address the Bill on safe access zones, as the Cathaoirleach will know, I am a co-signatory so I very much hope that we can pass the Bill on Thursday. I also welcome Senator Clonan and congratulate all of those who ran. It was a stellar performance by an awful lot of people, including members of my party. I congratulate them for putting themselves forward. I am sure we will see them again in the future.

I will also speak about carbon budgets. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, IPCC, report was stark. If we keep going the way we are going, we will reach 3.2°C above average pre-industrial temperatures by the year 2100. We just cannot do that. We have to move beyond that. For clarity, the Joint Committee on Environment and Climate Action recommended that we adopt these carbon budgets. Most of the recommendations related to sectoral targets, which have yet to come. That is where the public comes in. It is absolutely essential that the public is behind this. Many of the committee's recommendations related to that. I urge people to support these carbon budgets. We need to act now.

Senator Lynn Boylan: I will be very brief. I also wish to raise the matter of the IPCC report. I particularly welcome the fact that the panel said that we cannot rely on unproven technologies such as carbon capture. That is very welcome. It is unfortunate that we are seeing the nature-based solutions presented by peatlands not being seized upon to the full extent possible. Bord na Móna's plans to put a wind farm in the Mid-Shannon Wilderness Park fly in the face of what we heard from the IPCC yesterday.

I also welcome the fact that the IPCC has finally called out how the Energy Charter Treaty and investor-state dispute settlement mechanisms are holding back governments from taking the action needed. They are making the public pay for the stranded assets of fossil fuel companies. I hope the Deputy Leader will consult the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications and call on him to have Ireland unilaterally leave the Energy Charter Treaty. The reform process is going nowhere. We have a very small window of time to turn this ship around and the Energy Charter Treaty deserves to be put in the bin.

Senator Paul Gavan: Well said.

Senator Lisa Chambers: I thank the Cathaoirleach. The Order of Business started today with Senator Norris. He eloquently welcomed our new Senator to the House and articulated their close ties. We look forward to further exchanges in that regard. Many Senators, almost everybody, rose to welcome Senator Tom Clonan to the House. It is a momentous occasion for the House. Senator Clonan got to his feet on his inaugural debut speech in the House and spoke about his tireless campaigning for people with disabilities, his fantastic son, Eoghan, and all of his family and all the support he has had. One thing he said that stood out for me was that he

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wants to be part of a coalition of the willing which is a lovely way to put it. Those of us that are here to serve as he put it, often work together in a cross-party manner. As Senator McDowell pointed out we are a collegiate bunch and despite some of our differences on many issues, we tend to work together when the need arises to try and advance important issues. Senator Clonan's debut speech was excellent.

Senator Malcolm Byrne spoke on a couple of issues. First of all he congratulated RTÉ Raidió na Gaeltachta on its 50 years in operation, as did Senator Ward. He also spoke about the announcement today by the Government of the basic income scheme for artists, and was joined in that regard by Senators McGreehan and Carrigy. Senator Malcolm Byrne said we need to see further detail on exactly how this scheme will operate and how artists will qualify for it, and has requested a debate in the House at the earliest opportunity which I have requested through the Leader's office. Senator Malcolm Byrne also raised the issue of the ICCP report as have other Senators, including Senators Boylan, Pauline O'Reilly and Sherlock. We will request a debate on that report at the earliest opportunity. It is an issue that concerns many Senators.

Senator Buttimer spoke about the Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Tony Holohan, taking up his position in the University of Dublin. I do not have full details on how that appointment was made. I am informed that it is a secondment for a particular period which as I understand it often happens between public bodies but I have no further information to provide to the House. I do not want to talk off the top of my head. It might be worth a Commencement matter or raising directly at the parliamentary party meeting.

Senator McDowell welcomed Senator Clonan to the House. I do not have any knowledge of Sir John Maxwell but I have learned much this afternoon and appreciate the education in that regard. Senator McDowell also referenced tomorrow morning's sitting as did Senators Boyhan and Craughwell. I take on board what the Senators articulated. From their comments yesterday and today I would say that almost everybody in the House concurs with the sentiments of what they were proposing. I note that there is no amendment proposed so I have nothing to deal with in that regard. However, I would certainly join with other Senators in hoping that there is no attendance tomorrow by the Russian ambassador. I do not expect that there will be, for many reasons. It is just not appropriate in my view that he would be there.

Senator Garvey spoke about our over-dependence on fossil fuels and wants to advance the Bill on solar panels on public buildings. Senator Pauline O'Reilly brought that Bill to the House some months ago.

Senator Ó Donnghaile spoke about the need to expedite the publication of the Bill on a referendum on extending the voting franchise to Irish citizens beyond Ireland. He has requested an update on that. It might be worth a Commencement matter on that issue in particular. He also raised a very important issue in regard to the Passport Office. All of us are getting frustrated. I am actually waiting for a passport for my little boy as well and we do not know when we will get it. It is frustrating not knowing and it is months since the application was lodged. I sympathise with other families who are also in this situation. It seems to be particularly difficult when applying for a child's first passport. It is much easier to get other passports.

Senator Wall spoke about the Family Carers Ireland report that was launched today and commended the authors of that report and all of us who fed into it. It is an important body of work. He put on the record of the House that it is estimated to cost an additional €244 per week to a family just to run the household where they have an adolescent with additional needs. That

is a significant amount of money for any household, particularly in the context of rising food and energy costs in the State. Certainly we have much work to do in regard to providing supports and services to those families and individuals.

Senator Wall also raised an issue that he has raised previously around the cost of adapting houses, and the grants that are available to the local authorities which have not been updated to reflect the rise in the cost of building materials and labour. I understand there is an ongoing review but I take on board the Senator's remarks that it is moving at a very slow pace which is obviously making it very difficult for families to do those upgrades to their homes. Senator Higgins proposed an amendment to the Order of Business. I take on board what she said. I am not in a position to accept her amendment, which was seconded by Senator Ruane. It is my understanding that there are two elements to the public consultation, the first of which was on carbon budgets in general and which concluded on 8 February. The matter was then considered by Cabinet and a joint committee. It is the subject of that which is being considered today. My understanding is that there is a further public consultation with Ministers on a sectoral basis. That consultation is outstanding.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: It was never shared with the climate change committee. It was never published

Senator Lisa Chambers: The information I have from the Minister is that the public consultation on carbon budgets in general was concluded, but the sectoral consultation is still outstanding. I cannot accept the amendment to the Order of Business, but it is open to the Senator to raise the issue directly with the Minister today and ask that there be a delay in the work he is doing. I take on board the points Senator Higgins has made on public consultation and this having happened before it concludes. My information is that there are two aspects to the public consultation, one of which has concluded and the second of which has not. The Minister wants to proceed and I am happy to facilitate that happening today. As I said, if Senator Higgins wants to raise this directly with the Minister in the debate later today she can do so. I thank the Senators for their amendment.

Senator O'Loughlin spoke about the need for mental health reform and also welcomed Senator Clonan to the House. Senator Ward congratulated Raidió na Gaeltachta on its 50 years in operation. I have dealt with the issue raised by Senator Boyhan.

Senator Dooley spoke, as he often does, about Shannon Airport and the challenges the airport is facing. He raised particular concerns regarding practices between Dublin and Shannon airports. I have no further information on that particular issue, but I acknowledge that there are difficulties with Shannon Airport and its operation. The airport is important to the mid-west region and County Clare.

Senator Conway welcomed Senator Clonan to the House and acknowledged that it is great to have an additional voice in the House coming from an advocacy perspective on disabilities. He said he looked forward to working with the Senator on those issues.

Senator Sherlock spoke about the IPCC report. She raised in particular issues around cycle lanes in her constituency and the need to facilitate citizens having access to walking and cycle lanes. The Senator should spare a thought for those of us in rural Ireland where it is all but a pipe dream to have cycle lanes in and out of our towns and villages. It is something to which we aspire.

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Senator Paul Daly spoke about seasonal work permits and has requested a debate with the Minister for Foreign Affairs around getting those work permits expedited, especially those for the agricultural sector where there is an annual demand for those types of permits.

Senator Carrigy spoke about the basic income for the arts and mentioned a good news story in his area, Longford, where a remote working hub has been established to link directly with the Technological University of the Shannon, TUS. It is working very well.

Senator Ruane spoke about the issue of dual diagnoses. She referred to Cherie Flynn, and we extend our condolences to her family. We were very moved by the story the Senator told on the floor of the House. Words are fine, but actions are what are needed. The Senator has been a tireless and fantastic advocate for those working in the homeless sector and addiction services. I take on board her comments on mental health. I was not aware of the issues she raised regarding homelessness and the potential for discrimination in terms of access to services. It is appalling to think that is happening. I will certainly request a debate in the House on mental health reform, in particular psychiatric services. The Senator can liaise with the Leader's office to make sure we get the title of the debate correct and the correct Minister to come to the House to deal with that. I extend our sincere sympathies to Cherie's family on the tragic passing of the young woman.

Senator Craughwell spoke about tomorrow's sitting, which I have dealt with. He referenced the suggestion by a Minister of State at the Department of Transport that the Defence Forces would provide free hours of work. I was shocked to read that. The defence community has responded. The Representative Association of Commissioned Officer, RACO, made a statement today and I am sure the Permanent Defence Force Other Ranks Representative Association, PDFORRA, will do the same. They are quite insulted by the suggestion that their members would be called upon. We have still not addressed pay and conditions in the Defence Forces, the major retention crisis and the fact that people do not feel properly valued or acknowledged for the work they do. To suggest that they would be dragged up to Dublin Airport to do this work on a voluntary basis without any consultation was not appropriate. I understand the intention of the Minister of State wants to solve one problem, but he was lacking in consideration for the personnel who would be required to do that work. Consultation with the Defence Forces was also lacking. I take on board the comments of the defence organisations that they are very unhappy with the way that was dealt with. I agree with the remarks of Senator Craughwell in that regard.

Senator Dolan acknowledged the amazing fundraising for Ukraine of communities across the country, particularly a coffee morning in Ballinasloe that raised in excess of €600. I wish that community well.

Senator McGreehan raised the issue of a basic income for artists, but also the need for a basic income for carers. I think all Senators would support that.

Senator Gavan spoke about the safe access legislation that will come before the House on Thursday and asked for cross-party support for the Bill. He will be aware the Bill will not be opposed by the Government but the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, and his Department are drafting legislation to do the exact same thing. We have raised that issue in the House previously. It is about getting to the point we all want to reach, that is, where there are safe access zones, but we must ensure that whatever legislation is on the Statute Book is watertight and stands up to scrutiny because it could be challenged before the courts. It is the

intention of the Minister to provide for safe access zones. He has on numerous occasions commended the work of the group that published the Bill tabled by Senator Gavan which has cross-party support. The Minister wishes to reiterate his support for achieving that objective of safe zones that many of us in this House also support. We look forward to that debate on Thursday.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly spoke about the IPCC report. I will request that debate.

Senator Boylan also raised the issue of the IPCC report, as well as the Energy Charter Treaty. As that is a specific request, it would be suitable for tabling as a Commencement matter in order for the Senator to get a direct response on it. I do not have any further information to give her.

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Higgins has proposed an amendment to the Order of Business: "That No. 2 not be taken today." Is the amendment being pressed?

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: Yes.

Amendment put:

The Seanad divided: Tá, 9; Níl, 27.	
Tá	Níl
Black, Frances.	Ahearn, Garret.
Boyhan, Victor.	Buttimer, Jerry.
Clonan, Tom.	Byrne, Malcolm.
Craughwell, Gerard P.	Carrigy, Micheál.
Higgins, Alice-Mary.	Casey, Pat.
McDowell, Michael.	Cassells, Shane.
Moynihan, Rebecca.	Chambers, Lisa.
Sherlock, Marie.	Conway, Martin.
Wall, Mark.	Crowe, Ollie.
	Cummins, John.
	Currie, Emer.
	Daly, Paul.
	Davitt, Aidan.
	Dolan, Aisling.
	Gallagher, Robbie.
	Garvey, Róisín.
	Horkan, Gerry.
	Kyne, Seán.
	Lombard, Tim.
	Martin, Vincent P.
	McGahon, John.
	McGreehan, Erin.
	Murphy, Eugene.
	O'Loughlin, Fiona.
	O'Reilly, Pauline.
	Seery Kearney, Mary.

Tellers: Tá, Senators Alice-Mary Higgins and Lynn Ruane; Níl, Senators Seán Kyne and Robbie Gallagher.

Amendment declared lost.

Order of Business agreed to.

Sitting Arrangements: Motion

Senator Regina Doherty: I move:

(1) That Seanad Éireann resolves that -

(a) a joint sitting of both Houses of the Oireachtas shall be held in the Dáil Chamber on Wednesday 6th April, 2022, at 9.50 a.m., and His Excellency Volodymyr Zelenskyy, President of Ukraine, shall be invited to address such joint sitting via video conference;

(b) the Ceann Comhairle shall be Chairperson of the joint sitting and shall adjourn the sitting immediately following the concluding statement by the Cathaoirleach of Seanad Éireann;

(c) the arrangements shall be as follows:

(i) the Ceann Comhairle shall open the joint sitting by inviting the President to address the Houses;

(ii) following the address, statements in response may be made in the following order and shall not exceed the times indicated:

(I) an Ceann Comhairle – 2 minutes;

(II) the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and the leaders of the Green Party and Sinn Féin - 6 minutes each;

(III) the leaders or a representative of the Labour Party, Social Democrats, People Before Profit-Solidarity, the Regional Group, the Rural Independent Group and the Dáil Independent Group -3 minutes each; and

(IV) the Cathaoirleach of Seanad Éireann - 6 minutes; and members may share time;

(2) in the event that President Zelenskyy is unable to participate, the Ceann Comhairle shall be empowered to cancel or postpone, or to suspend, the joint sitting;

(3) the protocol and seating plan for the joint sitting shall be as agreed by the Dáil Business Committee and the Seanad Committee on Parliamentary Privileges and Oversight; and

(4) following the adjournment of the joint sitting, the Seanad shall meet at 12 noon in the Seanad Chamber and the following arrangements shall apply:

- (i) Standing Orders 29 and 30 shall stand suspended;
- (ii) the Order of Business shall be proposed at 12 noon.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I understand that it is not proposed to move amendment No. 1. Amendment No. 1 not moved.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: On a point of information, is it possible for us as a House to send a message to the Ceann Comhairle to liaise on the motion that is being put before the House?

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: That is a separate matter.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: There should have been consultation. I am sorry I did not get an opportunity to sign the motion, but we should have had a discussion on it.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: We will have to discuss that matter separately. We are discussing the motion.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Thank you, a Leas-Chathaoirligh.

Question put and agreed to.

Carbon Budgets: Motion

Senator Pauline O'Reilly: I move:

That Seanad Éireann shall approve the carbon budgets, copies of which were laid before Seanad Éireann on 24th February, 2022, pursuant to Section 6B(7) of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Acts 2015 to 2021 regarding the approval of the carbon budget.

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): Thank you, a Leas-Chathaoirligh, for inviting me to this session to discuss the proposed carbon budget programme which, following a lengthy consultation and review process, received approval from my Cabinet colleagues back in February and is now before both Houses of the Oireachtas for final approval.

As part of the consultation and review process, the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Environment and Climate Action undertook an extensive review of the carbon budget proposals. I greatly appreciate the work undertaken by the members of the committee to examine the proposals and engage with numerous stakeholders and experts in order to fully interrogate the carbon budgets and, more broadly, seek political consensus in support of robust climate action.

I am also grateful for the committee's recommendation to adopt the proposed carbon budgets and I appreciate the other recommendations delivered in its report, particularly with regards to monitoring our progress, ensuring a just transition, identifying opportunities to enhance our

ambition, and the need for effective citizen and stakeholder engagement.

The need for swift robust climate action is critical. Last year at COP26 in Glasgow, we witnessed the powerful testimony of many international leaders from climate-vulnerable nations, who painted a stark picture of the impact that climate change is already having on their nations and communities. The climate budget programme will support Ireland to deliver against its domestic, EU and international climate action obligations.

Last year saw a step change in our approach to climate action, with the signing into law of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 and the publication of the national development plan and the Climate Action Plan 2021. The introduction of our carbon budget programme will help us to build on the momentum from last year.

The 2021 climate Act establishes our climate objectives in law and will underpin national climate action in the medium and long term. Under the Act, the Climate Change Advisory Council, CCAC, submitted its first carbon budget programme in October 2021. The programme submitted by the council establishes a pathway to achieving our legally binding climate objectives. That means it will deliver on our commitment to a 51% reduction in carbon emissions by 2030 and it will set us on the way to net zero by 2050. Last December, I caused a copy of this proposed carbon budget programme to be laid before both Houses of the Oireachtas. Dáil Éireann then referred the carbon budget programme to the joint Oireachtas committee for its consideration and on 7 February, it published its report recommending that the proposed budgets be adopted by both Houses of the Oireachtas.

Following consideration of the public consultation, the recommendations of the joint committee's report and input from my Government colleagues, I took the proposed carbon budget programme to Government on 22 February and received Cabinet approval. The motion being considered today on the Government's proposed carbon budgets taking effect is the final step in the adoption of the carbon budgets but only the beginning of the implementation process.

The motion under consideration represents a significant milestone on this journey. Should the motion be approved by both Houses of the Oireachtas, the carbon budgets will then come into effect and set out an emissions framework for the country that will support our overall climate objective. Once these overall, economy-wide carbon budgets are adopted and have come into effect, my Department and I will begin the process of preparing the sectoral emissions ceilings. These ceilings will determine how each sector of the economy will contribute to the achievement of the carbon budgets. It is my intention that the sectoral emissions ceilings will be presented to the Government for approval by the end of June.

Preparation of the emissions ceilings will include extensive consultation with all Ministers and will be informed by new and existing analysis undertaken by members of the climate action modelling group, as well as additional external technical support. The work undertaken as part of the consultation and review process for the carbon budgets, including the joint Oireachtas committee report, will also inform and support the preparation and development of the sectoral emission ceilings. Once the ceilings have been prepared and approved by Cabinet, they and the carbon budgets will be reflected in the next climate action plan, and that will replace the indicative ranges of emission reductions for each sector that is in the climate action plan that was published in 2021. The process to deliver the next climate action plan will include further consultation with other Ministers, the public and various experts and stakeholders.

It is crucial that while we prepare our carbon budgets and sectoral emissions ceilings, delivery of climate action in Ireland continues at pace. The 2021 climate action plan, which I launched on 4 November alongside the Taoiseach and Tánaiste, provides a detailed roadmap for meeting our climate ambition under the climate Act. The Government has also published an accompanying annexe of actions to support the delivery of the climate action plan. The annexe sets out the detailed actions and measures, with timelines included, that are required to drive delivery and ensure our emissions reduce. The annexe also identifies the key Departments, State bodies and other key stakeholders that will oversee and implement these actions. The 2021 plan sets out indicative ranges of emissions reductions for each sector of the economy. Following the legal adoption of carbon budgets and sectoral emissions ceilings, these ranges will be finalised and reflected in this year's climate action plan. The Government will support the changes through major public investment announced recently in the €165 billion national development plan, including increased funding for retrofitting our homes, building new public transport, reskilling workers and supporting a just transition.

While the climate action plan 2021 builds on the ambitious targets of the 2019 plan, it represents a significant step up in terms of ambition and implementation. To highlight a number of the most significant measures included in climate action plan 2021, the plan commits to, first, an increase in the proportion of renewable electricity to up to 80% by 2030, including an increased target of up to 5 GW of offshore wind energy. Second, there will be a significant reduction in transport emissions by 2030, and measures will include enabling 500,000 extra walking, cycling and public transport journeys per day by 2030, and supporting the take-up of electric vehicles to reach almost 1 million by 2030. Third, there will be implementation of a new national retrofit plan to increase supply capacity and make retrofitting more affordable. Fourth, our enterprise sector will see a faster uptake of carbon-neutral heating, increased electrification of high-temperature heating and the phasing out of high global warming potential F-gases. Fifth, reducing emissions associated with agriculture will be central to achieving our climate ambition. This plan provides a pathway to reduce emissions while supporting world class food production through an innovation and science-based approach. There will be a reduction in chemical nitrogen and more targeted use of fertiliser, while maintaining our position as global leader in grass growth through multi-species swards. Sixth, there will be a reduction in emissions from land use and a move to being an overall store of carbon, which will involve further bog rehabilitation, increased afforestation and the rewetting of peat organic soils. A new forestry programme will be prepared for launch in 2023.

This plan places a just transition at its core. It sets out four principles that will guide our policy-making and implementation over the coming years to ensure that we can effectively monitor and manage our transition and that our responses remain flexible so we can respond to future transition challenges and target the areas in need of support. Each Minister, as well as the Government as a whole, will be expected to consider these principles as we develop and implement our climate policies. We have committed in the plan to establishing a just transition commission, which will make periodic recommendations to Government, building on research, engagement through the National Dialogue on Climate Action, and the annual review from the Climate Change Advisory Council, CCAC, on how Government policy can further the just transition.

In delivering this ambitious climate action plan, we must ensure we bring people with us and that the transition is fair. The National Dialogue on Climate Action, which was launched in March 2021, will facilitate public engagement, participation, community action, networking

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and capacity building activities on climate action, giving everyone in society the opportunity to play their part. In November last year, I announced €60 million in funding from the climate action fund for community climate action projects to support and empower communities to shape and build low carbon, sustainable communities in a coherent way.

As I mentioned earlier, the testimony presented at COP26 in Glasgow laid out the risks and challenges climate change presents us with.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I ask the Minister of State to conclude as we want to get all speakers in. He will be able to speak again when wrapping up the debate. I call Senator Róisín Garvey.

Senator Róisín Garvey: I wish to share time with Senator Pauline O'Reilly.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Róisín Garvey: I thank the Minister of State for coming to the House. We have been talking about climate change for a long time but we now see from the IPCC report that the time for talk is over and we need action. Unfortunately, the Green Party has not been listened to for the last 30 years. Luckily, we are in government now and we have worked very hard on this climate action plan and this climate budget and, for the first time ever, we will see sectoral targets. I am spokesperson for enterprise, trade and employment and rural development. We have had a lot of ambitious talk, greenwashing, and “sustainable this” and “sustainable that” happening for years. Businesses have caught on to the talk and some big business lobbies have caught on to the talk, but we need targets. Without targets, it is a waste of time. It is like being an archer with no bullseye. This sets out proper targets.

For example, in enterprise we need to reduce carbon emissions by 29% to 41%, so it is no good just saying “Oh yes, we have a little thing where we turn off the lights” or “Look, we use reusable bags. We are green.” That game is over. We need proper targets. This is what we need to do. We needed to do it 20 years ago so, without further delay, we need this motion passed and we need to move into action mode. The carbon budgets must be approved by both Houses. The Dáil will debate the motion on Wednesday, which is a formality following the Oireachtas committee deliberations.

When it is popular, many people are green and they are into green things, and when it is not popular, they are not into green things. We have seen this recently. It is said that we are not doing enough one day and then we are doing too much another day. At the end of the day, if there was not a Green Party, we would not be having this debate. Let us stop playing political football with something that is actually threatening human life. It is not just global because we are going to have a huge issue here. Even in my own county, I see farmers losing much more land than ever before to flooding and coastal areas are in serious trouble. Towns and villages all over Ireland are going to be threatened unless we plan properly and take it seriously, and every single section of society has to do this. When this is passed, we can move towards a stage where the Ministers have to set out their sectoral targets. That is what we need to do. We needed to do it 30 years ago but we certainly need to do it today and we need to take it very seriously. Even if you do not care about the migrants all over the world, care about your own house, your own neighbour. This is real and it is on our doorsteps.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly: I thank the Minister of State for coming to the House. I feel passionately about this, as a member of the Committee on Environment and Climate Action.

We looked in detail at the carbon budgets and we had members of environmental organisations in as well. Fundamentally, as a committee, we recommended that the two Houses pass the carbon budgets. That is my position and that has always been my position. There may have been one Senator and one Deputy who did not take that position. However, it was the opinion of the majority of the committee that we pass them.

As Senator Garvey said, we cannot keep saying that we need more action when, at the end of the day, what we need is urgent action. What the IPCC report laid out is that, by 2100, we are reaching 3.2°C above pre-industrial levels. That needs to be a shockwave that is sent across these two Chambers. I implore people to ensure we have these targets. It is not the end, by any means. In previous Governments, we did not meet our targets because we did not have that legislative basis and we did not have the climate action plan that we now have. At this point, we need the targets and then we need the sectoral targets. That is where the majority of the consultation must happen.

As the Minister of State outlined, there has been significant consultation to get us to this point. I know, from the local authorities, how difficult it is even at a local level to get some of these actions happening. People have to be held to account. They have to have their feet held to the fire and that is what these targets do.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: We have strong voices from County Clare today and another is from Fianna Fáil Senator Timmy Dooley.

Senator Timmy Dooley: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate. I had the pleasure of sitting on the climate change committee in the last Oireachtas on behalf of Fianna Fáil and I was probably in the minority in that we were in opposition, yet I supported the principle of carbon tax. We were not in government and we did not have to do it, but we did so because it was the right thing to do. I very much welcome the fact the Greens are part of government and that they have brought forward certain elements that will help us to address the climate crisis.

I have always advocated that we need to take the climate change debate away from environmentalists and academics. For sure, the science is there but if we start getting into the science of anything, we lose the vast majority of the population. That is not to suggest in any way that they do not understand it, because they do, but it is about how it impacts on their life. The vast majority of people I meet every day of the week fully understand where we are at with the climate crisis. They do not need to hear from the IPCC and they do not need to hear about targets. They just know there is a problem. They see the significant changes, they see famine in sub-Saharan Africa, they see it encroaching on arable lands in those regions and they see the migration issues that fly from that. They see it in their own back gardens. They see the very significant change in weather patterns. I do not want to get academic about this, but we all know that weather patterns change over certain cycles and they are not always cognisant of or consistent with climate change. When we have seen such diversity over a critical period of time, people are starting to accept that something is amiss. The science and evidence back that up.

We park that and then ask people how, from a farming perspective, they are going to address the continued pressure on an annual basis in terms of the supply of fodder for cattle in order to keep animals over the winter. This has come into sharp focus this year because we would normally expect to import significant amounts of grain from Ukraine. That will not happen because the grain will not be planted there. We are heading towards a crisis unless we are

fortunate with the weather.

Senator Garvey and I are familiar with areas of Clare where we were told 15 or 20 years ago that flooding was a once in 100-year event. Just two years later, there was another once in 100-year event. There are once in 50-year events. The average punter may not have a depth of scientific research behind him or her when commenting, but he or she knows full well there is a problem.

There is a significant problem with our debate around biodiversity and the practices that have developed which have lent themselves in a negative way to our environment. For the continuation of farming it is important that we change our ways. It is not about reducing things. In these debates, we get into an argument about how many cattle people want to cull and when the size of the national herd will be reduced. That is the sort of binary debate that some in the media love to engage in. They are doing so at the moment on the question of whether we should wear masks and who is right or wrong. Let us understand that we have a problem and need to reduce our carbon output. That is all. How we do that is up to the different systems that will operate within various sectors. Carbon budgets provide a good model for doing that.

The job of the Opposition is to highlight all that is wrong, but when carbon budgets are published it would be welcome if there was a coherent debate. I hope that when Opposition Members see the carbon budgets they do what they say they regularly do regarding financial budgets of the State, namely, put forward alternatives and show us how we get to where we need to be within the timeframe concerned. I see no difference across the debate, except for a small minority of Opposition Members, when I sit on committees. The vast majority of the Members of these Houses recognise the crisis we are facing.

Some do not want a carbon tax. Quite frankly, I would prefer not to have a carbon tax; I would prefer to have no tax. It is a small part of the mix at the moment, but is highlighted as being much greater. It is a bit like corporation tax. The model set out for carbon tax gives certainty to the market. We are going through a significant shock to the energy system. That will come to an end at some point, and we will get back on a regular trajectory, but there needs to be certainty for all of the people who have made investments that in the future the price of oil, gas and fossil fuels will increase based on the damage they cause to the environment, whatever floor eventually comes back when we reach the end of the Ukrainian crisis.

I appeal to all sides to face this debate with honesty. If there is a dispute or difference of opinion, we should be truthful to everybody and come forward with a worked alternative that shows the capacity to reach the targets scientists have identified. All we should be debating is how we should get there. We do not have to get into the hows, wheres or whats, but only how we get there.

Senator John McGahon: I agree with a lot of what Senator Dooley said. He referenced the concept of the average punter. I talk about that a lot in this House. What does the average man or woman on the streets of provincial towns like my town, Dundalk, want to be able to do? We all realise there is a climate crisis and everyone wants to be able to play his or her part, but it is about making it financially viable and easy for people to play their part in moving towards sustainability and dealing with the impact of the climate crisis. That is what we are doing through legislation such as we have.

Carbon budgets are the vehicle we will use to hit our sectoral targets by 2030 and 2050.

They allow people across Irish society, including those involved in business, agriculture or whatever else, to be able to see the level of sectoral emissions they have to get to in order to get to a low-carbon, climate-resilient economy. The same applies to carbon tax.

I sometimes try to think of an analogy, and the one I thought of throughout the week is that it is the equivalent of being in a burning house. The fire brigade comes along to put out the fire, but people tell it there is no need to spray water on the burning house because the fire will go out itself. That is the concept I think of when people say they want to defer the carbon tax, do not want to have a carbon tax at all, are not so sure about sectoral emissions or want to do this or that. The reason we are introducing all of these climate measures across society is to avoid a climate collapse, not today or tomorrow, but for our children, grandchildren and future generations. That is the overarching aspect of this.

It is a debate that is happening in our party at the moment. Some people want to defer the carbon tax, something with which I fundamentally disagree because I believe the money that is raised from a carbon tax goes back into society to help people with the climate crisis. Some 30% of it is going towards social protection, which will increase the fuel allowance by €5. It will also increase the living at home allowance, qualified child payments and the threshold for the working family payment by €10. That is what the carbon tax is going to do when we talk about social protection.

Some 15% of the carbon tax will go towards agriculture. That will include paying people involved in agriculture to help them with schemes to re-wet bogs and replant land. It will provide financial assistance for farmers to engage in more sustainable farming practices. At the Joint Committee on Environment and Climate Action today we discussed retrofitting. Some 55% of the carbon tax will go towards retrofitting, which will provide 100% free energy upgrades to those most at risk of fuel poverty. Those on the lowest incomes in our society will have 100% free energy upgrades. Those who are eligible will have an 80% upgrade. Those who want a full and deep retrofit will be able to avail of a 50% loan. The other 50% will be paid by low-cost loans where the finance is de-risked because the Government is going to put up State money. People will be able to get loans at interest rates of 2% or 3% over ten, 15 or 20 years. That is the benefit of the carbon tax or setting carbon budgets. They get us to where we have to be.

It is not just about providing financial aid to people or getting people into warmer homes so their health can improve and they can save energy. The main reason we are doing all of this is to avoid a climate catastrophe and climate collapse. I would be very reluctant to see a debate on carbon budgets or the carbon tax become a political football year in and year out. For the six years I sat on Louth County Council, I saw the property tax become a political football each year when we discussed whether to increase or decrease it, or keep it the same. The reluctance of politicians to make hard decisions meant property tax in Louth County Council stayed the same for six years and then we did not have money to help people with housing maintenance or upgrade sections of road throughout our county.

I am against playing political football. I am not saying that anybody else is playing political football. I want to be clear about that. I am, however, very against the concept of politicising something as important as carbon tax or carbon budgets when it is the safety of future generations and the very world that is at stake.

Senator Lynn Boylan: I am another member of the Joint Committee on Environment and

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Climate Action who listened intently to all of the discussion around carbon budgets and the climate Act. The Opposition played a very constructive role in improving that Act. One example is the just transition, which was not mentioned once in the original version. While the legislation did not go as far as we wanted, it is certainly an improvement on what was presented and that is what constructive Opposition is all about.

During the conversation on carbon budgets, I listened to all of the experts who presented at the committee. They were stark and brutally honest. The Climate Change Advisory Council told us that, in its view, this was the most ambitious strategy that could be delivered. Independent academics told us the following day that the proposal was not good enough. The tragedy is that they are both right. Even with these ambitious targets that are on the table today, we are taking from the carbon budgets of the global south. That is the truth. However, we also have a responsibility to ensure the communities in which we live are not hurt. I do not believe this Government can deliver on the targets that are in the carbon budgets and do so in a fair, equitable and just manner. There is a big body of work for the Opposition to make sure the situation to which I refer does not happen. We are happy to work with the Government to ensure it does not happen.

I am not optimistic that we will meet our carbon budgets, however. Industry emissions were up 15% last year. I refer to the scale of what needs to be done in order to deliver on those targets. We are always being told we have an enormous opportunity in renewable energy, yet all those who want to get involved in renewable energy, whether from community energy schemes or multinational corporations, are saying that Ireland is seen as a cold house for investment. Why would a firm do business in Ireland when it can go somewhere else and get the job done more quickly? They are telling us the cost of renewables is too high and our planning process is underfunded. I make the point, for the benefit of Fine Gael, that they are not saying we should try to make it more difficult for people to object; what they are saying is that we need a properly funded An Bord Pleanála, as well as dedicated courts to make decisions in a swift and timely manner. For the benefit of those who are calling for environmental NGOs to have their funding cut, those who want to get involved in renewable energy were all saying we need those environmental NGOs to be adequately resourced. We also need the National Parks and Wildlife Service to be adequately resourced so that planning decisions can be sped up. There is no statutory timeframes for decisions taken when it comes to planning. We are one of only two EU countries that do not have a green hydrogen strategy. I know it too is coming.

It seems like the Department is working in silos. The epitome of this is what happened with the climate action delivery board that rests within the Department of An Taoiseach. The Climate Change Advisory Council criticised that delivery board where the buck stops with the Taoiseach. It stated that the climate action delivery board was not meeting during Covid. Rather than taking on board that criticism and rather than the Taoiseach saying he hears the CCAC, there will be no working in silos and the delivery board will fulfil its obligations and address the issues of how we deliver on our carbon budgets and emissions reductions, instead the climate action delivery board revised the terms and conditions under which it does business and renewed the obligation to submit reports to Cabinet.

Sinn Féin supports these carbon budgets. I will admit they do not go far enough, but I do not think they are deliverable because what is lacking is the joined-up approach that is fundamental to ensuring we deliver on the scale that is required. I hope I am wrong when I say that I do not believe it will be delivered in a fair and equitable manner. I do not think just transition is at the heart of climate action in this country but I am hoping to be proved wrong.

Senator Rebecca Moynihan: I thank the Minister of State for coming to the House. I welcome this debate and, in particular, the important move on behalf of the State to move towards carbon budgets. While it is important that the budgets are agreed by the Houses for the next two years, I do see competition coming down the line from various Departments that may seek to offset their carbon emissions by using carbon budgets. I do not want that to happen. Offsetting is greenwashing. Collective and sustained action is what is needed. It would be preferable for the House to come back to discuss those sectoral carbon budgets each year.

I came from a meeting of the housing committee today at which we were specifically considering this issue. I am not sure it has sunk in within that industry how much we need to change in order to meet climate targets, even those in housing. There is a real challenge in meeting our housing targets and the large number of revised targets we should have if we are to meet the housing needs of those fleeing war in Europe. However, planning permissions are still being granted that involve the demolition of perfectly good buildings with materials that could be reused and repurposed to build carbon- and energy-intensive replacements. We need to be considering that. There is real competition in terms of delivering on both housing need and retrofitting. I want to see us achieve both those objectives, but I want that to be done in a way that ensures the housing need of people is put first.

The IPCC report published yesterday is a stark reminder - as it is every year, but particularly so at the moment - that the clear message we are facing is that we cannot delay climate action. The Labour Party does not agree with delaying the carbon tax because it is ring-fenced money to provide programmes such as retrofitting and it is an important tool in fighting climate change. All Members today received wide-ranging and comprehensive correspondence from Friends of the Earth. I wish to focus on recommendation No. 6, which is in the context of the cost-of-living crisis. It is a real shame that carbon tax has got caught up in this crisis because it is a very small proportion of the cost-of-living crisis people are facing. Friends of the Earth states that the Government should set up a just transition commission on a non-statutory basis now to secure a fair and just transition. It states that means a particular focus on retrofitting of social housing and targeting subsidies at those who are most at risk of energy poverty. I know the Department has an Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, study proposing offsetting the carbon tax increases to actually do that. That is why it is unfair that the focus has been on the carbon tax in a very blunt way in the political debate.

We cannot allow the action that is needed for climate change to be open to the populist approach we saw in the context of Covid. We cannot allow climate change deniers to use the crisis we have in energy and gas as an opportunity to spread disinformation about what taking climate action means and the consequences of that. Climate action will be uncomfortable for many but it also has the opportunity to provide new jobs and opportunities for people and, if done correctly, to distribute money raised from carbon tax back to those who need it most. We need to take the learnings from the digital revolution of the past ten years and apply them to climate action. Change is constant but our planet depends on climate action. It cannot become a cause for disharmony, fear and disinformation.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: In the context of discussing supporting or not supporting the carbon budgets, let us be clear that, in fact, the debate is in respect of whether these are the right carbon budgets. Of course, if they are not approved today - I have no doubt they will be approved - the consequence would be that they would be revised.

There are problems with the carbon budgets as currently presented. Reference has been

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made to the need for urgent, intensive and robust action. The carbon budgets as now presented are not robust enough. They fall short. Even NGOs that have reluctantly supported them acknowledge they are not aligned with the Paris Agreement or doing our fair share. Why is it acceptable for Ireland to not do its fair share? We are not the worst-hit country in the world right now, at a time of multiple crises. Why should it be acceptable that we do not do our fair share? The average is 7.6% but, in fact, we should be doing more than that. Not only that, all of the Government parties agreed in the programme for Government to a 7% average per annum reduction but these carbon budgets provide for a 5.7% reduction. The climate crisis has become more urgent in the past two years, so it is hard to see why the level of ambition has been allowed to slip. Let us be clear that it is an inadequate level of reduction.

Some people may be concerned about whether we can meet the targets and how we are going to organise. It does take radical change. This needs to be treated as an emergency. I refer to one of the witnesses who appeared before a recent meeting of the Joint Committee on Environment and Climate Action. I work very constructively with members of that committee. We debate very well the hows, the details, the sectoral emissions and specific policies, and I have no doubt we will continue to do so. However, what we are talking about now is the frame in terms of our ambition up until 2035. That is what is in the report that is being pushed forward, tying the hands of the next couple of Governments, by the way, in their level of ambition. That is what is being put forward.

Frankly, I always enjoy my engagement with the Minister of State, but the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, should be here to tell us how he has considered these matters because it is not visible how he has taken on board, for example, suggestions from the climate committee that there should be a requirement that there is no carry forward beyond 2030 and, indeed, the public consultation. We quote the average punter and the vast majority of the population. Let us not use their names in vain. The public, who care about this issue and are in many ways ahead of the Government and of politics in general on it, made submissions, but those submissions were not published. The report was not published. Unfortunately, when I contacted the Department I was first told that it did not have to publish it and then that it might publish it later. We should know what the public are saying because they can see the crisis. If they are honestly engaged with, they will respond in the same ways.

We have a situation, as the witness said, where we do not have the luxury of a single crisis. We are dealing with famine, an energy crisis and the horrific acts of war and war crimes taking place in Ukraine. The climate crisis is there at the same time. There is the same urgency to cut off Russian oil and gas as there is, from the IPCC report, to cut off all gas and all oil for the future. It is clear that we need to be finding our way out of fossil fuels and the same urgency is needed, but I do not see it in what is put forward.

How has the public consultation influenced the decisions here? Will there be plans for review-----

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Thank you, Senator.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I am sorry, but I have three specific questions for the Minister of State. Will there be plans for a review of the 2025 budget based on the IPCC science which has emerged? Will there be plans relating to the 2030 and 2035 budget in respect of the principles of climate justice?

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Thank you, Senator Higgins.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: It is crucial that we get these answers-----

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I know, and you have put the questions.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: -----because the information has not been provided to us. Do not tell us about the plan, but about why there is this frame and how it is intended to approach this in the future.

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): I thank the Senators for their sincere comments. One Senator asked about the staffing in the National Parks and Wildlife Service. The Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, has managed to double the staffing numbers in the budget for it.

Senator Moynihan asked about building emissions. We have an ambitious national development plan. Naturally, there will be emissions as a result of a large quantity of construction and a large quantity of retrofit activity. There is a great deal of work going into making sure the embodied emissions in that construction are as low as possible while at the same time trying to build housing as fast as possible.

There were questions about how the monitoring of the carbon budgets will happen. There are quarterly monitoring reports under the climate action plan and those are overseen by the Department of the Taoiseach.

On the questions about the level of ambition and whether we are going to meet our obligations under international agreements, the carbon budgets have been prepared with the aim of complying with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, UNFCCC, and the Paris Agreement. Regarding the public consultation, which was completed in February, the results were collated and edited and I have asked the civil servants to have them published as soon as possible. The results of that consultation were used to inform the Minister.

In addition, I thank all the members of the committee, including those present. I read the committee's report and I have the recommendations with me here. I note the first recommendation, in particular, which is that the carbon budgets as proposed by the Climate Change Advisory Council be adopted by the Houses.

I stress the enormous importance of passing the motion to approve the proposed carbon budgets to enable us to meet our ambitious national climate objective and our international emissions obligations. The science is clear and definitive on the need for urgent action. The negative effects of climate change are already being experienced globally, and they will continue to increase exponentially in magnitude and volatility along with global temperatures. The joint committee report on the proposed carbon budgets recommended that the carbon budgets proposed by the Climate Change Advisory Council be adopted by the Houses. Following an extensive review and consultation process, the proposed carbon budgets have now received Cabinet approval. The carbon budgets will support and underline the ambitious commitments made in the Climate Action Plan 2021 and will provide a stable foundation on which we can build the future iterations of the plan in 2022 and in each year up to 2030.

The proposed carbon budget programme provides Ireland with a strong and deliverable framework for meeting our national climate objectives and our international obligations to cli-

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mate action and emissions reduction. Moreover, the programme will allow for the development and implementation of the sectoral emissions ceilings. The process to prepare and implement these ceilings will include consultation with the relevant Ministers and technical input from the climate action modelling group, as well as additional analytical support from other technical support providers. These ceilings will be within the parameters set out in the carbon budgets and they will be reflected in the next climate action plan. The budgets and sectoral ceilings will replace the indicative ranges for sectoral emissions reductions that are currently in place for the 2021 version of the plan. Furthermore, the next version of the plan will be subject to its own review and consultation process, including a public consultation, and the results of that will be published.

As I mentioned earlier, a considerable level of co-operation and co-ordination will be required to ensure we can achieve these budgets, but I believe we have the capacity, commitment and determination to do this. As we transition away from fossil fuels and progressively decarbonise, we must ensure the way we decarbonise captures this unique opportunity to improve the quality of life for all. It is important to note also that the transition to a carbon-neutral economy will provide massive opportunities to foster innovation, to create new jobs and to grow businesses in areas such offshore wind, cutting-edge sustainable agriculture and low-carbon construction. While we all must act together towards our climate objective, I realise the costs of climate action will be more acutely felt by some than by others. The Government is committed to protecting those who are most vulnerable and to ensuring a just transition to a low-carbon economy.

I stress that the carbon budget programme is an important milestone in our efforts to tackle climate change. It represents a significant step on the trajectory towards the transition to a climate-resilient, biodiversity-rich, environmentally sustainable and climate-neutral economy by 2050. I again thank Senators on all sides of the House for their contributions.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Thank you. I welcome the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Eamon Ryan, to the Visitors Gallery.

Question put and declared carried.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 5.58 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 7.01 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 5.58 p.m. and resumed at 7.01 p.m.

Tourism: Statements

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): I welcome the opportunity to address the Seanad this evening to speak on tourism.

Sular bhuail ráig Covid-19 an domhan bhí turasóireacht ar cheann de na hearnálacha ba mhó agus ba thapúla fás sa gheilleagar domhanda agus chuir sí go mór le cúrsaí eacnamaíocha agus sóisialta in go leor tíortha, cathracha agus réigiún. Tourism has proven to be a vital industry in Ireland that sustains communities and drives regional development in a manner that other sectors cannot match. Apart from its economic value, tourism also plays an important role in promoting Ireland's image abroad, generating a positive impression of Irish people, our land-

scape and culture for our visitors.

The tourism landscape has changed drastically in the past two years. The outbreak and spread of Covid-19 have had a devastating impact on the tourism industry in Ireland and across the world. The pandemic struck Irish tourism towards the end of the first quarter of 2020 by which stage only 10% to 15% of annual overseas spending would have accrued. After the first quarter, there was a collapse in overseas travel and the OECD estimates that international tourism worldwide fell by 80% overall that year.

During this time, the Government committed to providing supports for the sectors worst affected by the crisis, including tourism. A tourism recovery task force was established in May 2020 and delivered a tourism recovery plan with recommendations on how best the Irish tourism sector could adapt and recover in a changed tourism environment. Later that year, I appointed a recovery oversight group to oversee the implementation of this plan. This group has reported regularly to me and has provided valuable inputs to the Government on the measures required to assist the sector. The recovery oversight group is continuing its work and will continue to report with updates on the implementation of the recovery plan and recovery in the sector more generally.

In 2020, more than €44 million was allocated to deliver business continuity supports and adaptation grants for the tourism sector to adapt premises to meet Covid-19 safety requirements. In 2021, we saw a short and successful summer season from a domestic tourism point of view, but given the consequential and necessary public health measures that were put in place, many of the jobs supported by tourism were either lost or their survival hinged on State support. A full recovery in the sector was further hampered by the fact that inbound overseas tourism could not fully recommence.

In budget 2021, I secured a record level of funding for tourism overall that included €55 million for a dedicated tourism business continuity scheme to help strategic tourism businesses survive the pandemic and drive recovery. This funding was supplemented by the outdoor dining scheme 2021 and the urban animation scheme 2021, which allowed Fáilte Ireland to deliver a number of targeted capital grant schemes to help tourism businesses adapt to the changed operating environment.

A further €50 million was secured from budget 2022 for additional business continuity supports and a €35 million increase to the tourism marketing fund to support the delivery of a marketing strategy to help restore inbound tourism to Ireland. This current investment is complemented by significant capital investment and I was very pleased to have been able to secure a large capital allocation of €36.5 million to Fáilte Ireland for tourism product development in budget 2022. I am continuing to engage closely with the wider tourism and hospitality sector, in close consultation with the Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland.

Throughout the pandemic, tourism enterprises have also benefited from wider horizontal supports such as the employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS, the Covid restrictions support scheme, CRSS, restart grants, the €2 billion Covid-19 credit guarantee scheme and the €16 million support package for pubs, bars and nightclubs, as well as the warehousing of tax liabilities. There is no doubt that the past two years have proven to be extremely difficult for all involved in tourism but hopefully the worst effects of the pandemic are behind us. While the outlook is certainly better now, we must remain conscious of the further challenges that lie ahead. Like many sectors of the economy, recruitment is a significant challenge for the tourism and hospitality

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sectors, with up to two thirds of businesses reporting reduced capacity due to staff shortages. My Department and Fáilte Ireland have been collaborating with industry and other Departments to ensure that there is a co-ordinated approach to addressing the labour and skills shortages.

In February, Fáilte Ireland published its most comprehensive research to date on the tourism and hospitality labour market. This robust and wide-ranging research programme covers the views of 1,000 employers and 3,500 workers with tourism and hospitality experience as well as international benchmarking, a review of education provision and consultation with recruitment agencies. This research is shaping Fáilte Ireland's work programmes for this year which will focus on providing support to the industry to address the immediate labour and skills supply challenges which will be critical to the short-term recovery of the sector; supporting businesses and the wider industry to work together to drive the long-term repositioning of the industry as an appealing and rewarding career choice and workplace, and ensuring a future pipeline of talent; and building the capability of individual employees to help businesses to bridge the skills gaps they are experiencing and also drive greater employee retention by improving the quality of training across the business.

Fáilte Ireland also chairs the tourism and hospitality careers oversight group, which will continue to work closely with industry bodies, education providers and other Government bodies to support sustainable employment in the tourism sector with an immediate focus on recruitment and retention initiatives, as well as focusing on the long-term repositioning of the industry as a career choice.

The tragic events in Ukraine also have the potential to impede the recovery of overseas tourism to Ireland. The recent spike in oil prices and rising inflation are making accommodation and transport services more expensive, adding extra pressure on businesses, consumer purchasing power and savings. It is important to remember, however, that our research tells us that Ireland's reputation as a safe, friendly and welcoming country will be a valuable asset in the short, medium and long term.

With specific regard to the ensuing refugee crisis, Ireland has welcomed more than 18,000 Ukrainian refugees to date. Planning and preparatory work is being ramped up across government to provide supports to those who have arrived here already, as well as the large numbers of further people expected to arrive. My Department and Fáilte Ireland are continuing to work with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to identify longer term accommodation options beyond the hotel sector.

As Senators know, President Zelenskyy will address this House and the Dáil tomorrow morning. I look forward to hearing his historic address and I have no doubt that Irish people will continue to play their part in the humanitarian response to this horrific and unjust war. Ireland firmly stands in solidarity with Ukraine and the Ukrainian people.

As we enter the recovery phase for tourism, the competition globally to attract tourists will be more challenging than ever and I am more than confident that Tourism Ireland is equally equipped for and up for the challenge. To this end, Tourism Ireland has started to roll out the green carpet and welcome back international visitors as they work to encourage as many overseas holidaymakers as possible to book Ireland for their next holiday destination. The concept revolves around creating a commitment to travel, by pressing the "Green Button" - green being the universal colour signifying "go" and instinctively connected with the island of Ireland. I was happy to help Tourism Ireland launch this new Green Button campaign in the United King-

dom, the United States and the United Arab Emirates in recent months when I travelled to all three markets to engage with our industry partners and reassure them that Ireland was open and waiting to welcome back visitors. During those trade missions, I saw at first-hand the excellent work undertaken by Tourism Ireland in highlighting Ireland's world-class tourism experience to international tour operators.

The importance of tourism to the economy on both sides of the Border and the clear logic in taking a joint approach to the promotion and development of the sector led to tourism being one of the areas chosen for formal North-South co-operation, through the structures created by the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. That co-operation has been hugely beneficial, with the tourism sector now an exemplar of what can be achieved when we work together on this island with a shared purpose and for clear mutual benefit.

In January, I took part in a shared island dialogue event hosted by the Department of An Taoiseach, which focused on all-island tourism. More than 160 tourism and civil society stakeholders from across the island joined the event online to discuss the success of tourism co-operation on the island of Ireland over the past 20 years, and explore how best to enhance opportunities for domestic and international visitors in the years ahead. Over the course of the dialogue a number of key themes emerged, including the opportunity for greater alignment and linkages between tourism initiatives on the island, and further developing on a cross-Border basis the on-island tourism that has grown in response to the pandemic travel restrictions.

My Department will continue to work with the Department of An Taoiseach on implementing our commitments to the North-South development of tourism as included in the shared island chapter of the renewed national development plan. This includes supporting Tourism Ireland in its mission to grow tourism into the island of Ireland; promoting the recovery of the sector post pandemic; and working with the Northern Ireland Executive, when it is restored, on developing large scale North-South tourism initiatives which will support the sustainable growth of the sector, including cross-Border walking and cycling trails, as well as new marketing opportunities.

As part of its marketing strategy this year, Tourism Ireland has established a recovery framework which will be underpinned by an extensive programme of promotional activity throughout 2022. The organisation has a flexible, three-phase plan to restart, rebuild and, ultimately, redesign demand. Over €80 million will be invested in the programme in 2022, which will allow Tourism Ireland to ramp up its campaigns in key international markets.

Fáilte Ireland is doubling its domestic marketing investment in 2022 to drive domestic demand, including short breaks all year round. In that regard, it has embarked on extensive marketing and communications campaigns, including its Keep Discovering campaign, which continues to encourage domestic holidaymakers to take vacations in Ireland, particularly during quieter shoulder seasons.

With specific regard to capital investment, I look forward to seeing the delivery of projects that will support a sustainable tourism sector from an environmental, social and economic perspective. The new NDP provides for the delivery of enhanced amenity through investment in tourism product development. Priority areas for tourism capital investment include the development and enhancement of tourist attractions, and activity-based tourism, to provide the type and quality of experience that visitors seek.

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Air access is a good measure of recovery and an indicator of future international tourism demand. As things currently stand, inbound air access from almost all overseas tourism markets is back close to where it stood pre pandemic. Last week, I visited Meitheal in Killarney, Ireland's biggest business-to-business international travel trade fair, and witnessed firsthand the pent-up demand in the inbound tourism sector. Closer to home domestic tourism is set to return to pre-pandemic levels this year.

As we begin to regrow our tourism sector, it has never been more important that we ensure the sector's future development is based on a sustainable and balanced approach. Environmental protection, economic competitiveness, community and visitor awareness and involvement all play a part in successfully achieving and benefiting from this approach. Both public bodies and private enterprises must continue to ensure that these principles are central to our tourism offering in order to maximise the future competitiveness of Ireland as a leading sustainable tourism destination.

Late last year I brought to Government a report developed by the Sustainable Tourism Working Group that identifies key actions that will promote sustainable tourism practices in the short term. This year our tourism agencies will focus on the delivery of this interim action plan which will enhance evidence-based decision-making for effective reduction of the tourism carbon footprint. The successful implementation of this plan will lay the foundations for a green transition of the tourism industry, and our destinations by providing better access to information and tools for visitors to practise responsible tourism and give tourism businesses and destinations the ability to measure the impact that tourism has on the environment.

In line with the programme for Government commitments, officials in my Department have commenced the development of a new national tourism policy that will seek to mainstream sustainability. The development of this new policy will involve consultation to help set out a path for the coming years, which will support a sustainable recovery and enhance the resilience of this vital sector. It is clear that the traditional model of tourism is changing. The development of this new national tourism policy gives us an opportunity to set out what type of tourism sector we want in the years ahead. Overall, we are returning to a good place with tourism in Ireland. The outlook has changed considerably after some very difficult times over the last two years. While I am conscious of the further challenges we face, I am confident that, with the ongoing support of Government, we will regrow and reshape our tourism ecosystem in a smart way that will ensure resilience and sustainability as tourism reinforces itself once again as one of our most important indigenous economic sectors.

Gabhaim buíochas leis na Seanadóirí as a gcuid ama inniu. Ba mhaith liom mo thiomantas do chur chun cinn an chláir oibre turasóireachta inbhuanaithe a athdhearbhú agus táim ag tnúth le haistriú glas ár n-earnáil agus ár n-áiteanna turasóireachta.

Senator Róisín Garvey: I congratulate the Minister on today's announcement of the pilot project for musicians and artists because music is a huge part of tourism in County Clare.

First, I will cite the definition of sustainable tourism: "Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities." I know that the following is before the Minister's time but, and I mean no offence to Fáilte Ireland, it has not always dealt properly with host communities. I remember that the national regulator, at a cycling conference, said that for one of the greenways that was promoted, sold and funded by Fáilte Ireland it had to ret-

respectively build connections and routes to local schools and villages. Fáilte Ireland had been so focused on getting tourists across a certain section that it forgot to include local communities

We still have a bit of work to do in tourism. The *Lonely Planet* guide says that the Burren eco-tourism network in County Clare has transformed Ireland's Burren and Cliffs of Moher Geopark into a global leader in sustainable tourism, which is brilliant. It is a great organisation and the work is done by a lot of volunteers. The Minister has visited the place and praised the staff but the new Cliffs of Moher plan puts cars and buses first. The plan seeks to bring bus services that only serve tourists and transports them from a village or town to the cliffs and back. In fact, a loop service would be much more sustainable and would include villages in north County Clare. If we are going to embrace communities as part of our success then one needs to analyse the proposed transport. A shuttle service that only travels to and from a venue means tourists will just go to the venue whereas a loop service will give tourists an opportunity to visit local villages, spend some money there and then go on to see the cliffs. At present 1.2 million people visit the Cliffs of Moher and it is hoped that the number will increase to 2 million but a lot of tourists are bused in and out so the local economy does not benefit. The county council owns the site but I would like to see the local villages thrive. If 1.2 million people visit an area then that should be reflected in all of the surrounding villages so the new plan must be adjusted. At the front of the plan is a proposal for more parking for coaches and cars with a 0.5 km expansion on either side of the Cliffs of Moher, which is the walking route. There is an amazing walking route that stretches from Liscannor to Doolin but it has been neglected apart from a small section at the cliffs. Such treatment of a walk is not best practice if we are serious about having sustainable tourism. The plan is to create walking and cycling routes in order that people can get to the cliffs but the plan is very vague. I thought that the initiative would have been front-ended if we were serious about creating sustainable tourism. We must place a stronger emphasis on such tourism. Most people say that they come to Ireland for its people but the reason tourists return is because they have met our people. If one has a tourism model where tourists can simply kiss the Blarney Stone or visit the cliffs then tourists may not return; we must consider this.

In the programme for Government, under the heading of Reigniting and Renewing the Economy, and tourism, the following statements are made: "work to ensure that ferry companies provide access for foot passengers without cars"; "as an island, we depend on connectivity in our tourism sector"; and "we recognise the huge value of our maritime and aviation sectors in supporting economic development, international connectivity and tourism via our ports and airports". I have emailed the ferry companies and British Ferries replied saying there is no way that it will let foot passengers on its ferries. I got very excited when British Ferries launched its new service to Bilbao because I thought I could travel guilt free with the possibility of getting on a ferry here and getting off in Bilbao. A ferry service would give me another option outside of flying. Sometimes it is good for us all to leave the island but I like to do so in a sustainable fashion. British Ferries, in its reply to me, said the company has no intention of ever carrying foot passengers on its ferry. I know that British Ferries is a private company but we have a climate emergency and every enterprise be it private or public will have to play their part and seek carbon reductions. I realise that we have some work to do around that aspect.

It is good that the Minister has established a sustainable tourism working group but she cannot keep an eye on everything. We must have clear targets because one often sees the suggestion to put the word "sustainable" into everything. I will give an example. I have read the report on the Cliffs of Moher. On paper the report sounds brilliant but it is very vague on com-

mitments to reduce dependence on cars and has one-hit wonders with a bus in and out of the place. We have work to do. I would push back against Fáilte Ireland. It is great at encouraging tourism but it is not great at ensuring communities benefit from it. That is something we have to get right if we are serious about sustainable tourism in Ireland. It is what people come to this country for. They want to meet the people.

Senator Sharon Keogan: The Minister is most welcome to the Chamber. As we come into the summer months, the high season for tourism, a €9.5 billion industry, it is essential we examine the unique challenges facing the sector and that Government and stakeholders cooperate in addressing them. As we continue to take in refugees who are fleeing the conflict in Ukraine, the need for long-term housing solutions will only become more pressing. We must rehouse families in the interests of their mental health and physical well-being. At the moment, hundreds of Ukrainians are simply being deposited in hotels, many of them having no idea of the services available to them or of the pathways towards further integration into life here with regard to schools, medical services and employment. There is a secondary concern from the perspective of the tourism industry in Ireland. The use of these hotel spaces by tourists boosts the economy and their rental by Government dampens it. More hotel rooms being available means greater capacity for tourists. The transition of refugees and asylum seekers from private hotels to more sustainable long-term accommodation is of double benefit.

Of course, before any would-be tourists find themselves at the front desk in a hotel lobby, they will most likely have had to navigate Dublin Airport, which seems to be operating as some form of lobster pot at the moment. You can get into the country all right but you will need good luck to get out. As airlines have begun rolling out their packed summer flight schedules, passengers have been reporting delays of more than three hours to get through security, with flights being missed altogether due to the backlog. With voluntary redundancies, Covid-related work absences and changes to security screening processes at a European level, the Dublin Airport Authority, DAA, has said these conditions are the result of a perfect storm. However, more can certainly be done to alleviate pressure on this key part of the system. The DAA must examine pay and conditions to attract more security workers.

Staffing issues are, of course, not limited to the area of international travel. As many as nine out of ten hospitality businesses are experiencing significant problems in recruiting essential core staff according to the latest figures from Fáilte Ireland. From chefs to bar staff, managers and kitchen porters, there are as many as 40,000 vacancies across the hospitality sector. Covid lockdowns and the inability to do business during them led to the closure of many establishments but also led to the flight of many skilled hospitality workers who may have left the country to work elsewhere or entered a different field to avail of remote working opportunities. Many restaurants and hotels have started to look abroad for staff, but venturing outside of the EU brings with it the nightmare of international work visa applications, which puts many off.

As a sector, hospitality has become more competitive in its wages to attract workers. This is to be welcomed but it cannot come at the risk of putting smaller businesses under. The Government must look at what it can do to lend a hand in this regard. One area to consider is the fast-tracking of Irish work visas for the chefs and key hospitality workers required by our businesses.

To take a step back and look at areas of interest in the sector in the long term, the years to come will be marked by sustainable initiatives which must penetrate to the very core of the operation of tourism and hospitality in this country. Not only will such changes be necessary to

meet climate change targets, but tourists and consumers are becoming increasingly aware and conscious of the impact of their lifestyles on the environment and will ever more so prioritise businesses that are at the forefront in integrating sustainable practices into their operations. From buying and cooking local to partnering with the right producers and taking measures on waste management and energy efficiency, small steps in every area of business will be essential if progress is to continue.

As well as the day-to-day operations of hospitality venues, businesses must also examine how business tourism and events can affect change. The meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions, MICE, industry forms a lucrative part of the tourism industry in Ireland. Every day, dozens of events take place throughout the country, many of which generate substantial environmental impacts. Event organisers and host venues must collaborate to reduce these impacts, where possible. The elimination of single-use plastics in favour of reusable or recyclable alternatives is to be encouraged. Energy and water consumption must be handled strategically to avoid waste. The minimisation of light and noise pollution should become an industry standard, particularly for outdoor events as we move into the summer months.

Overall, I am hopeful for the future of tourism in Ireland. I believe the challenges facing the sector will not prove impossible to overcome and that, if we act together, our reputation as a top-quality destination for international tourism will continue for years to come.

Senator Shane Cassells: I welcome the Minister and thank her for the details she has outlined in respect of the tourism sector. One of the phrases she used towards the end was the “tourism ecosystem”. She spoke about making sure we protect and grow that. It is a great phrase. It is something that has really grown over the past 20 to 30 years. When I started out in political life back in 1999 as a young councillor, one of my first appointments was as director of Meath Tourism. Back then, the CEO, Ms Bríd O’Connell, always passionately drove home to us the need for local and national government to back tourism in a very real way, beyond Dublin and Kerry, knowing the value it has for our economy, our brand and regional development in particular. Since then, that whole tourism ecosystem has grown substantially beyond the main tourism areas to places like Meath, which 20 years ago did not have that vibrancy. It had all of the key components with regard to its history and what it was able to offer to tourists, but it did not have the infrastructure because there was a lack of focus. Such focus has evolved over the past 20 years. Money is now generated, as the Minister has said, and 260,000 people are employed, with 70% of those employed outside of Dublin. The sector is worth €7 billion in direct spend to our economy, which is significant.

The sector has also come under pressure. In the Irish Tourist Industry Confederation’s spring report, it is said that the industry has “been scarred by the experience of the pandemic”, which is very evocative. However, it also says it is confident of rebounding in full this year and compliments the supports provided to the sector by Government and the Minister’s Department. The confederation spoke, as did the Minister, about the likelihood of international tourist numbers returning to 70% or 80% of the pre-pandemic figure for this particular summer, and it welcomed the Government’s €93 million fund for airports to incentivise airlines to reinstate services. Notwithstanding all of what has been said about negative experiences, I am hopeful the issue facing outbound tourists from this country will be resolved.

The staffing issue that has been touched on is quite significant. I remember when we had a debate on this same matter last year. Prior to coming into the Chamber, Noel Anderson, who represents the licensed trade here in Dublin and who is very well known to us all as managing

director of Lemon and Duke and the restaurant Bridge 1859 in Ballsbridge, spoke about how he had lost top-quality chefs to the haulage industry despite him being a very good employer. The skills shortage has come about as a result of such exits. I note the language the Minister used in her speech with regard to providing support to the industry to address the immediate labour and skills supply challenge. I ask that, in her summation, she expand on that support and the form it is taking. It is a profession that has provided great employment. Before I fell into the debauchery of political life, I had considered applying for a course in hotel management through the CAO. Instead, I fell into this very fine profession. I know from my time as a student working in the hospitality sector that it is something every single young person should experience to provide them with life skills beyond the course they themselves choose. There is, however, a very real fear that this summer the hotel industry will be under severe pressure because of the skills shortage. The Minister can only help and work with Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland in providing long-term solutions, but there is a very real fear in the here and now.

I know that the hospitality sector, a key component of the tourism sector as a whole, has made representations in respect of supports for the sector. Has the Minister considered that in advance of this summer in conjunction with the Minister, Deputy Michael McGrath, or anyone else? The sector was very significantly hit during the most recent lockdown.

I commend the Minister and the Department on all that has been done. As I said, the federation says it is confident of a very good summer ahead for this sector. I hope that comes to fruition. I ask the Minister to address in her summation the employment element. That would be very helpful.

Senator Micheál Carrigy: The Minister is very welcome. I compliment her on the work she has done in her Department. It is probably the busiest Government Department, but I compliment her on the way her Department has reacted and provided supports for the industry. I am chairman of County Longford tourism committee and have been since I went into local government ten years ago. I compliment the Hidden Heartlands team within Fáilte Ireland. I was involved in pushing for a dedicated brand for the midlands. The local Hidden Heartlands team, including Paddy Matthews and Grainne Cornally, work with us in Longford and do an excellent job promoting our region.

The Minister mentioned in her statement the difficulty finding staff. We will discuss that at Oireachtas joint committee level tomorrow, when I think we will have Paul Kelly from Fáilte Ireland and other representatives before us. We have spoken to Center Parcs, which is the largest product of its kind in the country and is trading very successfully in my county. It is attracting staff; the problem now is getting accommodation for those people. There are people willing to come from abroad to work in the industry but they cannot get accommodation. That has proven to be a difficult issue for them.

Fáilte Ireland recently undertook a survey on the industry that showed that the proportion of consumers taking short trips during 2021 was 54%, slightly below the 2019 mark of 57%. Some 49% intended to travel within Ireland for a short break and 18% intended to travel for a long break. That is strong for the market, but there is an issue with passports, which every one of us will have seen in our offices. The reality is that there has been a huge surge in the number of people looking to travel abroad. That will have a significant impact on our industry at home and particularly on families. That is what I have noticed. A great many of the people looking for passports are young families looking to travel abroad. The Minister mentioned in her statement the domestic campaign. I have not seen that campaign in recent weeks as strongly as it

was seen during the summer. We have to get that campaign up and running now to perhaps get people to change their habits and their thinking as to what trip they are planning and, it is to be hoped, to get them to stay in Ireland. I looked up the CSO figures for inbound travel into Ireland in February 2022. The total number of passengers was 787,000. Broken down, there were 408,000 continental passengers, 319,000 from the UK, 38,000 from the USA and 28,000 long-haul. That is 35% down on the figure for February 2020. If that follows through the year, we will be looking at roughly a 35% reduction in the inbound numbers of people coming into the country. That is why it is important we advocate that Irish people holiday at home as strongly as we did during Covid. I have not seen that campaign as actively as we saw it last year. That needs to be started straight away to get people to make different decisions and get them not to travel abroad but rather make them stay in Ireland and support the industry.

I am in favour of retaining the 9% VAT rate, which the Tánaiste spoke about recently. In light of the predicted figures for the year ahead, it is important we set out a clear statement to the industry that we will support it and support that 9% rate for at least another 12 months.

I am a member of the Oireachtas Committee on Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport and Media. We have met with various people from the industry. There is an issue in that Fáilte Ireland has on occasion said it represents not hospitality but tourism. We need to send out a strong statement that Fáilte Ireland represents the tourism and hospitality sector. There are positions on the board of Fáilte Ireland that are not filled at present. Will the Minister make sure that people are appointed to them? Applications to those positions are open, but I ask the Minister to ensure that one of those positions be filled by someone from the hospitality sector and the pubs and restaurants and that all areas of tourism and hospitality are represented on the board of Fáilte Ireland.

Once again, I thank the Minister for the work her Department has done in supporting tourism. I look forward to hearing her comments on the 9% VAT rate and having a hospitality sector representative on the board of Fáilte Ireland.

Senator Fintan Warfield: I welcome the Minister to the House. I appreciate her time here, given the six portfolios she has to her name. I was delighted to see Tourism Ireland invite over the directly elected mayors of greater Manchester and Liverpool city. It is great to see the link-up between Ireland and those cities so close to us. It is welcome that the night-time economy was a feature of those discussions. I know that Sacha Lord, the night-time economy advisor for greater Manchester, was here, invited by Tourism Ireland, and was part of a delegation on the night-time economy. I appreciate the reports at the weekend but I will await announcements by the Ministers involved on what exactly the new licensing reform or regime will look like.

Nightclubs deserve their own licence. We need to recognise nightclubs as culture and entertainment. They should not be locked into a pub licensing system as an add-on. If that is the case, nightclubs will be forced into a pub licensing system that is crippling financially and no one will open any new nightclubs. There were 522 nightclubs in 2000, and now there are 85. There are no big-room clubs in this city for 1,000 people or 1,200 people. The kinds of events in Manchester to which people, including me and friends of mine, travel are those held near Manchester Piccadilly station or those held by the Warehouse Project. In this city we had Tripod, at the top of Harcourt Street, which could hold 2,000 people. It is now gone, replaced with vacant lots. If we hold a mirror up to Dublin, are we attracting enough footfall at night? Are enough people travelling for weekend trips for gigs, concerts and festivals? Are we using our spaces into the night? The city is stripped of venues. Insurance costs are hurting businesses,

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and licensing laws, as most people now accept, are archaic. It is not an easy business environment in which to survive. I think that is why people my age, for example, rather than creating events and festivals, are opening venues and cafés instead.

I have some statistics as to how cities depend on the quality of their nightlife as part of their visitor attraction. The inbound spend in Dublin in 2016 was €9.2 billion. Nightclubs identified 4,500 full-time equivalent jobs nationwide. The music industry, which is built on live performance and the availability of venues and audiences, contributes €703 million to the economy. The wider arts sector, so much of which is experienced at night, had a gross value added of €1.5 billion in 2010.

The Minister has played her part in this area, particularly with a step change in respect of Government policy, but I want to see the Government take on a more active role in securing spaces in this city. We need a large flagship venue for club nights or gigs and music venues. I am talking about a venue with a capacity of 2,000 or 3,000. There must be loads of spaces in this city not being used. The Minister has an input when she talks to businesses at events in places like the Digital Hub and Guinness. What about the National Concert Hall and the capital plan for contemporary gigs, conferences and club nights there? There is a shortage of these venues, and the State should step in. The Minister's input in identifying and securing spaces would be considerable and transformative.

Has the Minister considered new theatre licences? Has she spoken to the Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee, about them? Can we return to the old position on theatre licences? There were fewer than 100 theatre licences at the time the arrangement was changed. The number is minimal by comparison with the 11,000 alcohol licences in this country. Could we examine the licensing regime again? With regard to a specific nightclub licence, the uptake will not be huge. Importantly, however, a specific nightclub licence has the potential to be fit for purpose and workable. It would remove the barriers to entry that exist in terms of the pub licence.

Senator Mark Wall: I, too, welcome the Minister to the House. There can be no doubt that the Irish tourism industry has gone through a devastating time. Covid-19 has had a profound impact on all sectors of it. In the past month or so, Fáilte Ireland presented the most comprehensive and robust research undertaken to date on staffing and skills in the tourism and hospitality sector. Thirty percent of businesses surveyed said they could face closure if recruitment challenges are not resolved. Fáilte Ireland's CEO, Mr. Paul Kelly, warned that staffing and competitiveness are the two most significant challenges facing the recovery of tourism in 2022. The pandemic has had a profound impact on the industry's skill base, with a mass exodus into industries that reopened earlier, according to Mr. Kelly. Mr. Kelly went on to say that plans, which we have set out today, aim to continue to drive domestic demand. These involve a €10 million domestic marketing investment to promote short breaks all year round, as the Minister mentioned.

Looking to the season ahead, Mr. Kelly said he expected a strong recovery, which is good news for everybody involved in inbound tourism, with forecasts indicating that 83% of the 2019 air passenger capacity will be regained by the end of the year. Other priorities to support the recovery of the tourism industry were also outlined on the day. Included are a digital audit of over 800 hotels and the development and implementation of four regional tourism strategies. These concern the Wild Atlantic Way, Ireland's Ancient East, Ireland's Hidden Heartlands and Dublin. There are 27 localised destination-development plans, which will be critical to delivering and driving the long-term recovery of tourism across Ireland.

I have spoken to many publicans and hotel owners over the past two years. Particularly in my conversations over recent weeks, I noted the owners are very glad just to be open again. I am sure many Senators are hearing this in their conversations with the owners. The problem is recruitment, however. As the Minister mentioned in her speech, many pubs and restaurants are unable to open entirely or in part because they cannot get the personnel to do so. The Minister mentioned in her speech that she is working with the industry to train staff and identify new ways to help with recruitment. I ask her to continue in that regard. It is vital to the future of the Irish tourism sector. I know of local businesses that are not in a position to reopen because of the lack of staff.

I also want to mention section 254 licences, particularly concerning my county, Kildare. They have made a difference. I would like to know where they stand in the Minister's plans as we move forward. They have made a difference and can change the streetscapes of many of our towns and villages. Again, the Government should continue to support this.

An important issue raised with me almost weekly as we enter the summer months concerns mobile food outlets. They are a new part of tourism in Ireland. Many of them are coming up against bylaws and problems with local authorities. Maybe the Minister has some direction for them concerning how they can play their part in tourism. I am aware that mobile food outlets can play a part in attracting tourists to many hard-to-get places, such as forests and mountains, and in maintaining these attractions. However, they are having a lot of difficulty in getting past the bylaws of local authorities. Maybe the Minister could investigate this.

I join my colleague Senator Warfield in welcoming the discussion on the night-time economy and the later opening hours, to 6 a.m. However, any arrangement introduced would have to be matched with workers' rights and pay. I am sure we will discuss this further in the coming weeks and months.

It would be remiss of me not to talk about County Kildare when I get the opportunity to talk about tourism. I am aware that the Minister launched the strategic plan for tourism in Killeen Castle last November. My colleagues from County Kildare and I joined her there. The plan outlines a vision for Kildare as a rural escape from the bustle of the city. Never a truer word could be said considering Kildare's exceptional thoroughbred experience, warm welcome and rich culture.

I want to mention two projects in which I am personally involved. The first is the Shackleton Museum in Athy. Given the recent discovery of the *Endurance*, Shackleton's ship, the Government should continue to support the project. Kildare County Council is actively involved in this regard. With the renewed interest in polar exploration, the project could put not only Athy and Kildare on the map but also Ireland. I hope the project is one that Kildare County Council and the Government can continue to support.

The second project is the Barrow blueway, which is only half finished. I hope the Minister will come down to open it when it is eventually finished, which, according to a recent reply I received, will be at the end of this year.

As always, Kildare is open for business. We hope to invite as many people as possible to the best county in Ireland and see them there.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: We move from one Lilywhite to another Lilywhite.

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The Minister is very welcome. I commend her on her announcement this morning of the living wage scheme for artists, artistes and musicians — so many wonderful people whose talent brings so many people to our shores. We will be able to use them to sell and support tourism internationally. The announcement was a revolutionary move. I really congratulate the Minister on it. It has been wonderful to go back to see live theatre recently. I had the opportunity to go to both the Abbey Theatre and my local theatre, the Riverbank Theatre, to see wonderful performances on stage.

The Minister mentioned Ukraine in her opening statement. The Abbey Theatre is having a concert for Ukraine on Sunday night, organised by Denise and Angie Gough. All proceeds are going to support the Ukrainians here.

This is a really important discussion because it recognises the significance of tourism in our country and its potential to support businesses. Tourism, as we know, is an important contributor to job creation. It makes a very positive impact in areas in terms of jobs. Even being a tourist in one's own town or country is significant, as many of us would have learned over the past two years.

The issue of VAT has been raised. It is important that VAT remain at 9% in the industry, if possible. While the supports the Minister spearheaded at Government level were very welcome, significant and important, this is a difficult time. We need further investment to support the whole tourism industry.

With regard to County Kildare, I thank the Minister for taking up the invitation to launch the strategy last November. It is a very exciting strategy. The Minister will have noted at first hand the enthusiasm of Into Kildare and the very many stakeholders in the business.

I was reared on Fionn Mac Cumhaill. Many of us are very familiar with the legend of Fionn Mac Cumhaill and that of the Fianna. The Fianna were probably the first to have people had races on the Curragh. Racing is still growing by way of the Thoroughbred County initiative and Kildare's three racecourses. I was speaking earlier today to Mr. David Mongey, the chairman of Into Kildare, and he told me that the Punchestown festival at the end of April is practically sold out. Thirty-two percent of the bookings, or almost one third, are from the UK. It is wonderful to see people coming back to Ireland for festivals. One can imagine what it means to the local economy and that in Dublin in terms of accommodation, meals, etc. One can imagine what that means to the local economy and the economy in Dublin in terms of accommodation, meals, etc.

I would also like to give a shout out to the blueway and greenway. They will be incredibly important in opening the smaller areas of Kildare, such as Robertstown, Rathangan, Monasterevin and on into Athy. It will give so many local businesses an opportunity to develop and expand. Of course, as my esteemed colleague mentioned Shackleton, when we look at international tourism, Shackleton will be key in Kildare. The only one who can overcome Shackleton is Brigid. I know the Minister is a supporter and fan of Brigid. It is fantastic that we will have the first bank holiday next year. There are many opportunities to be able to expand on that as a key tourism point, not just for Kildare, but for the country.

For the past two years, we have had the Hill of Allen lit up in white on the eve of St. Brigid, which symbolises the start of spring as well. There is a plan from Into Kildare to expand that around the country and possibly even internationally, and to look at many different ways that

we can develop the incredible legacy of Brigid – her spiritual and environmental heritage. In addition, she was the first feminist icon that many of us could aspire to. There is much room for potential in supporting Brigid and supporting that festival around the bank holiday.

We are a county that is full of culture on so many different levels. Lullymore Heritage and Discovery Park is an incredible asset. Again, I would extend an invitation the Minister to come down and see a small place that, in a way that no one else has, has heralded and celebrated the bog and how important the bog has been, not just to Kildare, but around the country. The Minister is incredibly welcome and I look forward to her further innovation and support of the tourism industry.

Senator Barry Ward: Táim ag roinnt mo chuid ama leis na Seanadóirí Lombard agus Dolan. Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire agus gabhaim comhghairdeas léi as an méid oibre a dhéanann a Roinn. Tá a lán ráite anocht faoin obair atá déanta agus an t-airgead atá ar fáil do rudaí atá ar siúl ar fud na tíre.

I want to focus on two things. The Minister and I would be familiar with the same area, having served in the same local authority, so these will not be new issues to her. There are two things in particular. The first is in relation to tourism promotion. Dublin gets a good shout on the tourism promotion front, but I feel Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown does not get a big enough shout. There are so many things in my area that are worth leaving the city centre to visit, from the village and town centres, such as Blackrock, Dún Laoghaire and Dalkey, to the food offerings that we have, including the excellent delicatessens, shops and food providers, from Glasthule to a two-star Michelin restaurant in Blackrock. There is so much to offer, as well as countryside amenities such as our parks, coasts and sea swimming, as well as the literary heritage. There is so much to see. It just feels like when tourism is being promoted, particularly for Dublin, those in the suburbs, particularly what we call Dublin's riviera, which is slightly tongue in cheek, get left behind. There is room for them to be remembered, particularly.

The second matter I raise is a project that goes hand in glove with that, namely, the Sutton to Sandycove, S2S, which is related to the Sutton to Sandycove coastal promenade and cycleway on the outside of the DART line. I am not talking about the coastal mobility route. I am talking about a dedicated space next to the sea that would allow people to easily cycle out, without contacting traffic or having to dice between lorries, buses or anything like that, but a dedicated cycleway that would be a tourist amenity beyond compare in this country. It would be a fantastic way to see the south-east coast of Dublin and well worth promoting.

Senator Tim Lombard: I will be very brief because time has been limited. I would like to raise two things. One is the cruise liner industry and where we are going with it. In Cork, it has a huge impact on our tourism trade. It is a real driver for our economy. However, we need to make sure that we get the boats down to Cork. We have more than 100 boats traditionally. Our liners sort of came to Cobh on a traditional basis. There seems to be an issue in Dublin Port that it is limiting the number of cruise liners coming in. If they cannot come to the capital city, the knock-on effect is they will not come to the second city. Will the Minister comment on where she believes the future of the cruise liner industry is going and what we can do to promote it, not alone in Cork Harbour, but places such as Baltimore and Bantry, which have had significant trade in the past few years?

The second issue I seek the Minister's comment on, if she possibly could, is Airbnb. Where does she believe Airbnb fits into the market? I am very close to Kinsale, which is literally hav-

ing anything up to 80 or 90 Airbnb properties on the market everyday, but no rental market because it has been sucked up by Airbnb. When will the promised regulations be put in place? I believe that Fáilte Ireland is involved, but I might be wrong and the Minister might correct me and give me her view on where Airbnb fits into the whole ethos of the tourism market.

Senator Aisling Dolan: I thank the Minister for her time today. I welcome her announcement. As the Minister heard, all across Ireland there are incredible attractions. However, we need to talk about our natural resources as well, such as our cycleways, walkways and railways, and how we are connecting people and bringing them together. We have that in heart of Balinasloe.

I ask the Minister about the Fáilte Ireland and perhaps the River Shannon master plan. How will we promote the tributaries that come into the River Shannon, such as the Sooke River and the water-based activities around those rivers? This is so crucial to well-being, mental health and local communities, especially when we do not have parks in many of our towns. Imagine living out in the countryside but not having a safe place to walk because there is no park. I also ask the Minister the importance of waymarked trails, such as the Hymany and Beara-Breifne ways, coming through Cork and all the counties. That is such an important route. I know there is a focus on investment in that as well. It is going through so many counties.

How does Fáilte Ireland see its role in promoting conservation projects, in terms of the tourism and education value, and particularly, for example, Galway's Living Bog in Mountbellew? We also have the Ballydangan Bog red grouse project, which is number one in terms of protecting curlews and red grouse. They are driving ahead and forging a path. How can we also use that to promote tourism?

Senator Eugene Murphy: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach Gníomhach agus tá fáilte roimh an Aire go dtí an Seanad an tráthnóna seo. Like many others, I want to welcome the Minister's statement earlier today on artists. It is ground-breaking. It has been very much acknowledged and recognised. I met with the Music and Entertainment Association of Ireland, MEAI, today and it is very happy with what the Minister proposed. It will be very important and significant in terms of developing the whole area of arts, whatever form of art it is. I have been involved myself, mainly through broadcasting.

This evening many Members on every side of the House have spoken about the challenges. The first message I have coming from the sector is to say thanks for the supports given and the constant engagement. It was a rough time, but it is acknowledged that with the support of Government we managed to keep the business going. It is good to see in budget 2022 we have a record level of funding for tourism, at €288.5 million overall. That is an increase of €67.5 million over 2021 allocation. Some €241.7 million is the current funding and €46.7 million is in the capital funding.

Like many others, I raise the issue of staff. I know a number of restaurants and hotels in my county, Roscommon, are struggling badly because they cannot get staff. It is sad to see fine establishments closing one or two days a week. That is what is happening. I was just thinking about this and I talked to a hotelier in Roscommon the other evening. There are a lot of semi-retired but not elderly people who worked as chefs and cooks in many establishments, sometimes in the Army or other institutions. We should look to a scheme encouraging them back in the short term. It would be a huge help. Many of them would come back. They will not want to work a full week, but they might do 20 or 30 hours a week. I know one hotel owner had a

staff member who could not come in the other day.

8 o'clock

The young lady in question, who has a young family, had to spend 15 hours cooking in that hotel to help the chef. That is the type of sacrifice those people have to make to keep their establishments going. Perhaps we could suss out some way of addressing that. Maybe we could establish some type of scheme to encourage staff who worked in particular areas as chefs and cooks to come back. Hopefully, as things return to normal, some of the pressure will come off the sector. That is important.

The Minister is well aware of the importance of the 9% VAT rate. It is vital for the recovery of the sector. Like everyone else, I believe staycations will be very important. While all the people coming from abroad are very welcome and spend a lot of money here, it is important that we promote staycations as part of the recovery programme.

For many years, my county, Roscommon, was not spoken about. It has some of the most hidden beauties in the Hidden Heartlands. People are only beginning to discover the fantastic facilities, such as Lough Key Forest Park, the Arigna Mining Experience, Loughnaneane Park in Roscommon town and all the villages along the River Shannon, including Termonbarry, Rooskey and Lecarrow. The real gem is Strokestown Park House. I am aware the Minister spoke about it some time ago. A €5 million development of the National Famine Museum is ongoing. We will welcome the Minister to the town. The development is ahead of schedule and should be opening in the coming months. It is one of the biggest projects in the Hidden Heartlands and it will bring a significant increase in tourism to our locality.

That is all very important. There are many gems in my county and around the west and midlands that are still only in the process of being discovered. Hopefully, the more we discover them, the more tourism will grow and the more revenue will be available to the State. Really and truly, we are going to have to look at tourism more and more in terms of revenue. People regularly see me on social media walking the glorious hills of Slieve Bawn. I invite everyone to visit the area. It is the most fantastic place. As Senator Carrigy will be aware, a wind farm was installed in the area some years ago and all hell broke loose. Everyone enjoys the area fantastically now, and the history of the mountain has been opened up. The walking trails are fantastic and they are great for one's health as well. There are many gems in the county. Local communities are working hard on many projects. Despite all that is going on in the world, we are in a positive place in terms of tourism in this country. I commend the Minister's work and that of the Government in the area.

Senator Maria Byrne: I thank the Minister for coming to discuss this important issue. The issue of skills shortages was raised and I, too, would like to raise it. I know, from speaking to many in the hospitality industry, that while the support that was put in place during Covid was most welcome and kept many businesses afloat, it has had knock-on effects. I am sure the Minister is aware of that. I note that there has been a loosening-up in the rules around work permits. There are many people coming into the country now, in particular, Ukrainians, some of whom I met last night. They want to go out and start working as soon as possible. Perhaps we could look at retraining people and getting them to work. Certainly, they are willing to work. Many businesses still cannot open on a Monday or Tuesday.

I welcome the announcement of the basic income for the arts pilot scheme, or the living

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wage at least. It is most welcome news. As a member of Limerick Arts Society, I have spoken to many artists. Many have found it hard to keep going and perhaps have had to get another job because they have not been able to keep themselves afloat through selling their paintings. During Covid, some artists improvised and hung their paintings on railings. They were not making enough, however, so today's announcement is most welcome.

There was a good news story in County Limerick today, with the announcement that Shannon Heritage had handed King John's Castle back to the Discover Limerick Designated Activity Company, which is a subsidiary of Limerick City and County Council. The contract was signed over at the weekend. I welcome that the council is now back in control of the marketing and promotion of the castle. It is a huge tourist attraction that brings people to Limerick.

I am also aware that Shannon Airport is at the forefront, with 22 new offerings of routes into the airport, including three new transatlantic routes. Tourist numbers are beginning to move in the aftermath of Covid. There has been a lot of collaboration between Shannon Airport and the council over the last ten months. This shows how two semi-State organisations can work together for the betterment of the people. They are also looking at marketing the area collectively and different options are being considered. The expansion of schemes like that is most welcome, because if groups in the region work together, it encourages the tourists to stay in the region as they arrive and spend money there. That is what we all aim to achieve in our regions. I thank Shannon Heritage for looking after the castle for the past 25 years. It is back with its rightful owner, Limerick City and County Council, today.

There are many attractions in our country. While we should encourage tourists arriving in the country to spend money here, we also need to encourage Irish holidaymakers to stay within the country. Many incentives were launched last year for people holidaying at home. I wonder whether the Minister would consider ways of trying to encourage our own people to holiday here. Last year, many people visited parts of Ireland that, possibly, they were never in before. I met people who spoke about discovering places they had never visited. We need to encourage people to stay in Ireland. Huge support was provided to the hospitality industry, for example, for outdoor seating. I pay tribute to the Minister and her Department for the attention and resources provided to local authorities and Fáilte Ireland to deliver those projects. I wonder if they will be expanded.

Senator Martin Conway: I wish to make a few points and ask some quick questions of the Minister. As she is aware, I come from County Clare. There is a skills shortage, as previous speakers articulated. While I believe our Ukrainian visitors may actually help to alleviate the pressure in the short term, in the long term, we will need to get our act together when it comes to bringing back training for those in the hospitality sector, including chefs, and so on. At this stage, the 9% VAT rate for the hospitality industry needs to be permanent. There cannot be too many peaks and troughs. That is important.

The Cliffs of Moher are a gold-plated tourist attraction. If it is not the first, I think it is the second most visited attraction in the country. My fear is that the plans that Clare County Council has for the Cliffs of Moher will turn the attraction into a city or town of its own and suck the potential of all the other villages in north Clare. We need to grow all our villages organically. We must complement the Cliffs of Moher. We need people to be attracted to stay in north Clare and the rest of the county. If the council continues with the type of grandiose plans that are being talking about for the Cliffs of Moher, we will kill the goose that lays the golden egg. While a few million visitors a year are going to the cliffs, the north Clare community does not benefit

to the degree that it should.

I support the suggestion made earlier that a representative from the pub, restaurant and gastropub industry be appointed to Fáilte Ireland. People come to our country to experience the gastropubs and restaurants. We can look at the number of restaurants now with a Michelin star or which are featured in the Michelin Guide. In County Clare we are delighted with the number of restaurants mentioned in the list of top 100 Irish restaurants in last weekend's newspaper. It is fitting and appropriate that there would be a representative from the restaurants and gastropub associations on Fáilte Ireland. For the life of me I cannot understand why that is not the case. Apparently, Fáilte Ireland's brief does not cover pubs and restaurants, and that oversight should be dealt with. If it requires a small piece of technical legislation, it can be introduced and we will initiate it here in the Seanad with no problem whatever. Perhaps it would only take the Minister signing a regulation to extend the board's remit or brief. If that is the case, I encourage the Minister to do that. In the first instance, having a representative of restaurants and gastropubs on the board should be possible because it should reflect a broad skill set.

I wanted to raise a number of other matters but, unfortunately, we do not have the time. It would be useful for the Minister to return in the term after Easter for further and more in-depth or detailed engagement on tourism.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Fintan Warfield): The House is scheduled to adjourn at 8.15 p.m. but the Minister may take a few more minutes if required.

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): I thank the Senators for their comments and kind words on the launch of the pilot basic income scheme for the arts today. I will address as many matters as possible in the time given to me. If I do not reach a specific question, my officials will follow up with the relevant Senators.

Senators Garvey and Conway asked about the plan for the Cliffs of Moher and I will speak with Fáilte Ireland about that before following up with the Senators. Senator Garvey asked about ferries access and I will liaise with the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, on the matter because it comes under his remit. The Senator also mentioned the sustainable tourism working group and one of the matters being progressed with that is evidence-based targets.

Senator Keogan spoke about visas and Senator Byrne may have touched on the issue as well. That comes under the remit of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment but it is relevant to my sector and I will continue to liaise with the Tánaiste on the matter. Senator Keogan also spoke about business and tourism and I fully support Fáilte Ireland's efforts in that area. I am attending a conference on it this Friday to lend my support to such efforts in a visible way.

Senator Keogan also mentioned Dublin Airport and I know the Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Deputy Hildegard Naughton, has been holding daily briefings with the chief executive officer of the airport and other senior DAA staff. It has implemented a number of measures recently and informed the Minister of State that these have improved the immediate position significantly. It appears that queue times at the weekend, for example, were substantially shorter than the previous weekend, with 95% of passengers through terminal 2 on Sunday having to queue for less than 35 minutes and 100% queued for less than 45 minutes. At terminal 1, 87% queued for less than 35 minutes and 92% queued for less than 45 minutes. The

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Minister of State will, of course, continue to monitor the position.

Senators Conway, Keogan, Byrne, Cassells, Carrigy and Murphy spoke about skills shortages. On the question of staffing, my Department and Fáilte Ireland continue to collaborate with the industry and other Departments to ensure there is a co-ordinated approach to addressing the labour and skills shortages. The additional fund I have obtained for tourism in the 2022 budget will allow for targeted investment in human capital, skills development and education to help address particular employment challenges faced by tourism. It is about tracking talent, assisting skills development and retaining staff.

Fáilte Ireland has an extensive plan in place to support the tourism industry and address both its immediate and longer term recruitment challenges to ensure businesses can recover. I will continue to support the industry alongside the Fáilte Ireland agency to address that immediate crisis in skills supply. There are included initiatives, such as a marketing campaign to drive up awareness of jobs in the sector, a range of supports to build the industry's recruitment capabilities and the new transition year work placement programme to provide tourism and hospitality businesses with a direct link to students looking for work experience. There is also a programme to support businesses in accessing people on the live register via the Government's new Pathways to Work strategy. Businesses will also be linked with local third level students and in co-operation with the industry, there will be an effort to link with industry to identify the international markets with the best potential for pools of talent, as well as the most effective labour access points.

Senator Keogan mentioned sustainable tourism. Under the arts section of the Department, we are working on the arts and festival piece. It was mentioned in the recommendations of the arts and culture recovery task force. There is a real desire in the arts sector to "green" the festivals. On the tourism aspect, we have measures that we hope will shine a light on areas and destinations at home that are striving to be best in class in terms of sustainability and provide better access to information and tools. The tourism industry needs tools to help visitors to practise responsible tourism and I see real potential in how we reshape and reimagine tourism post-Covid. We see how the domestic market will thrive and there is a yearning for the outdoors. Tourism Ireland had done great work on this and we need tourists to leave the cities and go into the hidden heartlands to use our blueways, cycleways and walkways. The potential is massive, particularly when we take in our food industry. Everything is there for the taking when it comes to sustainable tourism and we will work on that in our new plan. As I said, our officials have already commenced development of the new national tourism policy that will mainstream such sustainability.

I absolutely share Senator Warfield's enthusiasm for and interest in breathing new life into the night-time economy. I see tourism and cultural benefits in doing that and in all the Senator suggests, including the opening of spaces for arts and culture. As he knows, we are doing substantial work on the night-time economy area and I have a great working relationship with the Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee, who is very supportive of that. I will share with her the specific suggestions the Senator made today about the licensing system because it is under her remit.

I was delighted to support the outdoor dining measures that were mentioned by Senator Wall, along with the tourism projects he mentioned in Kildare. To respond to Senator Ward, I will speak with Fáilte Ireland as I know it has plans to promote the wider Dublin region. There is much to offer in the Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown area, although I noticed he only mentioned

what is in his own part of the locality. He is not here but I will mention the facilities in my part of Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown, from Glencullen, Dundrum and Stepside to Goatstown, Stillorgan and Churchtown. The list may be endless. We have promotions and sights to see there as well. I will mention his comments to Fáilte Ireland and speak with the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, about a cycleway. I will also speak to the Minister about Senator Lombard's query about Dublin Port.

Senator Lombard mentioned Airbnb in reference to Housing for All. Overall responsibility for delivery of that plan rests with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage but we have a lead role in the implementation of Action 20.4, relating to the new regulatory controls requiring short-term and holiday lets to register with Fáilte Ireland. I have engaged with the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, on the matter and Fáilte Ireland has had significant engagement with the Residential Tenancies Board in the final quarter of 2021. My officials meet on an ongoing basis with officials from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, as well as Fáilte Ireland.

Funding was allocated in the 2022 budget to Fáilte Ireland, which is being tasked with the design and implementation of the short-term lettings registration system and the agency is currently recruiting staff to work on the project with the project lead in place. My officials are also working on scoping the legislative provisions that will be required to underpin the system with a view to these provisions being enacted this year.

Senators Carrigy, Conway, Murphy and O'Loughlin raised the question of VAT. I know the sector is concerned about the matter and is seeking an extension of the reduced VAT rate. I have pressed for an extension of the reduction of the VAT rate beyond August 2022 but the very strong support package I secured in the 2022 budget is already assisting the tourism sector to get firmly back on its feet in the summer. Taxation is ultimately a matter for the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, and he has commented that the extension provides support for those eight months to the end of the 2022 summer season, allowing a longer period of recovery for tourism. Should the economic position on tourism demand alter, he has said the VAT rate applicable to tourism will be reviewed as part of the budgetary cycle.

I was glad to hear Senator O'Loughlin's report of the positive outlook for key Kildare tourism destinations, especially with the Great Britain market, which is one of our most important tourism markets. I see the huge potential of the bank holiday of St. Brigid from a spiritual and a feminist point of view. Our officials are working on how best to celebrate that bank holiday and drive the tourism market as well.

Senators Conway and Carrigy raised the issue of Fáilte Ireland board appointments. There are currently four vacancies on the board of Fáilte Ireland. The previous chairperson resigned on 15 August, with three further board resignations in September 2020, November 2020 and November 2021, respectively. Mr. Paul Carty, a previous ordinary board member, was appointed chairperson in February 2022, which has resulted in a further ordinary board member vacancy. The terms of office for four further ordinary board members were due to expire on 27 May 2022 but all four have been reappointed for a second term of two years' duration after 27 May. The process for filling the four existing vacancies has now commenced. It could not proceed until the chairperson vacancy was filled and the four reappointments were confirmed. It is open to anybody from any sector to apply for appointment to the board.

Senators Byrne, Murphy and Carrigy raised the issue of domestic marketing. Fáilte Ireland

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is doubling its domestic marketing target in 2022 to drive domestic demand for short breaks all year around. It will also delivery four new regional tourism strategies, setting out a ten-year vision and a five-year action plan for each vision. It aims to ensure that tourism businesses are visible, searchable and most importantly bookable through its digital that delivers programme. It remains focused on helping businesses to promote Ireland as an international destination but it is domestic tourism that is the focus. Fáilte Ireland estimates that domestic tourism will be back to 2019 levels this summer.

Overall, I think we can agree that tourism has turned a corner, thankfully. When I was at the trade event, Meitheal, in Killarney last week, the interest arising from that pent-up demand was phenomenal. We can expect a very good summer and bookings for next year. I was very proud of the various regions that were on display at Meitheal. Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland did a stellar job, as they always do. I believe that with the right support and direction, we can begin to reshape and regrow our tourism sector. However, we have to be careful not to grow just for the sake of growing. We have seen in the recent past that such growth can be unsustainable. We must grow in a way that means that future generations will also benefit from Ireland as a tourist destination, whether as visitors or as part of the industry.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Fintan Warfield): That is a good note to end on. I thank the Minister.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar athló ar 8.23 p.m. go dtí 9.50 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 6 Aibreán 2022.

The Seanad adjourned at 8.23 p.m. until 9.50 a.m., on Wednesday, 6 April 2022.