



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

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

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SEANAD ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 29 Aibreán 2025

Tuesday, 29 April 2025

Chuaigh an Leas-Chathaoirleach gníomhach i gceannas ar 3.30 p.m.

*Machnamh agus Paidir.
Reflection and Prayer.*

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad

Acting Chairperson (Senator Imelda Goldsboro): Before we commence, I welcome Kai Guerin, who is here on work experience with Senator Teresa Costello. I hope she does not work you too hard.

I have received notice from the following Senators that they propose to raise the following matters:

Senator Tom Clonan - the need for the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to make a statement on the implementation of the recommendations of a multi-disciplinary report on the care of an individual.

Senator Maria McCormack - the need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the National Ambulance Service in County Laois.

Senator Gareth Scahill - the need for the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to provide an update on the provision of funding for the replacement of older water infrastructure in rural areas.

Senator Robbie Gallagher - the need for the Minister for Education to review the mandatory retirement age of 70 years for school bus drivers in light of the shortage of school bus drivers available nationally.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove - the need for the Minister for Health to introduce legislation to mandate breast density reporting for all women undergoing mammograms.

Senator Nicole Ryan - the need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the protocol for the use of a deceased partner's stored sperm in assisted reproduction through the publicly funded IVF system.

Senator Patricia Stephenson - the need for the Minister for Health to provide an update on

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the women's health action plan and to outline the actions being taken to improve women's experiences and health outcomes within the healthcare system.

Senator Joanne Collins - the need for the Minister for Social Protection to make a statement on waiting times for decisions on domiciliary care allowance appeals.

Senator Laura Harmon - the need for the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to make a statement on funding for local authorities, including Cork County Council, for the tenant in situ scheme.

Senator Mike Kennelly - the need for the Minister for Health to implement mandatory cardiac screening for competitive athletes between the ages of 12 and 18 to reduce the occurrence of sudden arrhythmic death syndrome.

Senator Pauline Tully - the need for the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to make a statement on the shortage of appropriate residential settings for adults with intellectual disabilities and severe autism.

The matters raised by the Senators are suitable for discussion. I have selected Senators Tom Clonan, Maria McCormack, Gareth Scahill and Robbie Gallagher 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

Care Services

Acting Chairperson (Senator Imelda Goldsboro): I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Grealish.

Senator Tom Clonan: I thank the Minister of State for coming in.

I want to raise here again the case of Caitlin Hassan. Caitlin's mum, Louise Hassan, is here in the Visitors Gallery. Caitlin Hassan was sexually assaulted while in the care of Avista health-care. Since the assault she has had no supports and is currently at home with Louise. Caitlin is deeply traumatised and cannot dress or get out of the bed. She is a young woman who has been completely failed by the State in exactly the same way as in the Grace case.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Imelda Goldsboro): I ask the Senator to refrain from using names in the House.

Senator Tom Clonan: I have the full consent of Louise and Caitlin Hassan, and this is a matter that has been covered on the public record in all the national newspapers and on RTÉ, the national broadcaster. All the parties have been named and all the detail has been published, and this is the reason we are here. Here is a family that has been completely failed by the State. To get the help and support they need, many victims of sexual assault have to renounce their anonymity.

On the publication of the report on the Grace case, the Minister, Taoiseach and Tánaiste repeatedly asserted such a case would never happen again in the State. It is happening to Caitlin Hassan right now on the Government's watch. The multidisciplinary team and Avista published a comprehensive report on the supports Caitlin needs, and she is being denied those. Part of the reason she is being denied them is the legal action Caitlin's mum has been forced to take to vindicate her rights.

If I were knocked down by a drink driver and suffered broken limbs, a broken shoulder and a fractured skull, would the Minister of State deny me medical treatment because of the potential for the criminal prosecution of the driver of the car? He would completely disregard any such process and treat the injured party. Therefore, any legal steps the family in question have been forced to take in regard to the sexual assault and rape of Caitlin Hassan are completely irrelevant. To deny her the medical supports and therapies set out in the report is to add moral injury to physical injury.

When I was talking to Louise about this, she told me it was enough in anyone's lifetime as a mother for her daughter to tell her she has been raped in the care of others. That is enough to be going on with in one lifetime, but to have the resources of the State mobilised against her, to have the State have highly paid legal teams engage in lawfare and accuse her of lying and of a conspiracy theory, and for the State to withdraw all treatments is retaliation and failure. That is precisely what happened in the Grace case and precisely what is happening today. Therefore, I ask the Minister of State to communicate with the Minister responsible for disabilities, Deputy Foley, and the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill. We are not instructed by solicitors; we instruct them, and the Minister is currently instructing solicitors, senior counsel and barristers to fight the family in question – a single mother and her child, who was sexually assaulted while in the care of a State-provided carer, Avista.

The Grace case, we were told, must never happen again. It is happening right now on the Government's watch. Its members have all been informed. I appeal to the Minister of State, Deputy Grealish, to take the necessary action and provide the support and immediate care that Caitlin and her mum need.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Noel Grealish): I thank Senator Clonan for raising this issue. As he knows, I am taking it on behalf of the Minister for Health. I also welcome Louise, Caitlin's mom, to the Visitors Gallery. The Senator has raised a very important issue. I will read the statement given to me by the Minister.

The Government considers matters of safeguarding to be of paramount importance and values and appreciates people coming forward to report safeguarding concerns to the appropriate professional bodies and authorities. Although Senator Clonan refers to a specific case which is known to the HSE, he will appreciate that it would not be appropriate to address here the specifics of an ongoing sensitive case concerning allegations with respect to an individual. The HSE, however, assures the Department that, in respect of the case referred to by Senator Clonan, it remains engaged with both the service user and their family and has offered ongoing additional supports, including one-to-one counselling with their counsellor of choice.

In referring to the Senator's query and the recommendations of a multidisciplinary report, the HSE advises that a clinical multidisciplinary assessment report was recently completed in conjunction with the individual and their family to assess day services needs based on the indi-

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vidual's needs and wishes. This is being considered by the relevant parties.

I take this opportunity to offer reassurances on the various structures and processes in place within the sector which aim to protect against abuse and provide for appropriate action. A requirement exists for HSE-funded service providers to take appropriate measures to prevent abuse from arising as well as to respond to and report all abuse concerns as per their service agreement, in compliance with the HSE policy on safeguarding vulnerable persons at risk of abuse.

Senator Clonan may be aware that the Department of Health is currently developing a new policy on adult safeguarding in the health and social care sector in consultation with the Department of children, disability and equality. The Department of Health is at an advanced stage in finalising this policy to further strengthen existing protections in this sector. It is expected that these sectoral policy proposals will be brought before the Government in the coming months and that the preparation of related underpinning legislation will commence thereafter.

The HSE's trust in care policy is in place to ensure proper procedures for reporting suspicions or complaints of abuse against staff members while upholding the dignity and welfare of service user recipients. The HSE states that any trust in care investigation process involves the rights of all individuals involved and these rights must be fully protected to ensure a robust process and outcome in the interest of all parties. The Senator will be aware that fair procedures and the rights of parties involved in such a process must be maintained. That is the message that was given to me, Senator.

Senator Tom Clonan: With no disrespect to the Minister of State, that response is wholly inadequate. Saying, "We do not comment on individual cases" or, "This is a matter for the relevant authorities" is a rhetorical device that is used by the HSE, the Department of Health and previous Ministers. These are the systemic failures identified quite clearly in the Grace case. When people like Louise and Caitlin renounce their anonymity and come forward, as many rape victims do, such as in the recent case of Nikita Hand, for example, we commend them for coming forward because they want the issue to be addressed. It is not good enough for the Minister or the HSE to say they cannot address it. They must address this individual case. Is the Minister of State not shocked, having heard everything we heard about the Grace case, that this is happening right now on our watch? Rather than spending taxpayers' money, our money, on supporting Caitlin, they are mobilising those funds in order to fight and engage in inappropriate and adversarial processes against this family.

I am disappointed the Minister is not here. I appreciate the Minister of State coming in. He is a person of absolute integrity and I know he is shocked and upset by this. We can and must do better. This situation cannot be allowed to stand. It cannot be allowed to continue. It is the Grace case before our very eyes and, this time, we have the power to intervene. I ask the Minister to do so.

Deputy Noel Grealish: I realise the passion with which the Senator raises this issue, which is serious for the people involved. I will give the Senator one assurance, that what he has raised here today will be brought to the attention of the Minister. I will do it personally to ensure all proper procedures are put in place to ensure the issue the Senator raised will not happen again and this case is dealt within the proper procedures within the Department.

I cannot talk specifically about the case but the Government recognises the fundamental

importance of safeguarding those who may be at risk of abuse, harm or neglect, both in health and social care services and, more broadly, across society. The present-day approach to the delivery of services for vulnerable people is guided by an array of safeguarding advances that have been introduced and built upon. The Senator can rest assured that I will bring this matter to the attention of the senior Minister.

Ambulance Service

Acting Chairperson (Senator Imelda Goldsboro): I welcome the Minister of State.

Senator Maria McCormack: I raise serious concerns about the current state of the National Ambulance Service, particularly its impact on rural communities like those in County Laois. Recently, I met local paramedics who were very honest about the chaos they face daily.

Let us be clear, a decade ago regional ambulance control worked far better with quicker response times with local knowledge that saved lives. Since the move to a single national dispatch centre, the situation has dramatically deteriorated. Paramedics are now regularly sent all over the country. A crew dispatched from Laois to Galway could be stuck in Galway overnight. This situation leaves Laois with no ambulance available for long periods.

This is not an abstract problem. It costs lives. I spoke the last day about the impact this had on my own family, but today I want to share another heartbreaking story with the Minister of State. It is the story of Lauren McEvoy and her late mother. On 9 March 2023, Lauren's mother suffered a brain aneurysm at home at The Heath, Portlaoise, County Laois. Despite multiple 999 calls, with an ICU nurse explaining the critical nature of the situation, the ambulance took more than two hours to arrive. It had been dispatched from Clara, County Offaly. Even though Portlaoise hospital is just six minutes away, the ambulances in Laois were dispatched from much farther away than they needed to be. When the ambulance arrived, a further 45 minutes were lost at the scene. It was 10.30 p.m. before Lauren's mother was finally admitted to Beaumont Hospital.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Imelda Goldsboro): I caution the Senator about mentioning names.

Senator Maria McCormack: Yes, that is fine. I have permission from the family to mention names.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Imelda Goldsboro): Thank you.

Senator Maria McCormack: It was 10.30 p.m. before Lauren's mother was finally admitted to Beaumont Hospital, which was more than eight hours after the first emergency call. Tragically, Lauren's mother passed away shortly afterwards. One year later, the family still awaits a full response to their complaint. It is just not acceptable. We know the National Ambulance Service is in crisis. We are all listening to paramedics in our communities, but in Laois it is costing lives.

Paramedics have also raised with me the worsening conditions they are facing. We know that, in Laois, overruns are now normal, meaning crews regularly miss their breaks and health and safety guidelines are ignored. Staff burnout has reached crisis level and there is an extremely high turnover of paramedic staff. It is clear the system is at breaking point, and front-line

workers and communities are now paying the price.

I specifically highlight the situation in Laois. As I mentioned the last day, Laois has just one ambulance base compared with its neighbouring county of County Offaly, which has a smaller population but has two ambulance bases. Laois paramedics and residents suffer disproportionately as a result. I urgently call on the Minister to immediately implement some temporary plan for Laois to keep Laois-based ambulances within a defined radius of Laois until staffing and base resources can be properly addressed. The people of Laois cannot continue to face hours without any ambulance cover. Every minute lost is a risk to life. We owe it to Lauren's mother and countless others to fix this broken system before more lives are lost.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): I thank Senator McCormack for raising this issue today, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill. I wish to update the House on the delivery of pre-hospital emergency care in County Laois and the vital pre-hospital emergency response role delivered by our National Ambulance Service, NAS.

The National Ambulance Service serves the Laois-Offaly region from four bases located in Portlaoise, Edenderry, Birr and Tullamore. All four bases are staffed by a highly skilled workforce of pre-hospital emergency care practitioners. In the past 18 months, front-line ambulance staffing in the NAS Dublin-Midlands health region has increased by almost 10%. The Laois-Offaly region is also served through the national emergency operations centre clinical hub, which advises callers on locally available alternative care pathways, as well as five active community first responder schemes. Further support is provided by the emergency aeromedical support service based in Athlone, as well as the Irish Coast Guard search and rescue service.

I am aware of the recent press coverage concerning ambulance coverage in County Laois, in particular anxiety expressed by local public representatives, including Senator McCormack, that ambulances normally based in Laois are being sent out of the county on other calls. It may be helpful, therefore, if I detail the system of national ambulance deployment operated by the National Ambulance Service. Ambulance resources across the country, including in County Laois, are deployed by the NAS dynamically in line with international best practice. This means the NAS prioritises resource allocation to the highest acuity calls that require an immediate emergency response. The national emergency operations centre has oversight and visibility of all pre-hospital emergency resources nationally. This allows the National Ambulance Service to dispatch resources in the most efficient and effective way, ensuring that the nearest available emergency resource to the scene of an emergency is always dispatched. The operation of dynamic deployment has served to address some of the historical safety issues that occurred under the old ambulance station-based static system, where the nearest ambulance did not always respond to an emergency call. It is the case, however, that, with significant increases in urgent and emergency call activity nationally, which between 2019 and 2024 has seen the total number of calls rise by nearly a quarter, some lower acuity patient calls have, at particularly busy periods, experienced a longer wait for an ambulance.

The Government continues to prioritise increased investment in our National Ambulance Service. This year's allocation of €285 million for the NAS includes €8 million for new service developments to deliver up to 180 additional posts. This will help to support capacity building in our front-line emergency services, further expand the NAS suite of alternative care pathways and help to further develop NAS specialist services.

As I alluded to, patient demand for NAS services continues to rise, with nearly 430,000 urgent and emergency calls received last year, representing an increase of 8% from 2023. The further development and expansion of alternative pathways of care are, therefore, vital in transforming the delivery of urgent and emergency care, improving patient access to care and enhancing patient healthcare experiences and outcomes. With around 7% of all urgent and emergency calls now being triaged to the national emergency operations centre clinical hub for successful treatment through an alternative care pathway, the National Ambulance Service is committed to the continuous development of these pathways, which preserve front-line emergency ambulances for higher acuity responses.

I extend my sincere thanks and gratitude to the staff of the NAS and all our ambulance services for their commitment and dedication to patient care, both in County Laois and across the country. I will bring the point Senator McCormack raised to the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, Department officials and the National Ambulance Service.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Imelda Goldsboro): Does the Minister of State need to attend the vote in the Dáil?

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: Yes, but I will come back.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Imelda Goldsboro): I propose that the House suspend for the duration of the vote in the Dáil. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 2.54 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 3.05 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 2.54 p.m. and resumed at 3.05 p.m.

Senator Maria McCormack: I thank the Minister of State for his reply. I respect he is taking this Commencement matter on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, but Laois and Offaly are not the one county or the one constituency and they are not the one region for the National Ambulance Service. We had regions ten years ago - I think there were 11 regions - and now we have one dispatch centre.

Having spoken to my local paramedics, I know that, looking at Laois and Offaly together, there are four bases, but I am talking about County Laois having only one base and the impact this has on the communities and paramedics. I note the big investment put into the National Ambulance Service but, according to paramedics on the ground, they are still working the same roster they have been for 20 years. The new staff members coming in are covering people who are out on long-term sick leave.

These paramedics are at breaking point, given the pressure they are under. I spoke to a crew member who, on Friday night, was dispatched from Portlaoise to Thurles and then to Clonmel. That is 110 km away from the base. We are in a very difficult situation in Laois. I ask the Minister of State to ask the Minister for Health to give urgent consideration to the ambulance service in County Laois.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I again thank Senator McCormack for raising this important matter. In my opening reply I outlined the commitment of this Government, with significant additional funding for the National Ambulance Service in 2025.

I will bring the particular point the Senator has raised in respect of Laois to the attention of my colleague, Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, the Department and the National

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Ambulance Service. I will ask them - no doubt they will have looked in on this debate - to take on board what the Senator has said.

By way of general observation, as well as additional emergency ambulances, this extra investment in staffing will also benefit patients who do not need an emergency response or to be brought to a busy hospital emergency department. In recent years, as part of the ongoing reform programme, the National Ambulance Service has established a range of see-and-treat alternative care pathways. These include a pathway service whereby advanced paramedics and occupational therapists visit primarily older people in their homes or in community care.

Finally, I reiterate my thanks to the staff of our National Ambulance Service and emphasise the Government's commitment to investing in building further capacity in the service and overseeing continuous strategic reform.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Imelda Goldsboro): I thank the Minister of State. I welcome the Walsh family and Colin McEniry, guests of Senator Ahearn, to the Chamber this afternoon. They are very welcome and I hope they enjoy their visit.

Water Services

Senator Gareth Scahill: I rise today to seek an update on the provision for funding for the replacement of older water infrastructure in rural Ireland. I welcome the Minister of State to the Chamber once again. I also acknowledge the Uisce Éireann staff on the ground across the country who are doing an exceptional job in often difficult circumstances and with very limited resources. From my experience of alerting the local teams to leaks and outages across my home county of Roscommon, I have always found them extremely helpful and supportive. I would be doing them and the people of rural Roscommon and rural Ireland a disservice if I did not ask for an update and continue to do so.

First and foremost, I welcome the significant progress on Irish Water services in the past decade. Capital investment in water services has increased from €300 million in 2014 to €1.3 billion in 2024 but there is significant work that needs to be done. I note national leakage has reduced from 46% in 2018 to 37% at present and the target is 25% in leakage rates, saving 200 million litres of water by 2030.

After four months as a county councillor, I raised in the chamber of Roscommon County Council the need for the infrastructure in an area from Cloonfad to Garranlahan to be looked at. We called on Irish Water to specifically look at this particular area. It related to the infrastructural network of the organisation. A letter was sent on 12 December 2024, which was proposed by me and seconded by my former colleague, Councillor Paschal Fitzmaurice in Roscommon. Following that, at the beginning of this month, Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice from my constituency raised the issue of Cloonfad, a small village in County Roscommon. On 2 April, he was alerted to the 21st water outage for the village, where a pipe had burst once more. It has been a consistent issue at Lowberry Cross, with the people in that particular area consistently having to put up with water outages.

Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. For Cloonfad and specifically for Lowberry Cross, we have consistently tried to put a Band-Aid solution in place where leaks in the pipes have occurred. The same issues happen consistently

and repeatedly. I call on the Minister of State to do open heart surgery, so to speak, and replace the actual pipes in the area as opposed to continuing with the Band-Aid solution.

This is just one case. I am sure, with 30% leakage nationwide, that this is replicated in many other rural areas. I would like the Minister of State to address this now so that people living in this area have access to a fundamental requirement, namely, reliable water infrastructure. It is a basic requirement for domestic and business premises, no matter where they are located, but it is also a matter for public health, economic growth and regional equality.

I have numerous examples and headlines from local media over the past four years highlighting the outages that have taken place in Cloonfad and across that particular part of Roscommon. I look forward to the Minister of State's response and thank him for taking this Commencement matter. I know this is not his particular area.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I thank Senator Scahill for raising this issue today. I am taking this on behalf of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy James Browne, my colleague in the Department. I will give a general response and then address specifically the areas in Roscommon, Cloonfad and Lowberry Cross, that were raised.

I would suggest that Senator Scahill writes directly to the Minister on those particular villages and make specific reference to them. I have no doubt the Minister and the Department will revert to him.

In terms of how the Senator framed the question in terms of a plan for replacement of older water infrastructure in rural areas, at the outset I should advise that the Water Services Act 2007 sets out the arrangements in place for the delivery of water and wastewater services by Uisce Éireann. These services are a matter for Uisce Éireann, which has statutory responsibility for all aspects of water services planning, delivery and operation at national, regional and local levels. The progress of individual projects are matters for Uisce Éireann and approved through its own board and internal governance structures. The Minister has no functional relation to operational matters.

Uisce Éireann supports the Department of Rural and Community Development to deliver specific actions under the Our Rural Future policy. Its key action within Our Rural Future is to invest in infrastructure, including water and wastewater infrastructure, to support the development of rural towns and villages. The small towns and villages growth programme was established in direct response to requirements for rural support under the national planning framework and is one of a number of capital programmes under Uisce Éireann's overall capital investment plan. This is a national programme to cater for growth in smaller towns and villages where Uisce Éireann has existing infrastructure in place. Local authorities support the programme by identifying communities in need of investment. To date, 39 projects have been confirmed to be delivered through the programme nationally and an additional 11 projects in towns and villages will also be delivered through alternative Uisce Éireann programmes.

The EPA maintains a priority action list, PAL, for areas where it deems wastewater treatment improvements are needed and a remedial action list, RAL, where it deems public water supplies are in need of corrective action. Under its programme to eliminate raw sewage discharges, up to 23 December 2023, Uisce Éireann built new wastewater infrastructure for 31 towns and villages where none existed before, ending the unacceptable discharge of raw sewage into the environment. Uisce Éireann is progressing plans to deal with both lists, reporting

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regularly to the EPA on progress. Uisce Éireann has ramped up capital delivery for water services and infrastructure, from €300 million in 2014 to roughly €1.3 billion in 2024. The Uisce Éireann strategic funding plan for 2025 to 2029 sets out Uisce Éireann's multiannual strategic investment of €16.9 billion to 2029, which represents an unprecedented level of funding in our water infrastructure. Our water and wastewater infrastructure, however, requires substantial and sustained investment over a number of investment cycles to bring the system up to the standard required of a modern service to provide for population growth and to build resilience in the face of climate change.

Senator Gareth Scahill: I thank the Minister of State. I will read out a communication I got from a hospitality business in Cloonfad on 18 April, Good Friday. The title of the communication was "Absolutely Fed Up". It said that the business was left with no option but to remain closed that afternoon due to yet another water outage in Cloonfad on one of the busiest weekends of the year, the Easter bank holiday Saturday. This, the business said, was beyond frustrating. It said it was angry and disappointed with Irish Water, that this was not the first time it had happened and it would not be the last. It asked how small businesses like it are supposed to survive under these conditions.

I will be in touch with the Minister. I tried to make contact with him last week. I have the support of my Oireachtas colleagues in the Roscommon-Galway constituency on this matter and I have had the support of the Minister of State in the past with regard to water issues, for which I thank him.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I thank Senator Scahill again for raising this important matter. As he stated, he will follow this up with the Minister, Deputy Browne, and his office. The Senator made specific reference to Cloonfad and Lowberry Cross. I will bring that matter to the attention of the Minister and his officials.

On a general note, I reiterate the Department's commitment to the promotion and development of rural communities in addition to the work of Uisce Éireann. More than €143 million of funding has been provided for the period 2021 to 2025 under the national development plan for non-Uisce Éireann investment in the rural water sector. The multi-annual rural water programme is a primary funding stream which provides capital funding to address the challenges faced by rural water sections in maintaining, renewing and developing their systems and networks.

The Department secured record levels of investment in water services by Uisce Éireann in the period 2021 to 2025. This was reflected in budget 2025 when it secured record funding of €2.2 billion, including €514 million of a €1 billion equity investment, for Uisce Éireann to meet the cost of delivering water services in 2025. The overall investment and the specific improvements in our public water and wastewater services support improved water supplies across Ireland, including rural Ireland, and a range of programmes delivering improved water quality in our rivers, lakes and marine areas. This makes a significant contribution to addressing Ireland's needs.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Imelda Goldsboro): I welcome the group from Salon-de-Provence in France to Ireland and hope they enjoy their trip.

Bus Éireann

Senator Robbie Gallagher: Ar dtús báire ba mhaith liom fáilte mhór a chur roimh an Aire Stáit go dtí an Teach an tráthnóna seo. I thank the Minister of State for taking time out of his busy schedule to be here. This is the first opportunity I have had to have a debate with him in the Seanad. I wish him every success in his role. I have no doubt he will bring his usual vigour and determination to that post and will be a great success in it.

I raise the retirement age of 70 years for Bus Éireann drivers. This needs to be re-examined because it discriminates against people who are capable of providing a valued service. Many people feel it is unfair that drivers are not able to continue to drive a bus after their 70th birthday. These people are perfectly fit and healthy, are medically assessed and are licensed to drive a bus, yet they cannot do so due to Bus Éireann's one-size-fits-all policy, which basically means that people aged 70 years and older are considered unfit to drive a bus.

Another issue is that bus drivers aged over 70 years frequently drive commercial and private buses for much longer in life and there is no issue. Typically, a school bus driver will drive for roughly one and a half hours in the morning and the same again in the evening for five days a week during the academic year. It is ludicrous that someone aged 70 is not allowed to drive children to school but can drive a private bus and take the same children 200 miles down the road and back home again with no issue whatsoever. If the Bus Éireann assessment systems are good enough to determine whether someone can drive a bus at 69 years, surely those same criteria could be used to assess someone who is 70 years or older at a time when we need loads of drivers. No doubt come September this House and the Dáil will be back talking about the shortage of drivers for school buses. It is something that needs to be addressed immediately.

I understand that Bus Éireann has no current plans to address this particular situation but I note it recently reduced the minimum age for bus drivers, which was 23 to 24, to 21 yet it did not see fit to look at the mandatory retirement age of 70 years. In the UK, our nearest neighbour, there is no such age restriction. If you pass the medical and other tests, you are fit to drive, as far as they are concerned. I see no reason why we cannot adopt that same model here in this jurisdiction because clearly, as I said, there is a chronic need for bus drivers. Many who are retired from their life-long occupation now use this particular job as a part-time job as it is only an hour and a half in the morning and an hour and a half in the evening. It is not very taxing or stressful. Many of them enjoy it and they provide a valuable public service.

I look forward to the Minister of State's response. I sincerely hope the thinking has changed and that we can use whatever influence we have in both Houses to ask Bus Éireann to seriously assess the situation. Someone told me the last time it was raised in this House there were issues of safety once a person is past 70 years of age. We are not talking about someone working 40 or 50 hours a week. We are talking about someone working at most three or four hours a day, five days a week, for the academic year.

Deputy Noel Grealish: I thank the Senator for his very kind words. I look forward to working with him over the next four and a half to five years, I hope.

I am taking this matter on behalf of the Minister for Education. As the Senator is aware, the school transport scheme is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education. In the current school year, more than 172,500 children are transported daily in approximately 7,900 vehicles across 10,300 routes to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country. These daily trips cover over 100 million km.

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The retirement age for school bus drivers has been set by Bus Éireann at 70 years of age and this also applies to all Bus Éireann road passenger services. The policy and criteria also apply to drivers nominated by private operators who operate services as part of the school transport scheme, provided they hold the requisite license and satisfy an annual medical examination until the retirement age of 70 years.

The Road Safety Authority, under the remit of the Department of Transport, committed to reviewing the upper age limit for drivers as it relates to larger vehicles and school buses. This review is now complete. Under the new programme for Government, we have committed to “Carry out an independent assessment on the feasibility of removing the exclusion of drivers aged over 70 from the School Transport Scheme”. The Minister will be engaging with the Minister for Transport and with Bus Éireann to advance this.

In my role as an ordinary TD in previous Dáileanna, I constantly raised this issue and I fully support the Senator on this. I will also support it as a Minister of State in the Government. I can see no reason why a person cannot drive a school bus if he or she only does one or two hours in the morning and another one or two hours. It would solve a huge crisis. We have cases where buses are parked because they cannot get drivers. There are parents screaming to get buses to bring kids to school. I know it is not under my Department but I fully support the Senator on this and I will raise it in any avenue I can. I have already spoken to the Minister of State, Deputy Seán Canney, on this and I will meet him about this. He works in the Department of Transport. The Senator makes huge sense in what he is raising. I hope we will be able to find a solution to this.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: I thank the Minister of State for his comprehensive response. I am heartened by it. I know he raised this himself in the previous term as a Dáil Member. I look forward to progress being made on the issue. As the Minister of State knows well, the heat will come on come September when we are all inundated with inquiries about school transport. Does the Minister of State have any idea as to when we might see progress on this important issue? It is a win-win for the families, the school kids and those people over 70 years of age who are perfectly physically and mentally fit. They are well capable of driving, are fully licensed and want to contribute. As I said, it is not overly taxing. The hours are minimal. Does the Minister of State have any idea when we can, hopefully, expect some good news on this issue?

Deputy Noel Greally: I do not. I spoke to the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, about this when I saw the notice of Commencement matters. I will raise it in every avenue I can. We will hopefully see light to it. I think people can drive an ordinary bus until the age of 90 in the private sector, but not for Bus Éireann. Talking to the Senator, he mentioned that there is a completely different system in place in the UK. Maybe we should look at that. I would like to see something happen. I will raise it with the Minister of State and come back to the Senator. We will try to give him a timeline if some decision, hopefully the right one, can be made on this. I will revert to the Minister of State on the issues the Senator has raised.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: I thank the Minister of State.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 3.26 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 3.33 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 3.26 p.m. and resumed at 3.33 p.m.

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad

An Cathaoirleach: I note the Leader will be proposing a minute's silence for the passing of Pope Francis at the end of the Order of Business. Before I ask the Leader to outline the Order of Business, I welcome to the Distinguished Visitors Gallery the chargé d'affaires from the Polish Embassy, who is most welcome. Poland will be celebrating its national day on Saturday, 3 May, but I am assured by the Leader that the Seanad will not be sitting that day. I thank the chargé d'affaires for being here. There are long and enduring links between Ireland and Poland, going all the way back centuries, and decades in terms of being part of the European Union, which has helped transformed both our countries - two small countries that struggled long and hard for freedom, which we now both enjoy thanks to the relentless work of successive generations.

In 2019, the Polish Embassy produced an exhibit, A Forgotten Polish Hero of the Great Irish Famine: Paul Strzelecki's Struggle to Save Thousands, which was opened by President Michael D. Higgins. Another exhibit, which is open to everybody, in Dublin Castle, is on Constance Markievicz, who of course is so much part of our history, not only here in the Houses of the Oireachtas as a Member but also as somebody who struggled as part of our struggle for independence and freedom.

The last census showed there are more than 122,500 people in Ireland who have Polish heritage or were born in Poland. There is a Polish cultural and social association in Ireland that has done great work in supporting its neighbours from Ukraine. There are more than 40 Polish schools here and I also believe Polish is an exam subject in Ireland. We have worked together on UN duty with UNIFIL and our collaboration in that regard continues. In advance of the celebration of the national day, we acknowledge Poland's great support for Ireland during Brexit and the Good Friday Agreement. I thank the chargé d'affaires for being here. I wish him a happy Polish Constitution Day.

I welcome visitors from CBS Secondary School Kilkenny, who are guests of the Leas-Cheann Comhairle, Deputy John McGuinness. They are most welcome here today. I thank them for coming.

Anois, I call on the Leader to outline the Order of Business.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

Senator Seán Kyne: The Order of Business is No. 1, motion re expressions of sympathy on the death of His Holiness Pope Francis, to be taken on the conclusion of the Order of Business, without debate; No. 2, statements on forestry, to be taken at 5 p.m. and to conclude at 6.30 p.m., if not previously concluded, with the time allocated to the opening remarks of the Minister not to exceed ten minutes, group spokespersons not to exceed ten minutes, all other Senators not to exceed five minutes and time may be shared, and the Minister to be given not less than ten minutes to reply to the debate; No. 3, motion re the proposed approval by Seanad Éireann of the final draft revised national planning framework, to be taken at 6.30 p.m. and to conclude at 8 p.m., if not previously concluded, with the time allocated to the opening remarks of the Minister not to exceed ten minutes, group spokespersons not to exceed ten minutes, all other Senators not to exceed five minutes and time may be shared, and the Minister to be given not less than

ten minutes to reply to the debate.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: Directly after the Order of Business we will be moving a motion of condolence on the passing of His Holiness the Pope. My party, Fianna Fáil, wants to be associated with that. We acknowledge the late Pope's humility and compassion and, above all, his great empathy and understanding.

Since we met just before Easter, we received an e-mail from the Clerk, Martin Groves, to say he was retiring during the Easter break. I sincerely hope there will be an opportunity to note our appreciation and gratitude for his help and guidance to all of us. Those who are new and those who have been here longer have always very much appreciated Martin's advice and guidance and I hope we will have the opportunity to show that in an appropriate way.

Last night, at the invitation of the Dublin Lord Mayor, Emma Blain, I had the opportunity to go to the Mansion House for an event to celebrate the athletes who represented Ireland in the Special Olympics World Winter Games in Turin, Italy. It was wonderful to be there with the Minister for sport, Deputy Charlie McConalogue, the athletes, their families, the volunteers, and the coaches who were involved in bringing the athletes to the games, and to witness the joy and learning, in particular from some of the coaches who were previously athletes themselves and who have progressed to become coaches in their own sport. That is a wonderful thing. Inclusion is hugely important. The Special Olympics have unified sports involving people with ability and those with disability. They train together and play matches together, in particular soccer, basketball and golf. That is very important. It would be great to have a debate with the Minister for sport about proper inclusion in sport and how all communities can be involved.

Prior to Easter, I had the opportunity to attend my first Inter-Parliamentary Union event. It was extremely interesting. What is significant about this particular one in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, is that a motion was unanimously passed recognising a two-state solution for Palestine and Israel. That was very significant. Amendments were tabled by some countries which did not support it, but it got through. I pay tribute to the former Cathaoirleach, now Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer. He was the rapporteur for this particular report. It is significant that Ireland is leading the way on a two-state solution. It is important to note that and thank all of those who put the work into it.

Senator Garret Ahearn: I would also like to be associated with the comments of the Leader about the passing of His Holiness Pope Francis. I send my condolences to everyone who is upset and grieving at this time.

We also had a bereavement through a tragic accident in Tipperary a few days ago. A young 18-year-old girl, Bronagh English, passed away. It might not be realised by those in the House that she is connected to the House. Her grand-aunt was the former Fianna Fáil Senator, Ann Ormonde from Waterford, and her grandfather was the former Fianna Fáil TD, Donal Ormonde. Can we pass our sympathies to Ann and Donie? I met Donie yesterday and, as people would understand in such a tragedy, the family are in shock and are mourning. They are getting great comfort and support from their community and friends. It was a tragic accident to happen to a young 18-year-old just before sitting her leaving certificate examinations and to be thrown upon the family. I hope that as a House we might be able to pass on our condolences to the English family and to Ann and Donie in particular.

I also wish to be associated with the comments about Martin Groves. We were all surprised

by the email. I second the motion that we should do something appropriate, when the time allows, and speak on his contribution to the State over many years. We have all had interactions with Martin as Senators. He helped and guided me along the way in the past and I am sure he did that for numerous people in the House. I wish him the best. I also wish Bridget Doody the best in the next few months covering for him. She has been a professional as long as I have known her in her role and I am sure she will carry on the same professionalism Martin showed throughout his career here.

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call on the next speaker, I welcome guests of Deputy Charles Ward to the Gallery. They are from Finn Valley College in Donegal.

Senator Tom Clonan: I raise the issue of Ireland's triple lock. Over the weekend, the Taoiseach said that he has no difficulty whatsoever bringing to the democratic Parliament of this Republic the proposal to remove the aggressor's veto. By that, the Taoiseach is referring to the veto of UN Security Council mandates and resolutions. I understand where he is coming from intellectually on that, but I ask that we all stop and think about what is being proposed. The United Nations was set up as a means of protecting ourselves from complete and total self-annihilation and while it is not perfect, to paraphrase Churchill, it is the worst form of peace assurance except for all the other kinds of peace assurance that have been tried from time to time over history. Despite its imperfections, the UN has been a guarantor, for the most part, in ensuring we do not engage in mutual self-destruction, which is a likely prospect if we continue on the trajectory we are on.

I have great respect for the Taoiseach and I understand where he is coming from intellectually, but we are sending a major signal here. We are repudiating the validity of the United Nations as a legitimate multilateral agency and saying we no longer believe in multilateralism, that we will withdraw from that system and engage in whatever the Government of the day thinks appropriate. It is a bit like the referendums. The problem is not so much what is being taken out or removed, but what it will be replaced with. The triple lock is not being replaced with anything insofar as I can discern. The removal of the triple lock means that any future Irish Government - not only this one - can send any number of Irish troops anywhere in the world to any conflict. Do I trust the Government? Of course I do. However, do governments make mistakes? Yes, they do. That unilateral capacity of a government with a small simple majority to commit our troops - our sons, daughters and grandchildren - to conflict would be a seismic change. We have to be really careful that we do not just do this in a minor defence Bill. Think of the UN since its inception; it had Stalin as a Charter member, Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Andropov, Shevardnadze, Yeltsin and now this aggressor, Putin. They come and go. The system is sacrosanct. We gave a solemn declaration in 2002, backed up by the Seville declaration in 2002, ratified by our EU partners, that we would not remove the triple lock. I say particularly to my colleagues in Fianna Fáil that their voters do not want to see this. We can remedy the defects of the triple lock restrictions by raising the number of troops we can send from 12 to 120. That would remedy the problem. By removing the triple lock, the Government is seriously undermining our neutral status. If it is going to do that, we need a constitutional referendum to have neutrality explicitly placed in our Constitution, as is explicitly the case in Switzerland and Austria. I say this with the utmost respect but we need a proper debate with the Taoiseach and Tánaiste on this. It is a seismic change.

Senator Joanne Collins: I want to bring up an issue regarding section 39 workers. After a long and difficult process, an agreement was reached at the Workplace Relations Commission to improve these workers' pay. They are vital front-line workers involved with disability

and home care. The question remains as to when the Government will enact and recognise the agreement. In November 2023, there was a WRC agreement put in place which was never enacted. Furthermore, the section 39 workers face structural inequalities, particularly in relation to pay parity, compared to their counterparts who are directly employed by the State. When will the Government take the necessary steps to finally deliver full pay parity and when can the workers expect it to be enacted in practice, not just in principle?

Senator Patricia Stephenson: Many of us were deeply disappointed by the findings of the Farrelly commission on the Grace case. Grace is a 40-year-old woman living in the south east. A lot has been said about her in the media over the last few weeks. I take the opportunity today to speak directly to Grace, who is often missing from this discussion, despite the fact that she is central to this issue. Grace, you were failed over and over again by the State. You deserved love, protection and dignity but instead, those who were supposed to protect you turned you away. For more than two decades, serious concerns were raised about your safety but those warnings were systematically ignored. You were left in harm's way and your family was left to fight alone for justice that should have come swiftly.

Today I am here as a public representative but I am also here as a human being. It is appalling what was allowed to happen to Grace. The State failed her, her family and the 47 other children placed in that foster home. It also failed the whistleblowers who had the courage to speak up when no one else would.

The Farrelly commission was launched eight years ago, after Grace was removed. It delivered a 2,000-page report this month after a €20 million investigation. It confirms neglect and a fundamental failure in care, but it stops short of acknowledging the emotional or sexual abuse, despite a €6.3 million settlement by the HSE and a public apology in court. This contradiction within the commission's report cannot be ignored. The report lacks an executive summary, making it completely inaccessible to the very people most affected by its findings. It fails to name people responsible and, frankly, fails to deliver accountability. The Ombudsman for Children has said that the ship has sailed for justice but it cannot and must not. Grace, your voice may never be heard but your story must be. That is why I am calling for a full public inquiry, one that delivers truth, justice and lasting change. Ireland does not have sufficient safeguarding legislation for vulnerable adults, in complete contravention of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. We need mandatory reporting for abuse in all care settings. We urgently need to address the appalling safeguarding abuses we have seen within the Irish care system. I strongly request that we have a debate on this.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: The Leader has already proposed the motion in respect of Pope Francis. There has been a lot of discussion of him and his nature as a person. I do not agree with all of the church's teachings in many areas and have challenged the role the church has played in terms of the Irish State. Pope Francis's quotes and messages are really important contributions to thought in our time and the moral and policy space. He said that capitalism without limits create pain without limits. He said, "How can it be that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points?" He talked about the inequality of those issues. In *Laudato si'*, importantly, he spoke about the groaning earth, the challenge of interconnectedness and climate change as urgent. He also spoke about peace - the work of peace, which has been neglected constantly in a new narrative of war that is sweeping across the world - and the rights of refugees - not as numbers but as men, women, children, families and people who are suffering.

The one I want to highlight today, because it is one we all need to remember, is his repudiation of the doctrine of discovery. This is something from the 1500s. It was the doctrine that suggested and underpinned the argument that there is any justification for colonialism, the taking of land from indigenous peoples, its occupation and their destruction. For centuries, this was the underpinning for colonialism. He repudiated it. I acknowledge these ideas because they are ideas that we in our different ways continue to take up. Right now, we have a new doctrine of discovery - a new doctrine of colonialism - that is sweeping across the world in a wave of justification of colonialism. One of the clearest examples is the justification for the genocide that is taking place in Gaza and the idea that one might be displacing an entire population or letting it starve to advance one's own interests and security. It is regrettable that at a time when ideas and words matter, we had in our Seanad somebody who should be challenged. In his tweets, he spoke about his visit to our Seanad. There was a conversation about trade and matters of defence. This is from somebody who wears his IDF uniform in the commission, has past pushed for legislation to allow for more weapons, has called for more destruction of infrastructure and, when challenged about the deaths of children in Gaza, said they are not innocent civilians. I urge real consideration. This is a moment of diplomatic urgency. Last week, the occasion when we had this diplomatic visit was the moment the World Food Programme told us that food ran out in Gaza. The food from the World Food Programme ran out. It had no more food to give. Every opportunity must be taken. These are urgent moments. We should not contribute to a normalisation of a new narrative that some countries are able to ignore international law and colonise if it makes them more comfortable.

UNICEF posted that the children - the starving, starved and dying children of Gaza - are too emaciated and exhausted to cry out. It behoves us as parliamentarians and this Seanad to use every opportunity we have. I say with respect to the Cathaoirleach and my colleagues across the House and Government that we cannot let those issues - trade, technology and others - become the only things on the agenda and let the fact of a genocide and let pass us by the fact it is a choice not to let food into Gaza at a time when the population is dying. We must cry out and speak out. We cannot justify silence. I urge a redoubling of our diplomatic efforts in these matters. When the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade came to the House, unfortunately, the timing naturally meant that the focus was on tariffs, but we need to have that debate on what Ireland is doing on Gaza. We need to know at every level what is happening and we need to know that, behind closed doors, the same messages are being given to any delegates who come, particularly those who come with a doctrine or message of hate or dismissal in respect of the human rights of the people of Gaza.

Senator Ollie Crowe: Today I want to highlight the work of the RNLI following the publication of the data for 2024. Across the 46 stations on the island of Ireland, lifeboat crews launched 881 times last year and volunteer crews brought 1,007 people to safety. Some 234 of the launches were carried out in the hours of darkness. In my county, Galway, the crews' work was especially important as the RNLI rescue figures for 2024 show the charity lifeboats in Clifden, Galway city and the Aran Islands had a total of 104 rescue launches, coming to the aid of 94 people and with 38 of the launches carried out in the hours of darkness. This is extraordinary work by a charity that perhaps does not get the recognition it deserves and whose volunteers are lifesavers who drop everything else when needed to run the lifeboat station, often at considerable risk to themselves. Their busiest time of the year is upcoming and they are seeking to raise funds that will help their life-saving service continue, through their national fundraising effort, the Mayday Mile. I will certainly be supporting the cause and I urge all in a position to do so across the Houses to do likewise.

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Senator Evanne Ní Chuilinn: It has come to my attention that an issue I raised several weeks ago, on the provision of public health nurses in Dublin 12, has continued to escalate. I have been contacted by a number of parents of children aged between two months and four years who are not being seen for developmental checks. In one instance, the mother of a four-year-old boy was in touch to say her son's final sign-off before starting school will not be provided. She received a letter from the public health nursing team in the HSE in the past three weeks informing her that her four-year-old son would not be receiving his routine final developmental check due to what the letter describes as staffing shortages, Covid-19 and HSE or Government restrictions and guidelines. The letter also stated that unless she was to raise a concern herself, the child's health record would be closed on the active register within two to three weeks. As you can imagine, the language used regarding a time limit has caused a certain amount of alarm among parents. More to the point, parents do not feel equipped to make the assessments, or to look at their children and make clinical assessments. Developmental checks are not a formality; they are a key opportunity for trained professionals to assess the critical aspects of babies', toddlers' and children's development, whether it is in respect of speech and language, vision or hearing, or fine-motor, gross-motor or even just social development. The assessments exist to identify potential issues before children start school, when early intervention can make the greatest difference. The oversight needs to be addressed urgently. I have raised it before and would like to invite the Minister in to help explain why children in Crumlin and Drimnagh, and maybe elsewhere although I am not sure, are not being seen by their local public health team, and how the Covid-19 pandemic is still affecting this area of Dublin but perhaps not other areas of Dublin and of the country.

Senator Joe Conway: I draw the attention of Members of the House to what has happened regarding the enjoyment of broadcasting in our country over the past couple of months. Not long ago, it was announced by the BBC that it was withdrawing its BBC Sounds app from everybody outside the United Kingdom, which meant people who enjoyed digital radio of great quality through the app were to have it taken away. This is very regrettable for people in the Republic of Ireland and also people all over the world who like the standard of broadcasting and the educational and cultural input of the BBC. Many of us treasure it.

As somebody who lives in the south east, I know that up until BBC Sounds came along, we had to try to tune into BBC Wales, getting a very ropey and fluctuating signal, or listen to BBC Radio 4 on long wave, but now there is a crystal-clear flawless reception on the radio. It came with great sadness that the app was going to be withdrawn.

4 o'clock

There was a chink of light last Sunday week, however. I was listening to the "Feedback" radio programme. There seems to be a bit of a reverse ferret within the BBC in that it is going to look at this again and there may be a reprieve. Fundamentally for us in Ireland, I strongly believe that the removal of the BBC Sounds app goes against the spirit of strand 3 of the Good Friday Agreement insofar as it refers to cultural inclusion and diversity. I am also speaking up for the 100,000 people in Gaeltacht areas who listen to Irish-language broadcasts from BBC Ulster. Every one of us in the House should use our influence in our parties or wherever we can to entreat the BBC and the cultural attaché in the embassy to look at this question again.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: I propose an amendment to the Order of Business, that No. 9 be taken before No.1. The Protection of Retail Workers Bill 2025 seeks to provide protection to people working on the front line of retail. There are more than 300,000 people working in

retail throughout the country, in every town and village. We buy our milk and newspapers from them. They are essential in all of our communities. Unfortunately, far too many retail workers are going to work every day and night in fear of being assaulted, be that verbally or physically or through threats to their lives and their livelihoods. These assaults can be in the form of verbal assaults, casual sexism, casual racism, aggressive behaviour, physical assaults or more grievous bodily harm. I hope we can debate this Bill tomorrow in the House. With the Leader's permission, I ask Senator Alison Comyn to second the proposal to take No. 9 before No. 1.

Senator Gareth Scahill: I, too, wish to be associated with the remembrance of Pope Francis. I had the pleasure of attending mass in the cathedral in Ballaghaderreen last Saturday delivered by Bishop Kevin Doran and Vicar General Fr. John McManus in recognising and celebrating the Pope's life. I also wish to be associated with the good wishes towards Martin Groves on his retirement.

I take this opportunity to raise an issue that came up in the local media in Roscommon during the Easter break, that is, a pilot scheme delivering Safe Pass courses to transition year students. It is a pilot scheme spearheaded by Selina Galvin of John F. Hanley Limited in collaboration with a local construction company, Shannon Valley. They have been delivering Safe Pass courses to the students of Scoil Mhuire in Strokestown. It is an initiative that should be replicated and delivered throughout all transition year courses in the country. When I was growing up, you were able to go builders, construction workers and tradespeople during the summer holidays to look for work experience and get paid employment. Students now are hit with safety regulations that are impeding their ability to do something like that during the summer. Delivering a course like this as part of the transition year programme will empower and open up opportunities for those students that will stand to them when they go on to third level or further education. I commend this pilot scheme which took place in Roscommon and look for a discussion with the Minister for Education, Deputy McEntee, or the Minister for further and higher education, Deputy Lawless, to see whether there is an opportunity to introduce this scheme for transition year students nationally.

Senator Nicole Ryan: I express deep concern at the recent announcement that the long-awaited primary care centre in Kanturk in Cork has suffered a significant setback. The developer has withdrawn from the project, necessitating a retendering process by the HSE. This facility was envisioned to provide essential services, including GP consultations, mental health supports and ancillary healthcare services, to the community. Its delay is a profound disappointment to the Kanturk community, who have been waiting for improved healthcare infrastructure since planning permission was granted in 2018. This situation underscores the broader issue of the persistent neglect of rural healthcare development. While urban centres see rapid progress in healthcare projects, rural communities such as Kanturk face repeated delays and setbacks. The disparity raises questions about equitable access to healthcare services across the nation. I request that the Leader allocate time for a debate with the Minister for Health. We need to understand the reasons behind the developer's withdrawal, the anticipated timeline for the re-tendering and the measures being taken to prevent such occurrences happening in other areas in the future. It is imperative that we ensure that rural communities across Ireland have the same kind of commitment and resources as urban areas.

Senator Alison Comyn: I second the amendment to the Order of Business. I admit that I stand here as a woman torn. I have somewhat divided allegiance because I live in a place that straddles two counties, Louth and Meath. I speak, of course, of the senior championship game which took place over the weekend. Louth saw off Kildare, so commiserations to my colleague,

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Senator Fiona O'Loughlin, and Meath saw off Dublin. Now we will have a long-awaited showdown. It took 15 years for us to be able to see it again. I wish both teams great luck. Do I wear the red and white of Louth, where I was born and bred and now live, or do I support many of my family and friends in east Meath? On the day, I will just say may the best team win.

Speaking of Louth, I congratulate Louth GAA on receiving funding for a long-awaited stadium in Dundalk. It will be a state-of-the-art stadium, with 6,000 seats in the first phase. Of course, once we have taken the cup, we will need many more seats.

With respect, I ask the Leader to invite the Minister with responsibility for sport to come to the House. The first round of funding has just been announced but in a debate in the House, I could put the begging bowl out and talk about the second round of funding for the stadium so that Louth has a fully fledged stadium. An Lú abú.

Senator Manus Boyle: After the last contribution, I should thank Jim McGuinness and the Donegal team for seeing off Down.

An Cathaoirleach: This debate is beginning to sound like an episode of “The Sunday Game”.

Senator Manus Boyle: We will be waiting for you.

I raise the issue of defective concrete blocks in Donegal, which has been raised here a couple of times. On behalf of the Fine Gael councillors in Donegal, Jimmy Kavanagh, Martin Harley and Michael Boyle, I express deep concern regarding the defective blocks scheme. Numerous homeowners face real financial hardship. The delay in the implementation of the scheme is costing families many thousands of euro. Children are living on building sites. Last week, I visited a couple of the affected houses. You could put your hand through the gable walls of the houses, which is a sight I thought I would never see. The Minister really needs to engage. We need to invite him to the House to find out what is going on with these scheme. It needs to be pushed on. The people affected are at their wits' end. I never imagined that the problem was as bad as it is. I come from Donegal which is where the problem is the worst, including north Donegal.

On my recent visit, I met a family who have been looking for temporary accommodation for their daughter for two years. She is wheelchair bound and they cannot get accommodation. They want to build a house beside their family home so they can move between the two. Incredibly, they are not allowed to do that under the scheme. It is ridiculous that they cannot build a house just 12 ft over the field from their home.

I ask the Leader to invite the Minister to come in here to address where the scheme is going and how we can push it on. It has been kicked down the road for far too long.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: I wish to be associated with the comments made about Martin Groves. I wish him all the best and hope there is an opportunity to pay tribute to him at some point.

On behalf of the Green Party, I join in the expressions of sympathy for the late pontiff, Pope Francis. His encyclical letter, *Laudato Si' : On Care For Our Common Home*, was mentioned. It was a rallying call for nature restoration and a deconstruction of our economic growth model. His embrace of the LGBTIQ community and trans people will also be notable. I listened to

Colm O’Gorman this morning and, certainly, there is a mixed legacy there but it is still largely a positive legacy.

I also pay tribute to Katie McCabe, our first women’s national team member to reach a Champions League final. That is a huge achievement for a member of the women’s national team. I am not an Arsenal fan, but it is a great achievement for her.

The main issue I wish to raise is a report that came out from Uisce Éireann on pesticides and herbicides in water supplies and drinking water. There has not been a marked increase but there has been a significant increase nonetheless in pesticide residues in our water supplies. Uisce Éireann is attributing much of this to surface run-off and inappropriate use. The fact you can buy glyphosate and weed killers in supermarkets and stores is something that needs to be given consideration. There are much more stringent conditions on it in other countries or jurisdictions. Some legal restrictions on over-the-counter availability of these dangerous and harmful herbicides should be considered. They have important uses in agriculture, it must be noted, and certainly in the management of invasive species, but if we have increasing levels of pesticide residues in our water supplies, it is of concern to us all. We are now looking at issues with herbicide resistance in species like Italian rye grass, and that is going to be of concern to the farming community. There is a wider regulatory regime needed for herbicides and pesticides in this country, and it is something I ask the Minister to give consideration to.

Senator Maria Byrne: I wish, first, to be associated with the remarks about Martin Groves and to wish him all the very best on his retirement. From the first day that I was elected to the House, he was always a breath of fresh air and very supportive of new Members especially, offering them guidance. I wish him well and I hope we will have the opportunity to have him in some day to wish him all the best.

I wish also to be associated with the votes of sympathy to the late pontiff, Pope Francis. I actually went to the concert in Croke Park when he visited in 2018, and I think he was a man whose legacy will stay with us for quite a while.

The main issue I wish to raise is the tenant in situ scheme and the number of people who are now being refused and cannot get into the scheme. We are still in the month of April and there are people being refused because organisers are saying there is no money left. If we do not have the tenant in situ scheme, we have to have some sort of a scheme because there are too many families who are being threatened with eviction because the council is saying it does not have the money to buy the home. I would like the Minister, Deputy Browne, to come to the House to have a debate on the tenant in situ scheme and how we can deal with the situation because we already have people who are homeless and we do not want to add to that list. We should have statements in the House and a debate with the Minister, Deputy Browne, on the tenant in situ scheme and how we can resolve this issue into the future.

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call the next speaker, I welcome to the Public Gallery guests of Senator Frances Black, Deputy Mary Lou McDonald, and Deputy James O’Connor. They are most welcome to Seanad Éireann.

Senator Mark Duffy: I wish to be associated with the remarks on the retirement of Martin Groves. He was a great help to me in my early days, although I am still in my early days in the Seanad, and I put on record my thanks to Martin for his assistance. I would also like to be associated with the remarks on the Holy Father, the late Pope Francis, and his contribution to

community, society and faith right across the world and the indelible mark he made on inclusion and broadening the church's work for those in the most disadvantaged areas.

Just this weekend gone, I visited Erris Athletics Club in north Mayo, whose members have to travel 90 km to access standard and adequate sporting facilities. The club has more than 250 members. It has more than 250 members and 198 members under the age of 14 alone. They have to travel for more than an hour to access adequate athletic facilities. The Erris area is neglected in respect of sporting infrastructure and almost 2,000 people in Erris are registered with disabilities. The community has identified a location that would be located between the Irish Wheelchair Association's facilities and a secondary school. It is desperately needed from a public health and mental health point of view. I ask that the Minister for sport be invited to the Seanad to discuss the opportunity that exists for the State to invest in proper standards and facilities for an area that is sparsely populated but has huge demand for sporting infrastructure. It is often a forgotten area. I compliment Councillor Gerry Coyle, who has been working on this issue and who I will be working to support to deliver this infrastructure for Belmullet. I ask that we that invite the Minister for sport to a discussion on this, that a world-class athletics track be delivered and that we support the Belmullet community in delivering it.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: I call on the Minister for Justice to come before Members to answer questions on the crisis in An Garda Síochána with recruitment and retention. I highlight an incident in Carrickmacross as an example of what is happening around the country. I have received many calls and emails from worried constituents relating to an increase in crime, which has been an issue for a long time. This is coupled with a low visual presence of the Garda in the area and fear for safety due to recent frightening incidents in the Cavan-Monaghan-Louth Garda division. People understandably are nervous and are appalled that shocking incidents are now happening in broad daylight. On Sunday, a man wielding a knife on the main street and acting in a threatening manner caused major worry and upset. Thankfully, this individual has been charged with that offence. The fact that he had three bench warrants already issued to him, however, is deeply concerning.

Garda numbers are falling countrywide and the Cavan-Monaghan and Louth Garda division is no different. The level of crime is rising. Burglaries and other serious incidents of crime are increasing. Criminals are taking advantage of closed Garda stations and reduced Garda numbers. Our jails are bursting at the seams. People who have been convicted for crimes are doing little to no time or are being let out after a very short time. Since 2011, at least 140 Garda stations have been closed across the country. This is truly shocking in the face of an ever-increasing population and is leading to further demand on already overstretched resources. Garda morale is at an all-time low. They have no confidence in the Garda Commissioner. For the second year in a row, neither he or the Minister for Justice will attend the GRA conference. How on earth can the public have any confidence in Drew Harris if front-line gardaí have expressed no confidence in him? An Garda Síochána is in total crisis and we need to address this as soon as possible.

Senator Eileen Flynn: When I was appointed by the Taoiseach nearly five years ago, I spoke a lot about not wanting to be pigeonholed and not always wanting to just be the Traveler Senator. That is something that I am grateful for, especially in the past few months. I have proven my worth by getting elected on my own merit. I thank all of the people who voted for me. It is absolutely amazing.

What I am going to say next will be like me wanting my bread buttered on both sides but

this is not the case. I emailed the Labour Party three weeks ago and not once did Deputy Smith reply. I am not doing that out of entitlement. I sent him a message simply asking if we could speak about the Chair of the Traveller committee. I got no response until today. He provided me with a few words saying that Deputy Lawlor is now the Chairperson of the Traveller committee and to basically speak to him. The Government failed as well.

I will not use the word ‘lied’, but they misled the public in saying there was no opposition to the Traveller committee being formed using the d’Hondt system. It is my understanding that at the meeting of the Business Committee on the formation of the committees, even Government TDs said members should take the opportunity to decide, as they did the last time, without using the d’Hondt system. It is brilliant that the Traveller committee is a standing committee as it means it will be here long after my time. However, this is misrepresenting our community. It is like having an Irish language committee of the Houses with a French speaker leading it. It is absolutely appalling this has happened. I understand there is nothing the Leader can do about it, but I want to put my concerns on the record and address the Government and Labour Party. While many people will be surprised at the Labour Party, I remember what it did to people on the margins of society when it was in government. This is another example of that.

Senator Chris Andrews: I, too, extend my good wishes to Martin Groves on his retirement. He obviously knew something we did not and picked his moment when the weather was good. He has always had a good sense of judgment.

Over Easter, news came out that an International Protection Accommodation Services, IPAS, centre was not going ahead. All we hear from the Government is that communities do not have a veto. It seems, however, that the wealthy and affluent in Donnybrook and other affluent areas do have a veto. If you live in the inner city or in other neglected communities that are lacking basic resources and amenities, your voice is not heard by the State. If you are living in flats that are below any acceptable standards and the State treats you like a second-class citizen, then it will claim you are anti-immigrant. If you live in the affluent area of Donnybrook, you are, at worst, a NIMBY. In news reports, residents were complaining that their multimillion euro houses were going to be devalued because of the IPAS centre. This is how Ireland works; there is one law for the wealthy and another law for working people. Wealthy communities can pick and choose what is built in their areas while working-class communities have it imposed on them with little or no consultation or input. We need to know how these decisions are made, who actually makes them and if wealthy communities have a veto unlike working-class communities. We also need the Minister to come in here and explain how these decisions are made.

Senator Sharon Keogan: I want to be associated with the expressions of sympathy for Pope Francis. I welcome the one minute of silent prayer at the end of this session.

Outside this Chamber there is a rising issue that is dominating Irish society. Inside this Chamber we hear nothing about it. Out there, in the bars, in the taxis and on the streets, it is all people are talking about. Yet, in here, on the benches of the Seanad and the Dáil, we hear absolutely nothing. The issue is, of course, immigration. I speak of the gigantic national rally that took place last Saturday, when up to 20,000 people marched through Dublin to oppose the Government’s suicidal open-borders policy. Despite the numbers, we have still heard nothing about it. I have previously warned that if we in these Houses do not address immigration, others will. However, our ruling parties still seem intent on ignoring it, hoping it goes away. RTÉ has followed this approach on perhaps the only area in which it seems to have a good relationship with its Government funders at the moment. When RTÉ did pay attention it focused on the

counterprotest which was organised by the taxpayer-funded NGOs that tell Irish taxpayers that any problems they may have with mass, uncontrolled migration are imagined. The Opposition parties have not proved much better. In fact, many of them threw in their lot with the vastly outnumbered counterprotestors. They waved banners saying “We have a housing crisis, not an immigration crisis”. It is simply delusional to think the immigration crisis can be separated from the housing crisis, the law-and-order crisis, the healthcare crisis and so many other crises. Politicians and elites are prone to delusions but, luckily, the Irish people are not. You can keep ignoring them but their numbers will only keep growing.

Senator Rónán Mullen: First, I commend our leaders - President Higgins and Mrs. Higgins and our Taoiseach and Tánaiste - on representing our country so well at Pope Francis’s funeral. Everybody will agree this was a deeply fascinating pontificate and the late Pope Francis was a voice of conscience on many issues. He made us all, whatever our views, sit up and think on many important issues of the day. Ar dheis Dé go raibh sé.

This would be a good opportunity for a revival or to see more of the church-State dialogues that had been going on but which have only really been happening haphazardly in this country. There is great potential in meetings between the Government and the different faith communities, including non-believers. Some steps have been taken on this in recent years but not enough. There are many issues we could make progress on in our society. There are many people searching for meaning and many social challenges in our world in which voices of faith have an important contribution to make. I ask for a debate on this and on whether we could see a renewal of that. Issues like education, human dignity and many things need to be thrashed out and there needs to be much wider consultation. Voices of faith are an important part of the solution to many of the problems we have in our society today.

I also wish to briefly mention the death of Bishop Brendan Comiskey, whom I knew personally. I note what Colm O’Gorman had to say this morning in that we all know the catastrophic consequences of the failure of church leaders and other leaders in society in handling properly reports of abuse down through the years. We all know the tragedy which flowed from all that and it can never be forgotten. It was, at the same time, Shakespeare who talked of the good people do often being interred with their bones. Knowing Bishop Comiskey and some of his family members personally, I can say he was a very well loved and lovable person who did an awful lot of good, particularly as an ecumenist, in his role in founding the Christian Media Trust and so on. That is to be remembered today where we have a mature understanding of the undeniable tragedies and failings of the past that can never be denied but also that the good in people should never be forgotten. It is a complex reality and one we must all grapple with. I extend my sympathy to his congregation and family on his sad loss.

Senator Conor Murphy: A Chathaoirligh, apologies for the misunderstanding earlier. On behalf of our group, I offer my sympathies on the death of Pope Francis, someone who was considered a courageous leader and who spoke on behalf of the marginalised and vulnerable. It is not surprising, given he was a Latin American cleric, that he followed that doctrine which sees the proper role of the church on the side of the most vulnerable and dispossessed rather than the wealthy and powerful.

His nightly calls to the parish in Gaza epitomised the empathy and sympathy he had with people, as well as his being completely and vehemently opposed to unjust wars and illegal occupations. I was in Dublin Castle when he visited and heard his speech, which rightly understood the pain and suffering of those Senator Mullen has referred to, namely, those who were

traumatised by their experience of various church institutions, and the recognition that those grievances needed to be addressed in a just and fair way. I sincerely hope the church continues to follow in this way and that whoever succeeds Pope Francis places that same emphasis on the need for reparation and healing. There is still much unfinished business in Ireland in that regard today.

He was a vital voice for peace in this world and will be deeply missed for that. On behalf of our group, I offer our sympathies on his passing. I also take this opportunity to offer my best wishes to Martin Groves. He was full of patience and understanding for those of us who were new to this place. I deeply appreciated his support in easing our passage into the House and giving us an understanding. I wish him the very best in his retirement.

An Cathaoirleach: I join the Senator in wishing Martin Groves all the best in his retirement. He did it without ceremony, which is how he did a lot of his work here in the Seanad, quietly behind the scenes. He wanted to make sure we were in recess before he announced it as he would not welcome the tributes in public many members have given him for his long and distinguished service of four decades to the State. I thank everyone for their kind words and wishes. He will be around the House from time to time. I am sure he will appreciate Members saying it to him in person.

Senator Seán Kyne: I have no problem agreeing to Senator Fitzpatrick's request. I thank all Senators for their contributions. Martin Groves is in good company, having been mentioned in the same breath as Pope Francis. I have spoken to Martin and, if he wishes and in his own way, we will see what he is comfortable with in terms of valediction at a future date. He will certainly appreciate all the comments here today.

I acknowledge all the tributes to Pope Francis - we will have a minute's silence after the Order of Business - and to all practising Catholics, and indeed some non-practising Catholics, who felt strongly about Pope Francis. Senator Alice-Mary Higgins summed up his role and his values - the values of the Gospels as the Vatican said - and that he lived that life with courage and universal love, especially in favour of the poorest and most marginalised. We will remember him later today. I had the pleasure of attending Dublin Castle at the time of his address and visiting him and seeing him at Knock and bringing my mother there at the time. It was certainly an honour to witness him in Ireland on those days.

Senator O'Loughlin raised the issue of the Special Olympics. I acknowledge her work as an advocate for the Special Olympics down through the years. She and others have asked for a debate on inclusion in sport. I will certainly ask the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, to come to the Chamber to deal with that. It is a very important role.

Senator Duffy also raised matters relating to sport. There has been much investment in sports capital funding over the years. The athletics club in Erris can apply in future, if it has not done so. The crux may be the availability of land. It is a matter the Senator has raised, whether there is a scheme to assist clubs in purchasing land, and it is something about which there is uncertainty at the moment. When we get the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, in, that can be raised with him.

Senator Ahearn raised the tragic loss of Brónagh English over the weekend. Our sympathies to Ann and Donie Ormonde on their loss.

Senator Tom Clonan raised the issue of the triple lock. We have asked the Taoiseach to

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come to the House at a suitable date. That is between me and the Deputy Leader, Senator O'Loughlin. He has agreed to come in, subject to a date. We can have an opportunity to thrash out that matter with him at that time.

Senator Collins raised the issue of section 39 workers. The Minister, Deputy Foley, has indicated this is a priority. I will ask her to come to the House. In the meantime, the Senator may wish to table a Commencement matter on the issue.

Senator Stephenson raised the Grace case and called for a full public inquiry. I will request the Minister to come to the House to have statements on that matter. Once the committees are up and running in the next few weeks, that may be an issue the representatives on the children's committee may wish to raise and pursue. It would be a worthy exercise. It is a very comprehensive report of more than 2,000 pages. It is absolutely worth considering it, for Grace's case and indeed for all those in care, so that such things do not happen in future.

Senator Crowe highlighted the work of the volunteers in the RNLI. I agree with the Senator, acknowledge those volunteers and wish them well in their national fundraising day.

Senator Ní Chuilinn raised the matter of primary health care nurses in Dublin 12. Again, I ask that she table a Commencement matter specifically on the area, but I will also raise it with the Minister.

Senator Joe Conway talked about the BBC Sounds app and having it taken away. Again this might be an issue that could be raised by the committee on communications that might be coming. It is something that has caused some concern to those who have enjoyed the BBC Sounds app.

Senator Scahill raised the issue of Safe Pass. That is very interesting and it would be very worthy. Safe Pass is now mandatory on construction sites, with the hard hats and high visibility jackets. Thankfully, these things have helped with safety and it would be a very good idea to roll out similar courses in transition year. This is something the Senator could raise as a Commencement matter or on a future date with the Minister for further and higher education.

Senator Ryan raised the matter of Kanturk primary care centre and the disappointment of the community. Unfortunately, these things happen from time to time and tenders fall. It has planning permission and there is a commitment to pursue this project. It is to be hoped it can be got back up and running and retendered. There have been other examples, but if the Senator wishes to table a Commencement debate, she might get a more immediate answer on this project. Obviously, there is a commitment to pursue this project if it has gone to tender, and it is to be hoped it can be got back up and running as quickly as possible.

Senator Comyn raised the potential of the Louth versus Meath final. I know our former colleague in this Chamber, Senator Cassells, would be on the other side cheering and we wish them well. I might pose for a nice picture of the two of them on the day and I will not say who I will be shouting for.

Senator Boyle has again talked about the defective concrete block scheme. I have no easy or immediate answer on that matter. I will certainly raise it with the Minister, Deputy Browne, and will ask him to come to the Chamber. I have engaged with our councillor colleagues in Donegal as well and I know it is an issue that is heartfelt there, as it is with former councillors like Johnny McGuinness and his late father Bernard, who was one of the first people to raise

these matters a number of years ago. I know there is investment and commitment to investment and that there is work taking place, but there are still issues, some of which the Senator has highlighted. I will ask the Minister if he will come to the House specifically to talk on that matter.

Senator Noonan talked about the increase in our water of residue from herbicides and pesticides, which is worrying. I know a lot of investment, education and training for farmers has been undertaken. The Senator raises valid issues on the sale of Roundup and other herbicides and pesticides over the counter and whether they are being utilised correctly. It is something I will certainly raise with the Minister, Deputy Heydon. Perhaps the Senator may wish to table a Commencement matter on the issue as well.

Senator Maria Byrne raised the tenant in situ scheme and the refusal of applications because no money is left. I have had a number of concerns about that myself, including the fact that, even if a local authority or individual is applying, if the homeowner has planning irregularities or if there are some defects to the house, as there have been in some cases, these can take a number of months to be decided upon. By the time they are decided, three, four or five months of the eviction period have gone by, and suddenly the tenant in situ scheme is not available because the house does not have planning or is defective. There are serious issues and I will certainly request a debate on that matter.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly asked for a debate with the Minister for Justice on crime issues. Obviously, there has been increased investment in Garda numbers. Where gardaí are allocated is a matter for the Garda Commissioner but numbers have increased. We made changes when the Minister, Deputy McEntee was in the role, which have continued with the increase in the age of retirement and the age at which a person can join An Garda. We have seen an increase in the numbers interested in joining the Garda and hopefully that can continue on through to graduation. I will ask the Minister if he can come to the House to talk on matters of crime.

Senator Flynn raised her disappointment regarding the Chair of the Traveller committee. She is right. I had no hand, act or part in that and those decisions were made in the other House. I acknowledge her disappointment. I know from experience that being a member of a committee is as good as being a Chair. I know it does not have the prestige but being an active member of any committee is important. I know the Senator will continue to play an active role as a member of the Traveller committee.

Senator Andrews raised IPAS and Senator Keogan raised the immigration protest at the weekend. I will ask the Minister for Justice to come in. I think the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, is still waiting for the transfer and delegation of functions so the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, may wish to come in as well. IPAS centres are refused from time to time. There was a refusal in Oughterard in my own county and I know there are other applications pending. I know first hand it is an issue of particular concern in communities in different areas. No one is suggesting, I would say to Senator Keogan, that it is not a real live issue - it is in many communities. I will ask for a debate on the matter. The Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, received approval from the Cabinet today to publish legislation to provide decisions on international protection within three months. He has indicated that decisions are taking far too long and that up to 80% of people who applied for international protection in Ireland were not eligible for asylum. He has also indicated that there were 42% fewer international protection applications in the first three months of 2025 compared with the first three months of last year. I will ask the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, and the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, to come to the House

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to debate these matters.

Finally, along with other Senators, Senators Mullen and Murphy expressed sympathy for Pope Francis and the voices of faith. I do not know who I should ask to be involved in that.

Senator Rónán Mullen: The Department of the Taoiseach. It did it before anyway.

Senator Seán Kyne: Okay. I hope the Taoiseach will come to the House before the summer recess. This is a matter the Senator may wish to raise. He does raise valid points on the importance of faith. There are many people of faith both in words and in deeds as well, which is important.

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Fitzpatrick has proposed an amendment to the Order of Business: “That No. 9 be taken before No. 1”, which was seconded by Senator Comyn. The Leader has indicated he is prepared to accept the amendment. Is the amendment to the Order of Business agreed? Agreed.

Order of Business, as amended, agreed to.

Protection of Retail Workers Bill 2025: First Stage

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Criminal Justice (Public Order) Act 1994 to create specific offences for assaulting or threatening retail workers carrying out their employment.

Question put and agreed to.

An Cathaoirleach: When is it proposed to take Second Stage?

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: Tomorrow.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Second Stage ordered for Wednesday, 30 April 2025.

Expression of Sympathy on the Death of His Holiness, Pope Francis: Motion

Senator Seán Kyne: I move:

That, as a tribute of respect to the memory of His Holiness Pope Francis, Seanad Éireann sends an expression of its profound sadness and sympathy on the death of The Holy Father to His Eminence Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, Dean of the College of Cardinals.

Question put and agreed to.

Members rose.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 4.45 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 5.03 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 4.45 p.m. and resumed at 5.03 p.m.

Forestry Sector: Statements

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Senator Garret Ahearn): The Minister of State, Deputy Michael Healy-Rae, is very welcome to the Chamber for this important discussion on the forestry sector.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Healy-Rae): I am very grateful for the opportunity to come before the Seanad this evening. I am very thankful to be in the position I am in, especially now because of the difficulties we have in forestry. Following the recent storm we are in the unprecedented situation that there are 25,000 ha of trees on the ground. Before that happened, we had a very serious situation in forestry, in that not enough farmers were planting forestry. As there are competing schemes, what we in the Department need to do is make it more attractive. There is a struggle between competing schemes and the fact is that there are other avenues of land use and people are worried about forestry. There is no point in trying to make this out to be any nicer than it is. Forestry got a bad name in recent years. One of the main reasons is that if you wanted to thin or clear fell your forest, or if you wanted a permit to make a road, you heard nightmare stories, which were factual, that it would take a year, two years or two and a half years. Nobody should have to wait that long for anything from any Department. That should not be the case.

I am very grateful and thankful to the officials in the Department and the people from the Department working on the ground every day. They are improving every day. They are going to be so good by the time this thing is finished that they are going to be frightening. People will no more have an application sent in when they will get a licence back. I do not want to be flip-pant about it because there is a serious side to it. There must be proper assessment and evaluation. You would evaluate an awful lot in a year, two years or two and a half years, so that type of nonsense will not be allowed to continue in the future. I stress that it absolutely will not. I want to give Senators confidence.

I very much appreciate the work Senators do. In coming here today, I would like to think that in their constituencies they would become very strong advocates for planting trees. We want to have a balance. We want to have native trees, through the agroforestry scheme, which I hope to improve. To be blunt, I do not agree with the terms of the scheme at present. They are not good enough. The scheme is not attractive enough. The first bit of advice I would give to a farmer who wants to plant agroforestry at the moment is to wait until we improve the scheme. I want it to be improved, and it will be improved. If Senators do not believe in what we are doing they will not have the confidence to tell people in their constituencies that they are convinced, so I want to convince them.

I accept that we have a lot of work to do. An awful lot of land is ineligible. I debate the science that says it is ineligible. My son Jackie and I spent a number of days recently walking

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ground with people who were very smart about their business. The one thing I have learned is that if you were up in the sky today above Ireland looking down at the forestry we have, you would be refused if you were looking to plant that ground under the present terms and conditions. The vast majority of the forests we have, both under the ownership of Coillte and privately owned, if you were looking to plant them today you would be told: "We are very sorry, you are not eligible." Where would that leave us?

We have an awful job of work. I am very grateful for people's work. The officials in the Department have bought into this. They want to turn this ship around, because if it does not turn around it will sink. The Government set a target of 800,000 ha a year. As Senators are aware, things have not been as bad with regard to planting since 1946. We must improve on that. If we fail during my time in this Department, I will have been a failure, forestry will be a failure and it will do untold damage to us in emissions and the fines we will have to pay in the future. Every one of us - be it Senators, TDs, Ministers, or councillors at home in the constituencies - want to see people having confidence in planting trees again. In doing that, we in the Department have to up our game. It is our responsibility to make it more attractive. It is my fault if it is not got right. I am very invested in improving it.

As Senators will be dealing with people who have questions for them, I will go through a couple of headline points about the storm, some of which they may know already. There are 25,000 ha of forestry on the ground. They should not think that is a disaster. It is not as though the product is gone. The majority of it is windblown but it is still connected to the ground. It is not losing weight. Members should always remember that the best place to store timber is inside a wood when it is connected to the ground. That is the best place to keep it. Approximately 14,000 ha of that is owned by Coillte and the rest of it is private. The one thing I wanted to do at the very beginning was ensure people would be safe. A couple of very bad things have happened by people going at work themselves. Indeed, in my county we had an awful incident recently involving a chainsaw. The first thing I would say to people is that whatever about timber or their forestry or anything, they should be safe about what work they are doing. Get the proper assessment, get the proper foresters to come in, get the proper advice and get in the contractors when the time is right.

I have been visiting the sawmills. I have every confidence in our sawmills. Some people might have this impression that there is a lot of timber on the ground, so the sawmills are going to blackguard it and drag down the price. I would not agree with that. They are not going to do that. I am very proud of the sawmills we have in Ireland because I see the massive amount of money they have expended - hundreds of millions of euro creating jobs at home, turning a raw product into a multitude of uses to the highest of standards and exporting across to England and up to the North. It is great to see it. It is great to see our natural resource being turned into fine products that are up to the highest of standards. We have a job of work to do, including the haulage people and the contractors who will actually harvest this timber and bring it out. However, we only want it to be brought out as it is ready to go to the sawmills because we do not want it to be losing weight and losing income for the farmers who own it.

It is very upsetting, of course, especially for an older person who goes out to see his or her lovely forest flattened to the ground, and it looks awful, and that person thinks it is a disaster. It is not, really, because it is still connected to the ground in the majority of cases and it is not really losing value, and those people will be taken care of by their forester and the contractors that will come along. It might look bad and it might seem bad, but they still have a valuable crop, especially if it is of a certain age, if it is over 25, 26 and 27 years. Yes, of course, I will

not deny that if it is younger forestry, if it is 15 or 16 years old, they do not have the weight on the timber and if that timber is knocked, yes, of course, that is difficult.

One thing Senators will be asked, and I want them to know, is that there is going to be a reconstitution scheme. It is not there at present because we needed to be sure of all the analysis of the data before we could actually announce it. We cannot say what we will compensate unless we know the scale of the problem first. Therefore, people will ask what will happen when they take out their timber now and whether they will miss out on a grant to plant again. No, they will not. They are perfectly entitled to take out their timber and, yes, they can retrospectively apply for the reconstitution scheme when it will be in place, and it will be in place. I just hope we will be able to put together the money to make it strong enough to take the harm out of having to replant. Senators might ask why people would need the replanting grant now at a time when they would not get it otherwise. Quite simply, it is because of what I just said about how some of the timber might not be heavy enough, and if people are getting a cheque in the hand from the sawmills for their timber, they do not want to have to be spending too much of it replanting to get themselves back to where they were in the first instance.

The ash dieback, of course, has been a big issue. The reconstitution scheme continues. Those affected can avail of the climate action payment. To date, almost €3.56 million has been paid out on that. I have been visiting situations on the ground. One thing we have heard an awful lot about are the ESB outages. I know that is of great importance to all Senators because many of them have seen the trouble this has caused in the constituencies they are from. People like the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, are doing excellent work to ensure the corridors that need to be provided will be provided. We need to ensure the landowners will be consulted and compensated if at all possible. We just have to try to get that job of work done.

Senator Paul Daly: I welcome the Minister of State to the Chamber today. I am really enthusiastic about his enthusiasm, and I can vouch for it. I am a veteran of the previous two agriculture committees. I am the only one who sat on the previous agriculture committee with the licensing issues, in particular, that were ongoing. If there were a league table for topics discussed by the agriculture committee, forestry would have topped that league hands down. Although he was not on the committee, the Minister of State used to frequent most of those meetings as a non-member. I am delighted to be able to report to anyone who was not watching those meetings that his attitude and approach has not changed now that he has been elevated to the position of Minister of State. I am enthusiastic about that enthusiasm, if that makes sense.

This is vitally important, and I have scribbled notes the Minister of State can verify, but a word I have highlighted at the top and which he mentioned five times is "confidence". The Minister of State's biggest job of work at the outset of his new role is to reconstitute confidence in the sector and the people on the ground - the farmers, landowners and people in the private sector whom we want to bring with us on this journey and who we want to plant trees so that we can meet our targets. I do not like being critical. I am solution driven. I am not going to rehash all the problems, but there were problems, as the Minister of State rightly said. People's confidence in the sector was shattered and still is to an extent. The Minister of State's first and biggest job is to get people's confidence back, and if he can get confidence back in the sector, he will be halfway to square one because he has a big body of work to do. I am not being critical in any way of anyone who went before him, but he has a big body of work to do to get to square one. That is a big ask of any one man, but I know and have confidence that he will do that. I welcome his attitude towards it.

Something might have to sell to get the confidence back. There is always a debate, and it ends up coming down to emissions and climate targets. One would think the only thing a tree did was sequester carbon. Trees are a major part of good biodiversity. Forests and woods play a major role in our tourism industry. Timber is an unbelievable asset in our building trade. The last three never get mentioned, however. It is always about sequestration. I agree wholeheartedly with the Minister of State about where we can and cannot plant trees. The buzz phrase the last time was the right tree in the right place for the right reasons with the right management. I would agree with the Minister of State that maybe we were not putting the right trees in the right place. If we are to get the private sector and the farmers back confident and enthusiastic, we have to open up some of what I would call poorer quality land. We had €1.3 billion invested the last time in the forestry programme. It had to go to Europe to be approved for state aid. However, not only did it come back approved for state aid, it also came back with a list of environmental small print about peaty land and how we could not go to X, Y and Z - the Minister of State knows them. Like him, I would question that. It is an area that needs to be revisited. If we cannot open up all our land for forestry, we are not going to meet our targets.

On the targets and the 8,000 ha, last year it was 1,600 ha. We are getting closer to what might be achieved this year with the returns on the year to date so far. However, when we are coming in at 1,600 ha when it is meant to be 8,000 ha, how are we going to balance that book at the end of the day? For our climate targets, we have in one column 8,000 ha of forestry that is balancing something that is emitting in the other column. If we do not have the 8,000, which we are not going to have, how are we going to reduce the emissions column? Who is going to suffer down the line? Do we need to be looking at that at this stage? There are questions that need to be asked.

I do not know if the Minister of State said it today, but it is in documentation I have read, that there are 6,000 ha that are ready to go. Will they be planted? There is a lack of confidence because of what has gone on - the shenanigans that have happened, for want of a better word - over the past four, eight and ten years. People who applied for licences three, four or five years ago only got them last year or at the beginning of this year or whenever. Have they moved on? Has anybody done a survey as to whether the 6,000 ha that are ready to go and that are licensed will be planted, or is that just another figure we are using to balance an equation that may not be a realistic one?

I read a couple of weeks ago in *The Journal* that the EPA has now said there could be anything up to a 7% reduction in agricultural emissions based on the figures. It was using a standard European or worldwide figure, but when it gets to more Ireland-specific figures, it has actually admitted that what we have been calculating or using as our emissions could be at least 7% less. How will that affect our sums going forward?

Let me mention the few things the Minister of State specifically mentioned. With regard to the storm, I welcome the fact that he set up the windblow task force immediately. I agree we can take positives out of this. It is not the end of the world and not a matter of negatives, but I have a few questions about replanting. I saw a forest whose condition was hard to believe in that, while the outside trees were all still standing, those in the centre were all down, showing how nature is an amazing thing. If there is to be removal and you make a roadway to replant the trees, will saplings survive in a mature forest environment, which may be the habitat of larger animals, which may have different biodiversity and where life may not get through to the extent expected? It may not just be as simple as taking out one tree and putting in another. Maybe the farmers and growers will need a little research and help on this one. The matter may not be

straightforward for the reasons I have given, including the environment, large animals, different biodiversity and the lack of sunlight. We may need to put a bit of thought into this going forward.

The Minister of State can come back to me on some of these points and does not have to answer today. One of the last initiatives we dealt with at the last agriculture committee considering forestry was the additional support provided under the reconstitution and underplanting scheme, RUS, for ash dieback. I remember there was divided opinion as to whether what was on offer – the €5,000 CAP payment the Minister of State mentioned and the additional money for clearing sites – would be enough. The Dáil came to an end and we did not have any more meetings, so the Minister of State might update us on the feedback on the additional supports.

When we mention dieback, we have to mention biosecurity and the bark beetle. If we have learned anything from the ash dieback scenario, it is that we need to keep out foreign diseases. With the storm damage and repair work, there is a lot of talk about machines coming in from Europe and elsewhere. We need to be extra vigilant about biosecurity and biodiversity. We have to keep the bark beetle out at all costs.

As I said about land, there is an argument made that when peaty soil is disturbed when sowing trees, it releases a certain amount of carbon and that this amount may not be weighed against the sequestration of the tree. When people are doing the sums, do they take into consideration the biodiversity and other benefits of the tree? Do they take into the equation the displacement of concrete by timber at the point of end use? Considering all these advantages of a tree, maybe a little carbon loss at planting might not be bad at all. If we opened up a lot more land that is not now eligible, as the Minister of State said, we would get back the confidence of the farmers and reach the required acreage.

Senator Rónán Mullen: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit. I welcome his officials.

This is an area in which I have a developing interest because I am involved in helping a loved one with a forestry application. In that regard, I thank people for the support I have got. In making inquiries, I was very grateful for the assistance received from the Department. I acknowledge Mr. Delaney in this regard and also the Minister of State.

As is often the case when you are more directly involved with a matter, you come to realise the many issues people face. I have had occasion to speak to people in forestry. I thought I would take this opportunity today to put on record some of the concerns I am hearing. I realise the Minister of State is not hearing about them for the first time. Indeed, they are concerns he will be very well aware of. I have heard him speak eloquently about some of the issues. I am speaking now particularly about the world as seen through the lens of people involved in forestry and forestry professionals, who talk genuinely about the bureaucracy. One person said his pet hate is that when dealing with the Department, it is not always the same person who deals with his queries, meaning that each time he has a subsequent query, he must start afresh with a new person, who may have to rehearse or become familiar with the issues all over again. When it comes to the administration of bureaucracy in the best sense, there are decisions that have to be made on how tasks and work are apportioned, but can more be done so officials will have what some professionals would describe as a little more ownership of particular applications, be they for felling, roads or afforestation, the result being that those in forestry would deal with the same person constantly when going through the various phases of inquiry?

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It has also been pointed out to me that some inspectors could be more amenable to landowners or could work with people more, perhaps on preplanning consultations and talking to people in this regard. This is an area that the Minister of State has addressed at Talking Timber and so on. An example given to me was of somebody putting in an agroforestry application and who needed an assessment. It had to do with the hen harrier. The farmer had to pay €1,000 for an ecologist's report but then, when the ecologist gave the green light, the farmer failed the assessment because of soil type. Such farmers are left wondering whether they could not have been asked to obtain the ecology report only when it was established that there were no other grounds to fail anyway. When something like what I have described happens, it leaves the person feeling their money and time have been wasted unfairly. The situation is such that the person does not get a refusal but maybe an invitation to plant an alternative type of tree, leaving him or her feeling the whole application is being kept in limbo.

Another example given to me of an issue that causes frustration concerns where a farmer is told, in respect of a particular project, the county council requires a planning application to be made, whereas the professional involved knows or finds rightly that the council does not want to deal with the issue at all. The professional, as predicted, will say they do not want to deal with the issue at a planning level and urge applying for an exemption, but the farmer might not be able to go for an exemption because he or she will have been told by the inspector that a planning application is required. These are the day-to-day frustrations that arise. In some cases, there can be a very good reason. We all tend to see these things from our personal point of view when dealing with them but it may be that, in each and every case, there is a reason. However, it is fair to say that there is a sense on occasion that there is not the flexibility or sense of practicality needed to help things to progress.

We are at a point where the expected timeline for an assessment for afforestation is six months, or nine months if there is an ecological aspect. I believe I am correct in saying the latter. Some of my correspondents asked how it will be possible for the State to plant its target of 12,000 ha per year if it is to take six or nine months to get approval. I am not saying there is not another side to these questions but it is important that they be tabled. The way it was put to me concerned our talk about ensuring greater speed in the handling of applications for asylum and getting the period down to three months. It was stated that if we can manage something that concerns people's lives in three months, surely an application connected to forestry, being something of a less weighty matter, can be addressed with even more dispatch. As I implied, I am very open to hearing the other side of the arguments.

There is also a perception concerning broadleaves. The position is right and proper and the schemes now encourage the growing of broadleaves. Obviously, we have to note the colossal damage done by Storm Éowyn. The view that is quite widespread is that the premiums are simply not enough to get going the kind of forestry business required, given the value of land and indeed the demand for it, not least because of the nitrates arrangements. The question being asked is in the context of ash dieback, where the vast majority of broadleaves were ash and there has been a huge decline in broadleaves in the overall volume of native woodland. A lot of that ash will go into Sitka spruce in second rotation. In some areas, land could be up to €20,000 an acre. We know an ash forest may be worth €2,000 an acre. One farmer said in the context of what people do around the second rotation that if there is no premium, farmers would be better off grazing goats.

Could a more targeted approach be taken into the future? Perhaps there could be higher premiums where the State wants particular things done and has particular types of forestry it

wants to achieve such as, for example, in sensitive areas. Perhaps premiums could be run over a longer term and a lower premium provided in areas where farmers could plant whatever they want. These are the kind of issues that have been raised with me. As I said, I wanted to put them on the record today and to hear the response of the Minister of State if possible, in what is admittedly a limited amount of time available to him.

I wish to acknowledge, in the context of the recent storm devastation, the fact that many people were left without power for a long time. Great efforts have been made in that regard, but I had to raise in the Seanad in recent weeks the fact that some people were without power for an unacceptable amount of time. I also want to note the good work being done by Teagasc in its ongoing support for forest owners impacted by storm damage. That is my summary of the issues I want to raise with the Minister of State today. I do not intend to use all of my time. I will leave it at that. I will be very grateful to hear his response.

Senator Paraic Brady: The Minister of State is very welcome to the House. I am delighted to see him as Minister of State in charge of the sector at this moment in time. Coming from a rural area, he understands at first hand the suffering and pain the recent storm caused to rural communities, private landowners and forestry in general. I compliment him on meeting people in County Cork recently and engaging with a number of stakeholders in the forestry sector. I believe he has engaged with many personally, on which I compliment him.

I am sure everybody is aware of the following facts. As of 2022, an estimated 800,000 ha, or 11.6% of Ireland, was covered in forestry, compared to an average of 39% in Europe. Almost half of our forestry is in public ownership, mainly Coillte. Nearly one-third is made up of broadleaf, according to statistics from the Department. In terms of afforestation rates over the past three years, 1,652 ha were planted in 2023, which is a decline. Some 1,573 ha were planted in 2024. As of this year, 691 ha have been planted. This sends out a message that what is happening at this moment in time is not working.

People are fearful of planting trees. The Minister of State understands where this fear comes from. When trees are planted in rural areas, communities are decimated. The small shop and school are decimated. There was a campaign in Leitrim a number of years ago, Save Leitrim, and there were objections to planting in Leitrim because of the marginal land that it is. Unfortunately, that became the norm and spread throughout the whole of Ireland. This is a sector that needs to grow. The only way it can grow is by putting money in place to make sure it is viable for people to see a profit by the end of the year, whether a pension scheme, privately owned business or whatever else.

Let us be very clear in this House. Everybody is talking about climate change, our targets and what we have to meet. Our carbon credits are valuable, not only to the State but to farmers. If farmers are compensated for carbon credits, then and only then will we meet our targets. Let us be quite clear on that. If we compensate a farmer in the correct manner for soaking up our carbon credits for us, then and only then will people invest in our forests. That will create jobs and everything else.

There are 22,000 private forest owners in this country. Approximately 1,800 are affected by windblow at this point in time. Most of the affected areas are Sligo, Leitrim, my county of Longford, Cavan, north Meath, Roscommon and Galway because they are areas of marginal land. That is why they were planted over the past number of years. Unfortunately, we have seen the effect of that decision with the windblow.

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Some 26,000 ha of land have windblow. I stand to be corrected but I believe there are about 2.4 or 2.5 years' worth of forest on that ground. I have grave concerns. Our sawmills are capable of dealing with this and I agree with the Minister of State that the best place for our timber at this moment in time is on the ground. Unfortunately, farmers are panicking because they feel they are losing a percentage of the timber by weight.

Ireland has 11% forestry cover at the moment. The national target is to reach 18% by 2050. This means planting 8,000 ha per year. We are currently struggling to plant 2,000 ha per year. We need clarification on peaty rich and mineral rich soils. The new CAP reform from Europe states that those with peaty rich land will not be allowed to plant. As we know, a lot of regions I have mentioned have peaty rich soil. It has grown timber very successfully in the past. Trees such as Sitka spruce have been grown in the soil. There is no reason why such trees cannot grow again. We need a package to be put in place in order that the soil can be replanted.

If there is a thinning licence at this point in time, does that mean the land can be clear-felled? I need that question answered. Any standing timber under a clear-fell licence should not need to be cut at this moment in time, and I urge the Minister of State to address that point. If it is standing, it is growing in value every day of the week. The task force needs to provide clear information. We have drone footage from all over Ireland and know every forest that is standing at this moment in time, as well as forests with windblow. If a forest is standing and has a licence, there is no need to cut it down because it is growing in value day by day. We need to deal with what is on the ground first before we start taking down stuff that does not have windblow.

I refer to the Minister of State's commitment to the reconstruction scheme. He may not be able to answer this question today but does that refer to replanting for stuff that has windblow for a period of up to 15 or 20 years? Will it deal with all affected planting, including mature areas with windblow? Is there a percentage involved? If, for example, there is 20% windblow damage on a mature forest will the farmer receive a full package of replanting? Will somebody who has a planting that is 15 years old with 30% windblow, all of which has to be removed, get the full package?

Will there be percentages in the reconstruction scheme relating to the number of years the planting has already grown? That is important because some plantings have not matured but are out of the scheme and will be cleared. Other plantings have a higher monetary value and can go for sawlog and so on. Most farmers will pay higher percentages on sawlog. Will the scheme balance out that growth year on year?

The biggest bugbear is that the mills in this country control the price of timber. I am sure as a result of the Minister of State's dialogue with the mills they will hold the price of timber to a moderate value and that it will not decrease. The method for calculating the purchase price of timber all over Europe is by weight. Timber loses approximately 5% on the forestry floor on a monthly basis. Every other mill in Europe purchases timber by volume. After timber is purchased by a mill, by weight, it is sold by volume at the other end. If one harvests timber in Europe the weight of timber goes on the head of the harvester so everybody knows the value of the timber as it is cut by the harvester. In this country, timber is paid per weight on the way into the mills. Clarification on this matter would alleviate the issue. Farmers would not panic because their timber could stay in the forest because it will be paid on the harvest head of the forestry. This is very important and people might not get this. If farmers are paid on the head of the harvester they will not panic and the timber will stay in the forest. This is something I came up with. A perfect example of permanent deals is the fact Coillte, a semi-State body, sells

timber by volume, not weight, whereas a private owner sells timber by weight only. This means any delay in the movement of timber from woodland to the sawmill will incur a financial loss to a private owner.

Before I finish, in regard to the ash dieback problem, the question of whether there will be a compensation package for local authorities to deal with some of the ash dieback along roads has not been clarified with them. I hope some of my colleagues will speak about the ESB and maintaining power lines. I thank the Minister of State for his time and look forward to his response.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Garret Ahearn): I thank the Senator. The next slot is for Sinn Féin. Senator Collins is sharing time with Senator Tully. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Joanne Collins: I welcome the Minister of State. Forestry should be a key part of Ireland's response to climate change, supporting rural communities and protecting biodiversity. However, the reality for many forest owners is one of delay, financial loss and frustration. One major ongoing issue is ash dieback. Although the Department has the reconstitution scheme for plantation owners, there is no financial support for farmers and landowners with ash dieback on their hedgerows. Dead and dying trees along public roads are serious health and safety hazards, as we saw during Storm Éowyn when the roads were blocked for days and power lines were brought down, leaving homes without electricity for weeks. Sinn Féin is calling for a specific grant scheme to assist farm owners and landowners in safely removing trees before further storms cause even more damage and disruption.

This is only one part of the wider crisis. Storms Éowyn and Darragh caused devastating damage across the forestry sector with an estimated 26,000 ha affected, most of which now needs to be urgently felled. The Minister's task force is apparently drafting an action plan but forest owners need immediate practical support and not more reports. We cannot allow valuable timber to lie and rot on the ground while the forest owners have to shoulder the loss.

Another problem arising from the storms is the destruction of private property adjoining forestry, such as boundary fences, sheds and gardens. There needs to be a clear and fair scheme in place to provide support for these landowners who have suffered damage through no fault of their own. A major factor in the length of time it took to restore power after these storms was the difficulty in accessing the lines through the forestry. The corridors and setbacks around critical infrastructure such as electricity, communications and the water networks are too narrow and poorly maintained. Sinn Féin will call for the Department of agriculture and the ESB to work together to widen and maintain these corridors properly to protect essential services from storm damage.

I will also highlight the huge challenges farmers face when trying to manage their forests. Over the summer recess I met a group of forest owners in west Limerick. One of the landowners explained how he noticed ash dieback affecting his forest in 2020. He applied for his felling licence. He had a buyer lined up to buy the ash trees to make hurleys and any timber left over would go into furniture. By the time he received his felling licence in 2023 the dieback had affected every single tree in his forest so he was out of pocket by €50,000, on average. There is no grant that will cover that loss. Now, if he is to fell the entire forest when he eventually gets a contractor - the majority of contractors are taken up with forestry at the moment - he will have to get an ecological report. I assume that report would have been done when he originally received the grant to plant the trees so he will now have to pay another €2,000 to get the same report done to take away the trees. A few things just do not make sense in this. Years of invest-

ment will be lost with no proper support to replant or recover from this. This is not a unique experience; it is widespread across the country. The licensing system is too slow and bureaucratic. It is driving people away from forestry exactly when we need them.

Looking ahead, I want to raise an important issue about the GAEC 2 standard under the new CAP. Some 30% of Ireland's peatlands are under forestry, mainly monoculture Sitka spruce plantations. Research shows planting on drained peatlands actually releases more carbon than it stores. The process of draining, planting, harvesting and replanting peatlands is contributing to carbon emissions, not reducing them. Afforestation on peatlands must stop. We must develop a plan to restore existing forestry peatlands back to natural boglands to serve as a true carbon sink.

I will turn to the carbon credits, which I heard my colleagues speak about, and the ownership of carbon credits stored in Ireland's forests. For more than 30 years, Irish farmers have invested their time, land and money in planting forests, often encouraged by State policy. Who owns the carbon credits linked to those forests? Will farmers and forest owners have rights to the carbon credits of their forests or will these be captured by others? Looking forward to the EU emissions trading system in 2030, will forest owners receive carbon credits for existing forests they planted over the past decades or will the benefits only apply to new plantations?

One of the serious risks is posed by bark beetles. The eight-toothed spruce bark beetle poses a devastating risk to the forestry sector. If the Government fails to ban the importation of affected timber and forests are wiped out, will owners be fully compensated? What risk assessment has been carried out? What is the estimated cost to the sector if infestation takes hold? Crucially, why was it the Scottish Government that halted timber exports to Ireland when the larch beetle spread, and not our own Government and Department of agriculture being proactive? Given past failures, what specific steps is the Department now taking to prevent the importation of any other dangerous beetle into Ireland? Forestry owners have invested in good faith. They deserve action, fairness and real support from the Government, not empty words.

Senator Pauline Tully: The percentage of land that is under afforestation in Ireland compared with the EU average has already been mentioned. Ireland is way below where it should be, at below 12% when the average is 39%. We know how important afforestation is as part of the solution to climate change and in addressing carbon emissions. The previous programme for Government set a target of 8,000 ha per year to be afforested. We fell way below that, with not even a quarter of the target reached. This means we are playing catch-up on those targets because the targets set for 2030 and 2050 were dependent on reaching the targets set in the years from 2021 onwards. We need a robust plan that sets targets we will actually achieve to allow Ireland to catch up and ensure we will not be fined by Europe because we are not reaching our targets. We are in danger of being fined if we do not have a robust plan in place.

I want to talk about afforestation in west Cavan and Leitrim. A lot of that is hill land and peatland. I agree with my colleague who said we should not be planting on peatland and I disagree with others who said we should. Peatland that has forest on it needs to be returned to peatland because we are losing more carbon than we are saving.

As the Minister of State mentioned in his opening speech, there is resentment and mistrust among farmers about afforestation because they have seen the concentration of forests being put on land where there was no benefit to the local farmer or to the local community. We need a plan that works for everyone and for the environment. It needs to be regionally balanced; it

should not all be concentrated in one or two counties. It also needs to be balanced in terms of species. We must maintain a robust timber industry but we also need forever forests that are full of our natural woodland and allow those to mature.

The recent devastation caused by storms Éowyn and Darragh, particularly in west Cavan and Leitrim, was dreadful. It took the ESB crews weeks to get through the forests to repair the power lines. We need to see the Department of agriculture and the ESB working together to plan and ensure there is a corridor maintained either side of lines that is wide enough to ensure that, if a tree falls, it will not bring down the line and cut electricity for weeks, causing a lot of hardship for people. We need to ensure our electricity, communications and water networks are protected from storm damage. The 26,000 ha of forestry that was damaged during the storm needs to be clear-felled and extracted as soon as possible before it becomes worthless. The Minister of State said there is a plan in place or that one is going to be enacted very soon. We need to see that sooner rather than later. There are also issues for farmers with land adjoining forested land. They encountered damage where trees fell on building and fences and so forth. They need to be compensated and included in any action plan.

I want to talk about investment companies and some of the larger farming enterprises buying forestry. Especially in Cavan and Leitrim, they are outbidding the local farmers and then they are not there to take responsibility when something goes wrong such as the damage from Storm Éowyn. Communities feel abandoned and that they are left to clean up the mess. Something should be done to make it a fairer system so that enterprises cannot come in from a different part of the country or from a different part of the world outside of the country and buy up what they deem poor land to offset their emissions while not thinking about the local community or local farmers.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Garret Ahearn): Before I call Senator Noonan, I welcome Teresa Murphy, a sister of Senator P. J. Murphy, to the Chamber. As we all know in this Chamber, you cannot get elected without the support of your family, so I hope the Senator is looking after you today.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: I also welcome Teresa to the Chamber.

I welcome the Minister of State to this important debate. I never had the formal opportunity to wish him the best in his tenure as Minister of State. I know he will hit the ground running. Any time I have had the duty to call him on issues, he picked up the phone straight away and dealt with the issue. I do appreciate that. I know he has a busy portfolio.

I am going to raise a couple of points and questions. A number of Members mentioned peat slides. One of the first tasks I had as Minister of State was to travel to Drumkeeran in County Leitrim in 2020 when the bog slide took place at Shass Mountain. Watching 25-year-old Sitka spruce, which look like Christmas trees, sliding down the mountain showed me we had really a serious problem with forestry in Ireland. We saw trees of that age that had no number-value whatsoever sliding down the mountain in a bog slide event. It stressed the urgent need to reform our forestry policy. My colleague and former Member of this House, Pippa Hackett went a long way with the forestry strategy and I hope the Minister of State will continue that trajectory. It shows the scale of the challenges we had. The really significant challenge is that a very limited amount of land in this country is suitable for commercial forestry. That is something that is being borne out in the land use review.

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Between storms Darragh and Éowyn we lost 26,000 ha of forestry that was flattened. Of that, 14,500 ha was on Coillte estate and 11,500 ha was private. I welcome the Minister of State's commitment to the windblown forestry reconstitution scheme and to looking at the markets for windblown timber.

Looking at the report of the Climate Change Advisory Council, I ask that we get certainty on the LULUCF targets as they relate to windblown timber. Are they going to be credited to Ireland? I understand we are going to fall short on targets in many sectors. Perhaps LULUCF may come very close to meeting our targets under existing strategies. Is the LULUCF target for windblown timber going to be accounted for positively in terms of our sectoral emissions? I do not expect the Minister of State to answer that today but it is important because it could be an added benefit to the State from what was an awful national tragedy.

I welcome the Minister of State's commitment to agroforestry. It is an important sector and perhaps even more so as we look towards reductions in the herd. There are opportunities there for landowners. I welcome the new MSc programme in agroforestry set up by the National Organic Training Skillnet. There is huge potential in this area. I welcome the Minister of State's comments on this in his opening remarks. There is potential around collective land use practices, combining trees with crops and animals. That could deliver significant ecological and economic interactions between trees and agricultural components as well as co-benefits to climate, nature and water. I welcome the Minister of State's commitment in that regard.

The potential that exists to expand our native woodlands for delivering co-benefits in terms of flood mitigation, climate and nature, and water quality is critically important. Those schemes could be of huge benefit not only to the country but also to landowners who have pockets of native woodland on their land who could look at expanding those over the next number of years.

I have raised on a number of occasions in the House Coillte's regrettable decision to abolish or get rid of its not-for-profit division, Coillte Nature. I have read numerous reports, most recently the Coillte Forest Estate Strategic Land Use Plan 2023 to 2050, in which Coillte Nature is given a specific role in nature restoration in its work, the Dublin Mountains makeover being an example. We are embarking on a nature restoration plan, so why was this decision made? The senior Minister, Deputy Heydon, basically said there was nothing to see here, that Coillte would embed its work on biodiversity into its main strategic operations. I do not see how that is possible. Coillte Nature was doing very valuable work. It won an award in the RDS a few weeks ago for its work. It is a regressive decision by Coillte. I ask the Minister of State to take that up with Coillte in future meetings. Some of the work the National Parks and Wildlife Service has done, such as on hen harrier welfare, co-management of sites, looking at co-designing and redesigning sites for nature, and removing forest in areas where there is a nature benefit, is something that could still be developed but it needed that dedicated Coillte Nature division to carry out that work. I ask the Minister of State to give consideration to that.

6 o'clock

The issue of biosecurity was referred to by a number of Members. I stress the importance of local nurseries for indigenous planting of native trees and native stock. I did some contracting work for Coillte many years ago, harvesting native tree seeds, from ash, spindle and other species, around the country. It was most enjoyable going out in the autumn to harvest seeds and bringing them to Coillte to have them brought on. Part of our solution in biosecurity should involve our indigenous stock and local provenance. That is something we should look at in ash

dieback and some of the research being done, particularly in the UK, where they are leaving standing ash trees in local areas to see if there is a resilience to ash dieback. We should give consideration to this here. It is our native tree and it is hugely valuable from a cultural and biodiversity perspective. Those of us from hurling counties appreciate its value more than anyone. We should look more towards research. I think there is hope for ash trees. We should put more into research to try to manage the problem.

Regarding the point that was made about cutting down roadside trees, it should be about resourcing local authorities to better manage roadside trees. That could be about doing assessments about pruning and reducing them rather than removing them completely. I see widespread removal of trees from the countryside. I mention this in terms of research on fire blight as well.

I welcome the work that is being done. I urge the Minister of State to visit the fantastic team at Hometree, who have done fantastic work on local nurseries and growing native stock. Marina Conway from Enniscrone in Sligo is doing fantastic work in championing agroforestry as well. If the Minister of State gets an opportunity to visit Hometree, he will see the innovative work being done there. I know he is very active and is great for visiting places, but he should, during his tenure, visit them. I wish him all the very best in his tenure.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I welcome the Minister of State to the House. I will pick up on a couple of the points that have been talked about during the course of the debate. Coillte has been a focus for me for a long time. The Minister of State may or may not be aware that I have put forward proposed legislation on the mandate for nature, which was about changing the mandates of Coillte. Coillte is the largest landowner in the State, owning and controlling 7% of the land. Unfortunately, we have seen over a number of years policies in Coillte that have moved away from native trees and increasingly towards more and more Sitka spruce. We have seen the term time for wood decrease. We now import all of our telephone poles because those need to be trees that have a longer lifespan of 60 years, whereas we are seeing trees with a 30-year lifespan being increasingly used in forestry. Crucially, there is a short-term mindset in Coillte. That project is a really good example of it. With respect to the previous Government, to simply say, “Let’s have a non-profit bit of Coillte”, is not an adequate solution. Rather, we should be looking to shift the outdated mandate of Coillte, which is left over from the eighties. Coillte is very much a commercial forestry business. In the shareholder letters sent by the Government to Coillte, phrases like “cash generative” are used. It is not just value for money being talked about but short-term delivery of cash as the priority for Coillte rather than a longer term delivery of value for money or value for the State.

I would love an opportunity to meet and engage with the Minister of State and discuss with him the shifting of the mandate from it being the business of forestry on a commercial basis to one that is more sustainable economically, socially and environmentally. When we think about that, it is actually very solid. We still have the economic bit, which is important. We have to deliver economically through our forestry. However, if we are saying are they delivering for local communities and society, the decisions and choice we make might be different. For example, we know the scandal when there was all of the outrage about going with a large multinational, with Gresham House investors, rather than engaging with local partners. If the Government were to say you can look for the economic return but you have to do it in a way that is socially sustainable, then it would be done in a slightly different way. Similarly, in environmental terms, it would mean that not only would we be delivering and achieving what we need to achieve in terms of climate, first and most important, as other speakers have said, and

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in terms of biodiversity, pollinators and all of the rest that it is going to deliver for us, but also it would be the kind of thing that would be a bit of insurance for ensuring Ireland has credibility when we go to the next round of big forestry policies. We know there were huge delays in the previous forestry programme, which will expire in 2027, within the term of this Government. A lot of it was the feedback from the European Union at the time and some of what was said, and I looked at all of the correspondence back in November, related to Ireland having too much of a business-as-usual approach.

When you look to the 8,000 ha, and we have heard it talked about a lot, and I will come back to Coillte in a minute, the balance is really off, because there was 250 ha of broadleaf and 250 ha of birch or alder. Agroforestry, which I was delighted to hear the Minister of State mention because it is something that should get a lot more support, was pinned for about 100 ha. Meanwhile, the mixed high forest, which is basically Sitka spruce, was 4,645 ha. We cannot be saying we are doing agroforestry as well when we are doing 100 ha and doing 4,600 ha of Sitka spruce. I will come to that in a minute. This is where I think we need a better form of thinking about it. We need to increase and improve the premiums people get when they are delivering on broadleaf and long term. They should be based on the carbon aspect - that is one part of it - but it should also be based on what they are doing for biodiversity and how they are delivering what I have called the ecological care credit. I know there are lots of farmers around the country who are doing really good work - the riparian riverside scheme is a really good example - and they should be rewarded for it properly, rather than having schemes that benefit massive commercial investors who land in and land out.

Going back to the socially, environmentally and economically sustainable aspect, one thing we learned from Storm Éowyn is that Sitka spruce is a liability when it comes to sustainability. We saw the 11,000 ha of Coillte land that got badly damaged and we saw that Sitka spruce became more damaged. One of the earlier speakers mentioned the phenomenon whereby the edge of the forest was still standing and the centre was gone. I can tell you why. It was because a lot of the edge of the forest is where they stick the broadleaf and, in the middle, you will find large swathes of Sitka that did not and does not stand up to extreme environmental events. That does not just go for those environmental events like the storm. If we look to what happened in Killarney with the terrible forest fires a couple of years ago, what was really interesting was that many of the indigenous trees weathered it. They did not go down in the same way, they were not damaged in the same way, and they had a resilience when it came to those forest fires. There is a lot in terms of the sustainable planting of trees. The right trees in the right places is important, and trees that are actually going to survive and thrive in that location is also important.

There is an opportunity, maybe within this scheme, but certainly going in to the next scheme that is coming and where we will be going back to the European Union - I hope not spending a year and a half messing with it this time to try to get a new scheme or to try to get out of the state aid rules again - to have a really different shift. Someone mentioned those who are looking to replant after Storm Éowyn, the difficulties they face with trees on the ground and all the rest of it, and that they might need help to do it in a different way. I would say we should look to a premium for those who use that as an opportunity to shift towards a different model of forestry. We should look to particular incentives that encourage those who may have relied on the Sitka spruce and a short-term cycle with regard to its harvesting to invest in a longer term product and for them to feel confident that the State will pay them and reward them for that. It is an opportunity.

These are the policies that can be brought into place in general, but the big lever we have

is Coillte. If Coillte gives a lead or shifts the way it does forestry, that will be the easiest and quickest thing we will have done with regard to delivering on our climate and biodiversity targets. It will also give leadership and create capacity within the forestry sector that all individual farmers and individual actors will benefit from. What we have seen, however, with the closure of that Natura project, is that Coillte cannot do it if it does not have the right mandate. If Coillte is being told to deliver a little bit of cash this year and that the Department wants to see a return in three years' time but is also being asked to be the engine for a new form of and approach to forestry in the future, there is a contradiction there. I am urging the Minister of State to consider that issue of strengthening its mandate and giving it a mandate that will deliver. Doing so would make Ireland's case much stronger when it comes to accessing EU funds and exemptions in the future, for example. I would love to have the opportunity to engage with the Minister of State on that.

I will raise a couple of other brief issues. I am sorry to be saying so many bad things about the Sitka spruce, but I have a few more bad things to say. There is an issue with regard to pests, including the pine weevil. Other people have talked about ash dieback, but there is also an issue regarding the pests associated with it. Let us be a bit ambitious about our forestry and try to do something substantial. Let us create forests for the ages. Ireland used to have the kind of forests that they built cathedrals from. Let us not just produce forests that give us wood pulp and 20-year products. When we discuss carbon credits and sequestering carbon, we need to be clear and honest. A tree does not start to store carbon until 20 years in. If we are planting trees and cutting them down after 20 years, we are not actually delivering on that. We will get called out on that.

I look forward to further engagement with the Minister of State. I know he is interested in that social component and I hope the environmental component as well. There is much that could be done to improve how we do forestry and learn from some of the unfortunate incidents that have happened over the past year.

An Cathaoirleach: Senators Scahill and Ahearn have indicated they wish to share time. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Gareth Scahill: I will not go back over a lot of what my colleagues have said. One of the big things I encountered on Roscommon County Council before Storm Éowyn was the guidelines required for clear corridors in forestry for power and telephone masts and the proximity to roads and the enforcement and monitoring of those guidelines. That is one thing I wish to raise with the Minister of State.

A few of my colleagues mentioned the issue of roadside trees. Local authorities need to be resourced to treat roadside trees or to remove them. I know some of my colleagues do not agree with the latter approach. Tree management plans are what local authorities are following at the moment, but there is a safety element there. Many local authorities need assistance with removing these trees.

As for trying to hit the target of 8,000 ha of tree planting, I am looking at what has happened in other sectors and what other things we will need in that sector when we hit these targets. Arborists and arboriculture apprenticeships are something we need to promote right now in order that we will have the people on the ground to deal with this supply in a couple of years' time when the Minister of State hits the targets he is looking to achieve. Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board, GRETB, has a practical hands-on course in Petersburg Outdoor

Education Centre. It is very well subscribed. I would welcome the Minister of State visiting that facility at some stage.

We spoke about the 25,000 tonnes of trees that came down during Storm Éowyn. I may have that figure wrong. The mills are getting through that supply at the moment but, as there is an oversupply, there is a reduction in the actual price forestry owners are getting. My colleague, Senator Brady, made me aware that, for the first time in the history of the State, private forest owners have exported sawlog. A total of 3,000 tonnes of sawlog left Dundalk Port destined for Belgium last weekend. This was done without help or assistance from the Department. Forestry owners did it by themselves to achieve a fair price for their product.

Senator Garret Ahearn: I welcome the Minister of State. In the limited time I have, I cannot talk on every issue I would like to address. There is a particular issue I wish to raise, however. In his opening contribution, the Minister of State spoke about wanting to be a Minister of State who delivers and that if he does not deliver, then forestry fails, he fails as a Minister of State and the Government fails. That is true and the right way to look at it. There is one thing he can do that will differentiate him from previous Ministers and the Department in general and it relates to ash dieback. We still have people throughout the country who rightly feel they have been let down by the Department over a number of years. They believe they have not been heard.

Yesterday, I was on the land of Mary McCormack, just outside Killenaule in County Tipperary. She has been growing trees for years. It is a livelihood. She and her family absolutely love it. However, she has been dealing with ash dieback for the past ten to 12 years. It has been a real strain on the family. They feel as though no one understands it and no one listens. Mary told me yesterday that the Minister of State, Deputy Healy-Rae, has been vocal on this in recent years, he understands it and he gets it. Today he has said he wants to be someone who delivers. These people feel that they have been forgotten about. They do not believe the scheme is enough or that the Department really cares about them and their issues. They are looking for someone to show leadership on this issue. I am calling on the Minister of State to do just that. They have been crying out for this for ten years. They have faith in him to do it and to support and protect them. This is their livelihood. They love what they do. Some of the excuses that have been given about why things cannot be done and trees cannot be cut relate to habitat, birds and wildlife. Yesterday I drove through Mary's land. In the area affected by ash dieback, there is no habitat whatsoever. In the area where the trees are growing perfectly, you can hear birds, see rabbits and see everything going the way it should be going. That is not happening, however, where the trees have ash dieback.

I ask the Minister of State to visit Tipperary in his time in office, but also to listen to these people who have been vocal for the past number of years with the Department but feel as though they have not been heard. They are holding out for him to make a real difference for them. All they want to do is to grow trees and do it right, but also be supported and protected by the Department.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: I welcome the Minister of State to the Chamber. I have been hearing good reports back from my colleagues on Cavan County Council. I hope he means to go on as he has started.

In January, Storm Éowyn left behind a trail of destruction that was unprecedented in scale. Half of this devastation was on private land, meaning thousands of farmers, rural families and

small landholders saw decades of investment wiped out in a matter of hours. These people are now facing immense financial strain and a great deal of uncertainty, some having invested in planting their land as a future investment or a private pension. One forestry owner, who is a constituent of mine, recently shared that his timber was five years off maturity when Storm Éowyn hit and the impact on the market has been devastating. Before Christmas, sawlog was fetching approximately €100 per cubic metre but now prices have dropped to approximately €50 or €60. This is a direct result of supply and demand. There is suddenly a massive increase of timber available and nowhere near enough market capacity to absorb it. This has taken away the freedom for forestry owners to choose when to harvest, picking a time when prices are fair and returns justify the years of work and patience. That option has now been taken away. They are being forced to sell into a collapsing market because of a freak weather event and a lack of timely Government intervention. They are also losing out on their yearly supplement. What kind of compensation package can the Minister of State achieve for these farmers, to include the loss of earnings for the years until maturity?

I want to raise the issue of reckless and sometimes dangerous planting by Coillte, in some cases on important historical landmarks and monuments. Coillte is in the business of making money, of course. It is not in the business of managing facilities or amenities. I feel that for some sites, such as Killykeen, County Cavan, in Cavan Burren Park and Dún a Rí, which are amenity parks, Coillte cannot manage them effectively and that they should be signed over to the National Parks and Wildlife Service or even to some county councils. I hear the bell. Is that all I get?

An Cathaoirleach: I will give you injury time.

Senator Rónán Mullen: She is only warming up.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: Like everybody else, I want to mention ash dieback. I have been a county councillor for nine years. It is especially urgent along roadsides. Also, there are instances of antisocial behaviour in forests owned by Coillte. It is a big problem in a lot of the small amenity parks. We might consider park wardens or something along those lines.

An Cathaoirleach: Anois, an t-Aire Stáit. I thank him for coming to Seanad Éireann to discuss this important topic, which has been well explored. He took on the portfolio in a very difficult time, especially with the storm that levelled hundreds of acres of forestry. I thank him for his ongoing work.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Healy-Rae): I thank the Cathaoirleach and as I do not believe I have had a proper chance to do this, I wish him every good luck in his very important role. It is very unusual to have neighbours who are so near to each other being so near to each other again here in the Chamber. I hope I can deal with this properly in the time I have. I will go quickly.

An Cathaoirleach: I will give the Minister of State injury time as well.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I want to deal with everything properly. I really appreciate the Senators' engagement. I will start with Senator Paul Daly. With regard to the 6,000 ha, he made a very important point. They have approval and the Senator asked what is happening with them. Myself and Mr. Barry Delany, who is the head of forestry, are working on this already. In the very near future - I am committing to have it done within the next four weeks - we will be contacting every person who has approval and asking why they have not moved. If we need to

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do something to persuade or encourage them, we will be doing it. These people have a licence. They are ready to go. I am scratching my head and wondering why they are not planting. The Senator was very right to raise that.

With regard to the licences, to make it clear in case I did not do so already, previously, foresters had to get a thinning licence to thin and then a clear-fell licence to clear-fell. I merged those two licences into one. If Senator Mullen has a thinning licence, he can now clear-fell on the strength of it, which saves bureaucracy and time. The result is that 60% of all the timber that is on the ground now, toppled or whatever, already has a licence. It was said by a few people that this was a matter of urgency and that it is urgent to get the timber out of the forests. That is factually not correct. Of course, if you have a forest and it is knocked, you want to see it gone and turned into money. However, it is not dying, rotting or wasting. If timber has been cracked, of course that is a different thing. I want to make that clear. A number of people said it is urgent. Of course I would like to see a timeframe of a year and a half to 24 months, but that is the type of time we are talking about. The forest is not on fire, it is knocked and it is still worth money. I thank Senator Paul Daly for his kind words.

Senators Tully and Brady raised the amount of planting. This year we are improving but I am not standing here boasting about what we are doing. We might be doing better than we were doing, but what we were doing was a disaster. At present we are only a small bit better than a disaster. Do not think I am standing here saying we are doing great and asking for a pat on the back. That is not the case. We are coming from a very bad place.

Senator Mullen raised the applications and said that when a person is dealing with an official in the Department, he would like for that person to take ownership of that application. I do not want them to own the application for too long. What I want them to do is turn it around and send it out with "approved" on it. I would like for them to know who they are dealing with, but not to be getting to know them too well that they would have to be contacting them a lot or anything like that.

One thing I did not say earlier was that I have an ambition that every forest in Ireland that is privately owned will be certified. Certifying a forest will give people an interest in their forest again. I am not looking to put an imposition of money on them. My aim is that the Department will be paying for it. Any person who has a forest will go to their forester and ask them to do up a management plan and get it certified. We will have a national certification scheme. Senators will know this, but for anyone who is listening, certification is like being Bord Bia-approved for your beef. It is like quality assured status for your forest. It will be a good thing and will give people an interest in their forest. It will give them pride in it. Most important, when they are cutting it and sending it to the sawmills - at present the sawmills can take uncertified timber from a forest but if it is certified, it is all the better. That is very important.

On the broadleaf trees, Senator Mullen said the premiums are not enough. I have dealt with that already through the issue of agroforestry. The Senator referred to the ESB power lines. Those points were very well made and I will come back to them again. With regard to the premiums for broadleaf trees and agroforestry, Senator Malcolm Noonan and I are very good friends but sometimes we do not agree. He said that agroforestry could be a help when it comes to things like reducing the national herd. There is no intention by the Department of agriculture to interfere in any way with our national herd. We do not want to do that.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: I am not saying it is happening.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I just want to make that quite clear. From the Minister, Deputy Heydon, down to me and the other Ministers of State, we and this Government have no intention of reducing the national herd. We will promote agroforestry and make it a good use for people such that they can have cattle, sheep and a piece of land that is covered with agroforestry and get their premium for that as well. This Government is for farmers. We are for our national herd. We are supporting people who worked hard to build up a herd of cows and maybe a beef herd. This Government is supporting them in every strong, possible way.

Senator Brady described people being fearful of planting and the carbon credit issue, which I did not deal with. The carbon credits are very important. In my infinite wisdom many years ago, I automatically assumed that carbon credits were going to be a big thing of the future. I thought we would own them, could trade them and that they would be a valuable commodity. Unfortunately we have not got there yet. It is something we all aspire to. I believe that every farmer in the country, whether they have forestry or not, should be entitled to carbon credits. Many people would try to give the impression that farmers are doing some sort of damage to the countryside because they are farming it. Making a living producing food is a very necessary thing for all of us because otherwise we will all die of starvation. The issue of carbon credits is something I hope will be looked at in the future. The Senator's points are very well made.

A few Senators have mentioned the price of timber. Even today, I had the pleasure of visiting a very extensive sawmill. I was very glad to call to this business, which has existed more 100 years or more. To see the employment and expertise, and to see what they are doing on the ground with our product, and the massive amount of money that they have invested, the confidence they have in the sector, makes me really feel that we have an obligation to ensure they will have timber in the future and will not have to go to Scotland. In Scotland, 17,000 ha a year is planted compared with the paltry amount of planting done here. Scotland recognises the value of timber and the contribution that timber makes to its economy.

I am very glad with the way sawmills here operate. I am not afraid that they will pull down the price. They know they are in this for the long haul. The providers of their produce are their farmers. If sawmills do anything to blot their copybook at this time and lose the confidence of farmers, it will be bad for them in the future. These people are not fly-by-nights. They are not people who set up a business but are gone in no time. That is not the way. They are in this for the long haul. In general, they are generational workers. They are families and, hopefully, their families in the future will run these sawmills so they will do the exact opposite and try to keep the prices up.

Senators Collins, Tully and Higgins mentioned peatlands. This is where honesty is the best policy. I am not going to come in here and let on that I agree with somebody who says something that I do not agree with. I just do not operate that way. I am sorry and I do not mean to be rude or anything like that but if their policy with regard to peat was taken to its logical conclusion, in Ireland today, whatever amount of forestry we have, we would have about 80% less. If the policies that the Senators would like to see were there at that time, we would have a crazy situation. If the rules that are applied even today were applied before, we would not have any forestry or timber. That would affect the sawmills that give valuable employment and the construction industry were we want the timber. We would still need timber in Ireland but from where would we get it? We would have to import timber and that does not make sense.

Whether we like it or not, to get timber you have to stick a tree in the ground and it has to grow. If we are going to continually restrict where we go, and we are on 30 cm, and if we are

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going to be married to 30 cm in the future, then, quite simply, we will not have enough timber and will have to import it from Scotland and do nonsensical stupid things like that. I do not want that to happen. If we are talking about protecting the environment, is it not a lot better to have our own produce here in Ireland? That is why I and my officials in the Department will look at planting more peatland. Farmers want to plant peatland. Farmers do not want to plant their green ground because they have worked so hard to get the bit they have. They broke their backs and bones to make the land green and they do not want to plant trees on it but instead use it for grazing. We want to use green ground for grazing but plant trees on rough ground and peaty ground. I am afraid that this is just one of these things on which we cannot always agree. Am I out of time?

An Cathaoirleach: We are four minutes over time.

Senator Gareth Scahill: Keep going.

Senator Rónán Mullen: Burning it up.

An Cathaoirleach: The next Minister is waiting outside.

Senator Rónán Mullen: Give a bit of injury time.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I do not want to intrude on anyone's time. I am very sorry but I wanted to be respectful to everybody by answering all of the questions.

When we are talking about the future of forestry, and I am particularly saying this when I hear people inside here saying, "We do not want to plant peat soils", that does not make sense because, like I said, look at what happened before. If we did not plant the peat soils before, we would have no forestry, timber or anything now. I am sure there is logic in what the Senators have said but I cannot see it.

I have one thing to read out about the ash dieback, and I apologise that I forgot this earlier, so please allow me just this. I was very taken with the lady who said she was so upset that she felt let down by the schemes. Approvals under the new ash dieback reconstitution schemes continue, with 1,077 approvals for nearly 4,000 ha issued to date. Those forest owners who replanted under any of the ash dieback reconstitution schemes can also avail of the additional climate action performance payment, CAPP, of €5,000 per hectare. That is very important. To date, CAPP payments for an area of 1,419 ha have been paid, amounting to €3.5 million. Since ash dieback was first identified, a total of €16 million has been paid in respect of site clearance and the replanting of ash forests. I encourage any forest owner who has yet not cleared an affected site to consider applying for the reconstitution scheme. The message I have for the people who are unhappy with the ash dieback situation and the way they have been dealt with is please come back to the Department and engage with us. If there is something more that can be done for them, it will be done. I do not want to see people upset or losing out on money. It has been an upsetting time for them and I understand that, but we are there to engage with them. If we can do something for them, we will, but if we cannot, then we are sorry.

I thank the Cathaoirleach for his indulgence and the extra time.

An Cathaoirleach: I would always give a neighbour a bit of injury time.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Thank you, a Chathaoirligh.

An Cathaoirleach: That concludes statements on forestry.

Revised National Planning Framework: Motion

Senator Pat Casey: I move:

That Seanad Éireann approves the Final Draft Revised National Planning Framework, as approved by the Government on 8th April 2025; a copy of which was laid before Seanad Éireann on 22nd April 2025 together with the Strategic Environmental Assessment Environmental Report, the Post-Consultation Natura Impact Statement, the Post-Consultation Strategic Flood Risk Assessment Report, and the Appropriate Assessment Determination.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy John Cummins): It is great to be in the Seanad this evening. I spent four and half good years here as a Member, so it is always a pleasure to be back in the Seanad.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss and seek approval for the final draft revised national planning framework, which was approved by Government on 8 April 2025. The finalisation of the approval process for the revised framework plays a key role in delivering on our broader objectives across Government. It will allow the significant policy changes and other factors that have taken place since 2018 to be integrated into the planning system.

I will give a brief overview of the revision process, which began formally on 20 June 2023, when Government gave approval to commence the process of undertaking the first revision of the national planning framework in accordance with the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended. The revision process has provided for wide-ranging consultation and engagement with stakeholders and the public. It included the reconvening of the planning advisory forum and the establishment of an expert group, a cross-party departmental group and an environmental assessment technical steering group.

The draft first revision to the NPF and the associated environmental assessments were published in July 2024 and a national public consultation ran from 10 July to 12 September 2024. An information campaign, including broadcast, print digital and social media, also ran to raise awareness of the consultation process and to encourage the public to engage with the draft first revision. A total of 272 submissions were received during the draft consultation stage.

On 5 November 2024, Government agreed to progress and publish a draft schedule of amendments to the first revision of the NPF arising from the public consultation. On 8 April 2025, Government approved a final draft revised NPF following the conclusion of the environmental assessments. One of the key drivers of the revision process related to the need to reflect updated population and housing projections further to census 2022 and subsequent demographic changes. The revised NPF strategy sets out the need to plan for a projected population of 6.1 million people in Ireland by 2040 under the baseline scenario provided by the ESRI and a possible requirement to plan for a high migration scenario of 6.3 million by 2040.

Taking into account pent-up demand, the strategy sets out a need to plan for the delivery of approximately 50,000 additional housing units per annum nationally to 2040. This will result in the need to plan for more housing delivery than the capacity currently available within develop-

ment plans across the country.

The strategy sets out the spatial planning policy approach to accommodating projected population growth to 2040 in a manner that contributes to delivering balanced regional development with an even split of growth between the eastern and midland region and the southern, northern and western regions combined, based on a city-focused and compact growth pattern of development that will reverse the patterns of sprawl that have been a feature over recent decades. In terms of identifying locations for further growth and housing development at scale through transport-orientated development - a new element of the strategy - it is critical that planning for these opportunities commences immediately and is aligned with phased infrastructure investment.

Another critical element of this revision is the inclusion of new policies regarding renewable energy development, in particular, the inclusion of regional renewable electricity capacity allocations. This is to facilitate the accelerated roll-out and delivery of renewable electricity infrastructure for onshore wind and solar generation development in addition to the supporting grid development intended to support the achievement of the national targets set out in the climate action plan. The spatial planning system can play a key role in mitigating against climate change through the reduction of carbon emissions in sectors such as electricity and transport through the combined integration of land use and transport planning to support the use of public transport, cycling and walking. Areas of focus such as district heating, biomethane and the circular economy are also flagged for particular attention. The NPF revision will ensure that our planning system can adequately reflect these important Government objectives.

The revised NPF also acknowledges the clear link between climate action and the potential for investment generation and employment, including in connection with the offshore wind industry and green technology. The NPF highlights a need to plan for jobs and employment at locations that are integrated with the planned distribution of population and aligned to the development of the green economy and smart specialisation strategies that allow all regions to focus on their economic strengths.

The final draft revised NPF continues to support the overall development of urban and rural areas and deliver strengthened and diversified rural communities consistent with Government policy. Regarding supports for rural towns and villages, the draft revised NPF has been updated to take account of the town centre first policy approach and other Government initiatives such as the rural and urban regeneration funds, croí cónaithe and the continuation of the village renewal scheme and the vacant homes action plan.

Regarding the rural economy, the circular bio-economy, rural enterprise, the agrifood sector and diversification are strongly supported within the plan. The development of tourism and other industries suited to rural areas is addressed throughout the document aligned with the Department of Rural and Community Development's Our Rural Future policy, which is the Government's blueprint for rural development. Single rural one-off housing will also continue to be supported in line with programme for Government commitments. The final draft revised NPF continues to reflect the commitment to achieve the objectives set out in the 20-year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010 to 2030 and retains the policy support for the implementation of language plans in Gaeltacht language planning areas, Gaeltacht service towns and Irish language networks.

Approval for the NPF revision will ensure that the most up-to-date policy position becomes

formally embedded as national planning policy with which the regional strategies and local-level plans are required to be consistent. The revised NPF will provide the basis for the review and updating of regional strategies and local authority development plans to reflect matters such as updated housing figures, projected jobs growth and renewable energy capacity allocations, including through the zoning of land for residential, employment and a range of other purposes. The plan-led approach to development further enhanced under the Planning and Development Act 2024 will continue to provide the basis for the identification and prioritisation of infrastructure delivery. The enhanced delivery of key infrastructure projects is a core objective of Government and a particular focus has already been placed on identifying blockages and ensuring they can be removed. In this regard, priority actions from the programme for Government are being progressed, including the establishment of the new housing activation office. This office will enable infrastructure to support public and private housing development while providing solutions to infrastructure blockages. It will draw on a new towns and cities infrastructure investment fund established to support strategic investment in housing-orientated infrastructure.

Noting the urgency associated with the scaling up of housing delivery, the Minister, Deputy Browne, and I have already signalled the intention to issue a policy direction to local authorities following finalisation of the revision process to enable rapid implementation of the updated planned housing requirements, by local authority area, into the current development plans. This will give a clear direction to be followed by planning authorities in updating their plans allowing for all stakeholders in the planning system to have clarity on the location and scale of development proposed to meet our housing need across the country. I look forward to hearing the contributions of Senators this evening as we discuss a critical piece of policy, namely, the NPF and its revision.

Senator Pat Casey: I welcome the Minister of State and wish him the best of luck in his role. Hopefully, he will bring the energy he brought to the Senate when we had housing debates to his current position. Fianna Fáil supports this motion to approve the revised NPF. This framework is set to create the conditions necessary for accelerated housing delivery across Ireland. This approval follows a thorough revision process of the NPF that has been ongoing since June 2023.

This milestone decision sets a clear direction for Ireland's growth and development up to 2040. It establishes a policy environment designed to unlock potential and address critical priorities, particularly in housing, infrastructure and climate action. The revised NPF will directly inform the broader Government policy agenda. It will guide the actions of a wide range of public and private entities, including home builders, the renewable energy sector, infrastructure agencies and domestic and international investors. Ireland is in dire need of a significant shift in housing delivery. With the revised NPF and the new Planning and Development Act being implemented this year, we are ensuring that the essential conditions for accelerated delivery of new homes are embedded within our planning system.

The need to accelerate housing delivery is paramount and this is where I wish to make some observations and express concerns regarding the NPF, particularly the implication roadmap that will follow this publication. This roadmap will contain the prescribed details necessary for effective execution. As a Senator who participated throughout the entire process of the current NPF, I vividly recall my engagement with Niall Cussen, my concerns around the population target, the population distribution, its misalignment of infrastructure availability, the necessity for local flexibility and the top-down approach in adopting county development plans. I will raise some of the issues I raised then that are pertinent to the discussion today. These concerns

must be addressed in the roadmap to ensure successful implementation. I was a member of the Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage when the first NPF was introduced. The significant difference between the NPF and the national spatial strategy was that it was put on a legal footing. This was significant. After that, the Office of the Planning Regulator was set up. This was the enforcer of the NPF. This has led to complications and possibly over-prescribed figures and too much of an onus on a core strategy and a table within a development plan. I have no issue whatsoever with the general policies within the NPF. The strategy of compact growth whereby we want to try to achieve 40% nationally - 50% in the cities and 30% elsewhere - is a good policy. However, that policy is protracted and takes a lot longer. We are dealing with brownfield sites and we could be dealing with sites with environmental issues. It takes a lot longer to deliver on that. Perhaps when the Government is looking at reviewing its housing policy, it might look to see what is necessary to actually deliver that because that is where we would create a sustainable environment.

In the area of population, I recognise that the revised NPF projects an additional 950,000 in population growth up to 2040. This does not correlate with objective No. 42, which is to deliver 50,000 houses per annum per year to 2040. The average household size according to the census was 2.74. If we even take a lower figure of 2.4, that is a population of 1.68 million. There is a significant difference there and we need to try to focus in on how we address that. I already accept that the roadmap can introduce the headroom space, which in the current one is 50%. However, even if we look at the 50% that is in the current one, in my constituency and in Leinster, the population exceeded in 2022 what was projected in 2026. We cannot allow that to happen again because that has unintended consequences, specifically in Wicklow. I will probably focus in on that later. Around that population, we must get it right. Let us not make the development plan so prescriptive that it is preventing the delivery of housing.

With regard to the distribution of population, Niall and I had a humdinger on this many years ago and I still cannot accept it today. Fine, I fully understand and appreciate we need our levels - level 1, level 2 and level 3 towns. However, there is absolutely no point in allocating 32% of a county's population growth to a level 1 town that does not have the infrastructure required to deliver that population growth, while in the same county there are other towns that have the infrastructure available and that can deliver but are capped because they are at a much lower percentage population growth. We need to focus in and take account, and maybe leave some discretion for our local councillors to manipulate those figures. In Wicklow, we have now refused five significant planning applications for residential developments, two of which, sadly, were on core strategy, because they exceeded the population target of that town. In Wicklow town now, where we are, we have refused two planning applications on R2 lands despite all the R1 lands having been completed on the very same site. We are currently now doing a variation of the Wicklow town environs plan, which is only allowing us to grow the population by an additional 3,000 until 2031. I can tell the Minister of State right now that those houses are already being built, so before we even adopt this new plan, our population figures are out of date. In fact, when we adopted our 2022 county development plan, 16 of our 21 towns were already exceeding this 2031 target. We need to make sure that does not happen again. We need to make sure we allocate population growth to where we have the infrastructure today. There is no point, while we have it, waiting ten years and then using it. The other example was in Arklow in Wicklow. We just spent €149 million on a brand new wastewater treatment plant. It increased the population growth by another 22,500. The NPF is telling us we can build 80 houses per year for the next ten years. At that rate of going, it will take us 154 years to reach the capacity of the new wastewater treatment plant. That is the example. We should be able to

take the population from where we cannot deliver it into areas where we can deliver it.

With regard to the whole area of democracy, this has completely removed the power of the councillors. We have left them with absolutely no flexibility. I will revert back to the Wicklow town plan that has just been amended. Councillors proposed 14 amendments to that county development plan. Eight of them were to zone R2 lands to R1 because we had already reached our targets. Every one of the 14 amendments the councillors proposed has come back from the Office of the Planning Regulator, OPR, with the administration saying it exceeds core strategy. It comes back to this single table in a document that is so prescriptive. Even though those towns I mentioned have the services and transport, we are saying they cannot build houses there because they are exceeding the population target within that document. The language that is used in the roadmap will be critical if we are going to overcome this because there are opportunities. We need to sweat the assets where we have the assets. We need to follow the population where the assets are today, not where they might be in ten years' time, while preventing towns to grow.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I understand Senators Murphy and Kennelly are sharing time. I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins. I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan.

Senator P. J. Murphy: I thank the Minister of State for joining us. What we have before us in this revised national planning framework is a document that holds the potential to transform our nation's landscape, economy and communities for generations to come. We must consider our fundamental duty to the citizens of the entire country, focusing not only on those who wish to live in an urban setting but also those who choose to live in the many rural towns, villages and farms in this country. This framework is an opportunity to create a sustainable, inclusive and thriving environment where every individual can flourish regardless of the area in which they choose to live. The national planning framework is not merely a set of guidelines; it is a vision for our future. It reflects our collective aspirations and the shared responsibility we carry as the stewards of the Irish landscape.

In recent years, we have witnessed the challenges posed by rapid urbanisation, climate change and evolving social dynamics. These challenges demand a comprehensive and forward-thinking approach to planning. The revised framework addresses these issues head-on, offering a roadmap that balances economic development with environmental stewardship and urban growth with rural revitalisation.

One of the most commendable aspects of this draft is the commitment to sustainability. It emphasises the need for a low-carbon future advocating for smart growth and green infrastructure. By prioritising renewable energy, enhancing public transport and protecting our natural resources we are not only safeguarding our environment but also paving the way for a resilient economy that can withstand the tests of time. Furthermore, this framework promotes inclusivity. It recognises the necessity of engaging with communities across Ireland, ensuring their voices are heard in the planning process. This is crucial as we forge ahead. We must listen to the voices of all communities, urban and rural, and ensure their needs are met in terms of planning, transport, energy, water and wastewater infrastructure. Every community has unique needs. Some areas, such as my constituency in south-east Galway, are greatly in need of investment in wastewater infrastructure, while in other areas we see massive deficits in the energy supply networks. It is our responsibility to honour and integrate these needs into our planning efforts.

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In terms of energy security infrastructure, my colleague, Senator Kennelly, will speak in more detail on the LNG terminal proposal. I am also delighted to see that this amended plan makes specific reference to the Galway wastewater strategy, which covers the city and areas such as Moycullen and Athenry. Regrettably, however, I have noticed the absence of any specific reference to the greater Galway main drainage scheme, which was intended to serve my area of south Galway. I ask the Minister of State to engage with Uisce Éireann to see to it that this critical scheme is progressed to site selection stage as a matter of urgency.

Overall, however, this framework emphasises the importance, in general, of regional balance. It seeks to distribute the growth and investment more equitably across our regions, thereby addressing the disparities that have long existed between the greater Dublin area and provincial Ireland. By doing so, we can invigorate our rural areas, create jobs and enhance the quality of life for all citizens regardless of where they call home.

7 o'clock

At the heart of this framework lies a crucial emphasis on the development of infrastructure, especially in rural towns, villages and settlements. These communities are the backbone of the nation. They are rich in culture, heritage and potential. However, they often face significant challenges due to underinvestment in critical infrastructure. The revised framework recognises that robust infrastructure is not merely a luxury. It is an essential foundation for growth and prosperity. Investing in infrastructure in rural areas - whether it be transportation networks, broadband connectivity or essential services - can dramatically transform the landscape of these communities. Improved roads and public transport links can enhance accessibility, making it easier for residents to commute and for businesses to thrive. Fostering inclusive dialogues with rural communities is paramount. It is essential we engage residents in the planning process to ensure their voices are heard and their needs are met. As we consider this vital document, let us remember that the decision we make today will shape the Ireland of tomorrow with regard to the infrastructure and amenities available and the shape of our future communities.

I have spoken on many occasions in this House of the importance of a focus on the development of infrastructure in rural towns and villages. I am glad to see that this framework puts an emphasis on this. For a long time, I have been of the opinion - and I continue to be - that before we can remedy our housing crisis, we must first remedy our infrastructure crisis. This planning framework sets out with a degree of certainty such aspirations and, while no plan is flawless, I am happy to support the adaptation of this plan.

Senator Mike Kennelly: I welcome the Minister of State to the House. I speak in opposition to the amendment proposed by Senators Cosgrove and Harmon, not out of convenience but because of my deep concern for the energy security and future of our nation. I stand in firm opposition to the proposed insertion that states “, subject to a clear prohibition on the development of a Liquid Natural Gas terminal,”.

This is not because I ignore climate change and the challenges we face, but because I refuse to ignore the energy realities that are already upon us. On 8 January this year, Ireland recorded its highest ever electricity demand of 6,024 MW. On that day there was no wind or sun and nature did not co-operate, yet the country could not shut down. Therefore, 80% of our electricity came from gas-fired generation. That moment was not an outlier. It was a warning, a clear reminder that until we complete the energy transition, natural gas remains essential and not optional. The National Energy and Climate Plan 2024 recognises that a continuous and secure

supply of gas is crucial. It is a bridge to a renewable future, not a detour from it, and as we strive for the clean, green ambition, we must keep the lights on, the hospitals running and our economy moving.

Let us now talk about real, documented risk. On 26 September 2022, three of the four Nordstream gas pipelines were intentionally destroyed. Less than a year later, on 8 October 2023, the Baltic gas pipeline suffered the same fate. It was disabled for six months by nothing more than a ship's anchor. These are not hypothetical scenarios. They are facts and they are warnings for any island nation that depends on a single point of entry. Today, Ireland gets virtually all its gas from the UK via a single interconnection. If that supply is interrupted by accident, sabotage or simply market pressures, the consequences will be immediate and catastrophic. In November 2023, the Department's security of supply review was published. Its conclusion was stark. If our UK gas supply fails, we have no backup. Protected customers will not be served. That means our homes, hospitals, schools and businesses would all go without heat and power. Let us be clear. This is not just about discomfort. It is about human safety, economic survival and national resilience. The ESRI has warned that such a failure would cost Ireland up to €1 billion per working day. That is not a typo. It is a nightmare scenario with a real price tag. There is only one solution that provides full protection. It is a floating LNG terminal or a floating storage regasification unit, FSRU, like the one proposed for Shannon. It is mobile, low-cost, quick to deploy and geopolitically flexible. It is our insurance policy and it is the only one that would ensure we are never again one broken pipe away from a disaster.

The amendment before us seeks to pretend that these facts do not exist. It is internally irresponsible, strategically dangerous and politically populist. Worst of all, it gambles with the lives and livelihoods of millions of Irish people. That is a gamble I will not be part of. A just transition does not mean an unstable one. A decarbonised Ireland must still be a functioning Ireland. If we are serious about protecting our people, securing our economy and reaching our renewable goals, we must support Shannon Energy as part of a broader responsible energy strategy. I urge all Senators to look at the evidence and risks and to do what is right for the nation's future, that is, reject this prohibition and support the resilience Ireland deserves.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I understand Senators McCormack and Conor Murphy are sharing time. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Maria McCormack: Statutory planning frameworks are an important part of the planning system. If we get them right, they provide a clear framework for the social, economic, cultural and environmental development of the State and the entire island. However, if the plan is not right, it will be an impediment to development.

While I welcome that we will have a debate and a vote on the revised draft planning framework, the process leaves a lot to be desired. This statutory plan is of such significance that there should have been an opportunity for committee scrutiny, with presentations from external organisations and opportunities for Senators and TDs to propose amendments. The consultation process was far too short. Reasonable requests for extensions of the submission deadline were denied and now the Government has come back with a *fait accompli*. It is a real shame and means that many of us in opposition will have no option but to vote against the plan in its current form. The Government could have made this an opportunity to reach out to the Opposition and to reach a consensus.

While the document has some merit, on balance the weaknesses and omissions mean that

it does not command Sinn Féin's full support. The plan has a number of fundamental flaws, in particular how it deals with predicted population growth, regional balance and development, tackling spatial disadvantage and the calculation of housing need. Predicted population growth is difficult. However, the way it is done in the national planning framework makes it more prone to error. A census is conducted. Two years later, the ESRI is commissioned to undertake a report. A year after that, the national planning framework review is approved. By that time, the census data are out of date and in turn the entire underlying assessment of the statutory plan is fatally undermined. This has an impact on all aspects of the plan.

Sinn Féin's view is that the national planning framework needs to be subject to a more timely review immediately after the census to ensure it is based on the most up-to-date information. The reliance on outdated data especially affects the national planning framework's assessment of housing need. The 2018 national planning framework was based on the 2016 census. By the time that plan was agreed in 2019, the data were already three years old. That means that the previous housing need assessment of an average of 25,000 new homes was hopelessly inadequate. The current draft, which estimates housing need at an average of 50,000 new homes a year, is simply flawed. It is based on 2022 census data and an ESRI report that did not examine unmet housing need with the existing population growth. This was not the fault of the ESRI but of the Government that set the terms of reference for the ESRI report. Significantly, the revised national planning framework document ignored the Housing Commission's calculation of the housing deficit. When this is taken into account alongside the ESRI's estimate of emerging demand, we would actually need at least 60,000 new homes per year. With each year it is not met, the deficit grows, as does the need. If the plan underestimates housing need, this will impact on zoning, critical infrastructure, transport, public service planning and, crucially, public and private sector investment in residential development. This is one of the most serious flaws in the plan and must be urgently reviewed.

Sinn Féin is concerned about the proposal of 50-50 distribution of the future growth population between Dublin and the east on one hand, and the rest of the State on the other hand. It is just not balanced. There is a view that this will continue an over concentration of development in the greater Dublin area to the detriment of the south-east, south-west, Border and north-west regions. Far greater attention needs to be paid to the views of the regional assemblies and elected representatives from these areas to ensure the population distribution is regionally balanced and that investment in infrastructure, economic development, public services and houses is targeted to achieve this balance.

Sinn Féin is also concerned that the plan, like its predecessor, is blind to the spatial distribution of social and economic disadvantage. It is vital that investment, particularly public investment, whether in employment, services, amenities or housing, is targeted at those areas that need it most. If you are not mapping the geographical distribution of social and economic disadvantage and in turn aligning with public investment and that need, you run the risk of reinforcing that disadvantage. There are many other areas that Sinn Féin is concerned about, but my colleagues will address these. Unfortunately, the plan in front of us does not meet the needs and on that basis Sinn Féin will not be supporting it.

Senator Conor Murphy: I will address what I see as some of the deficiencies in the all-Ireland nature of what should be included, and it is very much part of the national planning framework. From a previous role I am acutely aware of the enormous benefits that can be derived from real, deep and long-lasting all-Ireland co-operation and the effect that co-ordinated economic and social development can have in an area. That makes sense not just for people,

communities and businesses on both sides of the Border, but to unlock the potential of the island as a whole. While there are some welcome specific references to cross-Border initiatives and issues, in the round the revised national planning framework is disappointing when it comes to all-Ireland development, particularly given the timeframe involved with it. It is a missed opportunity, and perhaps a whole array of missed opportunities, around planning, managing population growth, balanced regional development, development of all-Ireland transport and energy infrastructure, unlocking the economic potential of the north west and the Dublin-Newry-Belfast economic corridor. I would be interested to hear the Minister of State's response as to what level of engagement took place between Ministers and officials from here with ministers and officials who represent the Northern Executive and Assembly across the range of departments. I suspect it was limited and I think, as a consequence, the document is deficient.

It is particularly disappointing that the issue of all-Ireland co-operation is only included in what appears to be summary form in chapter eight, *Working with Our Neighbours*, rather than integrated into every chapter in the plan. As my colleague referenced, this week the ESRI has launched its latest research report, which is the culmination of 15 previous research reports on a wide range of policy areas providing in-depth analysis on key areas such as health, education and the economy. One of its key findings was that cross-Border co-operation has the potential to improve skills development, employment opportunities, healthcare provision, efficiency of energy supply and help develop approaches to mitigate the effects of climate change.

Reports like that make an invaluable contribution and provide objective evidence to inform policy for systemic collaboration across the island. They have outlined the clear advantage of substantially upscaling North-South collaboration in existing strategic areas such as education, health and environmental policy, and in extending the remit of co-operation to include new strategic areas such as skills provision, foreign direct investment, labour market access and energy security. We have welcomed the Taoiseach's commitment to resourcing the next phase of research and to explore joining the FDI offering across the island as well as combining the capacity of the North with FDI in the South. The global economic turbulence we are now experiencing highlights that that must be a priority. I also welcome that the planning framework contains some of the spirit of the ESRI report, but it is lacking in detail. What ultimately matters in these documents, given the NPF's legal status, is the detail. The policy objectives 56 to 63 set out general statements on economic co-operation such as the Dublin-Belfast rail corridor, the north-west city region, co-operation on health, transport and infrastructure, the canals network and tourism. These are all steps in the right direction, but it is the lack of detail and firm commitments to a detailed plan that is most disappointing, as is the inability to have further consultation input that my party colleague referenced. All of that leaves us in a disappointing position that we do not have a real opportunity to have substantial input and engage with others with regard to the proposition of this document.

I turn to the Labour Party amendment. We will not support it, but we will not vote against it either. However, if we had been given the opportunity, we wanted to insert issues about the proposal on commercial liquified natural gas to ensure any proposition in this area is State led, is for emergency use only, does not increase gas demand, is temporary and functions in a manner consistent with the climate change Acts. While we understand the concerns outlined by previous speakers, we would have other ways to approach the same issue. We will abstain on that amendment. I welcome continued opportunities, and we will take whatever opportunities we can get to continue to make an input to this, but the consultation and opportunity for further input are limited and restricted. It is disappointing in a document with such far-reaching

potential.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Senators Cosgrove and Noonan are sharing time.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: I move amendment No. 1:

To insert the following after “That Seanad Éireann”:

“, subject to a clear prohibition on the development of a Liquid Natural Gas terminal,”.

While generally perceived as a document which sets the agenda for accelerated housing delivery, the draft revised national planning framework is concerned with all aspects of life, including a 26-page section on climate transition and our environment. Therefore, I bring forward this amendment primarily because of the recent policy reversal by the current Government with regard to the building of LNG infrastructure. There are three core considerations relating to energy in this national framework, namely, energy procurement, energy generation and energy storage. The overall ambition is to adhere to our legally binding target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 51% over the decade 2021 to 2030 and to achieve net zero emissions no later than 2050. This target should inform everything we do in the context of energy procurement, generation and storage.

The national energy policy referred to on page 132 of the framework insists that all energy policy relating to planning should be built on the pillars of sustainability, security of supply and competitiveness. We in the Labour Party support these ambitions and want to work with the Government in achieving a just transition to reach our targets. However, the ambitious target to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 51% by 2030 will be difficult to achieve as it is. The SEAI report of 2023 states that 85.8% of our energy still comes from fossil fuels, so we have five years to reach 51%. This target will be rendered completely impossible if we allow the development of LNG infrastructure, which also flies completely in the face of, and contradicts, all three pillars of the national energy policy.

The first pillar of the national energy policy is sustainability. LNG is high in methane, which is 80 times more warming than CO₂. If it were a matter of filling the terminal once in case of emergencies, it might be justified in some way to build a reserve, but it is not. LNG needs to be vented to maintain safety of this volatile explosive gas. We either vent the gas into the atmosphere, or into the grid, or we use it. We are obviously going to use it. Maintaining a seven-day strategic reserve requires six replenishments per year, each of 170,000 cu. m of gas, equating to an additional 500,000 tonnes of carbon per year. It will take five years to build a terminal and if we are to reduce our 2018 emissions by 51% by 2030, how does building this terminal make sense? Should we unveil a new piece of fossil infrastructure the year we are hitting the 51% mark?

This brings me to the second pillar, which is security of supply. This document states that the inter-island gas network has been extremely reliable since its introduction 30 years ago. At the moment, everyone knows that we have two gas pipe gas lines supplying natural non-fracked gas from Scotland. Inter-connector 1 lands north of Dublin and interconnector 2 at Gormanston. A third available pipeline from Scotland to Carrickfergus is also connected to the Irish gas network through the North-South network. The same document assessed the risk of a failure to each pipeline and the results showed that the failure risk for interconnector 1 is once in 49 years and for interconnector 2 it is once in 52 years. For two failures to occur at the same time is extremely unlikely.

The third pillar is competitiveness. LNG is consistently more expensive than piped natural gas - in fact, it is five times more expensive than natural gas. While gas is used to provide heating and hot water in some homes, its chief use in Ireland is being burned in power stations in order to generate electricity. However, once the initial capital investment has been expended, the cost of generating electricity from renewable energy sources is minimal. As I said, our commitments to deliver our climate targets and reduce emissions by 51% by 2030 are legally binding. They are accompanied by penalties for failure to meet these targets.

The Irish Fiscal Advisory Council and Climate Change Advisory Council described the Government's seeming willingness to pay these penalties as staggering. We could pay anything from €8 billion to €26 billion per year in penalties. If the Government allocates just 10% of the planned national overall spending budget over the next five years to climate action measures, this could be enough to halve our projected penalty costs. True competitiveness will be achieved by working toward self-sufficiency and becoming a net exporter, not importer, of energy. Spending money in the building of new fossil fuel infrastructure such as an LNG terminal is not an investment. Rather, it is a monumental frittering away of our climate and financial future.

I have other concerns about the framework document that I need to address. A number of county councillors from rural constituencies have contacted me to express their concern that the planning framework could drive another nail into the coffin of rural Ireland. For example, there is no acknowledgement of the ongoing humanitarian disaster in Donegal. The defective concrete block scandal, whereby a plan to restore thousands of homes in Donegal to a liveable condition is required, needs to be included. In parts of County Leitrim, to which I have referred in terms of the threat of fracked gas, there is widespread belief that the rural heartland of the county is being transformed into a sacrificial zone. The wholesale plantation of unsuitable non-native Sitka spruce now covers over 20% of all of the land in the county. There is a very real risk posed by future exploration of precious minerals such as gold and a fear that allowing the importation of fracked gas will be a Trojan horse for the exploitation of significant gas reserves under the county as a whole. Leitrim is being sacrificed.

These concerns need to be listened to. A chronic shortage of housing has been reported in the Gaeltacht, exacerbated by the proliferation of holiday homes and short-term lets. Housing in the Gaeltacht is not addressed in the framework. I live in Sligo, which, despite being a regional centre recognised in the framework as performing a similar function as a city in our region, does not receive the support it needs to grow and develop in a sustainable manner. The deficiencies in our rail network illustrate this perfectly. The planning framework should support our communities and promote genuinely climate positive infrastructure projects such as the reopening of the western rail corridor, allowing populations throughout smaller towns and villages in Sligo, Mayo and Donegal to commute to larger centres to work while being able to live in their own villages, supported by essential services such as schools, GAA clubs, primary health care centres and community centres.

I urge Members to support my amendment. This framework will last until 2040. If we really want to see a commitment to reach our climate action targets and not pretend that investing in fossil fuel infrastructure will meet that, we need to instead invest in balanced regional development by opening up the western rail corridor and improving links between Sligo and Dublin.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit. I will focus on some of the positives in terms of green initiatives in the NPF. I refer to the stronger focus on compact low-

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carbon growth, helping to reduce car dependency emissions, the formal integration of environmental assessments, including SEA and appropriate assessment, the national policy objectives aimed at supporting biodiversity protection, commitments on a new national nature restoration plan, which I know the Minister of State is leading on, policies of no net loss for biodiversity - it should be a net positive for nature - supporting green belts, urban green belts and blue spaces, commitments in alignment with the climate action plan and the biodiversity duty under the national biodiversity action plan. Commitments on transport orientated development are hugely welcome. I believe that approach is central to reducing private car use, lowering transport emissions and improving accessibility to jobs, schools and services. The requirement that 40% of new houses nationally would be within existing footprints is important. The Minister of State's colleague mentioned town centres first in terms of heritage regeneration. How does this square with a business as usual approach to rural housing?

The NPF supports the development of offshore renewable infrastructure, including wind farms, and places an emphasis on onshore generation. It reinforces policies and supports vibrant rural towns and villages and investment in local infrastructure. The NPF does not specifically mention LNG projects but it places a stronger focus on renewable energy development, highlighting the need for the accelerated delivery of renewable energy generation to meet climate targets and the Government's national hydrogen strategy.

I want to make a specific point on Uisce Éireann and water supply, and the midlands and eastern water supply project, which is referred to as the Shannon pipeline. That project will suck up all of the resources of Uisce Éireann. It will take ten years to complete and I do not think it is feasible. Where is the balanced regional development? We will continue to facilitate the expansion of Dublin through projects like this. I have significant concerns about that.

In terms of housing, the NPF sets a target of 50,000 homes per year, falling short of the 60,000 recommended by the Housing Commission. It does not include binding housing delivery mechanisms or legal accountability for meeting targets. It lacks binding targets for social and affordable housing, despite the clear and growing need we are all aware of in the House.

Planning remains too loosely aligned with employment centres and essential services and risks disconnects between housing location and community need. For those of us Senators based in rural Ireland, we see the NPF as business as usual in terms of lopsided development. I will support it, but I will also support the amendment put forward by my colleague.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I welcome the Minister of State. In considering this, I have to join with others in saying that given the length of time the planning framework will cover and how important it will be as a frame for all of the policy discussions and issues we will raise over the next few years, I regret that we have not had a proper process going through committees with an opportunity to engage and consider the collective wisdom we may be able to draw from Oireachtas Members of all parties and expert witnesses. There have been consultations, but we should take more time to consider the plan.

I want to look to a few of the key points, some of which have been addressed by others. I refer to social and affordable housing. There is concern about mixed development in the context of the LDA and others. It is not clear what that will mean. Will it involve profit-maximising development or social and affordable housing, and to what extent? We know from the recent articles we have seen there are those who bemoan that there may be a gap in the luxury housing market in terms of a recession. The actual gap is about the houses that people can afford to

live in.

We need social housing that allows those families who cannot afford to purchase a house or be secure in the unstable rental environment in Ireland to have foundations on which their families can build and grow and homes from which their children can go to school. We need to allow them to plan their lives. Our greatest social substructure is social housing that ensures every family can have a proper start in life. I regret that social and affordable housing has not been identified more clearly in the ambition of the targets. Others have mentioned that the plan falls short of what was recommended by the Housing Commission. There are disjoins. I acknowledge that this is not just about housing but one piece that was missing from Housing for All was the failure to acknowledge the positive reality, from my perspective, of migration and to acknowledge that it is part of the population change we have. At the time, Housing for All simply left out whole sections of people who need to be housed but were not featured within the plan and strategy. Then, when we had people coming through, it was treated as an emergency, rather than an actual reality of modern states. Migration is a reality and should be planned for just like other housing need and should be built into the picture, rather than being treated as an emergency at the fringes. That was missing from Housing for All, even at the time when we knew that Ireland had committed, rightly, to give support to those from Ukraine who were coming through. This needs to be planned for to ensure that our housing capacity is genuinely there in terms of where our population will be.

Another piece in terms of housing that notably is not coming through, despite being identified again and again as probably one of the single, earliest things we could do, is to really tackle vacancy and dereliction. There are not strong measures within this around tackling the extraordinarily high levels of vacancy and dereliction. I acknowledge there is reference to brownfield sites and existing footprints but these are very indirect. However, there are no robust measures that will tackle the issue of dereliction and the extraordinarily large amount of housing left vacant. Sometimes properties are left vacant as part of investment portfolios and not used as residences. When we talk about vacancy and dereliction, it is not just about the boarded-up houses in our towns and villages, it is also about having apartment blocks with apartments empty, because they simply are driving up the price.

There are some positive measures. I am glad the Minister of State has joined us because of his remit in terms of biodiversity. There is some hopeful language in relation to biodiversity in this. I was glad to see that the SDGs are mentioned in national policy objective 14 and biodiversity in national policy objective 88. These are quite strong references to biodiversity. This will be one where I will look to the Minister of State specifically, because it will be about how strongly the Minister of State interprets his powers in this regard and how he applies them. When the document says that this should be done in relation to biodiversity, it is important that it is not with regard to biodiversity at the fringes, but that there is an assertion of biodiversity sustainability being in the core design of the steps that are taken in the core projects. It should be central to projects rather than being at the fringes of projects. That will be crucial, as it cannot be the scatter of seeds at the end. The word “sustainable” is used constantly in the document. When we talk about “sustainable” it is important that we are clear that this interpretation should be a “sustainable” that matches the sustainable development goals. It should not just be “sustainable” as in “you can keep doing it”, but sustainable in the more meaningful sense.

These are areas where a robust interpretation will determine if those paragraphs and policy protections actually mean something. There are areas where I am concerned about contradictions. For example, national policy objective 32 talks about rural areas and investing in ICT

and in climate services. I am hoping that should read, “ICT related”. If that is to do with data centres then that is a problem because it is in total contrast to our climate goals. It is important when we see that language to know exactly what it means. One of the things not being acknowledged or properly addressed is the fact of very large energy consumers and what that does to our planning and to our energy piece. This is where I want to come to. I had a few other points but I will put them aside because I want to use my last two minutes to speak in support of Senator Cosgrove’s amendment. The issue is around demand and we have to be honest about this issue.

There is a driving up of demand when we look to having data centres and other large energy users that may use up to 30% of the electricity in the State. We constantly hear about the lights going out in hospitals but we do not hear about the risks posed by data centres and other large users. These are commercial services that in many cases, all they produce are ads that refresh every millisecond. They are vampires on our energy system and they are jeopardising the country’s energy security, in the long term. Let us be real and acknowledge that we are on a planet which has a limited period of time and a limited amount of space before it becomes so hot that people start dying in their hundreds of thousands, if not millions. That is where we are at. We need to be real and acknowledge that climate change is real, as are its impacts and costs. It will be hitting us if we contribute to it. Liquefied natural gas, LNG, has an 80% higher impact, that is, the impact comes sooner and is quicker. The reality is that most LNG will be gas that is fracked in the United States. That is where it is largely produced and the United States has left the Paris Agreement. We should not be setting up infrastructure that requires us to take one of the dirtiest fossil fuels in the world from a place that is not even measuring it or limiting it or making any effort to ensure that the way it is extracted does not contribute to the escalation of climate change. It makes us complicit in that and it is dangerous. I spoke about the disasters in the past in Bantry. There we saw deaths from the Whiddy Island disaster and others. We are talking about a very dangerous fuel, which as has been described, requires venting and all kinds of processes that will be taking place in Ireland. There is a reason we banned fracking in Ireland but now we are looking at bringing that in at a time when it will take a long time to be created anyway. It will compete directly with and undermine renewables. For example, British Petroleum has now said that it will abandon renewables and go back to focusing on fossil fuels because of this new wave of cheerleading on fossil fuels. If we choose renewables, we must choose renewables. I support the amendment. I think it is a responsible one and I hope that the Government would have regard to it in their policies.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: There are 13 minutes left and three speakers so I ask you to each take about four minutes. Next is Senator Kyne.

Senator Seán Kyne: I welcome the Minister of State and the review of the national planning framework being legislated for. The 2018 framework provides a basis for review and revision. It allows us to guide and tweak policy, based on the needs of 2025, while at the same time not reinventing the wheel. We need to plan for the million or thereabouts extra people that we will have in the country between now and 2040, never mind those who are already here, who we have to house, employ and care for. This is a very significant challenge. We all accept that growth is guaranteed and that we must manage it. We need to spread it out across the country to create and sustain communities, while at the same time ensuring that our five engines for growth, the five main cities, are able to drive economic development and be centres for innovation and creativity. The framework also recognises the crucial contribution made by rural areas and that they are central to the economic and societal development of the country. Initiatives

like the national broadband plan have given a new lease of life to rural communities. Flexible working has provided opportunities for people who live at home to commute one or two days a week, as necessary. This has been a game changer for many communities.

We need to continue the investment in our towns and villages to ensure that they are attractive places to live. The various rural development funds such as the rural and regional development fund, RRDF, have been central to this work and underpin the provisions in this framework. I also welcome the focus on linking the growth centres within the regions, such as Galway to Sligo to Letterkenny and Cork to Limerick, to mention just two. The framework's vision of improved transport links leading to better economic and social outcomes is welcome. It is not new thinking but it is good to see it as part of policy.

Turning to the west, the northern and western region is a region in transition. This means it has gone backwards regarding its status within the EU regions. That is not to say that every part of it. One could look at a town like Athenry or at Galway city and argue they have not gone backwards. The region as a whole, however, has. It is disappointing. It now ranks as one of the bottom 20 regions across Europe out of 300 regarding infrastructure and the gap between the northern and western region and our other two regions is actually growing. We are launching this new framework from a poor starting point. It is a challenging task to remedy that situation. We need to discriminate positively towards the northern and western region in terms of policy and resources. It is a sad state of affairs that we have two of the more prosperous regions in the EU and beside them we have an area in transition. That imbalance must be corrected.

Galway serves as the regional capital for the north-western region and involves a movement of people for business, education and health services daily. We simply must improve the transport links north and south. We must upgrade the N17 links within Galway and Sligo. We also must reopen the western rail corridor. We have talked about it for long enough. We need to see action on that very quickly

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: Hear, hear.

Senator Seán Kyne: It would be a game changer and I have been a long-term supporter of it.

Galway city is the earmark for the minimum target population of 122,000 by 2040. This would be an increase of 36,000. It is a tall order when one considers the traffic issues around the city and the lack of progress on the Ardaun concept, which was a new town that was envisaged back when Adamstown was being envisaged and commenced in Dublin. It is a new town immediately to the east of the city near where the motorway ends. We have not seen a lot of progress on this to be honest about it. One of the main necessary drivers to develop it would be a wastewater strategy encompassing that whole area and places like Athenry, Oranmore, Clarinbridge and Craughwell. That will take pressure off Galway city and allow it to develop as well.

Relating to the review of the development plans which are necessary to come to. These cannot take two years. A measure must be put in place to fast-track those in order that if there are to be an extra 500 people in a certain town, it can be done quickly and not take years to review plans, strategies and everything else like that.

Senator Joanne Collins: I welcome the Minister of State. I wish to take a moment to speak on the section on realising our island and marine potential. The current approach set out in this section is quite weak from a fisheries and seafood perspective, in particular the im-

portance of embedding the principle of consensus and co-creation between the fisheries, the offshore renewable energy, ORE, and environmental protection sectors on the formation of marine protected areas and the identification of future sites of offshore renewable energy and development.

There is little reference to seafood development. National policy objective 49 is the only objective referring to the entire seafood and fisheries sector and while it broadly covers a vague commitment to the sector, it is lacking in ambition. The focus of the chapter is on promoting the development of the ORE. The seafood sector has always recognised the need for ORE development but in a way that does not impinge on the livelihoods of the fishermen and aquaculture producers. While this continues to be recognised and discussed by the seafood-ORE working group and is referenced in the programme for Government, this document does not even make reference to co-existence with other marine users, including the seafood sector, or the importance of assessing potential impacts on fish stock and habitats from ORE development if approved in sensitive areas.

On aquaculture, some of actions and objectives in the national strategic plan for sustainable aquaculture need much more ambition and overall policy, such as the NPF, to realise the potential of the seafood sector. There appears to be lack of synergy with the national marine planning framework, NMPF. The NMPF recognises the important role of seafood production, fishing and aquaculture as a source of economic and employment activity, most notably, within those coastal communities that are more economically dependent on those activities than alternative sources of employment. Coexistence of aquaculture and ORE could be considered in the future as there are opportunities for aquaculture activities that should be explored.

The IFA aquaculture committee agrees that the development of offshore renewable energy is important to achieving Ireland's energy and climate targets. The ORE development could help to deliver positive, local, economic, social and environmental benefits. However, stakeholder engagement and consultation would be vital for this part in making this work. The aquaculture industry must be represented at any stakeholder engagement groups, relating to the proposed the establishment of any further proposed designated maritime area plans, DMAPs. Aquaculture provides an important social dividend by providing employment in rural, coastal and island communities through the sustainable production of high quality food with a low carbon footprint. The sector's contribution in sustaining vitality and in coastal areas must not be ignored or underestimated.

Senator Garret Kelleher: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit, an Teachta O'Sullivan, agus an Aire Stáit, an Teachta Cummins, a bhí sa Teach níos luaithe, as ucht teacht isteach chun an rún seo a phlé. It should be noted that Ireland is one of only a small number of European countries with a coherent and overarching plan for sustainable development. In general terms, I am supportive of both the revised national planning framework and Project Ireland 2040. With the significant population growth Ireland has been experiencing in recent decades and the challenges that this and future population growth presents in areas such as transport, renewable energy and climate action, it is vital that the national planning framework is comprehensive and inclusive of regional strategies, metropolitan area strategic plans and our 31 city and county local development plans. It is crucially important that the NPF specifically targets the delivery of key infrastructural projects that will dramatically transform the communities in which we live.

One concern I have relating to the NPF process to date is the lack of direct involvement from our three regional assemblies and the extent to which the suggestions made in the submis-

sions of the three regional assemblies were included in the final draft of the NPF. The principle of subsidiarity is based on recognition that decisions impacting on our regions are best made at regional level and likewise that decisions impacting on our counties, cities, towns and rural areas are best made at local level. This point was made in a recent Council of Europe monitoring report, which recommended that Ireland should seek to reduce the current centralised nature of government by looking to strengthen both local and regional government throughout the country.

One of the national policy objectives in the revised national planning framework, NPO 95, states:

Metropolitan Area Strategic Plans for the Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford Metropolitan areas and in the cases of Dublin and Cork, to also address the wider city region, shall be reviewed by the Regional Assemblies in tandem with the appropriate authorities and as part of a review of the relevant Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy.

I welcome the inclusion of this objective but I take this opportunity to stress the importance of backing up the objective with budgetary commitments, particularly for projects identified as key priorities across each of our regions.

From a Cork perspective, we have just begun a public consultation process relating to the emerging preferred route for our new light rail or Luas system. If we are serious about balanced regional development and the importance of strategic capital investment outside of our capital city, it is vital that ambitious plans, such as Cork Luas, are supported by specific budgetary commitments and delivery timelines. This will boost public confidence and buy-in to hugely significant capital projects of this nature which, if delivered effectively, will transform the way we live.

Meaningful and closer co-operation with our three regional assemblies and with our 31 local authorities - given the local and regional knowledge and expertise that they possess - will inevitably result in more effective delivery of the key projects we seek to deliver for our communities and regions under the national planning framework, the national development plan and Project Ireland 2040.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Before I call on the Minister of State, I welcome Deputy Feighan to the Visitors Gallery. He is accompanied by Mr. Michael Dugher, former MP for Barnsley East, Mr. Michael Lonergan from the Irish Embassy in London, Mr. Jeff Cooke and Mr. David Wild. They are all very welcome and I hope they enjoy their visit to Leinster House and the Seanad.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan): I acknowledge Deputy Feighan and his esteemed guests. I thank the Senators for their contributions to today's debate. I have listened intently and will try at the end of the main body of my speech to come back to many of the comments and points raised. I will also respond on the proposed amendment, which the Government will be opposing. I will touch on the reasons for this towards the end of my contribution.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to outline the importance of the first revision of the national planning framework. I welcome the valuable discussion that has taken place, which reflects the importance of ensuring there is an up-to-date national strategic plan in place to guide the decisions that will shape Ireland for the next 20 years and provide the policy clarity needed

to give certainty in these challenging times. The NPF is the Government's high-level strategic plan for shaping the future and development of our country to 2040. As outlined earlier by the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, this framework has been revised and updated to take account of changes that have occurred since its initial publication in 2018. It is a framework to guide public and private investment, to create and promote opportunities for our people and to protect and enhance our environment, from our villages to our cities and unique rural areas.

Countering the trend of urban sprawl, supporting the targeted delivery of infrastructure services and increasing the availability of new homes is a key focus of the revised NPF. In the period between 2022 and 2040 it is expected there will be roughly an extra 1 million people living in our country. This population growth will require new jobs and homes which we need to plan for in a sustainable manner. This will require more land to be zoned as well as more housing from other sources, such as through tackling vacancy and dereliction to utilise our existing building stock and to assist in meeting our climate obligations. The NPF does not itself zone land and there must, therefore, be a further step to formalise the translation of updated NPF population and housing figures to the local level. The allocation of updated planning and housing growth requirements on a local authority by local authority basis will involve the balanced methodology that factors in the level of housing demand arising and performance in terms of recent housing delivery and capacity while ensuring adherence to the policy parameters of the NPF strategy. Work on this stage is under way based on revised NPF housing figures and it is intended this will inform the updating of development plans across the country in the coming months. This strategic plan-led approach to future housing development will inform the making of decisions on planning applications in a robust and efficient manner assisted by the statutory decision-making timelines contained within the Planning and Development Act 2024.

The impact of this will be significant and will require co-ordination and prioritisation to ensure that necessary infrastructure is in place both to support and enable housing delivery and to ensure housing delivery is aligned with the provision of services and facilities, including education, childcare, healthcare and recreational facilities, to support the expansion of existing settlements and the creation of new, sustainable communities. Therefore, it will be critical to continue to deliver compact and sustainable growth patterns and any allocation of land related to updated targets will need to reflect the potential of brownfield land, including infill sites, the conversion of existing buildings and the reuse of vacant and derelict buildings, in addition to greenfield land, to deliver housing.

Addressing vacancy and making efficient use of existing housing stock is a key Government priority. To address this, a number of structures have now been established, including a dedicated vacant homes unit in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, a full-time vacant homes officer in each local authority and the publication of a vacant homes action plan to draw together a number of vacancy-related measures across relevant Departments. The latest vacant homes action plan progress report, published in March, shows real progress is being made in tackling vacancy and dereliction, with significant investment through schemes such as the urban regeneration and development fund, the vacant property refurbishment grant and the repair and leasing scheme that help local authorities and property owners to bring vacant and derelict properties back into use and revitalise towns across the country.

The cornerstone policy of both the existing and the draft revised NPF is the achievement of greater regional balance in future population and employment growth. The ongoing shift to more regionally balanced growth supported by urban centres of scale will be important in ensuring effective regional development and in supporting competitiveness, economic prosperity

and environmental sustainability. Critical to the achievement of greater regional balance is the overall development of both urban and rural areas in Ireland, with a particular policy focus on delivering strengthened and diversified rural communities, consistent with Government policy. This extends to the Gaeltacht areas across the country where the promotion and protection of the Irish language through the implementation of the language plans are supported in this revision.

The revised NPF provides clear support for the continued development of Dublin as our capital city, along with a focus on the potential of our regional cities to provide an effective counterbalance to Dublin. The opportunities provided by the green energy transition to effect regional development are promoted by the strategy, in addition to the need to deliver essential infrastructure such as transport, water, wastewater and electricity projects that are needed to support additional population and employment growth in all of our regions. The funding of infrastructure projects with specific public investment projects to support and promote greater balance in regional development that align with the NPF is facilitated by the national development plan, NDP. Accordingly, the important interaction between the NPF and the NDP is essential to realising our objectives. The Government has committed to provide increased support for infrastructure through the creation of a dedicated infrastructure division in the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform and through the new housing activation office in my Department. It is essential we continue to address barriers to delivery to meet the needs of current and future generations. This NPF provision builds on the existing policy approach to ensure we develop resilient, vibrant and inclusive places and communities. I am confident that with the implementation of the policy objectives of the NPF at national, regional and local levels, we will ensure the sustainable development of our country for future generations.

The proposed amendment to the motion tabled by Senators Cosgrove and Harmon is opposed for the following reasons. First, the national planning framework is a high-level policy strategy and it would not be appropriate to prohibit any particular type of development which could be considered under the Planning and Development Act. Approval of the House is being sought for the final draft revised national planning framework, noting the specific wording of section 20C(8) of the Planning and Development Act 2000. If any amendments were to be applied, it would require the environmental assessments to be recommenced, meaning the revision process would not be concluded for a number of months. This would further delay the completion of this important piece of work which, as the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins outlined, is critical to informing the updating of regional strategies and local authority development plans to reflect matters such as updated housing figures, projected jobs and growth, renewable energy capacity allocations, and the rezoning of land for residential employment and a range of other purposes. This would delay the process which would further delay the development plans which have to be amended quickly and efficiently in order that we can achieve housing targets. There are also energy security issues, which have been alluded to by other Members of the House.

I will very quickly touch on what Senator Casey was speaking about as I entered the House, which was the Office of the Planning Regulator and the frustrations at county development plan level in terms of the reserved functions of councillors. I agree with him that it is very important we give those reserved functions back to councillors and ensure they are able to implement them in a way they see fit at a local level. We saw during the most recent iteration of county development plans where towns were dezoned and areas that were suitable for development were dezoned. That must be addressed as these development plans are being reviewed.

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We have heard time and again from many Senators about the importance of and the need for investment in infrastructure, whether that is in water supply, broadband, roads and public transport. It is absolutely vital if we are to see a sustained development.

Many Senators spoke about the need for regional balance and that is the core policy of this framework. There has been some criticism of the consultation. This process has been going on since 2023. There was an extended public consultation period from July to September 2024. The Oireachtas joint committee on housing also met to discuss this very plan. I appreciate the support that has been offered and I am heartened to hear of the mentions of biodiversity and the nature restoration plan. I am delighted it is getting a sounding in this House as well because it is important.

8 o'clock

All development must have this at its core as well. Regarding the nature restoration plan, it is grand to have it in the national planning framework but we must ensure it also makes it into the national development plan and that it is funded, so that if we do have a nature restoration plan, we can actually fund it and put those measures in place.

I thank all the Senators for their contributions today.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I thank Minister of State. I welcome guests of Deputy Maeve O'Connell to the Gallery. They are all very welcome and I hope they enjoy their visit here this evening. Enjoy the experience here, not only in the Seanad but in Leinster House as well.

Amendment put:

The Seanad divided: Tá, 6; Níl, 25.	
Tá	Níl
Cosgrove, Nessa.	Ahearn, Garret.
Harmon, Laura.	Boyle, Manus.
Higgins, Alice-Mary.	Bradley, Nikki.
Noonan, Malcolm.	Brady, Paraic.
O'Reilly, Sarah.	Byrne, Maria.
Stephenson, Patricia.	Casey, Pat.
	Clifford-Lee, Lorraine.
	Comyn, Alison.
	Costello, Teresa.
	Crowe, Ollie.
	Curley, Shane.
	Daly, Paul.
	Duffy, Mark.
	Goldsboro, Imelda.
	Kelleher, Garret.
	Kennelly, Mike.
	Kyne, Seán.
	Murphy, P. J.

Seanad Éireann

	Murphy O'Mahony, Margaret.
	Nelson Murray, Linda.
	Ní Chuilinn, Evanne.
	O'Loughlin, Fiona.
	Ryan, Dee.
	Scahill, Gareth.
	Wilson, Diarmuid.

Tellers: Tá, Senators Nessa Cosgrove and Laura Harmon; Níl, Senators Garret Ahearn and Paul Daly.

Amendment declared lost.

Question put: "That the motion be agreed to."

The Seanad divided: Tá, 25; Níl, 11.	
Tá	Níl
Ahearn, Garret.	Andrews, Chris.
Boyle, Manus.	Collins, Joanne.
Bradley, Nikki.	Cosgrove, Nessa.
Brady, Paraic.	Harmon, Laura.
Byrne, Maria.	McCormack, Maria.
Casey, Pat.	Murphy, Conor.
Clifford-Lee, Lorraine.	Noonan, Malcolm.
Comyn, Alison.	O'Reilly, Sarah.
Costello, Teresa.	Ryan, Nicole.
Crowe, Ollie.	Stephenson, Patricia.
Curley, Shane.	Tully, Pauline.
Daly, Paul.	
Duffy, Mark.	
Goldsboro, Imelda.	
Kelleher, Garret.	
Kennelly, Mike.	
Kyne, Seán.	
Murphy, P. J.	
Murphy O'Mahony, Margaret.	
Nelson Murray, Linda.	
Ní Chuilinn, Evanne.	
O'Loughlin, Fiona.	
Ryan, Dee.	

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Scahill, Gareth.	
Wilson, Diarmuid.	

Tellers: Tá, Senators Garret Ahearn and Paul Daly; Níl, Senators Maria McCormack and Conor Murphy.

Question declared carried.

An Cathaoirleach: When is it proposed to sit again?

Senator Seán Kyne: Tomorrow morning at 10.30.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar athló ar 8.30 p.m. go dtí 10.30 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 30 Aibreán 2025.

The Seanad adjourned at 8.30 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 30 April 2025.