



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

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

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SEANAD ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 14 Bealtaine 2025

Wednesday, 14 May 2025

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach i gceannas ar 10.30 a.m.

*Machnamh agus Paidir.
Reflection and Prayer.*

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad

An Cathaoirleach: I have received notice from the following Senators that they wish to raise the following matters:

Senator Robbie Gallagher - the need for the Minister for Justice to provide an update on the Dublin and Monaghan bombings that occurred 51 years ago this week.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove - the need for the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to suspend implementation of GAEC 2 until 2026 to allow time for the identification of all peatlands and wetlands impacted and to inform affected farmers.

Senator Manus Boyle - the need for the Minister for Transport to make a statement on future funding allocations for road safety initiatives, in particular at Dunkineely National School, County Donegal.

Senator Mike Kennelly - the need for the Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform to review the offer made to a family in Listowel, County Kerry under the national relocation flood programme.

Senator Garret Kelleher - the need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on section 39 funding for Westgate Foundation, Ballincollig, County Cork.

Senator Eileen Lynch - the need for the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications to publish the guidelines linked to the national biomethane strategy regarding the location of biomethane plants.

The matters raised by the Senators are suitable for discussion. I have selected Senators Robbie Gallagher, Nessa Cosgrove, Manus Boyle and Mike Kennelly, and they will be taken now. The other Senators may give notice on another day of the matters they have raised.

Nithe i dtosach suíonna - Commencement Matters

Dublin-Monaghan Bombings

Senator Robbie Gallagher: Last year, President Michael D. Higgins visited Monaghan town to lay a wreath to commemorate the victims of the Dublin and Monaghan bombings 50 years previously. It was a poignant moment for the relatives and friends of the 33 people who lost their lives in Monaghan and Dublin on that fatal day - the greatest loss of life on a single day during the entire Troubles. A year on, our thoughts and prayers are with the victims and their families again this week. It is said that to be forgotten is to die twice. That is a very relevant comment for the families of the victims of the Dublin and Monaghan bombings. The families have continued for yet another year to await the truth of what actually happened on that fateful day on 17 May 1974. I pay tribute to all those who have worked so hard down through the years to try to lift the lid on this mystery. I acknowledge the enormous work done by Justice for the Forgotten, and Margaret Urwin in particular, as well as everyone else and, indeed, all the Members of both Houses who tabled many motions on this issue to try to move it forward.

Each year we gather here to discuss this year. Last year, there was a promise of progress with an investigation by Iain Livingstone into the Troubles, including Operation Denton, an investigation into the Glenanne gang which has been blamed for approximately 120 sectarian murders in the 1970s and 1980s and is suspected of carrying out the Dublin and Monaghan bombings, as well as potentially others, such as the bombing in Belturbet in December 1972 where two young teenagers lost their lives and the bombing in Castleblayney in 1976 where one man lost his life.

As the decades pass, the death of loved ones related to the victims of 1974 is becoming more and more prominent, making the quest for truth and justice even more pressing as they suffer the insult of truth delayed and truth denied as their own life journeys reach their natural end.

I would be grateful if the Minister of State could update me about the reports and when the victims of the Monaghan and Dublin bombings can expect the reports to be published.

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Marian Harkin): I thank Senator Gallagher.

First, I want to express my condolences and those of the Government to all of the families whose loved ones were killed and to all those who were injured and maimed on that awful day of 17 May 1974. I am old enough to remember it well. It is utterly incomprehensible and heartbreaking that on a day almost 51 years ago so many innocent people going about their daily lives, perhaps going to work, shopping, meeting friends, walking in the city, taking the train or whatever, were callously and brutally attacked. Their lives were changed forever. The survivors and the families of the victims remain firm in their quest for justice and for information about what happened to their loved ones. I commend them on the courage and dignity with which they have pursued justice and accountability in the years since the attacks.

The Government is fully committed to seeking the truth behind these events. We have worked consistently to implement the all-party motions adopted by the other House which call on the British Government to allow access to all relevant documents relating to the Dublin and Monaghan bombings, and we continue to regularly raise this case with the British Government.

Most recently, on 24 April, at the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference in Hillsborough Castle, the Minister raised the bombings with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Hilary Benn, referencing the findings of the Barron and MacEntee inquiries, citing it as an ongoing issue of concern. The Government will continue to raise these bombings and the all-party motions with the British Government.

Last year Senator Gallagher also tabled a Commencement Matter on the bombings, with a focus on the reports due to be published on these atrocities and I will give an update. The Operation Denton report, which is an independent analytical review being carried out by Kenova into the Glenanne gang, is still awaited. The Dublin and Monaghan bombings are included as part of this report. A further report is to be published by the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland. The ombudsman investigation, entitled Operation Newham, is examining collusion with the Glenanne gang. In recent weeks the ombudsman, Marie Anderson, confirmed that the investigation has led to a decision by the public prosecution service to prosecute a former member of the RUC for offences, including murder, so she is not in a position to publish as it would be potentially prejudicial to the future criminal proceedings.

The Government is fully committed to assisting the families and finding the truth of what happened. In addition to the Barron and MacEntee enquiries, An Garda Síochána has been assisting the UK authorities in their investigations I just referenced. I will add to that in my final response.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: I thank the Minister of State for her comprehensive response to date. I know she has great feeling for the victims of the Monaghan and Dublin bombings and their ongoing journey in trying to find the truth of what happened on that fateful day. I know some of these people personally and all they strive for is the truth. Unfortunately, the British Government has been a constant roadblock in people's quest to do so. The Irish State has handed over documents to facilitate the work of this inquiry. I am disappointed we have not got to a point where a report has been published yet and I do not know whether the Minister of State is in a position to give any indication of the timeframe involved with that.

Briefly, I thank everybody who has worked so hard to try to bring a conclusion to this. Indeed, I mention Barry Lenihan from RTÉ who has done intensive work in interviewing the victims' families and the survivors of that fateful day and the work he did to allow them a platform to express how they were feeling. That was a useful piece of work and I compliment Barry Lenihan on it. I look forward to the Minister of State having any additional information she might be able to pass on to us.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I mentioned the Barron and MacEntee inquiries. It is important to note that when a legal issue arose that would have prevented the provision of Garda material to Operation Denton, the then Minister for Justice took extraordinary steps to put in place a bespoke mechanism to allow relevant information from An Garda Síochána to be shared with Operation Denton. Of course, the investigation into the Dublin and Monaghan bombings remains an open case in this jurisdiction. Any new evidence that comes to light, from whatever source, will be fully pursued by An Garda Síochána.

I thank Senator Gallagher for his ongoing commitment to seeking out the truth in regard to the atrocity we now refer to as the Dublin and Monaghan bombings, which took place 51 years ago next Saturday on 17 May 1974.

Seanad Éireann
Agriculture Industry

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: I thank the Minister for taking this Commencement matter this week as it is a matter of urgency. As the Minister knows, farmers are required to sign and submit their basic income support scheme forms by tomorrow, Thursday, 15 May, to be entitled to receive their annual payments from the Department of agriculture. Part of this submission is a declaration that the farmer is compliant with GAEC practices on the farm. Just over a week ago, I met with representatives from the IFA in Sligo, Leitrim and Roscommon. These farmers, all thinkers who take their environmental and legal responsibilities seriously, wanted to draw my attention to the BISS submission date in a last-ditch hope that the Minister might listen to my plea on their behalf.

Most Senators from rural constituencies such as Sligo-Leitrim, which includes parts of south Donegal, will know at this stage that GAEC stands for good agricultural and environmental conditions. GAEC regulations set out minimum environmental standards which must be adhered to. There are nine GAEC standards in total. GAEC 2 is the last to be imposed and relates to the protection of peatlands and wetlands. As only approximately 20% of our landmass is thought to be carbon-rich or mineral soil, GAEC 2 will not affect large swathes of the country, such as eastern counties, where the land is rich and well drained. There is a fear, though, that it will have a disproportionately significant impact on my part of the country. A lot of the things that farmers are being asked to do are things they are totally comfortable with - no problem at all. For instance, ploughing of grasslands to a depth greater than 30 cm is prohibited, but I am told there is no problem with that. Grasslands can be reseeded only once every four years. Again, I understand that is considered standard practice. GAEC 2 allows for the maintenance of existing drains but tightens up on the prohibition of digging new drains without planning permission on peat-rich soil. That is all very well as well, but the farmers I spoke to from the IFA are struggling with two basic issues.

The first of these issues is the definition of what constitutes peaty, carbon-rich and organic soils. This is what I would like the Minister to provide if he can: clarification in plain English as to what constitutes peaty soil. Are we able to agree on a single terminology for these soils? Are they peaty, are they carbon-rich or are they organic? I have heard all three of those terms used interchangeably and, as we all know, the use of multiple phraseologies often leads to confusion and misunderstanding. The current definition on the Department's website is:

A peat soil is defined as organic soil materials which have sedentarily accumulated and have at least 30% ... organic matter over a depth of ... 45 cm on undrained land and 30 cm deep on drained land.

The Minister knows all this; there is no need for me to go into it. However, a couple of questions occur to me. "Dry mass" is the mass of a biological sample once the water has been removed. An ordinary farmer is surely unable to ascertain this himself or herself, and this must be a job for a laboratory that can test a soil sample. Assuming this is correct, have soil samples on all land parcels throughout the State been taken?

The second issue that farmers are concerned about is what portions of a farmer's land are classed as being peaty or carbon-rich. As of 6.15 p.m. yesterday, the Department website advises, "The Department is in the process of writing to farmers subject to the standard." In the process? The deadline for submission of BISS forms is tomorrow. When will the Department complete its process of writing to farmers? If farmers find themselves in the process of decid-

ing whether GAEC 2 applies to their land when the deadline expires, and when they decide it does not, will they get paid?

This leads me on to portions of land. If a farmer believes or learns subsequently that a proportion of their land is mineral or non-peaty soil, can they split their land into portions? This is a bone of contention that has come up a lot. The Department's website indicates that this will be possible "in certain circumstances", but what are those circumstances? Should a farmer disagree with a decision that all or part of their land is classed as peaty, what will the process be for lodging an appeal? They must have clarity. These farmers I have spoken to are not trying to upset the apple cart. They just want clarity. There is nothing more certain to undermine a relationship than uncertainty. Will the Minister grant our farmers the respect they deserve and pause the implementation and enforcement of GAEC 2 for one more year?

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon): I thank Senator Cosgrove for raising a really important issue and giving me the opportunity to put on the record of the House a reassurance to farmers in her area and all over the country who are concerned about GAEC 2. The Senator has outlined those concerns, and I know from my colleagues here in Donegal and Kerry as well that those concerns are shared by farmers. Much of this is down to the fact that there has been stuff talked about that has nothing to do with GAEC 2, which is a baseline conditionality for this. One's base is what was known as the single farm payment. This is only linked to that. It is a baseline requirement for that. This is something we as a country signed up to in 2023. We got a derogation in 2023 and 2024. We sought a derogation for this year. It is not in my gift to give an extra year; this is a decision of Europe. We asked for it and we were told "No". We are dead in breach. If we do not implement a measurement, we will be in breach and will be subject to fines that would definitely be in the region of €100 million-plus and would come out of my budget to support farmers. I cannot let that happen. We engaged with the Commission and looked to have a set of standards that, because it is baseline, should not impact hugely on farmers' day-to-day activities. That is what we worked towards and what we got agreed. The reason the letters are going out at such short notice is that when I came into this job on 23 January, this was not signed. We had not made a submission. It was the first thing I was asked to do. I engaged with farm organisations and had a lot of consultation rather than just signing it, because I wanted to get my head around the issue and understand the extent of it. I reassure the House that there was really detailed engagement to make sure there was no alternative, and to reassure myself that the measures that are in the proposal will not change farmers' day-to-day activity and that there is a minimal entry element. At that point, I sent a submission to the Commission to say this is what we wanted to put in place. We had been having detailed engagement with key stakeholders like the farming organisations over the course of the past couple of years, during that time. The Commission only approved our proposal on 30 April. I could not write to farmers before then. There is enough confusion. There would be more if I went writing to farmers saying they might be in GAEC or they might not be. We know where the area is. I will talk about the map and the point the Senator raised in a minute. Ultimately, when we got approval and the Commission said it accepted our proposal, that triggered our letters to go out.

How do we come up with the areas? There are a number of existing peat maps that have mapped the whole country. Teagasc has the Hammond map from 2009, which is the one we have used. It is the best one to use in this space. We had to have a controllable area so we can prove to the Commission that we have an area that we can control and examine to make sure the conditionality is met. That conditionality does not change a farmer's day-to-day activity.

He can continue to plough, reseed and maintain existing drains and even lay new drainage in a GAEC 2 parcel, subject to existing planning legislation. While it has been in place for 20 years, is that planning legislation in effect? Have people applied for planning previously when they were doing this drainage work? Possibly not, and that is where some of the concern is. I have received loads of queries from farmers wondering if this will stop them from getting planning permission for a house or a shed or something. It is completely separate. It only relates to applying for the single farm payment. The local planning authority does not know what parcel is GAEC 2 and what is not. It is only between the farmer and the Department. We have sent out the maps now. Anyone who is a GAEC 2 farmer has received a map indicating what land parcel on their holding comes in under that. To come up with a control area, we proposed and the Commission accepted that it would be any land parcel with 50% or more peat - it does bring in some mineral soils. We could not have less than 50% peat in the land parcel. If we went for every land parcel that had any peat in it, that would have brought in another 800,000 ha of mineral soils. We think we have got the sweet spot here where we have the right balance between doing what we need to do to meet the baseline conditionality and allowing farmers to continue to have day-to-day activities pretty much unhindered and making sure there will not be a load of farmers fined at the end of this process, which I am very confident there will not be.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Malcolm Noonan): I welcome our visitors in the Gallery. I hope they enjoy their visit to the Dáil and Seanad today.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: I thank the Minister for his reply. I knew there was a lot of progress on it since 30 April. I am delighted. However, there is still uncertainty among the farmers I represent. If the deadline for submissions is tomorrow, can something be addressed tonight? I know the Minister has only recently taken over his brief. Is there some way there will be a guarantee so people do not feel they are going into something and they cannot reverse? The concern was about the appeals process. There is no guarantee or clarity around that, if people want to make an appeal. Could there be more clarity?

Deputy Martin Heydon: Apologies. I did not answer two of the Senator's earlier questions. One was on appeals and the other was on splitting the parcel. Farmers can split the parcel if there is a natural boundary like a wall or hedge in an existing land parcel. They can just do that on the application. There will be an appeals mechanism. Most farmers will not need to appeal this. It will not change their day-to-day activity. I can understand why there is confusion. I can understand how scarred and concerned people are around nature restoration and land designation. This is not that. GAEC 2 is not that. It is a baseline conditionality of just the single farm payment when you apply. My Department consulted the relevant stakeholders and NGOs on the proposed standards. Once approval of the standard was received from the Commission, we wrote to farmers straight away. My Department provided direct information to the farm advisory services. Most farmers are putting in this application in consultation with their advisers. The advisers have been briefed. We had meetings with public and private advisory services to ensure requirements are fully understood. My officials attended a number of public meetings where concerns were raised. My Department officials continue to attend local meetings and we will continue to answer farmers' questions.

As I outlined, the standard will have minimal impact on day-to-day operations of farms beyond what is already legally required anyway. There is no opportunity to further delay the introduction of GAEC 2. To do so would put us in breach with no defensible case to the Commission and would leave us open to significant fines which would come out of the pot of money I have to support farmers. I cannot let that happen because I would then have less money to

support our farmers day to day. I reassure farmers about GAEC 2. Farmers down the line will not face loads of fines because day-to day activity will not change.

Road Safety

Senator Manus Boyle: I welcome the Minister of State. I have submitted a Commencement matter about Dunkineely National School. I am not sure if the Minister of State knows Dunkineely. It is built on the N56. I would also like to mention Keeloges and Killaghtee national schools, which also have a problem with the N56. The priority today is Dunkineely. It is built on a hill. If you come from Donegal town or Mountcharles, you climb the hill heading for Killybegs and, going the other way, you descend. This issue was raised in 2023 when a car went through a red light at the school and there was a near miss. There were other near misses in January and May 2024. We were told the Department was doing a report. Where is the report? It is two years on and nothing has happened. Will raised tables be in place for September for the children going to school? What is really holding it up? That is what the public ask me. Is it Donegal County Council or TII? People want to know. Thank God nobody was injured at the school on those three occasions. Do we have to wait until something really bad happens and then things will be implemented? I must thank the local gardaí, who keep a high profile there in the morning and evening. People now know coming into the town that the gardaí could be there. That is slowing things down. This is a school. Uncles, aunts, parents, grannies and granddads take the children to school in the morning. Their hearts are in their mouths trying to cross the road. There are big, heavy, loaded HGVs coming from Killybegs and traffic from Donegal town. What is there at the minute is definitely not working. We have to get something as soon as possible. I really hope the Minister of State has the answers with her today.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I thank Senator Boyle for the question. I am familiar with the area he spoke about. I had the privilege of representing Donegal for three terms in the European Parliament so I well know where Dunkineely is. The Minister for Transport is the person who has responsibility for overall policy and Exchequer funding relating to the national roads programme.

11 o'clock

Once funding arrangements have been put in place with Transport Infrastructure Ireland under the Roads Acts and in line with the national development plan, the planning, design, improvement and upgrading of individual national roads is a matter for TII, in conjunction with the local authorities concerned.

A priority in the NDP is to maintain the quality and safety of the existing national road network. In the context of the national roads programme capital budget, which is provided by the Department to TII, significant funding has been provided towards the safeguarding of the national road network. In 2025, approximately €15.6 million in capital Exchequer funding was allocated for the protection and renewal of the existing national road network in Donegal. It is important to say that this includes allocations for minor road improvements on the N56.

TII's road safety section discussed the progression of potential safety improvements on the N56 at Dunkineely National School with Donegal County Council at a meeting held in March this year. Donegal County Council is finalising an assessment of potential options at this location. Following this, a report will be prepared setting out the safety measures Donegal County

Council proposes to implement, the estimated scheme costs and the expected safety benefits. TII anticipates submission of the finalised report to TII for consideration by the end of June, about six weeks from now. Once approved, any works at this location will be considered for funding in 2026 subject to funding availability.

Apart from that, the Minister of State with responsibility for international and road transport, logistics, rail and ports, Deputy Seán Canney, has responsibility for the safe routes to school programme. I am advised invitations to make expressions of interest for that programme were sent to all primary and secondary schools in the country. A total of 932 schools applied for this programme, which is about a quarter of all schools in the country. A total of 170 schools were selected in round 1 in 2021. Round 2 consisted of 108 schools and round 3 of 141 schools in November last year. The nature of the safe routes to school programme is that all schools which initially applied will eventually enter the programme on a rolling basis. It is my understanding that Dunkineely National School did not apply for this programme.

It should be noted that if a school is not currently in this programme, it does not mean it will not receive any new or improved active travel infrastructure. While there are no plans for an additional call for schools to join the programme, funding for active travel infrastructure for schools is not confined to the safe routes to schools programme. In some cases, schools outside that programme are included in wider active travel projects if they are in the vicinity of these works. I will finish my comments after the Senator's reply.

Senator Manus Boyle: I thank the Minister of State for coming in to answer the question. It is disappointing to hear that no money will be made available until 2026. This has been going on since 2023. I ask that the Department pay a visit to the school, along with me, to see the problem. I am here to try to help the people of my area. I hear about this weekly from parents and grandparents. They ask why this is happening in Donegal and they are not being looked after. This happened in 2023. It is totally unacceptable. I do not mean to get at the Minister of State. No funding is to be made available until 2026, but this is a priority. We are here to help people. To say that nothing is available until 2026 is disappointing. I ask the Department to come to the school and stand with me for a couple of hours to see the amount of traffic going past the school and what needs to be done.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I thank the Senator. To be honest, I share his frustration. As he said at the beginning, we are talking about children, parents, grandparents, teachers and all in the vicinity who use the school. I am conscious of the importance of ensuring road safety, particularly in the vicinity of schools, but there is an ongoing process. As I am not a Minister responsible for this, I cannot say whether this can be speeded up or what could be done. If the Senator wants to contact me afterwards, I would certainly be willing to contact the Minister to see how we can expedite this in order that children attending that school and their families can feel every effort is being made to ensure the road at the school is safe for use.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Malcolm Noonan): I welcome to the Visitors Gallery pupils and teachers of Ballycanew National School in Gorey, County Wexford. I hope they enjoy their visit to the Dáil and Seanad here today. They live in a beautiful part of the country and I hope they enjoy the sunshine down there over the weekend.

Flood Relief Schemes

Senator Mike Kennelly: I thank the Minister of State for coming to the House. This Commencement matter relates to flooding. If there is time, I hope to speak later on how flooding events in the past ten years have completely destroyed many areas in Listowel.

Today I bring to the Minister of State's urgent attention a deeply distressing case involving the Gabrielyan family in Listowel, County Kerry, and the limitations of the OPW flood relocation scheme, VHR. The Minister of State will know well the voluntary homeowners relocation scheme, VHR, which came into effect in 2017. This family - Liene and Artur and their two sons - have endured unimaginable hardship. Their home in Gortacrossane has been flooded three times, most recently in 2023, and they were evacuated again in November 2024. The entire contents of the house were destroyed and the property - their home - is now uninhabitable with black mould, damp and structural decay.

The family was approved for the OPW relocation scheme in November 2021, and after the most recent flood, their offer was increased. While this may appear notable, it has proven entirely inadequate in the current housing market. Over the past three years, the Gabrielyans have made numerous bids on houses, only to be repeatedly outbid. The terms of the scheme have severely restricted their ability to compete. They cannot use any of the funds offered by the OPW as a deposit, which must instead come from their own resources, a demand that is simply not feasible for the family, especially while they continue to service a mortgage on their uninhabitable house. Further, under the relocation scheme no funds are released until their home is demolished. The bank mortgage clause, however, requires the sale be finalised within three months of demolition, an almost impossible task given today's housing market.

In effect, this places the family in an impossible situation. To secure another home, they must first render themselves homeless. In one heartbreaking example from December 2023, the Gabrielyans put down a deposit for a house and arranged to live there as caretakers while the deal was finalised. When the sellers learned there would be a delay in funds due to the nature of the OPW procedures, the vendors pulled out of the sale.

This family has lived in fear for more than a decade. Their young sons have been traumatised, sleeping with torches by their beds and racing up ladders to the attic, once warnings are sounded, to save their personal items from flood water. Their mental health is deteriorating, their parents are at breaking point and they have done everything right. They have paid their mortgage, engaged with the Minister of State's Department and the OPW and they have sought legal guidance, yet they remain trapped in a cycle of loss and hopelessness.

This is not just a policy issue; it is a moral crisis. We have a duty of care to these children. The State has an obligation to not only provide safe housing but to ensure its own schemes are designed to support, not block, families in crisis. I therefore call for the urgent review of the terms of the OPW relocation scheme in this case. I wish to allow for a portion of the relocation funds to be used as a deposit, as is standard in private sales. I want to ensure bridging support or temporary accommodation is provided during the gap between demolition and new purchase. This makes sense. Most important, there is a need to review and increase the offer to reflect the reality of the current housing market in Kerry, where even modest homes are now attracting bids in excess of €350,000. Let us not allow bureaucracy to prolong the suffering of this family. They have waited long enough and it is time we acted with compassion and with common sense. As I have said from the get-go, Listowel has been a lightning rod over the past ten

years. This family were the first to be really affected by flooding events that have changed and destroyed areas. The Minister of State has seen this himself. This family have been through hell more times than Satan. I look forward to the Minister of State's answer. It is to be hoped we can come to a conclusion on this.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform (Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran): I thank the Senator for raising this important matter. The voluntary homeowners relocation scheme was introduced by the Government in 2017 to address the very serious flooding of those homes that flooded in the winter of 2015-16, including those homes flooded by turloughs. This is a national scheme of humanitarian assistance, targeting aid at the worst-affected properties, for which there are no alternative feasible measures.

To be eligible for assistance under this once-off scheme, a homeowner must meet a number of conditions, including that floodwater entered and damaged the building during, or as a result of, flooding during relevant dates such as to render it uninhabitable and that there is no viable engineering solution that could protect the building from future flooding. At all times, participation in the scheme by homeowners is voluntary. The property occupied by the homeowners referred to by the Senator was identified by the local authority as having flooded during the relevant flood event of 2015-16. The property has a history of flooding as a result of fluvial flooding during extreme rain events which causes the stream adjacent to the property to burst its banks and an engineering solution is not viable.

In line with the provisions of the scheme, an offer of financial assistance was made to the homeowners in 2022 which provided for three options: the purchase of a new or replacement home, the construction of a new home on a site they own, or the purchase of a site and construction of a new home on that site. The offer of assistance accepted by the homeowners was based on the maximum allowance for the purchase or construction of a replacement dwelling house that can be offered, by reference to the local authority acquisition cost guidelines and unit cost ceilings issued by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage as of quarter 2 of 2021. It also included an additional amount in respect of legal, demolition and other costs, in line with the provisions of the scheme.

In light of rising construction costs and house prices since the original agreement with the homeowners in March 2022, the Office of Public Works, OPW, made a number of revised offers of financial assistance in 2023 and in 2024. These revised offers of financial assistance reflected updated local authority acquisition cost guidelines and unit cost ceilings issued by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage which were applicable at the time of the revised offers. This has ensured that the best offer could be made at those points in time, within the provisions of the scheme.

Similar revised offers were made to other applicants under the scheme, who have managed to successfully complete their home relocation. Unfortunately, this has not been the case for the homeowners in question. The homeowners have recently communicated with the OPW to inform it that they have been unable to secure a replacement home since the last offer of assistance was accepted by them on 18 June 2024 and have requested additional financial assistance to purchase a replacement property. The OPW will assess this request having regard to the most recent updated local authority acquisition cost guidelines and determine whether an increased offer can be made.

Senator Mike Kennelly: I wholeheartedly thank the Minister of State. The family has applied for the offer to be revised and increased. Can it take it that it is with the Department and we can look positively on an increase for the family to secure a home? I welcome all the work that has been done. It has been revised twice and the family has gone back again to look for further funding to eventually get out of this nightmare that they have been living in for more than ten years.

On the Listowel works, I wholeheartedly thank the OPW for everything it has done to alleviate any future heartache for people in the area. This is my third time speaking about flooding events in the Listowel area. I thank the Department. The Clievragh works in Listowel were a contributing factor in the downstream flooding that affected the family. The works are nearly finished. A report on the minor flood relief scheme works in Listowel has been commissioned by Kerry County Council and the OPW. We were expecting the Minister of State to visit Listowel to allay all the fears of further flooding in the area. I will not finish until everyone is happy with the work the Minister of State and I, as a public representative in the Seanad, do for them.

Is it feasible that the family will get an increase? What is the position on the works in Listowel?

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: It is very difficult to speak about individual cases but I can speak about them one to one. There is a scheme in place, as I have laid out. To date, 31 homes have received a formal offer of financial assistance for relocation. Of these, 24 homeowners have now completed the process, which has enabled them to relocate and purchase or build a replacement home under the scheme. Three of the homeowners who received offers are not proceeding under the scheme and the remaining homeowners are in varying stages of progressing through the scheme for relocation. I assure the Senator that, at all times, the OPW is available to discuss any aspect of the scheme with the homeowners and to assist them with relocation under the scheme.

My office is open to working with all families. I was the one who introduced the scheme in 2017. There is a ceiling, however. We work with the Department of housing and there are criteria set out, but we are available to assist where we can. I encourage the Senator to go back to the homeowners with a view to their engaging with the Department. Where we can help, we will not be found wanting. The works fall under the scheme and we have to go along with the guidelines in front of us.

The Senator raised a question about Listowel. I have a report and am examining it. I will get back to the Senator on this. As I said to him, I will be visiting Kerry. A date has not been signalled but I assure the Senator that it will be in the very near future. I will work with him, but he can understand where I am coming from in that it is very hard to speak about individual cases when there are so many.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 11.17 a.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 11.33 a.m.

Sitting suspended at 11.17 a.m. and resumed at 11.33 a.m.

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call on the Leader, I welcome the Chairman of the Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement, along with two hard workers in his office, Joss Brooks and Oisín Twohig, who are transition year students. You are most welcome to Seanad Éireann today.

Death of Former Member: Expressions of Sympathy

Senator oirleach: Yesterday, a number of Members mentioned the death of a former Member of the House, Paddy O'Toole. Paddy was known as a hard-working Cabinet member from 1977 to 1987. Prior to that, he served in the Thirteenth Seanad from 1973 to 1977 and in the Seventeenth Seanad in 1987. He was a native of Doolough in Erris in north County Mayo. He was a primary school teacher just outside Ballina prior to his political career. He was nominated to the Seanad in 1973 and elected to the Dáil in 1977, and remained a Deputy for a decade. In that time he served in various ministerial roles, including Gaeltacht, defence, fisheries and forestry. He served Ireland during the very difficult times in the 1970s and made a significant contribution to public life. He was known as a skilled politician, as evidenced by his remarkable political career. He was also a Gaeilgeoir, a proud Irish speaker. He was dedicated to Mayo. Indeed, he was one of the few people to see his county win all-Ireland championships. Please God he will see Mayo winning an all-Ireland from heaven at some stage in the future. Paddy was steeped in his community and his political career was marked by public service. Despite all his successes, he was a humble man who always had his feet on the ground.

I convey our condolences to Paddy's wife, Jacqueline, his children, Jackie, John, Pádraig and Helen, his sister, Maureen, his grandchildren and his friends and other family members. The Leader will propose a minute's silence at the end of the Order of Business.

I welcome to the Gallery students from Rush National School, who are guests of Deputy Grace Boland.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I extend my welcome to the Chair of the Good Friday Agreement committee, Deputy Devlin, and his interns. I also welcome the students and teachers from Rush National School, whom I met coming into the Chamber.

I indicate my intention to move a motion to have a minute's silence on the death of former Minister Paddy O'Toole at the end of the Order of Business.

The Order of Business is No. 1, statements marking National Biodiversity Week, to be taken at 1.30 p.m. and to conclude at 3.30 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 each, all other Senators not to exceed five minutes each, time may be

shared, and the Minister to be given not less than ten minutes to reply to the debate; and No. 2, Private Members' business, Public Health (Restriction on Sale of Stimulant Drinks to Children) Bill 2025 - Second Stage, to be taken at 3.30 p.m., with the time allocated to the debate not to exceed two hours.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: The first issue I raise on behalf of the Fianna Fail group is the ongoing genocide and starvation in Gaza. Since 2 March, no humanitarian aid has been delivered to Gaza, with a global hunger monitor warning that more than half a million people, which is a quarter of the population, are facing starvation. RTÉ News is reporting that the United Nations aid chief, Mr. Tom Fletcher, has very strongly criticised the Israeli-initiated and US-backed humanitarian aid distribution plan for Gaza. Mr. Fletcher described the plan as a “fig leaf for further violence and displacement” of Palestinians in the war-torn territory. He called it a “cynical sideshow” and a “deliberate distraction”. He said those words in an address to the UN Security Council. We are all concerned by and occupied with our helplessness in the face of this starvation and genocide and the human tragedy taking place. This House must call again today for an immediate ceasefire, the release of all hostages and unrestricted access for humanitarian aid. Anything less than that is inhumane. The Fianna Fáil group reiterates that call.

The National College of Ireland, located in the Dublin docklands in my constituency, is an incredible centre of excellence in education. Everybody associates the college with third level education but its early learning initiative is incredibly special. I give a huge shout-out today to the home visitors from that early learning initiative, particularly those who visit the north inner city. They go out to support very young people, including infants - our youngest citizens - and their parents. They support them in social ways, medical ways and with a whole holistic approach to their wellness and well-being. They do so to increase their capacity and confidence and ensure they succeed in those early days, weeks, months and years. Being a parent is probably the most challenging job any human being can undertake. The home visitors are there with new parents and new babies in those early days, weeks and months. They give them support in a way that is accessible to them, is meaningful to them and adds real value. I want to give a huge shoutout to the home visitors in the north inner city. As I am speaking here today, they are probably visiting parents and their children in their homes.

I return to the subject of our post offices. We all know that there are over 960 post offices in Ireland. They provide not just a postal service but huge social value as well. I ask the Leader to arrange a debate with the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Peter Burke, to come to the House and have a debate on the future of the post offices. Our own colleague, Councillor Tom O’Callaghan, is a postmaster. Postmasters throughout the country have done enormous work campaigning to save our post offices. The House should support them and we should have a debate on the future of the post office network.

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call the next speaker, I welcome Senator Cathal Byrne from County Wexford and his uncle James, aunt Jackie, Sarah Egan and cousins Mary and John Byrne. I am sure this is payback for canvassing. I thank them for coming to Seanad Éireann. Maybe it is credit in the bank for canvassing into the future. They are most welcome. They can rest assured that Cathal makes a great contribution to Seanad Éireann. I thank them for being here.

Senator Manus Boyle: I express my sincerest condolences to the families of the two young boys who drowned in Buncrana over the weekend. It was yet another tragedy in Donegal. I send my heartfelt apologies to the families.

I stand here again to speak, like a broken record, about the National Ambulance Service. On Saturday, I got a phone call from a mother in Portnoo, Ardara. On Wednesday evening, her son took sick with a spiking temperature. He started convulsions and had rapid breathing. This scared the life out of the family. They rang the ambulance at 9.30 p.m. It was 11 p.m. before the ambulance got there. This little boy has profound disabilities and has a liver disease. He is very well cared for by his mother and father. The paramedics were fantastic with him. When they arrived, they engaged with him and got him to Letterkenny University Hospital. The mother queried what if this happens again. It took an hour and a half. I do not want to feel like a broken record, but every day I come in here I have constituents coming to me saying how bad the ambulance service is in Donegal. We all talk about the golden hour. The previous two times I stood in the House, I spoke about this matter. In one case, it took over an hour and a half. In this case, it was an hour and a half before the ambulance reached them. Everybody is busy but there has to be a profound review done for Donegal. We seem to be left on our own all of the time to get things done. I hope that with the help of the Leader, we will try to get something moving forward on it.

Senator Tom Clonan: I echo the call by Senator Fitzpatrick for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. I am particularly concerned that in the past few days Netanyahu's Government has called for a major call-up and mobilisation of Israel Defense Forces reservists. We are on the precipice of another major expansion of Israel's military operation in Gaza. Before I speak about the situation, I want to be clear that I condemn Hamas absolutely for their war crimes, their actions on 7 October that were genocidal in nature and intent, their war crimes in holding hostages and the bodies of hostages prisoners against their will and their indiscriminate shelling and rocket fire into Israel and civilian targets. The situation in Gaza at the moment has reached a point of no return. A total of 70% of Gaza's territory is designated no-go areas or military zones. The population of 2.2 million is crammed into an area of less than 100 sq. km. That is, by definition, a *Konzentrationslager*, or a concentration camp. It is what Himmler described as the operational characteristics of a ghetto. A very good example is the ghetto in Warsaw, Warschauer, in which 500,000 Jews were concentrated into one area, surrounded and deprived of food and water. The people of Gaza have not had a delivery of water or food in ten weeks. They are literally being starved. One survivor of the Holocaust said:

Every day we had a little cup of water. We starved for half a year. There was no life. We were starving.

That is precisely what is happening to our Palestinian brothers and sisters in Gaza, of whom 55,000 have been butchered and slaughtered by the IDF in continued air strikes, which we are facilitating through the onward navigation of military aircraft through our airspace and through the payment by the taxpayer of the navigation fees for those aircraft. A total of 13,000 children have been killed while 20,000 women and girls have been murdered. Of the total killed in Gaza, for shame, 12,000 have been disabled men, women and children. It is the greatest mass disabling event in recent human history. We have an absolute moral imperative to call this out for what it is. It is ethnic cleansing writ large. We must act. Our actions must go beyond words. We must take action. I suggest we revisit the occupied territories Bill as a priority.

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome guests of Deputy Malcolm Byrne from Carnew National School to Seanad Éireann. Is that everybody dressed in blue? I welcome the boys and girls of Wexford. As is the tradition in Seanad Éireann, there is no homework for the rest of the week.

Thank you for coming to visit. As well as getting an education, you get off homework.

Senator Joanne Collins: I want to raise the issue of the sheer lack of home help supports, which, I am sure, is the case throughout the State, but I am going to concentrate on County Limerick. A case that stood out to me among the many I come across involves a family living in County Limerick. The father, who was once a fiercely independent man, is now living with advanced dementia. He needs 24-hour care. For mobility reasons, he needs two people just to move around his house. His elderly wife, who is a healthcare assistant, and their grown-up son, are doing everything they can to keep him at home. Currently he is in St Camillus' Hospital for a week or two of respite. Their question is: what happens when he comes home? Who is going to be there to help? They are being offered an hour and a half of home help, once a day, from Monday to Friday. They spend the other 22 and a half hours themselves looking after their husband and father. The lack of support they are receiving from home help is what they worry so much about. Like many families across County Limerick, they feel isolated. They are being encouraged to keep their loved ones at home but are being given no real support to do so. They are told that the HSE promotes home care but the reality is cruel. There is a gap in the policy and practice. In that gap falls the carers who are exhausted, isolated and unheard.

I have another case just down the road from me. The elderly mother of a good friend of mine, who was an active woman, fell, broke her hip and had to go to hospital. She went in for respite after, to ensure she was ready to go home. She now is ready but she has only been offered one half hour slot a day. They are actually calling it a pulse check because by the time the home carer gets there, a half hour later they are gone again. They are not able to actually do anything. He has to leave his elderly mother in the nursing home, even though she could go home, but she does not have enough care at home because he is working and cannot give up his job to sit at home. I would love the Minister for Health to come in and have a discussion on the lack of home care, the barriers and why the HSE cannot seem to employ enough home helps. Is it the section 39 issue? What is the actual issue around this?

Senator Tom Clonan: Hear, hear.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: I reiterate the call I made yesterday regarding the occupied territories Bill. Every nation and state must play a part. My party leader confirmed at the week-end there is no impediment to the existing Bill and it needs to be brought forward as a matter of urgency. We need to put every pressure on the Israeli Government over the atrocities it is carrying out in Gaza.

This morning, I wish to raise a pretty damning Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, report on septic tank inspections across the country. First, there is an inconsistency of application, and of inspection and enforcement regimes where, of the very small number of septic tanks - 1,390 - inspected, 56% of them failed. The implications of that are immense for human health because people are drinking water from sunken wells, and also for the receiving environment and vulnerable water bodies across the country. We really need to get to grips with this once and for all. It needs to happen at Government level and at local authority level. There needs to be consistency of application in the inspection regime.

I call on the Government to give consideration to free well water testing for all rural households, which is another important issue. A lot of families do not know what is coming out of their taps. They do not know what issues are there and there is E. coli contamination. We are facing a real public health risk here. The report is pretty damning and there has been little or no

progress since the inspection regime started in 2013.

Where are we going with this, unless we have consistency of application with all local authorities? Some 95% of those tests took place in four counties - Mayo, Limerick, Kerry and Wexford. There is a problem here and it needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. The free well water testing would give householders either the confidence or the information they need to address the issues. Grants are available in the priority areas for action, which are the high status objective catchments. The national inspection plan needs to be ramped up and the Government and particularly the Minister for local government, needs to take in the local authorities and ensure the inspection regime is brought up to a standard where we know where the problem is and we can start to fix it. It is a huge risk to public health and to the aquatic environment.

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call Senator Duffy, I welcome his intern and guest in the Gallery, James Cafferkey from St. Muredach's College in County Mayo. We are delighted to have him here and I hope the Senator does not work him too hard.

Senator Mark Duffy: I join in the Cathaoirleach's welcome to James Cafferkey. He is a TUI student in St. Muredach's College and has been a great help to me. Yesterday evening, James attended a launch of the new strategy for the No Name Clubs, which is a youth organisation aimed at youth empowerment across Ireland. It has launched its new strategy that runs until 2029 and it has a great focus on working on building on the work of the No Name Clubs, to improve it, to empower young people and to improve the connectivity and inclusion of young people so they have things to do in their towns and villages. Something I would like to work with the No Name Clubs, James and young people on is to make sure that in areas where there is no availability of No Name Clubs that we work to support those neighbourhoods and communities to have the clubs and activities for young people.

I also highlight the issue of human trafficking. A conference was hosted in Ballina by the Ballina and Castlebar Soroptimist clubs. The conference was introduced by the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Calleary, and titled Hidden in Plain Sight. Speakers included representatives from An Garda Síochána and also Ruhama, a charity that does incredible work in this space. The conference aimed to raise awareness. I raise awareness of the work and the plight of those affected by human trafficking, who were promised a better life in European countries. When they arrive, they have their independence, mobile phones and connections with the outside world taken from them. They are told they are in debt. It causes immense suffering and pain for people who were promised a better life and are being taken advantage of. I compliment that conference. It spotlights and highlights a very important topic, which I would like further discussion on in the near future.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I wish to highlight a report by Bord Bia, entitled Export Performance and Prospects 2024-2025. I am sure everyone here knows of the amazing work that Bord Bia does. This report is quite interesting because it highlights there is €17 billion of business exports. It is an amazing success story and organisation that is highly focused on food and horticultural production. There are challenges around alcohol that is exported. There will be serious challenges relating to potential tariffs if they are not sorted out. This is an amazing organisation that is the engine in marketing and innovation for agriculture, horticulture, food production and beverages, which is another important facet of its work. Senators will be aware that it will be showcasing its organisation at its now infamous Bloom festival, which is in the next few weeks. It is being well promoted. I hope as many people as possible can go. The leaders of the main political parties go every year, spend the day there and bring teams with them.

That is important in highlighting this unique enterprise that is Ireland. We have the green island of Ireland. We are an island. I refer to the challenges, excitement and possibilities of an all-Ireland approach in terms of what the Taoiseach talks about and the shared island initiative. We can collaborate more across the island of Ireland. Let us forget about the political issues. The potential for the natural resources, production and enterprise of this sector is enormous. I call for a debate on it. It is important we have a debate on this field. The Minister of State, Deputy Noel Grealish, is responsible for this area. We should invite him because we need to see the plans but also prepare for the challenges and seek diversification. I do not know whether anyone heard “Morning Ireland” on RTÉ Radio reporting on the challenges around diversification to Asia and the Arab states in terms of our food markets. We need new markets and to put in place policies that will support them.

Senator Maria Byrne: I wish to raise the issue of BusConnects. Limerick is due to launch its BusConnects network shortly. There is an industrial estate in Annacotty, Limerick, where more than 2,000 people work. Lacking foresight, Bus Éireann will not run a bus out to the Annacotty Business Park. I have spoken to businesses there and have met them. Some of them even ask people when they apply for a job whether they have a car or a mode of transport of getting there because it is quite a distance - more than 2.5 km - from the next bus stop to the business park. Unfortunately, they have had people take up jobs who then fall by the wayside because in the winter time, they do not make it to work on time. I have written to them myself. I would like the support of the Leader’s office in highlighting the fact that it is short-sighted of BusConnects not to connect the Annacotty Business Park to the rest of Limerick.

Senator Linda Nelson Murray: The Department of Finance is inviting people to submit their views on the development of a new action plan for insurance reform. In case people do not know, this is very important. This consultation aims to give and gathers feedback from stakeholders to shape the next phase of insurance reform.

12 o’clock

The Action Plan for Insurance Reform 2020 delivered good progress in stabilising the insurance market, improving competition and addressing key regulatory issues. However, many issues remain. We see it every day when young people try to get car insurance, and when older people, businesses and festivals seek insurance. The Government is committed to further reforms that will ensure fairer pricing, enhance competition and provide a more sustainable insurance market for consumers, businesses and insurers alike. We will not get to do all that unless people submit what it is they want. I have spoken in the House about the importance of insurance reform and that the programme for Government keeps on track, ensuring insurance can be secured by businesses, community groups, sports clubs, cafés, restaurants, festivals and even thatched houses, which were mentioned here a few weeks ago by a Senator colleague.

Over the past few years we have witnessed an excellent programme of insurance reform. If we want to see this continue, I urge people to submit their feedback and outline what they would like to see happen because the closing date is next Monday.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I wish to raise the case of Ryan Cornelius who has been in prison in Dubai for 17 years. He first went to prison when his youngest child was six years old and that child is now 23 years. Last Friday, I met his wife and relations. Initially, Ryan was sentenced to ten years in jail, but as he reached the end of that sentence, another set of trumped up charges were made and he was sentenced to another 20 years. The man is 71 years of age

and has not seen his youngest child since that child was six. I will forward Ryan's details to Members of the House and I ask that we ask the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to intervene. I understand that Ryan is a British citizen but his wife is Irish. Irish people go to Dubai on holidays all the time. It is simply not good enough that a person can be arbitrarily locked up and forgotten about for 17 years.

My second point, which will be of interest to the Deputy Leader, is that I understand the Air Corps is expected to move CASA aircraft to Shannon because we cannot guarantee 24-hour flights out of Baldonnell anymore. Baldonnell closed at 8 o'clock last night. I understand that the Garda helicopter is likely to be moved to Weston in the next few days because, again, we cannot guarantee air traffic control. Will the Deputy Leader join me, as she has an interest in the defence area, in my request for the Minister for Defence to come to the House to talk about how we will resolve the issue of losing highly specialised people in the Defence Forces, Air Corps, Naval Service and Army. We have to revisit the salary structures and the way in which we compensate those with specialisms so as to retain them. I am happy to engage one to one with the Deputy Leader in order that we can put together something for the Minister. I would appreciate her assistance with that.

Senator Gareth Scahill: Following on from a Commencement matter my colleague, Senator Boyle, had this morning on school safety measures, I noted the Minister of State, Deputy Harkin, said in her response that there are currently no plans to reopen the safe routes to school scheme for new applicants. She also referred to the active travel measures that could be utilised by schools for safety measures. The safe routes to school scheme was designed specifically for those measures. The scheme opened and less than 25% of eligible applicants applied, but it closed while schools were still dealing with Covid-19 during a lockdown. I have heard people numerous times in the House over the past couple of weeks calling for safety measures at schools. I call for a debate with the Minister for Transport to discuss the safe routes to school scheme, getting it reopened and included in the next programme, and having something to put forward to the transport committee.

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome more guests of Deputy Grace Boland. I welcome the pupils from Rush national school in County Dublin. It would be remiss of me not to give them a night off from homework, because otherwise there would be a small bit of problem. I also welcome Ellie Griffin from Trinity College Dublin, who is an intern of Senator Tom Clonan. She is most welcome here today.

Senator Chris Andrews: Six years ago, there was an agreement for 900 social and affordable homes on the Irish Glass Bottle site. The agreement was put together between An Bord Pleanála, Dublin City Council, the Government, the then Minister for housing, Eoghan Murphy, and the housing action group in Ringsend. There was going to be 350 social houses and 550 affordable homes. That was the agreement the then Minister signed off on. Now it seems that is being reneged on because there will not be any affordable housing in the first phase of the scheme. That will make it much more difficult to ensure the remaining 550 homes are squeezed into the last phases.

Obviously, this is devastating for residents and it will make it harder to squeeze the affordable homes into the remaining development. I am concerned and I have a strong belief that there will be no social housing on this site because of the huge cost. When neighbouring sites are producing two bedroom apartments and looking for €1.1 million for them, it will be very difficult to ensure this social housing goes on that site. From a time when there were 900

homes promised, that is looking like it will all unravel and there may be a fraction of that on the Irish Glass Bottle site. Obviously, the residents in Pearse Street, Ringsend, Sandymount and Irishtown are devastated because they seem to have to continually pick up the tab for the Government's failure on housing. I ask that the Minister for housing come to the House and discuss that particular issue.

I extend my sympathies to An Garda Síochána on the loss of Garda Kevin Flatley. I understand he was a garda in Pearse Street, a station I know well, and I know gardaí have huge respect within the local community. I acknowledge the loss to his family and friends.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: I raise today the proposal being considered by the Minister for Justice to increase personal injury awards by almost 17%. We are in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis. Inflation impacts families, businesses and communities across the country and now the Government thinks it is the right time to raise personal injury awards, a move that will inevitably lead to higher insurance premiums and, no doubt, higher claims. We already know from the Central Bank's own data that motor insurance premiums rose by 9% in the first half of 2024 alone, and that is before any changes to injury awards.

In regions like Cavan and Monaghan, we are already paying through the nose for insurance while driving on some of the worst roads in the country which are little more than a patchwork of potholes. A previous analysis found that payouts for personal injuries in Ireland are on average 4.4 times higher than in England. If you experience a minor ankle fracture in Ireland, you could expect to receive up to €54,000, while in England, the same injury warrants up to €14,000. The payout for personal injuries in this country is high enough without raising it further. The impact of higher awards will be felt most by ordinary motorists and small businesses. It will also directly impact community, voluntary and sporting groups, many of which are already struggling to keep the doors open. The Government cannot allow this to go ahead without full and considered debate. I ask the Minister for Justice to come to the House for a debate on the matter.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: Senator Fitzpatrick spoke about the ongoing genocide in Gaza and the fact there are half a million people facing starvation. There is no doubt we all feel devastated by what is going on since the horrific attacks on 7 October. Nothing can ever take away from how horrific those attacks were, but what has happened since has been completely disproportionate. The Senator is right in saying we need to recommit to calling for a ceasefire and, collectively, to recommit to looking for a two-state solution. I spoke recently about a decision at an Inter-Parliamentary Union meeting that I and Senator Duffy were at. A resolution was passed unanimously by 180 countries looking for a two-state solution, which is the longer term solution. What is happening now, however, is absolutely horrific in terms of both food and water not getting to the people living in Gaza and, of course, what Israel is planning to do in terms of upping its military game. Last week Ireland issued a joint statement expressing huge concern together with about six other countries.

As regards the occupied territories Bill, I agree we need to have a full debate in this House and ask where it is at. The Tánaiste met with Senator Black last week to discuss it. Apparently, it was quite a positive and constructive meeting and they will meet again soon. As we know, the Attorney General had been working on the Bill and looking at ways of ensuring that Bill, or a similar one with the same intention, would be legally robust and would stand up. That is what we need. Senators Clonan and Noonan spoke about the same issue. It is absolutely shocking. I will ask for a full debate with the Tánaiste purely on the issue of Gaza, giving us the up-to-date

position, including where the occupied territories Bill is at. We need to know that and we need to know the nuances around it. I am totally happy to look for that this evening.

Senator Fitzpatrick spoke about the National College of Ireland's early learning initiative. It sounds fantastic. It sounds nearly like a cross between a home school liaison and what our public health nurses are doing. To see a third level and further level college doing that in the community within which it is situated is wonderful, and I have no doubt that will give huge value to the communities and to the generations coming through. We need to see more of that. That could possibly be rolled out in other areas as well, particularly in areas of deprivation.

Senator Fitzpatrick also spoke about post offices. Councillor Tom O'Callaghan came in and gave a briefing as to where the situation is at. All our communities and villages and towns that we all represent would be lost without the post office network. For many people, especially those who are older, their weekly visit to the post office might be their only social contact. We will look for a debate on the future of the network. To be fair, a lot has been put in place in terms of extra services that post offices can provide. When I went to buy a Leap card the other day, it was great to be able to go to the post office and do that. There are other services, but I have no doubt we all have ideas and suggestions we can bring forward to this, so I am happy to look for that debate also.

Senator Boyle spoke about the very sad situation of the two young men who were drowned in Donegal. We join the Senator in giving his very deepest sympathies to the families. Somebody I know has a connection with the families, with the boys, very fine young people and families left devastated in a community that has seen an awful lot of grief. We share the Senator's sympathies.

Senator Boyle also spoke about the National Ambulance Service and the need for the review. He spoke about a specific situation. It is shocking when we hear of any situation where people are left without a timely service. We can ask for that debate, certainly, but I think the Senator should also go further with that specific case as a particular situation.

Senator Clonan spoke passionately, as he always does, about the situation in Gaza. When we think of 2025, the year that we are living in, and we look back at the time of the diary of Anne Frank, I remember as a young child reading that and wondering how it could happen, and all the adults in my life saying nobody in the world knew that was happening at the time. We all know about what is happening now. It adds to that sense of helplessness.

Senator Collins spoke about the lack of home help and two particular situations. I genuinely do not know if those two families have been given hours but cannot get the individuals, or whether they were just not given those hours. There are two sides to it. If they were not given the hours that they clearly need, that is a problem. Equally, maybe they have been given the hours but there is a problem trying to get people to work with them. Either way it is a problem. We have always prided ourselves on trying to ensure that people can live independently in their homes as long as they can. We must do more and more. There have been difficulties recruiting home help workers. I see that right across the country and indeed in my own constituency. We will certainly look for the Minister to come in because it is an important issue. We need to make sure that we have the correct policies in place. We will ask the Minister to come in for that.

Senator Noonan spoke about the damning report on septic tank inspections and the inconsistencies with the regime. We absolutely need consistency across the board, in terms of the

inspections and the reports. The Senator raised the possibility of looking for free well water testing. That would play a positive role, I think. Obviously, there would be a cost to the State which would have to be queried. There are certainly public health risks in terms of problems and contamination of water. We will look for a debate on the whole area.

Senator Duffy spoke about the No Name Club and the new strategy. No Name Club has always been a great organisation which empowers young people and encourages them to have positive activities without the necessity to look for alcohol or whatever. It is great to hear there is a new strategy in that regard. I am looking forward to hearing more about it. The Senator also spoke about the horrific situation that is human trafficking. It is going on in every village and every town. There are these temporary brothels set up. Young women are coming in under the illusion of getting a job and having a new life and their passports are taken from them. It is shocking. It is modern day sex slavery, essentially. Well done to those who had that conference, Hidden in Plain Sight. We need to do more of it. I know through the years there have been different presentations by Ruhama and others in the audiovisual room. I am sure they will be coming back to us again. It is certainly something we need to be aware of.

Senator Boyhan spoke about the Bord Bia report, which highlighted €17 billion of exports. The Senator also highlighted Bloom, which is coming up. It is always a fantastic initiative and I love going to it. I think Senator Duffy has a particular interest in going this year. I look forward to being there. Senator Boyhan is correct in saying there are serious issues and concerns regarding tariffs and trade. The foreign affairs and trade committee is having its first meeting today and this will be very high on its agenda. I know the Cathaoirleach has proposed setting up a special select committee in the Seanad to deal with trade issues. Within those two places, we certainly have the opportunity. We can look for a general debate on the matter also.

Senator Maria Byrne spoke about BusConnects and the Annacotty Business Park not being catered for. That is short-sighted. In Kildare, I do find the Local Link bus helpful. The NTA is quite helpful in discussing possibilities and the extension of existing links. I hope it can be solved at a local level. If not, the Senator has our support in bringing it up at a national level. While we try to support public transport and encourage people to use it, we need to make sure those links work.

Senator Nelson Murray spoke about the consultation concerning insurance reforms. I looked at that last week and there were only five submissions.

Senator Linda Nelson Murray: There are eight now.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: There are eight now. I raised the issue on the floor because I was disappointed to see there were only five submissions and the closing date was 19 May. As the Senator said, it is an important area. A lot of good reforms have been carried out. Those who have concerns need to put their submissions in. The Senator is absolutely right to highlight it.

Senator Craughwell spoke about Ryan Cornelius, who has been in prison in Dubai for 17 years. I genuinely do not know anything about the situation but I note his wife is Irish. If Senator Craughwell sends me the details, I will forward them to the Tánaiste's Department. We will see what kind of movement we can get. Senator Craughwell also spoke about the Air Corps decision to move the CASA aircraft to Shannon and the decision to move the Garda helicopter to Edmondstown. He said that we have to be careful to make sure we do not lose highly skilled

Department of Defence personnel in that area. We will ask the Tánaiste, separate from the debate on Gaza, to come to the House on that matter. They need to be two separate debates.

Senator Scahill spoke about the safe routes to school. They were designed for a specific reason; he is right about that. It is disappointing to hear they are not being continued. We will ask the Minister to come to the House on that matter and for it to be raised at the transport committee. We could also ask for it to be raised at the education committee. It is important. The money spent was not huge but it made a real difference to make it safe for our children.

Senator Andrews spoke about the Glass Bottle site. It would be disappointing to lose the 550 affordable housing units. We are not doing enough on affordable housing. There are also concerns regarding the 350 social housing units. I cannot see a situation because of Part V in which they would be lost but I appreciate the Senator's concerns. I suggest he submit a Commencement matter specifically about the site. There are other partners. It is a significant area and Dublin badly needs it. He has our support. He also mentioned the sad passing of Garda Kevin Flatley. We had a minute's silence for him yesterday. It is so tragic. Everybody I know is completely shocked by it. He seems to have been a very fine man and was doing overtime in an area he would not normally be in when this happened. We think of his wife, daughters, family, neighbours and the community.

Senator O'Reilly spoke about the possibility of personal injury awards being increased by 17%. The Government did not suggest that; it was the Judiciary. The Judiciary presented a report to the Minister for consideration. The Senator is correct that it suggested a 17% increase. I raised this matter last week on the floor of the House. It would be incredibly regrettable. Businesses would go out of business if there was an increase. It would lead to increased legal fees. I am sure all Senators will join me in asking the Minister, although he has to consider it, not to recommend this. We are with Senator O'Reilly on that.

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome guests of the Leas-Chathaoirleach, former councillor Mary Greene from Waterford and Nuala Kennedy from Carlow. They are welcome to Seanad Éireann.

I ask the Deputy Leader to move the expression of sympathy for former Senator Paddy O'Toole.

Order of Business agreed to.

Death of Former Member: Motion

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I move:

That Seanad Éireann expresses its deep sadness on the death of former Senator Paddy O'Toole, conveys its sincere condolences to his family, and expresses its gratitude for his notable contribution as a Member of Seanad Éireann to Irish public life and for his dedicated service to the people of Ireland.

Question put and agreed to.

Members rose.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 12.26 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 1.31 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 12.26 p.m. and resumed at 1.31 p.m.

National Biodiversity Week: Statements

Acting Chairperson (Senator Seán Kyne): I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, to the Chamber. The Minister of State will have ten minutes, the group spokespersons will have ten minutes and all other Senators will have five minutes.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy John Cummins): I welcome the opportunity to address the Seanad to mark the launch of National Biodiversity Week 2025 and to speak on an issue that is vital to all of us and our future, namely, the preservation of our biodiversity. The Minister of State, Deputy O’Sullivan, would have liked to have been here but sends his apologies. Unfortunately, he had a bereavement in his family and I am sure all here join with me in expressing our condolences to the Minister of State’s family. We are thinking of them at this difficult time.

As we are all aware, biodiversity is the foundation of a healthy and sustainable environment providing the essential ecosystem services on which we depend: clean air, water, food and a stable environment. Yet, today, biodiversity in Ireland and across the globe is under threat from habitat loss, pollution, invasive species, climate change and unsustainable land and sea use. National Biodiversity Week offers a moment to celebrate the incredible variety of life on our island, from peatlands and pollinators to our native woodlands and marine life, but it also challenges us to act. We must invest in restoration, support farmers and landowners in sustainable practices and engage the public in stewardship of our shared national heritage. Biodiversity loss is not just an environmental issue; it is also an economic and social issue. National Biodiversity Week, which takes place from 16 May to 25 May, is an annual ten-day celebration of nature and wildlife that offers a variety of free events and activities which aim to highlight the importance of biodiversity. It is organised by the Irish Environmental Network and funded by the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS. It provides opportunities for the public to connect with nature and learn from local experts and groups that are actively working to protect our natural heritage.

As well as highlighting the importance of biodiversity, National Biodiversity Week is also about experiencing the fun, enjoyment and spectacle of the nature that surrounds us and connecting with a wider environment. A wide range of events have been organised by the NPWS sites, partner organisations and agencies, NGOs, heritage and conservation groups along with many more. These events will reach communities in every corner of Ireland and will showcase our coasts, rivers, estuaries, hedgerows, peatlands, native woodlands and the marine environment. Guided nature walks and field trips for children will introduce participants to pollinators and other biodiversity in local green spaces. Hands-on workshops will also take place. There will also be an opportunity to discover wildlife through whale watching, farm walks, biodiver-

sity cycle tours, art workshops and more. All events are published on the National Biodiversity Week website and will be promoted by the Irish Environmental Network and the National Parks and Wildlife Service throughout the week.

As people gather to celebrate biodiversity across Ireland, they will also discuss how to protect and restore biodiversity. As National Biodiversity Week kicks off, a variety of in-person and virtual events will bring communities together nationwide to be inspired by nature and learn how to pitch in to protect it. Families and students can even participate in biodiversity week at home through special events like the biodiversity scavenger hunt, which is a self-guided activity to discover wildlife in gardens and local parks. The backyard bioblitz will see wildlife experts on hand throughout the week to help to identify photos of animals and plants submitted online. Amateur nature photographers are invited to submit photos for the 13th annual biodiversity photographer of the year competition, which is happening throughout the month of May.

A number of key international awareness days will also take place during the week. These include the European Commission on 21 May inviting all member states and stakeholders to celebrate the day by organising and supporting bioblitz events in Natura 2000 sites. This year's theme for International Day of Biodiversity, on 22 May, is "harmony with nature and sustainable development". European Day of Parks, on 24 May, is a commemorative day for protected areas across Europe that was launched in 1999 by EUROPARC Federation to celebrate protected areas throughout Europe. European Day of Parks celebrates the creation of the first national park in Europe, a set of nine parks created in Sweden in 1909.

I encourage everyone to attend their local events. In my own constituency in Waterford, events are planned to allow people to see and appreciate the marine life near Heilbhic, along with guided biodiversity walks and talks in the Comeragh Mountains, in the Anne Valley and along the beautiful Waterford greenway. Events will be held across the country from Glenveagh, which will host Le Chéile don Dúlra on 21 May, to a celebration of Natura 200 in St. Gobnait's Wood, which is a special area of conservation in Cork, and in the Connemara National Park.

Substantial progress has been made in recent years to support biodiversity, in particular through the efforts of the NPWS. I compliment the team there, and I know I do so on behalf of the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, for the work they do day in, day out. Of course, the NPWS is an agency under the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. Biodiversity action in Ireland has grown considerably in recent years, with a strong emphasis on collaboration with landowners and local communities to enable a collective response to the biodiversity crisis we face. A significant number of initiatives, projects and funding streams managed by the NPWS are now delivering positive change for a range of habitats and species across our country. As we mark National Biodiversity Week, I invite all Members of the House to reflect on the urgent need to protect and restore our natural heritage. Biodiversity underpins the well-being of this and future generations. I welcome the contributions of colleagues and look forward to a constructive debate on how we can better protect our biodiversity going forward.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Seán Kyne): Senator Fitzpatrick will share time with Senator Daly. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: I welcome the Minister of State and join with him and colleagues in offering deepest sympathies and condolences to the Minister of State, Deputy

O’Sullivan, on the death of his dear sister, Anne Cullinane. May she rest in peace. I acknowledge the presence of the former Minister of State with responsibility for biodiversity, Senator Malcolm Noonan. During the previous Oireachtas term, I had the great pleasure of welcoming him to the great botanic gardens my constituency, where he launched the latest national biodiversity plan. It is with great pleasure that we get to take time today to talk about biodiversity, because it is probably one of the nicest subjects politicians can get to engage in.

I commend the staff of Leinster House who take care of our biodiversity here on the grounds. It gives me great pleasure every day to come in and see the seasons changing, and the way the grass has been cut or not cut, the flowers growing and the wildlife that encourages. We are very privileged to serve here, and that privilege is greatly enhanced by the surroundings we all get to enjoy on a daily basis. It is easy to take that for granted and I do not want to do that. I acknowledge the very fine work that is undertaken.

When talking about biodiversity closer to home, there are a number of groups in my constituency. The Minister spoke about the Government’s commitment, the State’s commitment and the amount of resources that have been put in place to encourage and support biodiversity, not just in an informal way but in statutory activities, and that is very welcome. However, it is the people who daily give their time to protect our natural heritage and environment who are the real heroes of biodiversity. I am talking about people who are involved in groups like Connecting Cabra, which is a grassroots organization of people who live in Cabra and come together. Cabra was built as a post-war local authority housing estate. Many of the houses have very large back gardens but very modest front gardens and not an enormous amount of green space. The members of Connecting Cabra have come together and are reintroducing nature in a myriad of different ways. I congratulate them on the work they have done to date and I encourage anybody who has free time this weekend to go out and visit them in Cabra. They will be holding a biodiversity festival this weekend. They are not the only people in Dublin Central, however, engaged in championing our biodiversity and natural heritage. It is happening at Mud Island in North Strand, as well as in Ballybough. Who would have thought there would be somewhere like the Mud Island Community Garden in an area that everybody associates with the concrete jungle of the inner city? It is a spectacular garden. Senator Noonan has visited it. One sees the seasons change, the wildlife, the plants and the growth. It is such a beautiful oasis of nature and biodiversity in the city.

In Phibsborough there is a great biodiversity group which holds a Buzzfest event every year. The Buzzfest is about bees, primarily the bees of our Royal Canal. We in the city are blessed to have our canals. On the northside we have the Royal Canal and on the southside there is the Grand Canal. The Royal Canal is one of the most spectacular places in the city. It is a haven for wildlife. Up by Broombridge on the banks of the Royal Canal there is a nest with five swan’s eggs in it, and that swan is guarding them with her life. That is just one example of biodiversity in the capital.

I congratulate everybody who is involved in championing biodiversity on a daily basis in their ordinary lives. I want to champion all of the State organisations which give of their time and have built biodiversity protection into their policies and operations. Fianna Fáil as a party in government is absolutely committed to rising to the challenge of climate change and restoring biodiversity, which is our natural heritage, via a just transition to a sustainable society and circular economy. It behoves all of us to do all we can in our daily lives to ensure our biodiversity and natural heritage is championed and protected, because it is not just an environmental issue but a social issue, one that will pay dividends not just for us in our daily lives, but for future

generations to come. I suggest, in the week that is in it, we all recommit ourselves in whatever small way we can to protecting and championing our biodiversity.

Senator Paul Daly: I wish to be associated with the remarks of the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, and those of my colleague, Senator Fitzpatrick, in sending my deepest sympathies and condolences to my good friend and colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, on the death of his sister, Anne. Go ndéanfaidh Dia trócaire ar a hanam uasal.

When I stand up in the House, people wait to see what aspect of farming I will talk about, but I am going to give everyone a break on this occasion and not mention farming. I acknowledge, however, the great role that our farmers and agricultural sector play in our biodiversity. As the custodians of the land, while often knocked, our farmers and farming community are our best minders and proactively protect and enhance our biodiversity. I will leave the agricultural side at that.

There is an issue I have raised here before and it is a bugbear I have. The fourth national biodiversity national action plan refers to taking, "a Whole-of-Government and Whole-of-Society approach". The new biodiversity guidance for public and State bodies sets out that it is a legal requirement for public and State bodies to consider biodiversity in their decision-making and daily operations.

I will move on to Transport Infrastructure Ireland and the maintenance of our motorways. It drives me mad, to say the least, every morning and evening as I come to Dublin from Kilbeggan on the M4 and M6 these days to see lorries with big yellow arrows protecting tractors with flail mowers and self-propelled lawn mowers mowing the 1.5 m wide strip of grass on both sides and in the centre of the motorway. It is not in any way a hazard. It does not in any way affect the safety of the motorway. It does not in any way hinder visibility along the motorway. These are lawns 2 in. or 3 in. high because these people will be back mowing religiously again in another three weeks. We are trying to promote no-mow May, etc., for the sake of the dandelion and the red and white clover. Pollination is part of biodiversity. Our Irish native honeybees are becoming extinct. We do not need to mow this grass until September. If we do a simple calculation, on the motorway I mentioned, which runs from here to Galway, 1 m of grass on both sides of that road multiplied by the distance from here to Galway is the equivalent of 95 or 96 acres of potential dandelions for our bees. The State owns that land and there is no reason of safety or otherwise to interfere with it during the summer months. If we had a national park of 95 acres or a farmer or an individual who was prepared to donate 95 acres to the State for biodiversity, there would be bells and whistles everywhere. We have it under the control of Transport Infrastructure Ireland. Leave it alone. Let the bees have it until September. That is only the road from Dublin to Galway; we have motorways all over the country. I got slated when I mentioned the need to cut grass for safety reasons on secondary roads and back roads. I am not talking about secondary roads and back roads. I am not talking about long, heavy grass that lies out on a road. I am talking about 3 in. or 4 in. of grass on the verges of motorways that is not in any way a safety hazard. If nothing else comes out of this debate, I want the Minister of State to take that back to the Department of Transport and see if it can be looked at. It would save a fortune of money as well as the good it would do for biodiversity. That is the one issue I wanted to raise. I thank our spokesperson, Senator Fitzpatrick, for allowing me the time. I hope the Minister of State can bring this matter back and that something can be done about it. It is a no-brainer.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I welcome the Minister. I wish to be associated with the condo-

lences to the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, on the loss of his dear sister. May she rest in peace. My thoughts are also with their extended family.

I will start with agriculture. I am a member of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Agriculture and Food and, although it is now a separate committee, I am also on the marine committee. I will focus on agriculture. Farmers and many Senators represent farming communities are fully committed to saving our biodiversity. We are now going to embark on preparations for the next Common Agricultural Policy, CAP. In the 2023-27 CAP, many commitments and promises were achieved in the context of creating and maintaining habitats and the importance of that. I make the case again that we must incentivise our farmers, too. Clearly, under CAP, the European Green Deal and particularly in the EU context of our consciousness of the environment, as well as our own, we have to look at imaginative ways of embracing set-aside in certain circumstances. We had all of this years ago. There are ecosystems and best farm practices that we can and should embrace. That is really important. I am making the strong case that we should support, incentivise and reward farmers when it comes to biodiversity because it is important. It was promised that by 2030, habitat biodiversity assessments would be conducted regularly as part of the national farm survey. That is important and something we need to keep in our minds going forward.

I acknowledge the former Minister of State and current Senator, Malcolm Noonan, in this regard. He very much led in this area. Many of the things he predicted a few years ago have come true and many of the benefits he set in place are beginning to come through. One of the important benefits, and one which I wish to acknowledge today, is how he championed and sought to ensure that every one of our 31 local authorities had a biodiversity officer. That is very important. I have a word of caution in this regard, however. On a printout I received today of the 31 local authorities and the names of each of the biodiversity officers, in many cases there is an asterisk after the names. At the end of the list, it states that these positions - the ones with an asterisk beside them - are positions funded entirely by the relevant local authority. There is not too many of them. Currently, many of these biodiversity officers are funded centrally from the Department. We do not know how long that is going to continue. We need the Minister, and I ask the Minister of State to take this back, to do an audit of that. What are the contractual arrangements for each of our 31 local authorities? In some local authorities, they actually have two officers. We want to ensure they remain in these roles. That is really important. They have a key role, and rightly so, in communities that are driving this agenda. We need to ensure they are part of a multiteam in terms of planning, heritage and biodiversity and they are all interconnected. I acknowledge the absolute commitment of the former Minister of State, Senator Noonan, to driving that and his enormous commitment to the Heritage Council.

Virginia Teehan heads up the Heritage Council in Kilkenny. It has done an amazing job. While I had concerns initially when the Minister brought forward proposals to give additional powers and functions to the Heritage Council, I now see the benefit. It is all under one roof and collectively driven. It is not broken up between natural heritage and built heritage. All heritage, be it built, natural or maritime heritage and all of that, is included. Virginia Teehan is doing an amazing job, as is the whole organisation. It is driven. What has really impressed me about the Heritage Council's work in the area of biodiversity is that it interviews and assists local authorities in recruiting biodiversity officers and heritage officers. It provides a one-stop shop. It knows what it is doing. It is building strong, practical relationships and putting plans in place. It is also cosupporting and cofunding projects in a co-ordinated way rather than some Minister at a desk in some building or headquarters deciding who best can benefit from

this funding because it is politically advantageous for them. It is now done on a numeric and assessment basis. That is important.

Looking at the functions and responsibilities of a biodiversity officer in a local authority, there are six or seven points. They are mandated to create a local biodiversity forum; to write a local biodiversity plan in conjunction with others; to research surveys and collect data; to provide advice on biodiversity to all local authority staff; to undertake community engagement in raising awareness of biodiversity and driving forward practical projects in partnership with others; to develop strategies, policies and projects relating to wildlife, habitats and biodiversity; and to provide biodiversity expertise to groups such as the heritage forum and the climate action team. They are doing amazing work. It is a good news story. We need to support it. We need to secure the funding model going forward for each of these biodiversity officers. There will come a time when the Department may have to review it or give block funding to the local authorities. These people are working and want their jobs to be secure. They want their work to continue to grow. I acknowledge all the people who have played their role or part in this.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Seán Kyne): Before I move to the next speaker, I welcome the students and staff of Skerries Community College who are here this afternoon. They are guests of Deputy Grace Boland. I hope they enjoy the day and learn a lot about our Houses of Parliament. They are all welcome.

Senator P. J. Murphy: First, on behalf of the Fine Gael group, I express my sympathies to the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, and his family on the loss of his sister.

As Fine Gael's spokesperson for biodiversity, I am delighted to speak on the merits of biodiversity week. I am grateful to my party leader and the Tánaiste, Deputy Simon Harris, for appointing me to this position as spokesperson for biodiversity in the Seanad. One of the reasons I first entered politics many years ago was because of my love of the Irish countryside, its flora and fauna and the nature around me and my desire to see it protected. As a farmer and as someone who observes nature both in my own farm and in the Irish countryside on my travels for work every day, I know that agriculture and nature can and must coexist. Indeed, they must go hand in hand.

As a commercial beekeeper for more than 20 years, I clearly understand the problems and threats posed by both the deliberate and accidental introduction of new species to our island. We need to be much more restrictive on honey bee imports in particular. I am quite concerned about the lackadaisical approach taken by both this Government and the previous Government in advancing through the Dáil the legislation that passed through this House more than two and a half years ago on restricting and limiting the imports of queen bees into Ireland.

As an angler and a hunter, I am aware that our traditional country sports are sustainable only while there is a surplus to be harvested within nature. Year on year, we see these surpluses diminish. Our salmon stocks and our red grouse and grey partridge numbers, all key game species in this country, have declined in the past 40 years. That does not need to be the case. Through good fisheries management in catchments such as the Erriff River on the border between Galway and Mayo, we have seen how salmon numbers can be sustainable and how angling can be sustainable in well-managed fisheries. Through several projects with red grouse in Wicklow and Galway, we have seen that with good management and predator control, populations can be kept sustainable. The same can be said for the Lough Boora project with the grey partridge, where we have seen the almost extinct Irish grey partridge brought back to popula-

tion numbers where they have been able to be reintroduced to other parts of the country. With good management, not only do we retain these key native species, but we retain our traditional ways of life as well.

Over the millennia, species have come and gone naturally. However, the current extinction rate is unprecedented and accelerating. Species decline and extinction are beginning to affect the ecosystems services that we, as humans, depend on.

2 o'clock

All of these ecosystems are themselves dependent on biodiversity, from the tiniest microbes to the largest mammals, and their interactions, which together make up the web of life that we have all around us. Ireland is home to globally important populations of birds, fish, mammals, invertebrates, plants and fungi across a wide range of terrestrial, freshwater and marine habitats. The seas and coasts surrounding our island support vast colonies of seabirds, abundant fish and cold water coral reefs, whales and dolphins, as well as rich algal and invertebrate communities. On land there is a wealth of species in our mountains, peatlands, turloughs, woodlands, grasslands, lakes, rivers and coastal habitats. Over 31,000 species have been recorded in Ireland and its surrounding seas and I have no doubt there are many more yet to be discovered.

However, half of our rivers and two thirds of our estuaries are not in good ecological health. Very often in this and the other House of the Oireachtas people point at farmers when it comes to water quality but maybe we need to look at municipal wastewater treatment in our towns and villages and in rural Ireland. In my own municipal district of south Galway, we have two salmon rivers, the Dunkellin which runs through Craughwell and Kilcolgan, where it enters the sea, and the Clarin which enters the sea at Clarinbridge. These three settlements are not serviced with wastewater treatment facilities and water quality in these salmon rivers is declining year on year, along with the salmon numbers in the rivers. It is also worth noting that these two rivers enter the south of Galway Bay at the world famous but very vulnerable St. George oyster beds which are also seeing problems because of water enrichment in the estuary. I raised the issue of wastewater servicing of these settlements with the housing Minister in this House on two occasions but I have yet to receive an answer of any substance. Silence is what I received.

The Burren lowlands of south Galway and north Clare are, on a European scale, the most important habitat for bumblebees. Our limestone walls and pavements have for centuries, if not millennia, provided critical nest sites for these creatures. Over 80 species of bumblebee are found in this very small geographical area but one in five is now endangered. One in seven of these species is deemed to be near extinction and one in ten is deemed to be vulnerable to extinction. Due to poorly considered regulations by our Department of agriculture, hundreds if not thousands of kilometres of stone walls are condemned to disappear from the west of Ireland in an attempt to promote hedgerows that do not naturally have a place in this part of our landscape. When these walls go, they are gone forever and with them the fragile local ecosystem that they have sustained over the centuries.

All is not negative, however. In recent years due to fantastic voluntary efforts and State assistance, with particular credit due to my colleague here, Senator Noonan, we have seen the successful reintroduction of a number of key raptor species. The golden eagle, the white-tailed eagle, the red kite and the osprey now grace Irish skies again after decades, and in some cases centuries, of absence. Due to improvements in habitats on cutaway bogs, the common crane has now resumed its place in the Irish countryside and the little egret, which was rarely sighted

just 20 years ago, is now a common sight throughout Ireland. This winter, a pair of glossy ibis made a temporary home on my own farm in south Galway. This is a bird that up until a few years ago I had only ever seen in pictures online. Now, due to improved habitat across the western seaboard, we are seeing them more commonly right around the area that I live in. Barn owl numbers are also on the rise throughout Ireland, as are those of most other native birds of prey, including the peregrine falcon which almost disappeared completely from this island in the 1990s. This being said, we must never get complacent. The curlew and lapwing numbers have been declining sharply over the last ten years. Work is being done on this but numbers continue to decline nationally. As farmers we must find a way to be productive in our industry while also making room for nature. As politicians, we need to give responsible leadership so that future generations of Irish people can enjoy the magnificent natural living wonders of this beautiful island home that we live in.

Senator Maria McCormack: I will share time with Senator Collins, if that is okay.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Victor Boyhan): Yes, it is okay. We are not under enormous pressure, given the number of people present. It might be possible to take another five minutes later if the Senator wants. Does she want to share time?

Senator Maria McCormack: Yes.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Victor Boyhan): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Maria McCormack: On behalf of the Sinn Féin group, I extend my condolences to the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, on the loss of his sister.

I am happy to talk about biodiversity. In Laois, and nationally, we have a real opportunity to tackle biodiversity and the climate crisis in a meaningful way. We must follow on from the work our colleague, Senator Noonan, did when he held the brief. In my county there is a visionary proposal to develop a greenway through Cúl na Móna, linking Cashel and Ross bogs, along disused Bord na Móna railway lines. The project is about scenic walking rather than cycling trails and rewilding, restoring vital habitats and reconnecting communities with the beautiful nature that surrounds them. This initiative has unanimous support from Laois County Council. It has the potential to transform a post-industrial landscape into a thriving biodiversity corridor, while supporting native species, strengthening water quality and acting as a carbon sink. It is a win for climate, nature and the people of Laois.

We know the reality. Ireland is in the grip of a biodiversity emergency. We have to do more. Some 80% of our habitats are in a poor or inadequate condition. Species like mallard ducks, kestrels, butterflies and native plants are disappearing at an alarming rate. Nearly half of our freshwater systems are in decline. It is now not just an environmental issue; it is a health, economic and cultural one. Projects like the Cúl na Móna greenway offer a way forward. We have seen successes locally in Laois with Abbeyleix bog, where local people came together to protect and restore an ecosystem. That model works. Laois has its vision, but we need Government support to make it happen. A motion was passed by local county councillors in Laois in October 2024, but we need the Government to drive this forward and engage Bord na Móna so that the project is not delayed any longer. This is more than just a local trail. It is about setting a national example that climate action can be community led, nature has value beyond profit and rural Ireland can be at the heart of real environmental leadership. We all need to enshrine the right to a clean, healthy and safe environment in our Constitution, something recommended

by our citizens' assembly. I ask the Minister of State to back the new greenway in Laois and biodiversity and build a better future for all through biodiversity.

Senator Joanne Collins: I welcome the Minister of State. Today, during biodiversity week, I want to speak about the urgent need to protect and restore biodiversity, especially through a better approach to forestry. I also want to reflect on what that means for my county, Limerick. Ireland is in the grip of a biodiversity disaster and crisis. One in five rare species is at risk of extinction. Our native woodlands, once thriving, are now scarce, reduced to just over 1% of our land area. In County Limerick, we are fortunate to have pockets of extraordinary natural beauty, from the Ballyhoura Mountains to the wooded valleys of Shannon and Deel, but even these landscapes are under pressure. For too long, forestry policy in Ireland has worked against biodiversity. Blanketed Sitka spruce plantations, often in inappropriate sites, have done real damage to soil, river and habitats. In Limerick, communities have raised genuine concerns about monoculture plantations planted without proper consultation or regard for local ecosystems.

Let me be clear. We need more trees, but we need the right trees in the right places and for the right reasons. We need to move away from industrial forestry and towards a nature first approach. We need to move to native woodlands, mixed-species planting and forests that support wildlife, clean our air and water and strengthen our rural communities. That means supporting farmers in Limerick and right across Ireland to become stewards of biodiversity. They should be rewarded, not penalised, for protecting native trees, hedgerows and wetlands. These features are not barriers to productivity; they are building blocks to a sustainable future.

We must stop planting on carbon-rich peat soils. Such so-called green projects are, in fact, carbon time bombs. I was very taken aback by the statement by the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Healy-Rae, during our discussion on forestry a few weeks ago that not only would he continue to plant on our bogs and peatlands but he actually is promoting an increase in planting on those areas, which we know emit more carbon than they soak.

The Government's forestry strategy must go beyond words. It must deliver funding, enforcement and, above all, trust that the forestry system works for people and for nature. Sinn Féin stands for a forestry policy that values biodiversity, respects local voices and leaves a legacy of living landscapes, not just timber profits. In County Limerick and beyond, our biodiversity is not just a treasure; it is a responsibility. Let us mark National Biodiversity Week not with slogans but with serious political will.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Victor Boyhan): I thank the Senator for her constructive use of time. The next slot is for the Cross-Party Group. There are three speakers on my list but I see only two are in attendance, namely, Senators Cosgrove and Noonan. As time is on our side, and if the Minister of State is amenable, I propose that the Senators have five minutes each. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: I will not even need five minutes. The Minister of State is very welcome. I take this opportunity to give praise to my colleague Senator Noonan. I am delighted he is part of our group because, as Minister of State, he placed biodiversity and the threat of biodiversity loss firmly on the agenda within policies. His legacy will always be there and I thank him for that.

Other speakers referred to the impact of having not only biodiversity officers but heritage

officers as well. The roles are all intertwined. It is really important, as the Acting Chairperson said, that the Government makes sure the funding continues and there is no inconsistency in or threat to that funding.

As someone from a coastal community, I take the opportunity of these statements on National Biodiversity Week to talk about our inland and offshore fisheries. Thus far in the lifetime of our planet, there have been at least five mass extinction events, each of which, in turn, probably took place 440 million, 365 million, 250 million, 210 million and 65 million years ago. We are all familiar with the theory that a comet caused the last mass extinction 65 million years ago. However, the four previous events were likely caused by volcanic activity and changes in oceanic chemistry such as changes in oxygen, methane and carbon dioxide levels in the deep sea.

At 99 years of age, the veteran environmentalist and film maker, David Attenborough, has just released a new film in which he shows in graphic detail the damage we are doing through overfishing, over-exploitation and the wasteful and unacceptable pillaging of life from the ocean. This is not only stripping the oceans of life we need to maintain, but the methods we use to trawl the seabed for fish and the extraction of oil and gas from wells deep under the seabed increase the release of carbon dioxide and methane into the sea, which measurably alters the chemical make-up of the water. Most marine life is extremely well adapted to the conditions it finds itself in and is not necessarily easily adaptable. A slight change in the chemical make-up of the water has a profound effect on the creatures that live in it. Having moved from the surface of the water into the air, the same CO₂ and methane move into the atmosphere, adding to the levels of warming gasses and driving warmer temperatures on the earth and in the oceans. Colder oceans slow and even prevent the escape of methane gas from the seabed to the surface, while warmer oceans transport methane more quickly from seabed to surface.

As other speakers have noted, for all our actions, there is a reaction, as we are all living forms and are all connected. On the one hand, we are asking farmers in Leitrim, Sligo and Donegal to rewet their lands to trap carbon. However, we are also allowing super trawlers and fossil fuel conglomerates to play havoc with the delicate balance of ocean life as their actions accelerate the release of carbon dioxide and methane, which is 80 times more warming than CO₂, into the atmosphere. David Attenborough assures us that there is hope, which is great. He describes the sea as our greatest ally against climate catastrophe. He says that the sea is able to recover and bounce back stronger than ever with remarkable speed in ways that we did not know or understand previously. This is a message that I am heartened to hear. Living in a coastal community like Sligo, I am heartened that National Biodiversity Week in Sligo later this week will recognise the importance of our inland and the care that we need to take of our inland and coastal waters. We need to heed the serious and real warnings from environmentalists that we risk being responsible for a new mass extinction but we also need to heed the message of hope. Most of all we need to act. Messages of hope will not bring about change. We as legislators can bring about change. Going back to my first point, we need to make sure the loss of biodiversity is at the forefront of any monetary decision. The impact on the environment and most importantly the impact on biodiversity should be the forefront of any of those decisions.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: I extend my sympathies to the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, on the passing of his sister Anne. I am delighted with his appointment. He has the same grá for this post as I did. I thank the Members for their kind comments on my small role over the past couple of years in stopping the rot. We had a poor track record up to that. I thank the Taoiseach because he gave me great support during my time in office and I had cross-party support as well.

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I will start National Biodiversity Week on Friday on Lough Ree with Owen Murphy and the fantastic team with the Breeding Waders European innovation partnership, EIP. It is a fantastic project. Senator Murphy spoke about the loss of many of our breeding wading birds and our ground-nesting birds. That is an innovative project doing fantastic work with farmers and local communities in trying to keep important species on our landscape. I am looking forward to that.

I pay tribute to the Irish farm network, National Parks and Wildlife Service and everybody involved in biodiversity week. I think back to taking over the ministerial role in 2020 and examining the context of it. We were in the depths of a global pandemic and nature became a great consolation to all of us. We found in our 2 km and 5 km walks that we started noticing nature. Perhaps because things were becoming more silent, we could hear the birds singing and we could notice the sights and sounds of nature more. It did spark a reawakening in all of our collective consciousness of the need, importance and significance of restoring nature. I welcome that. The Government was leading on what communities had asked us to do and what farmers had been asking us to do. That is where we took that lead and initiative from. I pay tribute to the leaders on that over the past number of years, such as the NPWS. It is an incredible organisation. It has incredibly dedicated public servants. Some of them will be watching our debate this afternoon.

I travelled the country and visited every county in my little grey partridge, as I called her. It was incredible to see the work they were doing, from general operatives in our national parks to the park rangers to the district conservation officers to all of the scientific staff right up to the top level, headed by Niall O'Donoghue and his team. I saw an incredibly dedicated group of people who finally had been given the resources to do all of the stuff that they wanted to do for decades. Some of these people were 20 to 30 years in the NPWS and never had those resources to lead on the headstarting programmes for curlews, the grey partridge project, the natterjack toad and the reintroduction of species. All of these projects have been hugely important. It is also about the tracks and trials in our national parks and nature reserves. We now have two new national parks. We could and should have more. We also have more nature reserves. The NPWS has purchased quite a lot of land over the past number of years and all of that will be put to good use for nature. The critical issue has been the shift in the relationship between the NPWS and particularly landowners and farmers over the past number of years. It is now a much more collaborative approach. We have farm plan schemes and good schemes there such as EIPs and LIFE projects that farmers want to be actively involved in. Before they were being told by the EU to follow a certain method of production and now this is a whole changed approach. Farmers are embracing biodiversity. There has to be money attached to that. Some people call that compensation but it is not. It is about getting paid properly for ecosystem services, water quality and restoring nature on their land. That brings us to the next big project that we have to do collectively as a country, which is the new national nature restoration plan. That is going to be a very important piece of work that is being led by Dr. Aoibhinn Ní Shúilleabháin and the team in the NPWS. I look forward to seeing that emerge.

There is one critical issue I have to raise. My colleague spoke about the drivers of biodiversity loss. We are looking at real concerns about EU funding and where it is going to go. Is it going to go to environmental schemes like the LIFE projects or is it going to be siphoned off for defence spending? The Government has to play an important role in shaping that conversation and to then look separately at the big driver of biodiversity losses. Yes, we can have headstarting programmes and perimeter and predator proof fences to protect lapwing and other species but we are really at nothing unless we tackle the root cause of this, which is economic growth.

That is our global economic system and financial flows from countries like Ireland into polluting industries and fossil fuels. This is a bigger picture for all of us. It is important that as a Government we must lead on that.

I thank the Irish Environmental Network. I want people to go out and enjoy nature in their locality because it is everywhere, as Senator Fitzpatrick said. Even here in Dublin city centre amazing work is being done. Let us go out and enjoy it. People should go out and enjoy biodiversity week. They should go out and appreciate it and when they have done that, they should lobby their politicians to ensure we increase the spending and continue to invest in nature and our wonderful National Parks and Wildlife Service.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Victor Boyhan): I welcome Deputy Claire Kerrane and her guests to the House.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: We have incredible biodiversity in Ireland. This week represents a great opportunity for people not only to enjoy it aesthetically but also to understand the necessity of our biodiversity. On Sunday, Cavan Public Participation Network, along with the Irish Environmental Network, launched National Biodiversity Week in beautiful Belturbet, County Cavan. There was a huge turnout with a wide range of outdoor workshops. Attendees got to enjoy Turbet Island, which is a very unusual island in the middle of a town that hosts a lot of biodiversity. People were able to record the biodiversity in the area on their loop walk.

A range of events is happening over the next week in Cavan that will appeal to various age groups. It is great to see children in particular taking great joy in being in forests and out enjoying natural scenery. In my local forest there is a bat walk. It is a wonderful way to build community and take people out of the digital space we find ourselves in and increasingly more attached to. A number of events taking place in Cavan will appeal to both younger and older generations. They range from more data-based workshops to ones that encourage a deeper understanding of Irish biodiversity.

One workshop that stood out was on beekeeping and biodiversity. Thankfully, in recent years we have developed a deeper appreciation for our pollinators and a greater understanding of the vital role they play in sustaining the Irish ecosystem. We need to continue that kind of education. Bees pollinate more than 70% of our wild plants and one third of the food that we eat, from apples to clover. Without them our native flora, food production and the wildlife that depends on these habitats would be at serious risk. If people go to the Cavan Public Participation Network Facebook page, they will find all the activities that are on during the week.

Little steps can happen in different ways. My local parish church, which has land available, decided to do more planting and parishioners made an outdoor classroom beside a lake where they hold little workshops for students close by. Little steps like that are all very encouraging but they need to be funded. If the windscreen of my car over the past couple of weeks is anything to go by, things are improving.

Senator Gareth Scahill: It is fitting to welcome Councillor Leah Cull to the Chamber this afternoon. She is from the biodiverse-rich area of Arigna in north Roscommon so it is topical she is here. It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to speak during biodiversity week. It is a time to reflect on the beauty, resilience and importance of our natural world and to celebrate the local efforts to make a real difference in preserving it. In County Roscommon, we are very proud to lead by example, and across our towns and countryside individuals, communities and

organisations are coming together to safeguard and enhance our biodiversity, not just for today but for generations to come.

We have seen powerful work in agricultural communities. The Farming Rathcroghan project is helping to reimagine how we farm, blending heritage and innovation to promote biodiversity on farms while preserving the historical landscape of the Rathcroghan region. As part of the Rathcroghan farming model, we are proud to see the revival and recognition of traditional skills that connect our farming practices with our culture and archaeological heritage. One such skill is dry stone construction which has now been formally recognised as part of Ireland's intangible cultural heritage and inscribed in the UNESCO world heritage representative list. Within the Rathcroghan landscape, techniques such as dry stone walling and hedge laying play a crucial role, not only in supporting biodiversity by creating habitats and corridors for wildlife but also in enhancing the landscape setting of archaeological monuments. These skills reflect a deep-rooted respect for the land and its history and are a vital part of how we farm with nature and heritage in mind. I congratulate Richie Farrell, who runs the project in Rathcroghan, and the team around him.

Perhaps one of the most inspiring examples is in Taghmaconnell, where the Karst Farming Group is doing pioneering work. The recently published biodiversity report shines a light on the unique karst landscape, a fragile and precious system of limestone soils, wetlands and underground water systems. This report does not just document the richness of local flora and fauna, it sets out a community-led vision for how farming and biodiversity can thrive together. I was delighted to see on Monday funding of €1.6 million approved from the recent European Innovation Partnership under the CAP strategic plan for connecting old and new farming technologies to conserve the unique species of the karst grassland.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the great work of our local GAA clubs on the green club programme. GAA clubs across Roscommon have embraced the role of environmental stewards, promoting sustainability through actions such as pollinator friendly planting, energy conservation and waste reduction. It is a brilliant example of sport and sustainability going hand in hand.

These are not just isolated projects. They are connected by a shared vision, which is one of respect for nature, pride in our local environment and a commitment to acting locally to solve global challenges. As we mark biodiversity week, let us recognise and support these efforts and be inspired to do more, because protecting biodiversity is not just the job of experts, it is a role we all share. Whether it is planting for pollinators, supporting sustainable farming or simply cherishing the wild spaces around us, as my colleague Senator Noonan mentioned, every action counts.

Senator Eileen Lynch: I would like to be associated with the remarks of sympathy to the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, on the loss of his sister.

It is very timely we are having this discussion today for biodiversity week as we face so many challenges in terms of biodiversity. We need a practical, future focused approach, one that respects our rural communities and values the role of farmers as stewards of the land. I say this with urgency because the evidence is now overwhelming. Ireland's biodiversity is under serious pressure.

Nowhere is this more evident and nowhere is both the challenge and opportunity demon-

strated more than in The Gearagh, just outside Macroom in my constituency of Cork North-West. This ancient riverine woodland, a rare alluvial forest formed by the River Lee, is of European ecological significance. It is home to otters, kingfishers and many unique wetland habitats. However, decades of drainage, forestry and hydroelectric development have damaged what was previously a vast wilderness. There is now a massive opportunity to restore and protect what remains. That means working closely with local farmers and landowners, not against them. We have seen through the Gearagh management plan the start of a collaborative vision – one that includes low-impact farming, ecotourism potential and environment enhancement. These are the kinds of localised, community-rooted conservation models that we should be supporting.

At a national level, as has been mentioned, the CAP strategic plan is already funding biodiversity actions that work. Through ACRES, farmers receive payments for planting pollinator-friendly margins, preserving hedgerows, protecting water courses and supporting breeding habitats for endangered birds like the curlew and the lapwing. These are practical, measurable actions, and farmers are responding positively to them.

In Cork, the biodiversity regeneration in a dairying environment, BRIDE, project has led the way, offering results-based payments for tangible, visible improvements. Fine Gael has long championed results-based agri-environmental schemes, and it is time to expand models like BRIDE across more high nature value areas.

There is, of course, as I mentioned, room to improve, but there is always room to improve. We need more flexibility and regional targeting within ACRES so that farmers in areas like the Lee Valley in Cork and the Musherua mountains are supported to tackle their specific environmental challenges. We need stronger interagency co-ordination between the NPWS, Inland Fisheries Ireland, Teagasc and our local authorities across the country so that landowners can get clear, co-ordinated advice on biodiversity-friendly practices and there is investment in habitat restoration projects like the Gearagh, not through top-down directives but through bottom-up partnerships with those who know the land best.

I also acknowledge the role that local hunt, gun and coursing clubs play in conservation of our native wildlife. However, I want to be clear: illegal or out-of-season hunting, or disturbance of protected species, undermines our conservation goals and cannot be tolerated. While there is a close partnership between the NPWS and An Garda Síochána in this regard, we need to see more done to stamp out illegal hunting through the establishment of a wildlife crime unit. Enforcement must be fair and firm but, equally, it is vital that we include gun clubs and games associations in species monitoring, invasive control and habitat protection because this is partnership in action.

While we are undoubtedly facing a biodiversity crisis, there is also possibility and opportunity. If we get this right, Ireland could lead in Europe on farming and conservation working hand in hand.

Senator Linda Nelson Murray: Biodiversity is one of the most important and vital issues that we as a global community can tackle to improve our planet for future generations. From the breakdown of our waste to the pollination of the most delicate flower to the production of all our food sources, our biosystem has the final say on the direction our planet will take. Clever design and thought-out plans around our towns can contribute to biodiversity in a positive way, as opposed to placing token flower beds or the odd tree in parking spaces around town.

Yesterday, I attended the bio-economy forum in Enfield, County Meath, and it was an eye-opener. I picked up this book called *Back to the Future with Beo and Raja*. It is a very good way of explaining biodiversity to early learners in a fun way. I highly recommend it.

As it is biodiversity week, I acknowledge my father-in-law, Dr. Declan Murray, who is an emeritus associate professor of zoology with the school of biology and environmental science of UCD. Declan researched, and continues to research, the systematic taxonomy, ecology and distribution of chironomid. Did my fellow Senators know that an Irish man - a Meath man, my father-in-law - through his studies discovered multiple new species of chironomid, which are non-biting midges, to the world of science? Who knew that studying flies was going to be so important to biodiversity in Ireland?

Chironomids are often used to determine the health of streams because of the diversity of the different water cultures they can tolerate. They play important roles in aquatic ecosystems, biomonitoring and conservation due to their ecological diversity. In fact, on many a holiday with my father-in-law, he has come along with his little bag and his net, and has discovered new species of fly to the world in places like Portugal and Lanzarote. So, as part of biodiversity week, I would like to acknowledge my father-in-law, Dr. Declan Murray, who at a ripe old age - let us just say that he is in his 80s - continues to play a pivotal and vital role in biodiversity in Ireland.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Victor Boyhan): I thank the Senator. That is a nice way to conclude the Senators' contributions. On behalf of all Senators, I wish the Minister of State well in her new Ministry. She is no stranger to this House. She was an amazing Senator when she was here. I know she is doing amazing things in her new Ministry. Like all my colleagues, I wish her well. I know she has great respect for this House, its debates and its goings on. She is very welcome. This is the first time I have had an opportunity to see her in this Chamber since she took up her new role. I congratulate her and wish her every success for the coming years.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): We had four and a half years here. All of us worked together. It was fabulous to learn. I started in the Seanad. Then I was elected to the Dáil and now I am a Minister of State. I am delighted to be sitting here. I have to mention my colleague, Senator Noonan. As everyone will know, we are both from Carlow-Kilkenny.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: The Minister of State is wearing the Kilkenny colours.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: Yes. Like other speakers, I pay tribute to the work done by Senator Noonan. It is important to highlight that too. I know the work he has done because I worked with him over the previous few years. I thank him for his work. I also thank Senator Nelson Murray's father-in-law, who was ahead of his time.

Senator Linda Nelson Murray: Yes.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: Well done to him. That is how things change. I have to say well done to him as well.

Today is a good news story. We have had a very important discussion. I am bringing it to a close. I thank the Cathaoirleach for the opportunity to discuss the plans for National Biodiversity Week and to highlight the continued efforts of the NPWS to protect and restore Ireland's biodiversity.

I thank all the Senators for their valuable contributions and the shared commitment they have expressed here today to safeguard Ireland's biodiversity. That is what this is all about. Many speakers have spoken about education and communication, which will play a huge role going forward. Senator Malcolm Noonan mentioned funding three or four times, which is another issue we must examine.

It is very clear from the contributions that the issues of biodiversity and our natural heritage are of great importance to this House. We must take action and provide greater investment to halt the loss of biodiversity and work towards a more sustainable relationship with the natural world.

I encourage everyone here to take the opportunity to visit a national park, a nature reserve or a protected area during National Biodiversity Week to witness at first hand the excellent work being done to protect and enhance the natural environment, as we heard so clearly outlined by all of the speakers.

As Senator Noonan and I are here, it is important to give Carlow-Kilkenny a little mention in the context of biodiversity week.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: Never.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I mentioned Carlow-Kilkenny all of the time when I was here. There will be a focus on bees, pollinators, trees, woodlands, rivers and water quality, etc. The staff at Kilkenny Castle give tips to gardeners on growing wildflowers and supporting pollinators. Walks and other initiatives are important. I could go on all day about places like Altamont Gardens in County Carlow. It is important for everyone to highlight their own area, to let people know what can be seen and done, and to explain how we can promote these places and make people aware of them. I am a firm believer that awareness is the key to many things. It is important to inform even a few people about something important that is happening.

We have spoken about the challenges. Funding is challenging. A lot of progress has been made in recent years to support biodiversity, in particular through the efforts of the NPWS and an executive agency under the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

Senator Boyhan mentioned city and county biodiversity officers. I know this initiative has had a huge positive influence. I know that in areas that did not previously have biodiversity officers, those officers have done amazing things like writing local biodiversity plans, conducting research surveys and data collection, providing advice to local authority staff on biodiversity, facilitating community engagement and raising awareness. While such changes may seem small, they are not - they are a huge game changer in the sense that we need to work on biodiversity.

In recent years, we have seen the fruits of the investment by the Government with a significant growth in action being taken to support and maintain our biodiversity. While the NPWS has been central to this work, it also relies heavily on collaboration with communities and land-owners. People spoke about farmers today and the issues of ACRES and dry stone walls were raised. I can confirm that the National Parks and Wildlife Service will engage, as a matter of urgency, with the Department of agriculture on this very issue. I believe that was brought up earlier as well.

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When we talk about our communities, landowners, farmers and recreational land use, it is all a collaborative response to our biodiversity crisis, and we have a crisis. We have our challenges. I know Senator Noonan has been highlighting this for a long time but we are aware. All of us can, whether it be through funding or whatever way we can and through the small things, make those changes. Let us ensure National Biodiversity Week is more than a moment of awareness. Let it be a springboard for sustained action and a commitment to leaving the natural world healthier, richer and more resilient than we found it.

We have to think of our children and the future and to make sure we look at this. However, as we get out to enjoy the nature in this wonderful period of sunny weather, please do not light fires, including barbecues, take the time to properly dispose of cigarettes butts and please bring home your waste. Remember that nature is home to our wildlife and plants. Leave them as you find them for everyone to enjoy.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Victor Boyhan): As always, I thank the Minister of State for her energy and enthusiasm. Well done on a tight but passionate response. It is appreciated.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 2.41 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 3.30 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 2.41 p.m. and resumed at 3.30 p.m.

Public Health (Restriction on Sale of Stimulant Drinks to Children) Bill 2025: Second Stage

Acting Chairperson (Senator Seán Kyne): I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Murnane O'Connor. I understand Senator Keogan is sharing time with Senator Mullen. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Sharon Keogan: I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

The Minister of State and fellow Senators are very welcome to the House this afternoon. It is with a strong sense of responsibility and urgency that I introduce the Public Health (Restriction on Sale of Stimulant Drinks to Children) Bill 2025. This legislation is born out of concern for the welfare of our children and young people who are increasingly consuming high-caffeine and stimulant-laden energy drinks, products that are not designed for growing bodies or developing minds. While marketed in flashy cans and trendy branding, the contents of these drinks have serious physiological implications.

Let us begin by looking at the facts. Many energy drinks are defined by their extremely high sugar content. While the Government introduced sugar tax legislation to reduce the sale of high sugar drinks, it is apparent that this has not yet had the desired effect.

Some 80% of the energy drinks market in Ireland is controlled by three brands. Of these, two have not altered their sugar content, meaning that today many, if not most, energy drinks still contain up to three times a child's daily recommended sugar intake in one serving. In 2019, a Safefood Ireland survey found some brands contained up to 17 tps of sugar in a single bottle. Another Safefood Ireland survey found that the standard 250 ml energy drink contained the caffeine content of five cans of cola.

What is concerning about these figures is that we know from extensive studies that these drinks do damage to young people's health. Energy drink consumption among adolescents is linked to higher BMI and increased obesity risk. A US study of 1,737 teens found that the consumers of energy drinks had significantly higher BMI. In Ireland, children consuming more than 200 ml a day of sugary drinks had an 80% likelihood of being overweight or obese, leading to significant health complications throughout life.

There are clear negative impacts on mental health such as seen in the classroom. In one US study, adolescents who consumed energy drinks were found to be 66% more likely to exhibit hyperactive activity and inattention. The Irish Heart Foundation representatives who are here today say teachers have reported to them that the increased consumption of energy drinks affects young people's mood, well-being and behaviour and causes significant problems at school level.

A significant 2020 study, *Energy Drinks and Their Adverse Health Effects: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis*, found that among adolescents who use energy drinks, 17.5% experienced palpitations, 19.6% reported chest pains and 12.5% had tachycardia, that is, an elevated heart rate. The same review found 20.9% of the adolescents surveyed reported headaches, 10% had experienced dizziness and 8.1% had tremors. It also reported that 35.4% of adolescents consuming energy drinks reported insomnia or sleep-related issues. I should not have to emphasise how important sleep is for teenagers and healthy development.

Last year, there were calls in Ireland from a Mater Hospital cardiologist to ban the sale of energy drinks to minors after two young men suffered cardiac arrest due to overconsumption. In multiple studies in the US and the EU, energy drink consumption has been linked to longer QTc intervals, meaning a higher likelihood of palpitations or fatal irregular heartbeats.

What is exceptionally worrying is that while we are debating whether to take action, the trend clearly shows that consumption and consequences are on the rise. A US study that analysed 223 million emergency department visits by young people between 2017 and 2023 revealed that hospital visits for caffeine overdose among teenagers doubled during this time. America's poisons centre likewise found that between 2022 and 2023 there was a 24.2% increase in calls related to paediatric exposure to energy drinks. Even more worrying, children aged six to 12 experienced the highest spike cases, which doubled from 11% in 2020 to 20% in 2023.

In Ireland, the intolerably high level of energy drink consumption among young people has been well documented. The European Food Safety Authority research has found that at least 68% of those aged ten to 18 were regular consumers of energy drinks. Euromonitor International found that, on average, Irish people buy 5.5 l of such drinks per person, making us the seventh highest energy drink consumers on earth. What is alarming is that among young people aged between ten and 18, 12% identified as high chronic consumers, that is, they consumed the equivalent of a can of Red Bull a day. This additional 12% were identified as high acute consumers who consume the equivalent of more than four cans in a single session. That is approximately one in five Irish children and teenagers. Given everything we know about the harmful effects of energy drinks and the alarming scale of the consumption among minors, it is imperative that any sane society and government act quickly, yet these drinks are sold freely to minors without regulation. This Bill seeks to address that legislative gap.

I will walk through the Bill section by section. Section 1, interpretation, defines key terms such as "stimulant drink", "sale", "retail business" and "authorised officer" to ensure consistent

application of the Bill.

Section 2 empowers the Minister for Health to make regulations necessary to implement the Act to adopt new public health data or industry practices.

Section 3 outlines three goals: ban sales to under-18s, restrict advertising to minors and require health warnings. It excludes parental provision to their own children from these prohibitions. We are regulating business, not parenting.

Section 4, prohibition of sale to minors, makes it an offence to sell to under-18s with a defence for retailers who verify age with ID, like tobacco and alcohol laws.

Sections 5 and 6 ban sales from vending machines accessible to minors and require staff to verify age at self-checkout, with no exceptions, as well as covering online and remote sales, deeming the sale location to be the point of dispatch to ensure Irish-based sellers are accountable.

Section 7, restriction on advertising, bans advertising to children, especially near schools and youth venues and on media platforms aimed at minors. This is particularly important as junk food advertised and targeted at minors remains an unaddressed epidemic in our country. Energy drinks are targeted towards young people through unconventional new media advertising methods such as promotions by online influencers.

Section 8 calls for warning signs on product packaging. Manufacturers must make clear health warnings to inform consumers, especially young people, of potential risks.

Section 9 continues to require retailers to display warnings at physical and online points of sale, including websites and social media.

Section 10 authorises the HSE to appoint officers to oversee compliance.

Section 11 outlines the powers of the authorised officers including inspection of premises, seizure of records and taking of samples with safeguards for private dwellings.

Section 12 allows supervised test purchases by minors with full consent and safeguards to ensure retailer compliance.

Sections 13 to 16, inclusive, outline the system of penalties and compliance. Section 13 permits fixed penalties for selling to minors, advertising breaches or failures to display warnings. Section 14 outlines how official documents may be served to individuals and businesses. Section 15 details penalties for breaches including fines and potential custodial sentences. Finally, section 16 allows the courts to require offenders to pay the HSE investigation and enforcement costs.

Section 17, expenses, allows the Minister to cover costs associated with implementing this Act.

As per section 18, the Short Title and commencement, the Act will come into force within six months of enactment or earlier if the Minister decides.

This Bill is not about demonising drink or limiting personal freedom. It is about protecting children from aggressive marketing and harmful substances. It is not a radical idea. Countries across the world are acting on this issue. France, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland and Hungary have

all implemented restrictions. In addition, we must consider the fact that businesses in Ireland such as Boots and Aldi are already banning energy drink sales to under-16s by themselves. We would be naive to assume this is purely out of goodwill. These corporations likely see the significant potential legal risk and liabilities in selling energy drinks to minors. We have an obligation as lawmakers and adults to ensure the commercial environment our children grow up in values their health over corporate profits.

Before I conclude, I would like to express my deep and unending gratitude to all who have helped bring this Bill to creation and onto the floor today. This of course includes all those Senators who were good enough to cosign and second the Bill. I also thank those who consulted with me during the early stages of the Bill, especially the teams and representatives from the Irish Heart Foundation, Safefood Ireland, Children's Rights Alliance, Irish National Teachers Organisation, INTO, and Diabetes Ireland. Of course, no Bill can be allowed to pass without mentioning the wonderful support staff that we have in the Oireachtas. I am referring to the wonderful Library and Research Service, our indispensable drafting service and Bills Office, without whom there would have been no making of this Bill a legal reality. I commend the Bill to the House. I ask for support as it progresses through its Stages

Senator Rónán Mullen: I welcome the Minister of State. I commend my colleague Senator Keogan on bringing forward this important Bill. I thank Senators Wilson, O'Reilly and others for supporting it. I am often struck when I am doing the family shopping of what a long way we still have to go in this country in getting people the information they need about the products they are purchasing. It may have to do with place of origin of certain products. There is huge inconsistency if we compare products in supermarkets and so on and in the dangers of processed foods. It is a knotty problem because even when we consider the social good that is the provision of hot school meals, there are concerns about the nutritional qualities of those. Approximately €120 million is being spent annually at this point on school meals. We all regard that as something good and valuable, yet now we are hearing concerns about whether this is introducing children to junk food who might not otherwise be subjected to it. Could it be something that would do more harm than good?

There is a huge need for us to take an evidence-based approach to these issues as opposed to a simply market-led approach. That is why I say to those who say that this is nanny statism and we should not overregulate in this area that when it comes to child protection, we cannot be too careful. As Senator Keogan outlined, there is a strong case to be made for the restriction of the availability of certain products where there is a significant body of evidence that they are doing harm. There is a time later in adulthood when people are free to make choices in a more informed way hopefully. This is first and foremost a child protection issue and that is a lens through which we should examine this. The amount of sugar and caffeine contained in these drinks is simply dangerous. As has been said, many of them contain very high amounts of caffeine. In some cases, it is between 160 and 200 mg per can. That is double the amount found in an average cup of coffee, which is approximately 80 mg depending on the strength.

I note the review done by a health-related organisation that was highlighted in a letter recently to Victoria Atkins in Britain, who was the health secretary at the time. Official guidance states that people should consume no more 3 mg of caffeine per kilogramme in the body. Despite this, data from the National Drugs Library shows that 30% of adults, 68% of adolescence and 18% of children consume energy drinks. We should examine where countries are going in the EU. The Minister of State will say the Government needs to examine more of this and consider the evidence, etc. It should consider the evidence by all means. Let us have an evi-

dence-based approach but do not take too long over it because this is an important public health issue. It is noteworthy that in the UK many shops of their accord have stopped selling such high energy stimulant drinks of the kind we are discussing. Just two weeks ago, Hungary banned such drinks for children. Poland has done so, and I believe Lithuania as well. The European Parliament's committee of petitions recently decided to maintain a petition on an EU ban. Ireland should do its best to be among the fast movers in this area.

I reflect on comments made recently by the HSE lead for obesity, Dr. Donal O'Shea, a person I admire very much. He has important things to say about a range of areas concerned with public health. He described these energy drinks as very bad for children's health. He noted that they have surged in consumption among young children and teenagers in recent years. In his view, there is good evidence that they are bad for people's ability to concentrate and their attention span and if they have any tendency towards anxiety, they drive that. He says they should simply not be freely available to purchase as they are at the moment. He importantly points out that many parents know very little about these drinks. They are unaware of the extent to which their children are buying them as online trends often dictate. These drinks are promoted heavily by influencers through the likes of Snapchat and Instagram. In some cases parents will not have even heard of them but there will be a craze among teenagers. Dr. O'Shea also warns against the potential excessive influence from vested interests who will make the arguments about the nanny state, job losses, and so on. At the end of the day, it is an evidence-based approach with public health and young people's health as the priority. That must be the driver here.

I commend my colleague, Senator Keogan. I know what the Government is going to do today but let us hope it will not be long before legislation of this kind is on the Statute Book.

Senator Teresa Costello: I move amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after "That" and substitute the following:

"Seanad Éireann resolves that the Public Health (Restriction on Sale of Stimulant Drinks to Children) Bill 2025 be deemed to be read a second time this day 18 months, to allow sufficient time for examination of evidence of public health concerns relating to such substances, and scrutiny between now and then by officials in the Department of Health in conjunction with the proposing Senators."

Fianna Fáil welcomes the discussion on this issue. I thank Senator Keogan for bringing this before the House. In our election manifesto Fianna Fáil pledged to introduce restrictions on the sale of high-caffeine energy drinks, including a ban on their sale to children. We remain committed to that objective and we are pleased the conversation is moving forward in a constructive and meaningful way. Fianna Fáil supports the central purpose of the Bill, which is to prohibit the sale, advertisement and promotion of stimulant drinks to persons under the age of 18.

As legislators, we have a duty to protect public health and, in particular, the health and well-being of our children. Consumption of energy drinks has been steadily increasing in Ireland. The 2024 evaluation of the sugar-sweetened drinks tax reported a jump from 30 million l in 2020 to 40 million l in 2023. These drinks now represent 10% of all carbonated drink consumption in this country. While sugar levels have shown some reduction recently, the high levels of caffeine and other stimulants such as taurine continue to raise significant public health concerns. Research, including the 2016 Safe Food Review, has highlighted the need for education, data gathering and voluntary restrictions on sales to minors but clearly voluntary measures are

no longer sufficient. Children and teenagers are still being exposed both directly and through advertising to products that can have harmful health effects. Other EU countries have acted. Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and, most recently, Hungary, have banned the sale of energy drinks to minors.

What struck me most while researching this issue was the serious impact energy drinks can have on both mental and dental health in young people. One article I read highlighted how caffeine, acting as a stimulant to increase alertness, combines with high sugar levels to create a sudden jolt of energy. This jolt often leads to side effects such as increased heart rate and blood pressure, jitteriness and insomnia and is quickly followed by a crash. According to health professionals, regular consumption can cause adolescents to become dependent on that high, creating a difficult cycle to break, with withdrawal symptoms such as headaches, low mood or even depression. On the dental side, despite some reduction in sugar, energy drinks are still highly acidic, contributing to acid erosion of teeth. The Oral Health Foundation points out that caffeine also causes dry mouth by reducing saliva, which plays a key role in protecting the teeth. That means children who regularly drink these products are at high risk of serious dental problems and not just cavities.

Focusing on caffeine specifically, we know it increases anxiety, disrupts sleep, raises blood pressure, causes acid reflux and can even be toxic in high doses. It is clear that these drinks are not harmless pick-me-ups. They are potent stimulants and their effects on children and adolescents deserve far more scrutiny. We understand that under EU Regulation No. 1169/2011, products containing more than 150 mg of caffeine per litre already must carry specific health warnings but labelling alone is not enough. This Bill seeks to go further to regulate access and to reduce the exposure of children to targeted advertising. We are also in an era when sugar is often seen as public enemy number one. Sugar-free drinks, sweetened with artificial sweeteners and synthetic additives promise guilt-free sweetness. The rise of sweeteners is, in part, a sign of the spectacular success of sugar taxes, which have been introduced in more than 40 countries since 2010. Today, even sugar-free stimulant drinks dominate the shelves. There are serious concerns about the sugar-free stimulant drinks. Health experts warn that these beverages can impact cardiovascular health, dental health and may increase the risk of metabolic syndrome, a condition that affects how the body processes sugar and fat. The problem is that we do not have long-term studies to truly understand how damaging sugar-free energy drinks can be, but we have some early clues. A 2021 study on wild mice found that both regular and sugar-free stimulant drinks negatively impacted the blood-brain barrier and caused brain inflammation by disrupting blood pressure and blood sugar levels. What stood out was that the sugar-free versions produced worse outcomes.

In another study, the same team of researchers examined the connection between stimulant drinks and metabolic syndrome. The results showed both regular and sugar-free stimulant drinks increase the chances of metabolic syndrome, with insulin resistance being the key factor. These findings suggest that even without sugar these drinks can have a harmful impact on how one's body regulates energy and fat. We need more human research but these findings are concerning enough to make anybody think twice about reaching for a sugar-free stimulant drink.

Fianna Fáil supports the intent behind this legislation and looks forward to working constructively with all Members and the Minister to ensure evidence-based, proportionate and effective public health policy can be delivered in this area.

Senator Maria Byrne: I thank the Minister of State for coming to the House discuss this

important issue. I compliment Senator Keogan and the other Senators who signed the Bill. The sentiments behind it are very important. A few years ago, a consultant at the Mater hospital spoke about two young men who had suffered from cardiac arrests. Allegedly, they had consumed eight to ten cans of drinks that contained stimulants. I understand the sentiments behind the Bill and I believe we need to examine this issue.

I also understand where the Minister of State is coming from, in terms of the need for proof to have all of the facts and figures before we can do something. I understand why the Government amendment has been put forward. The issue of drinks containing stimulants is something we as a Government must take seriously and examine, especially in the case of minors who do not know what they are drinking. In some cases minors drink multiple cans of drinks containing stimulants. We need to see how we can legally implement rules and regulations for these products.

I am not being negative but one concern I have in respect of the Bill is that many small businesses are under a lot of pressure. They have health inspections and inspections for different things and another layer of inspections relating to the implementation of the legislation would put pressure on businesses, especially smaller businesses. It is something that needs to be dealt with in a very delicate way. A lot of small businesses find it difficult to have people on watch all of the time to deal with issues. It may be fine for some of the bigger retailers that have large numbers of staff but many small shops have only one or two staff. If a person who is underage but does not look it were to go into a shop as part of a test case, I am not sure that it would be a fair to fine the shop as a result. It is something I have a reservation about but I understand the sentiment behind it, in that there must be some level of control.

There are many aspects of the Bill that need to be considered. I am sure Senator Keogan and the other Senators who signed the Bill brought it forward in good faith and I do not think anybody is against the Bill or its sentiments.

4 o'clock

Finding the correct way of regulating it is the way forward. I am sure the Minister of State and her team will be working with the Senator as well as with the different organisations, perhaps the producers of the goods or the people supplying them. I am sure there is a list a mile long as to the different people the Minister of State and her officials will have to reach out to to get that middle point that will be acceptable to all.

This genuinely needs to be looked at because it is alleged there are many health implications associated with some drinks. It was proven that some drinks in Australia and New Zealand had something like 200 mg of stimulants in a can of 350 ml. Many things need to be looked at to get this to a correct level. I wish the Minister of State well in her deliberations and I wish the Senators who brought this forward well.

Senator Nicole Ryan: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the stimulant and energy drinks Bill tabled by Senator Keogan and colleagues. I acknowledge the intent behind this legislation, which is clearly driven by a genuine concern for the health and well-being of young people and which I think is a concern we all equally share.

While we are not opposing the Bill, further work needs to be put into it. There is undoubtedly merit in examining the growing consumption of high-caffeine and high-sugar drinks by children and teenagers and the very real health implications that come with it, as other Senators

have mentioned, such as poor sleep, increased anxiety, attention difficulties and, in extreme cases, heart complications.

However, we must also approach this with a sense of proportion, practicality and long-term thinking. We have seen time and again that banning something does not make it go away. We need only look at our history with alcohol, tobacco and illicit substances. Prohibition rarely eliminates the demand; it often just pushes it underground, into black markets and removes the ability to regulate it safely. The same could easily come true of drinks, particularly in communities where trust in institutions is quite fragile.

The other questions lie in how this would actually be enforced. How do we really stop those under the age of 18 from buying energy drinks via vending machines - I note the Senator put that into the Bill – and food delivery apps, or simply asking an older person to buy them for them? Would the legislation also extend to online orders and imported goods? The logistics need a little bit of fleshing out.

There is also the wider issue of consistency. If we are beginning to ban energy drinks, we are opening a door to calls for restrictions on protein supplements, vitamin boosters or other high-caffeine or stimulant-based products in health food stores or gyms. Where is the line drawn, and who decides that line?

We cannot, however, agree with the Government's proposal to postpone this for 18 months. That is just simply kicking the conversation down the road. Committee Stage of the Bill can be taken. The urgency of the issue deserves a timely and thoughtful legislative response instead of further delays.

That being said, I want to be clear that we are more than willing to work with Senator Keogan on this Bill. If this Bill is to progress, it needs clear definitions, more robust evidence and a practical, enforceable framework that will not backfire or criminalise young people for making impulsive decisions. We should use this Bill as a starting point, not just to look at bans but to have a broader, more meaningful conversation about youth health, digital advertising, education and food literacy. Ultimately, this is not just about energy drinks but about giving young people the tools to make better choices and building a system that supports them to do just that.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: I welcome this Bill into the Seanad. I was very proud to cosign the Bill. It is a public health Bill that aims to ban the sale of high-energy or stimulant drinks to under-18s. It is a good Bill. The heavy lifting on the energy drinks Bill was done by Independent Senator Sharon Keogan, and I acknowledge the work she has done on this over the past number of years with others. She should be very proud of what she has produced. It is a very thorough Bill. I was happy to cosign it because it is an important Bill, with the best interests of our young people at heart. It is also in the programme for Government. The Bill addresses growing public concern about the sale of popular drinks to young people and the health risks associated with them. It is also in the programme for Government. The Bill addresses growing public concern about the sale of popular drinks to young people and the health risks associated with them.

High energy or stimulant drinks are a multimillion euro industry. These drinks are heavily marketed and promoted to young consumers. I urge Senators to look at the shelves in their local supermarkets because the shelves are laden down with these drinks. At the moment, almost 40 different brands are on sale in this country, which is a sharp contrast with the range available

in the past number of years. Obviously, it is an expanding and lucrative market. Young people are attracted to these drinks due to their promise of energy-giving properties and a belief that these drinks will help increase their fitness. These drinks are heavily promoted on platforms like Snapchat and Instagram and by influencers. In my opinion, evidence exists that proves these drinks are not a healthy option for young people.

Dr. Aileen McGloin, the director of nutrition for *safefood*, has stated that in the long-term we are looking at associations with obesity and type 2 diabetes. These are stimulant drinks, which contain high levels of caffeine and sugar that have been linked to adverse health effects, including insomnia, increased anxiety and digestive issues, all which are deeply disturbing. As adults, we all know the effects of consuming too much caffeine, so it stands to reason that young people can be even more impacted. The Bill aims to prohibit the sale of stimulant drinks to young people under the age of 18 as well as restricted advertising to this cohort. The Bill also seeks clear health warnings about any potential health risks caused by excessive consumption to be clearly visible on packaging at points of sale. I see no issue with this.

The health and wellbeing of our young people is vital. In presenting this Bill to the Seanad, Ireland follows the example of other European countries like Hungary, Poland and Lithuania, all of which have similar Bills that restrict the sale of high-energy drinks to minors.

The Irish Heart Foundation, from whose policy team I welcome Mr. Mark Murphy and Ms Saoirse Morgan, has called for a ban. There is worrying evidence from Newcastle and Teesside universities that links cheap energy drinks to depression, anxiety and suicidal feelings. Highly caffeinated drinks can also increase a child's risk of experiencing ADHD symptoms, severe stress and poor sleep quality. I was very disappointed to hear on the radio this morning that the Government had opted to shelve this Bill for 18 months to think about it. The Bill is ready and is in the programme for Government, so I want to know what the problem is.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I understand that Senators Scahill and Kennelly wish to share time equally. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Gareth Scahill: I, too, compliment the Senators for tabling this Bill. Having gone through it, I fully support the Bill in principle. I grew up in a time that, when somebody was sick, one brought a bottle of Lucozade to help the person's sugar levels recover and so on. As we evolved and developed, sports drinks came on the scene. They were great, as they contained carbohydrates and electrolytes, aided recovery and prolonged performance on the sports field, specifically endurance sports. Traditionally, society pushed it to its limit. So much so that now throughout all of the supermarkets and retailers, these products are particularly marketed to an age demographic that it probably does not suit and are easily accessible to that market. Therefore, there are not too many Senators who would not agree with the Bill in principle.

I wish to mention a small issue that my colleague Senator Maria Byrne mentioned. I refer to the additional work for retailers, particularly small retailers and corner shops, which have a staff of just one or two people. Recently, Senators had a discussion on the Protection of Retail Workers Bill. We had a very in-depth conversation about all of the additional work we were putting on those people and the fact that a lot of those people were minimum wage workers. With the introduction of this, we would be putting an additional onus on them to carry out many different checks. There is then the potential of fines hanging over their heads and the businesses' heads. That is the element I would like to explore further and I would be happy to go through that with the Senator.

I spoke to the Minister before she came in today and while this says 18 months, I do not believe we are looking at 18 months. I believe this Bill could be pushed through this Stage and Committee Stage a lot quicker than that. In principle, I support the Senators on it but I am happy to go with the Government's amendment at this stage.

Senator Mike Kennelly: I welcome the Minister of State and I thank Senator Keogan for bringing forward what I believe is a very important Bill. It is timely. As a parent and as a coach all my life who has dealt with children and adults, I have seen first hand what these stimulant drinks can do. They can drive kids, young adults and even adults nearly to a certain point of breakdown. It is timely and necessary to restrict the sale of stimulant drinks, commonly known as energy drinks, to children under the age of 16 in Ireland. As far as I am concerned, no child should be sold caffeine. This proposal is not about curtailing personal freedoms or interfering with choice, it is about safeguarding the health and well-being of our young people; children who are still developing physically, mentally and emotionally and who deserve the full protection of the law when it comes to substances that can cause harm.

As stated, energy drinks are marketed aggressively to adults and children. They are often presented as essential for athletic performance, which is wrong. They are also presented as contributing to concentration and endurance but let us not be misled; these drinks contain high levels of caffeine and other stimulants, often in quantities far exceeding those found in a standard cup of coffee or a can of soft drink. Some cans contain up to three times the recommended daily caffeine limit for a child in a single serving. Medical professionals and public health experts have repeatedly warned us of the dangers. Consumption of these drinks by children has been linked to increased heart rate, high blood pressure, sleep disturbances, anxiety, behavioural difficulties and even cardiac incidents in rare, but serious, cases. They are often consumed in combination with sugar laden diets, or even alcohol, increasing the risks.

Last week I tabled a Commencement matter that I will really pursue about the mandatory health screening for every kid from 12- to 18-years-of-age, which would hopefully detect undiagnosed heart conditions. I agree wholeheartedly with the sentiments of the Bill. I also agree with the Minister that there should be an evidence-based approach and sufficient time for an examination of evidence and public health concerns relating to such substances. I agree with the Bill and really support it. Some 18 months is a long time away, but I would like to work on the Bill and with Senator Keogan on the mandatory screening. We saw three teenagers die in the last three weeks, so I support this Bill going forward and support anything that can put more pressure on the Government to bring it to fruition before the 18-month timeline.

Senator Michael McDowell: I now regret that I did not add my name to the supporters of this legislation because the case that has been made by Senator Keogan and other supporters of the Bill seems to me to be a very strong one. Furthermore, I am of the view that given it is Government policy to go down this road, the question we really face this afternoon is one of timing.

I fully accept the Government is entitled to assemble its own evidence. Maybe the particular limits of concentration of various substances and all the rest of it in the Bill are worthy of review but I was here last night - I think the Leas-Chathaoirleach was here too - and a complex Bill was put forward by Senator Lynn Ruane in relation to parole in the criminal justice system. The Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, came in and said he wanted six months to think about it because there were things in the Bill which - I agreed with him - needed to be carefully looked at and a few corners to be looked around. However, the 18 months the Government is asking for now is too much. I have been in government. I know what happens if, 18 months into your

term, you begin to address your mind to legislating for the matter and send it over to the parliamentary draftsman's office and get the heads of the Bill put before Cabinet and go through the pre-legislative scrutiny process, which was not there in my time, and the like. All those things take time. The real question is: is there a will to take any protective steps in this matter?

I am also conscious of the nature of the advertising for some of these drinks. There is the suggestion that "Red Bull gives you wings" and all the highly clever, suggestive cartoons saying that drinking this product can get you to do things which otherwise you would not or could not do. That is a very strong subliminal message that you are missing out on something or that if you are depressed or feel inadequate, there is a solution and it is in a can, so go off and have it. There are also the sponsored events - young women and men with beautiful bodies leaping off cliffs into magnificent seas in Acapulco and all the rest of it - including Red Bull-sponsored events. However, we do not talk about the obesity and the people who would kill themselves if they jumped off those cliffs and who are affected by consumption of these products. Soapbox derbies are also to be seen sponsored by these manufacturers on TV channels.

There is a strong commercial push aimed at the suggestible and the young to consume these products. If the Government wants to accumulate evidence or to put flesh on the exploratory undertakings which it gave in its programme for Government, it should get on with it. There is a big Department of Health here. There is a HSE to run the hospitals, but the Department of Health is there to decide on matters of public health of this kind and on policies in that regard. If the Department of Justice can ask for six months, as it did last night, it is a bit of a smack in the face with a cold cloth for Senator Keogan and the others who have signed this Bill to say it will next come back before this House for consideration in 18 months' time. We could do better than that. That is all I want to say.

Senator Seán Kyne: I commend Senator Keogan and the other Senators on this Bill. It is a very meaningful, well-put-together and well-drafted Bill. I commend her, the others and the team behind this. I know the Minister of State does not sit at Cabinet and, like all Private Members' business and all legislation, Bills such as these go to Cabinet for discussion and decision. That was where the decision was made, and neither I nor I am sure anyone else here is privy to those discussions, or indeed whether there were discussions. I know from my brief time at Cabinet that some things are not discussed in as much depth as others. This Bill is worthy of discussion and scrutiny as part of pre-legislative scrutiny in a committee. The committees are up and running. The Government could and should look at the Bill. This is part of the programme for Government, as has been said. It is a very worthy issue. There are issues as regards sale versus consumption. A child's mother or father could buy a drink - legally, presumably - and give it to the child, of course, and then that is parental responsibility or parental choice.

You see sometimes on social media, "Do you realise that this can of soft drink contains ten, 12, 14 spoons of sugar?" or whatever it is. It is hard to believe it. We talk about labels on alcohol and I see there is still debate on that matter. Is it time for labels like that? I think most people know what a spoonful of sugar is. If there are ten spoonfuls of sugar in something, a label of that type on a product is worthy. Parents can see it. Schools and education have an important role as well. If children consume energy drinks in school, is that something that should be looked at? That is not sale but consumption. There are a lot of things that could be explored as part of pre-legislative scrutiny. That is the word I was looking for earlier. It is a very important issue. There are children who, unfortunately, may have an irregular heartbeat or something for whom a small stimulant can be fatal. There are also children who would absolutely benefit from not consuming these drinks for their own health. Senator Keogan has described

very clearly the science that is out there. This could be further explored as quickly as possible as part of pre-legislative scrutiny. I ask the Minister of State to further engage with the senior Minister and the Department to see if this can be expedited and pushed towards pre-legislative scrutiny. There should be an informed and proper debate on it. There are many experts in this field. If there are others who are opposed for some reason, let them bring those arguments forward. That is the role of society and of a legislative process. That can be thrashed out. While I understand the decision that was made by the Government, I think this Bill is worthy of quicker debate, analysis and enactment for the safety of the children of this country.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: As there are no other Senators indicating, I will call the Minister of State.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): I thank Senator Keogan for her Private Members' Bill and all the Senators who have spoken. I also welcome our visitors from the Irish Heart Foundation. Their work on this issue and the public health issues relating to obesity and sugar-sweetened drinks is crucial. We have included them in our consultation in the new obesity plan. I thank them. It is very important that they are here today.

I have no doubt that we are all in agreement that protecting our children from consumption of substances that can be harmful to their health, either in the short or the long term, is necessary. The discussion today has been very helpful and has given me a good understanding of the range of concerns Senators have about the potential harmful impact of stimulant drinks on our children and young adults. We have an excellent track record of being at the vanguard of introducing public health measures and legislation to protect our children and young people from health-harming substances. Our public health legislation on tobacco and alcohol control and restrictions is well regarded by many countries.

This Private Members' Bill sets out draft legislation to introduce restrictions on the promotion and sale of stimulant drinks. These are non-alcoholic drinks containing a mix of both caffeine and other stimulating substances, better known as energy drinks. My understanding is that the Senator is concerned about the mental health and behavioural impacts as well as the impact on academic performance. I certainly do not oppose in principle the intent behind the submission of this Bill. However, before considering introducing restrictions, it is important to fully understand the potential harmful impact of consumption of these drinks on children's health and the level of consumption in Ireland by young people, and to fully consider all appropriate policy options. That is the aim. I met the Senator and I have said I would be delighted to work with her and anyone in the Chamber who wants to meet me. There will be absolutely no problem in that regard.

The evaluation of the sugar-sweetened drink tax, published in September 2024, found there had been a decrease in carbonated drinks consumption and in the sugar consumption associated with carbonated drinks in Ireland since the introduction of the tax in 2018. However, the exception to this reduction has been energy drinks, which have seen a marked increase in consumption since 2020. The average amount consumed each year between 2009 and 2020 was less than 30 million l. Between 2021 and 2023, however, the amount of energy drinks consumed jumped to more than 40 million l per year. Energy drinks now represent over 10% of total carbonate consumed in Ireland every year.

A worrying trend was that the initial increase in energy drink consumption was accompa-

nied by a significant increase in sugar consumption between 2018 and 2021. However, the sugar consumption from energy drinks has declined since 2021 even as general energy drink consumption increased. This suggests that the more recent increase in energy drinks consumption is largely related to low- or no-calorie energy drinks that fall below the sugar-sweetened drinks tax thresholds.

One of the conclusions of the evaluation of the tax was that the consumption of energy drinks merited further examination, given the significant increase in consumption and possible public health concerns regarding the stimulant components of energy drinks. There are some concerns around the consumption of energy drinks by children, pregnant women and breast-feeding mothers. In EU Regulation No. 1169 of 2011 on the provision of food information to consumers, the European Commission set out the requirement that products containing more than 150 mg of caffeine per litre, other than tea and coffee, must be labelled with the caffeine content and the statement: “High caffeine content. Not recommended for children or pregnant or breast-feeding women.” Energy drinks are generally covered by this regulation.

There is some scientific evidence that has increasingly linked energy drink consumption in children to a range of adverse health outcomes, including elevated blood pressure, sleep disturbance, behavioural issues, all of which are concerns mentioned by Senators, and, in some cases, cardiovascular complications. This evidence will need to be examined closely. In 2015, the European Food Safety Authority, EFSA, published a scientific opinion on the safety of caffeine on foot of a request from the European Commission. It found that for children and adolescents, the information available is insufficient to determine a safe caffeine intake. EFSA therefore based its recommendation for maximum caffeine intake on the adult level of 3 mg of caffeine per kilogram of body weight per day.

We need to undertake research at a national level to better understand the consumption patterns of children and young adults in Ireland with regard to energy drinks in order to inform policy options. We have spoken about the situation in other EU member states. Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Hungary have introduced legislation banning the sale of energy drinks to persons aged under 18. Poland has also legislated for restrictions on labelling and sales through vending machines. Those member states supported those measures with national data.

A commitment is included in the programme for Government to “explore restrictions on the sale of high-caffeine energy drinks, including a ban on their sale to children”. The Department of Health is at the very early stages of considering the process by which we deliver on this commitment. I assure Senators that we will deliver on it. It might take 18 months to look at this but I assure Members that we are committed to safeguarding health and well-being and seeking what is best policy and practice to achieve that.

It is essential that a thorough assessment is carried out to evaluate any public health concerns with regard to energy drink consumption by children and young adults in Ireland and to determine appropriate policy measures. Policy measures to address public health concerns regarding energy drink consumption must be grounded in the best available scientific evidence. Adults can make informed decisions about their consumption but children are not miniature adults. Their developing bodies and brains are more vulnerable and they deserve our protection. Just as we limit their access to alcohol, tobacco and gambling, we may need to protect them from potential harms associated with the consumption of energy drinks.

However, if we are to propose regulations to restrict or ban sales to children, such regula-

tions will need to be robust, appropriate and based on the weighing up of the scientific evidence. Successful policy development will require consultation with key stakeholders, particularly those most impacted by energy drink consumption, and scientific experts. We will need to engage with children and young people themselves on this issue. Our undertaking is that we will talk to everyone. We have to get the experts in but we have to engage with children and young people. We need to make sure that we listen to them too. It may be that a range of policy options will be identified and the feasibility, enforceability, long-term position and negative impact of these will need to be assessed. Learning from the experience of those EU member states that have already implemented legislation to restrict or ban the sale of energy drinks to children will be important to us.

At this point, it is too early to consider the draft legislation proposed in the Private Members' Bill, hence the Government's motion to defer the Second Reading for 18 months to allow time to carry out the necessary evidence gathering, research and examination of appropriate policy options and stakeholder engagement, including with the proposing Senator.

I have the privilege of being the Minister of State with responsibility for health and wellbeing. I assure Senators that supporting, protecting and improving the health and wellbeing of our young people is a key priority for me in this Government. I can commit to that. We already have a range of policies and programmes in place to improve the health and wellbeing of young people in Ireland. Many policies and initiatives are under review or development.

The Healthy Ireland framework is under review with a view to developing a new framework in the near future. A new national physical activity framework is due to be launched soon. The online health task force will be making recommendations to the Minister for Health later this year on how to ensure we safeguard our children in a digital world. We have to look at the digital world too. A new obesity policy is currently being developed as the current obesity policy and action plan draws to a close at the end of this year. It is under this plan that the sugar-sweetened drinks tax was introduced, so this will all come in. We will have a new obesity plan in 2026.

I am committed to ensuring that the health of our young people is not compromised by any unhealthy food and drinks. We owe it to the next generation to take brave, evidence-based action where it is needed. We also need to give young people a voice. I look forward to working with colleagues across the House, health experts, academics, parents, educators and young people themselves as we deliver on a programme for Government commitment, which this was, to explore restrictions on the sale of high-caffeine energy drinks, including a ban on their sale to children.

I thank Senators and everyone involved for this Private Members' Bill. I have no doubt that we are all in agreement that protecting our children from consumption of substances that can be harmful to their health is necessary. The motion is deferred for 18 months. It is not to stall restrictions. We need to work on this with the Department. The Government has committed to exploring restrictions on the sale of high-caffeine energy drinks, including the ban on their sale.

I thank everyone. Everyone spoke about how this concerned the health and future of our children. I am committed, as is the Department. I hope to talk to everyone soon. As I said to Senator Keogan, I will meet her shortly. I have learned that everybody working together can achieve more, which is the aim going forward.

Senator Sharon Keogan: I thank Members for their contributions and participation in the debate on this Bill. This is significant legislation, with many provisions that will cover a great deal of ground. The Bill has been several years in the making and, as mentioned, it has involved the input of many others, including experts and civil society organisations. It has been written following a study of similar laws already in place in other EU nations. We also hope it anticipates the evolving nature of the problem, which we hope will not grow into a crisis. Consequently, we hope it will make a meaningful impact on the lives of children and adolescents. We hope it will not only prevent the negative consequences of the current open season policy, such as the stress felt by teachers and parents dealing with mood swings and poor behaviour in their classrooms and homes, but also the anxiety, insomnia and palpitations experienced by young people themselves. We hope that it will promote the positive outcomes that will result from such a ban. We hope to see young people who feel calm, well rested and full of a healthy energy that comes from a good diet and an active lifestyle. We hope to see young people who are at ease in study, work or play. We hope to see young people who grow up happy and free of anxiety and fatigue.

I must address the Government's proposed amendment to delay the Bill for 18 months on the grounds that further discussion and research are needed. While calls for discussion and further research are always welcome, we wish to emphasise that much of the groundwork has already been laid. We must point out that several other countries have already carried out their own research and found it appropriate to introduce similar bans, such as Lithuania and Latvia, which did so as far back as 2014 and 2016, respectively. Both countries have reported that the ban significantly decreased energy drink consumption among minors. Additionally, Hungary passed its own ban this year and the UK appears set to follow. Likewise, we should reflect on the fact that for nearly 15 years, we have complied with EU law on stimulant drinks whereby we place warning labels on them for pregnant women and people with health conditions. If we have agreed to this for so long, then we must ask why it is deemed acceptable to sell the same drinks to children and developing teenagers.

Dear Members, while debate is welcome and should be facilitated, we must acknowledge that the situation is not improving. Therefore, we should not unduly delay. Today, it is reported by UNICEF that Irish teenagers are among the least happy in the developed world. This legislation is urgent and cannot wait too long.

I wish to thank the Minister of State for her presence and I emphasise that I look forward to working constructively with the Government to pass this law. I hope that, in progressing the Bill, we do not allow partisanship to cloud our judgment. This legislation should not become a political football. I urge all parties and Independents alike to view this Bill not as an opportunity for point scoring, but as a shared duty and obligation to protect the health and wellbeing of the next generation. There should be no exclusion from the legislative process. I welcome scrutiny, collaboration and amendments where appropriate. I remain open to good ideas from across the floor because at the heart of this Bill is a simple goal, namely, to do the right thing. This is not about politics or headlines. This is about building a society that is safer, healthier and more supportive of our children. It is about learning from international evidence, listening to parents and professionals and acting decisively before more young people's lives are impacted. We all share a responsibility, not just as legislators, but as adults, leaders and people entrusted with the care of our communities. Let us meet that responsibility together with resolve and unity.

I commend the Bill to the House and I look forward to working with the Minister of State

in the coming years. I am a member of the children's committee, which I hope the Minister of State will come to. We might even start this legislation at that committee.

Amendment put and declared carried.

Motion, as amended, put and declared carried.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Garret Ahearn): When is it proposed to sit again?

Senator Seán Kyne: Tomorrow morning at 9.30.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Garret Ahearn): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar athló ar 4.38 p.m. go dtí 9.30 a.m., Déardaoin, an 15 Bealtaine 2025.

The Seanad adjourned at 4.38 p.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Thursday, 15 May 2025.