



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE  
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

**SEANAD ÉIREANN**

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

Gnó an t-Seanaid - Business of Seanad . . . . .	82
Nithe i dtosach suíonna - Commencement Matters. . . . .	83
Crime Prevention . . . . .	83
Electronic Tagging . . . . .	85
Local Government Reform. . . . .	88
Renewable Energy Generation . . . . .	91
An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business . . . . .	93
Visit of UK Delegation . . . . .	106
Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2022: Motion. . . . .	107
Equality (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2025: Second Stage . . . . .	114

## SEANAD ÉIREANN

*Dé Céadaoin, 21 Bealtaine 2025*

*Wednesday, 21 May 2025*

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach i gceannas ar 10.30 a.m.

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*Machnamh agus Paidir.  
Reflection and Prayer.*

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### **Gnó an t-Seanaid - Business of Seanad**

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

Senator Maria McCormack - The need for the Minister for Justice to make a statement on initiatives to prevent antisocial behaviour in urban communities, in particular initiatives to deal with ongoing teen crime in County Laois.

Senator Robbie Gallagher - The need for the Minister for Justice to make a statement on the current policy on electronic tagging of people on probation, bail or temporary early release.

Senator Garret Ahearn - The need for the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to make a statement on the timeline for sign-off on the agreed new security allowances for councillors.

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 locations of biomethane plants.

Senator Chris Andrews - The need for the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence to make a statement on the acquisition of Airbus H145M helicopters.

Senator Nicole Ryan - The need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the eligibility criteria and protocols in place for accessing IVF through the public health system in cases where consent has been given by a deceased partner.

Senator Mike Kennelly - The need for the Minister for Education and Youth to make a statement on the implementation of a dedicated Bus Éireann secondary school transport route to Tralee along the R557, specifically to service the communities of Lixnaw and Abbeydorney.

The matters raised by the Senators are suitable for discussion and I have selected Senators

21 May 2025

Maria McCormack, Robbie Gallagher, Garret Ahearn and Eileen Lynch and they will be taken now. The other Senators may give notice on another day of the matters that they wish to raise.

## **Nithe i dtosach suíonna - Commencement Matters**

### **Crime Prevention**

**An Cathaoirleach:** I welcome the Minister for Justice, Deputy O’Callaghan back to the House. We could give him the title of honorary Senator he has been here so many times this week. The first Commencement matter is from Senator Maria McCormack.

**Senator Maria McCormack:** I am delighted the Minister is back in this House. I am deeply troubled by what I am witnessing in our community in Laois and surrounding counties. I am not alone in this concern. Over the past week, I have received numerous calls from frightened and frustrated residents who feel like prisoners in their own homes, living in fear of reckless behaviour and repeat offending. One constituent said to me that the State is absent when it is needed most.

This issue is all over our local media, including the *Laois Nationalist*. What has pushed this into the national spotlight is the extraordinary comments made by Judge Andrew Cody in Portlaoise District Court last week. He said, “The Government is failing to protect the citizens of the State.” This is a damning verdict from one of our own judges, a judge, who, in fairness, has been forced to watch the same cohort of young offenders appear before him week after week, having committed crime after crime with no meaningful consequence, no available detention space and no sign of urgency from the Government. Judge Cody went further saying:

There is a core to this gang here in Portlaoise who continue to commit crimes without any fear of recrimination. They do so because they know the courts, the gardaí and society have been handcuffed, while they walk free.

These are children, some as young as 14, stealing cars, tearing through our streets, driving the wrong way down the M7, smashing up businesses, destroying public property and uploading it all on TikTok for clout. It is being glamorised. It is being encouraged and we are being humiliated. Judge Cody was clear. The Garda and the courts are doing their best but he said the ultimate sanction and deterrent of imprisonment has been taken away because Oberstown Children Detection Centre is full.

This week, gardaí arrived with a court order to place two of these teenagers in custody. They waited 25 minutes at the gate of Oberstown only to be told that it was full. They were handed a sealed letter and told to bring the teenagers back to the Garda station. What message does that send? What message does it send to the victims, the public and the perpetrators? We are witnessing the complete breakdown of a youth justice system, not due to the negligence of the Garda or the Judiciary but due to Government failure. There are simply no places left to put these young people in when they offend, and the crime continues. As Judge Cody said, these youths have done so in a shocking and dangerous manner without any regard for their own or anyone else’s lives. The lesson being learned by these juveniles is that they can continue to commit crime without any consequences.

This just cannot go on. I am calling for immediate action, including the emergency expansion of Oberstown or the provision of temporary regional youth detention facilities; a full Government-led response to organised youth crime because that is on the increase, day in, day out, particularly the grooming and recruitment tactics of gangs targeting vulnerable children; proper resourcing for gardaí to respond to these escalating crimes, including youth-specific detention and intervention units; and investment in diversion and early intervention programmes, not after the tenth arrest but when the first warning signs emerge. This is not about locking children away and forgetting about them; this is about creating a system that deters dangerous behaviour, protects the public and offers real structured rehabilitation, not TikTok fame. We need action. We do not need apologies. We need beds, not sealed letters, and we need justice, not headlines.

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Jim O’Callaghan):** I thank Senator McCormack for raising this matter. It is a great honour for me to be back in the Seanad and I hope to be here frequently. I wish to advise that, within my Department, I am delegating responsibility for youth crime to the Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins. Notwithstanding that, it is an extremely important issue and I welcome the opportunity to respond to what the Senator has to say.

In terms of the judge’s comments, it is important that people are fully aware of the penalties that can be imposed on children who are convicted of offences before the court. The Senator is correct in noting that the ultimate sanction is detention. However, under section 98 of the Children Act, other options are available to the courts, in particular sanctions that can be imposed upon parents or guardians. That is something that the courts need to look at more. You can find yourself in a situation, however, where a child is just not amenable to any sanction from a court or, indeed, his or her parents and where it is regrettably appropriate for the child to be detained.

The Senator is correct in what she said about Oberstown but it is not completely full. Five or six spaces are kept available for girl offenders as opposed to boy offenders. An indication of the difference between offending between sexes is that the spaces for girl offenders generally are not occupied. The boy offender sections are full.

I am extremely concerned about this matter and, because of that, I had a meeting last week with the Minister for children, Deputy Foley. We discussed what could be done to increase capacity at Oberstown. She will reflect on that to see what can be done. Obviously, some individuals can be released from Oberstown, thereby providing spaces. However, I am fully aware that unless there is the prospect of a custodial sanction being imposed, in the infrequent occasion that it is necessary, then the courts and the Garda can find themselves in a situation with juvenile delinquents where there appears to be no sanction in respect of it.

There are other options available to try to stop children continuing on the pathway of criminality. We are doing a disservice to children unless we try to correct their behaviour at that stage. If a child is involved in criminal behaviour at the age of 15, 16 or 17 years, then there is a strong likelihood that, by the time he or she gets to 18, that individual will be continuing with that behaviour and finally find himself or herself in prison immediately. There is a responsibility on us to try to divert children. That is why the youth diversion programme is useful. As the Senator will know, the youth diversion programme operates in Laois. We have 93 youth diversion programmes, with two operating in Laois. They are the Acorn project, which is operated by Youth Work Ireland Midlands, and LOOP which is operated by Foróige.

It is a complicated issue, as the Senator will appreciate, to know what to do with children who break criminal law. However, we need to focus more on the interests of the community

21 May 2025

and individuals who are the victims of that criminal behaviour. It is not much comfort to them to know that the offender is under 18 years of age.

I am looking at Oberstown. I have discussed it with the Minister, Deputy Foley. We need to provide more spaces. Since our population is increasing, we are inevitably going to need more spaces in prison and youth detention centres. That is incompatible with another ambition and policy I have, that being, to try to make community sanctions available for the purpose of a penalty being imposed.

**Senator Maria McCormack:** I thank the Minister and appreciate that he gives a thorough response every time he is here. I agree that we need to consider diversion and engage better with the youth diversion services but the issue of youth crime reached crisis point in Laois this week when there was no option and people felt that the youths got away free. There was no deterrent, leading to uproar in the community because so much car theft and other criminality was going on under our noses.

There is work to be done. I am delighted that the Minister is looking at Oberstown to see how we can move forward on this. I hope that lots of investment and time are put into people at a young age to deter them from crime.

**Deputy Jim O’Callaghan:** It is important that the Judiciary is aware of the options available under section 98 of the Children Act 2001. There are more options available other than simply a custodial sentence. I agree with the Senator that, on occasion, a custodial sentence is appropriate but the imposition of a sanction on the parent or guardian, or the imposition of an order requiring the parent or a guardian to be bound over, can also have an impact. These are sanctions that need to be given consideration.

I am aware of the issues that are of concern to the Senator and An Garda Síochána. I will continue to engage with the Minister, Deputy Foley, in respect of Oberstown. There is limited space there and, as the population increases, we are regrettably finding ourselves having to deal with more delinquent children. We are doing them a disservice unless we try to divert them and, regrettably, a custodial sanction is necessary on some occasions.

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Victor Boyhan):** I welcome the children from sixth class in the Ranelagh Multi-Denominational School. Their visit is timely because we have present their local TD, namely, the Minister for Justice, Jim O’Callaghan. It is great to see young people here and I hope they enjoy their day in the Oireachtas.

### **Electronic Tagging**

**Senator Robbie Gallagher:** I, too, welcome the children from the school and I hope they have an enjoyable day.

I welcome the Minister back to the House. Like Senator McCormack, I compliment him on his commitment to attending this House. He is setting an example that I hope many of his colleagues will follow.

Without doubt, the Minister has inherited a very busy portfolio and there are many issues on his desk that need immediate attention. I will discuss one that he mentioned in his previous contribution, namely, prison overcrowding. The latest figures show that there are currently

5,348 inmates in Irish prisons, which only have a capacity for 4,666 prisoners. There are also 398 mattresses on floors, while 566 inmates are on temporary release, 113 of whom are serving custodial sentences of six months or more. There is also the serious question of people being given sentences and travelling to prison only to be turned around in what is known as the revolving door system. This practice, as I am sure the Minister will agree, is concerning for the effect that it has on the justice system and the perception of justice in this country among the gardaí, the courts and the general public.

The increase in the prison population has resulted in a large number of prisoners sleeping on mattresses on floors and on the necessary redeployment of staff to landings for safety reasons, thus diverting staff from facilitating educational and rehabilitative services. Not only does overcrowding lead to an increased risk of violence for prisoners, but it also threatens the health and safety of prison officers. Ultimately, there is an increased risk of reoffending and an increased threat to public safety in general. Since the report by the prison overcrowding response group was submitted, the prison population has continued to grow, hitting record numbers with certain prisons consistently experiencing overcrowding significantly beyond that.

The programme for Government commits to implementing electronic tagging for appropriate categories of offenders. I understand that work is under way on scoping out the practical operational considerations of such a move for relevant categories of offenders to inform the next steps. I would be grateful if the Minister could provide an update on where this work stands.

Many other jurisdictions have introduced electronic tagging but I understand that there are concerns. The tagging system currently used in the UK came under scrutiny recently following a BBC exposé on the breakdown of the system and the widescale abuse of prisoners participating in the early release system. I would be grateful if the Minister would outline his Department's plans to ensure that any such breaches of a new plan in Ireland will be dealt with by immediately returning the prisoner in question to prison and imposing other penalties.

I note that many, including the Minister's predecessor, the former Deputy Dermot Ahern, have said it is inevitable - I have heard the current Minister say it many times as well - that, with the increase in the population, we will need more prison places. Even with the best will in the world, though, it will take time to build prison places. We need to come up with creative ideas and greater solutions that can address the problem. For example, electronic tagging can play a significant role in that. Also, as the Minister said, we need to make more use of community service for lesser offences to keep people from going to prison at the outset. We need to be creative with our solutions because, with the best will in the world, it is going to take years to build additional prison spaces. I look forward to the Minister's contribution.

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** I welcome those from Ranelagh Multi-Denominational School who are in the Gallery. They are a great school and it is great to see them in the Houses of the Oireachtas.

Senator Gallagher raises an important issue. It is one of the most pressing issues that is facing me as the Minister for Justice. It relates to what is the overcrowding issue in our prisons. Since I have been made Minister for Justice, I have visited three prisons already. I have been to Cork Prison and Cloverhill Prison. I was in Shelton Abbey open prison on Monday past. As Senator Ryan knows, I am going to Limerick Prison on Monday. It is extremely important that, as Minister, I see what is actually happening in our prisons. Very many of the prisons are dominated by people who are excellent members of staff who are doing their best under difficult



circumstances. I am not going to hide the fact we have an overcrowding problem within our prisons. It is my responsibility to try to fix it.

As Senator Gallagher identified, one of the mechanisms by which it can be fixed is through electronic tagging. When one thinks about it, we introduced the capacity for electronic tagging on our Statute Book back as long ago as 1997 in the Bail Act. We also refer to it in the Criminal Justice Act 2006. The Sex Offenders (Amendment) Act 2023 provides for electronic monitoring in certain circumstances. If we have these statutory provisions that state that electronic monitoring can be used, it is pretty surprising we do not have it available to us at this stage. Our neighbouring jurisdiction, Northern Ireland, has tagging. They do not have same resources that we have in this country on a *per capita* basis, so there is no real reason it has not been introduced to date.

In the next number of months, I intend to put out for public tender the contract to provide tags that can be used within the prison system and our criminal justice system. The benefit of that will be that we will not have to remand as many people in custody prior to their trial because, if they are electronically tagged, we can avoid any difficulty in respect of them absconding. It is a sanction that also can be imposed in respect of those who are convicted to supervise them after they either finish their term of imprisonment or indeed on a term of imprisonment. There are other solutions that are needed as well. I have proposals to try to ensure we get 1,100 new prison spaces in the next 18 months. I will be bringing a memorandum to Government in the near future in respect of that. We need to provide prison spaces in a fairly immediate mechanism. That will require me to try to cut through the red tape and, I hope, avoiding having to go through the public sector spending code. We need to get prison spaces available in the immediate future.

There is also the longer term plan in respect of building a new prison. That is something that will be necessary because of our rising population. However, I am not a person or Minister, and I do not believe we are a country, who thinks we are going to solve our criminal justice issues through the imposition of a greater number of prison sentences. We need to examine alternative options when it comes to sanctions. Prisons should be a place for dangerous people who have committed violent offences. I was in Shelton Abbey and there many individuals in the open prison who are doing extremely well. They are engaged in employment in the prison. They are living productive lives. There is also a sense of rehabilitation there. The function of prison is twofold. It is rehabilitation as well as punishment. We need to examine alternative penalties that can be imposed, such as community sanctions. In the Criminal Justice (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, I gave the opportunity and hope to be able to put into law an option for more community sanctions.

**Senator Robbie Gallagher:** I thank the Minister for his comprehensive response. One thing I am very heartened by is the number of ideas he has to address this very serious issue. As he said, it is the most pressing issue on his desk currently. I am heartened by the manner in which he is tackling this and by the vigour, enthusiasm and sense of determination he is bringing to his portfolio. It is hugely impressive. I look forward to progress being made, not just with tagging. It is great to hear the supply of tagging equipment is going out to tender, which is very much welcome. However, the option to examine alternatives to people going to prison in the first place by community service and so on is something that needs to be explored. I am heartened by the Minister's response. I look forward to the much-needed progress in this area in the not-too-distant future.

**Deputy Jim O’Callaghan:** I thank Senator Gallagher. I will provide a detailed update in respect to where we are. I am advised that work is under way involving representatives from the various agencies to prepare to operationalise electronic monitoring. This includes the consideration of technology, data protection, procurement, implementation and operating model design. The project will determine in what order the various legislative provisions should be commenced, having regard to the practical and operational considerations involved with each potential cohort. The important information from the Senator’s point of view is that an initial roll-out of electronic monitoring is expected later this year following a procurement exercise to select a service provider. That is good news. It will mean there is another option available for the Judiciary and greater options for the Probation Service and Parole Board. It will have a positive impact on the overcrowding issue within prisons, but as part of the solution. It is not the complete solution.

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Victor Boyhan):** I thank Senator Gallagher and the Minister. We in this House greatly appreciate the Minister coming to us directly as the lead in justice. I thank him for his time.

### **Local Government Reform**

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Victor Boyhan):** I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy O’Sullivan, to the House. On behalf of the House, I offer our condolences yet again to him on the loss of his sister. We know it is a difficult time for him and his family. Our thoughts are with him.

**Senator Garret Ahearn:** I wish to also be associated with the condolences on the very sad passing of the Minister of State’s sister. I hope he is well and it is good to see him back. We are all thinking of him.

As the Minister of State is aware, a number of years ago there were new security allowances put in place for public representatives. This was in light of the change in society, the change in the workload for councillors and Oireachtas Members and essentially to make sure people could go about their day and do their job without fear of anything happening. We have seen instances in the UK but we have seen minor incidents in Ireland. As a Government and as politicians, we have an obligation to try to encourage people to get into public life. It is important to do that and part of that is making sure they are safe to be able to do their job.

Measures were put in place a number of years ago and they have not been ideal. One of the main reasons for it was that a councillor could pay for security for their home or for their office if they had one, but it was just a 50% rebate and there was a €5,000 limit. Take-up has not been as much as we would like it to have been, and similarly that was the case with Oireachtas Members. Before Christmas, there were changes made for Oireachtas Members, with the allowance being increased and, importantly, a 100% rebate on it.

Since this new Government has taken office, the Minister for State at the Department of local government, Deputy John Cummins, has been in this Chamber speaking on it and knows it is a priority. He has worked on it along with the Minister, Deputy James Browne. They have put a proposal together.



*11 o'clock*

Senator Kyne and I met LAMA to discuss a range of issues, including pensions. This was one of the main issues up for discussion in terms of security for the 949 councillors across the country. In fairness to the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, and the Minister, Deputy Browne, they have acted very quickly. A proposal has been put forward and now just needs to be sanctioned by the Department of public expenditure. I call on the Minister for public expenditure, Deputy Chambers, to do this as quickly as possible. I know a number of councillors across the country, at the moment, who are looking to do work on their home or office or something in terms of security and protection. They are waiting because they want to see what the new scheme will be, whether it will be a higher amount and a 100% rebate and if it will be backdated to the start of the council term. These are all concerns that LAMA raised with Senator Kyne and me.

I raise this issue on behalf of all 17 Fine Gael Senators. It needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. We cannot have public representatives across the country waiting to do things that are a necessity simply because they do not know when the scheme will be signed off on. I would really appreciate getting some clarity on this today. In fairness, the Department of housing has acted very quickly on this and it just needs the Department of public expenditure to sign off on it. I do not see any reason it should not when it is about security and people's safety while carrying out their work. This needs to be signed off on. LAMA wrote to the Minister, Deputy Chambers, outlining the need for this to be finalised as quickly as possible. On behalf of LAMA and my fellow Fine Gael Senators, I ask that this be done as quickly as possible.

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan):** I thank Senators Boyhan and Ahearn for their kind words of condolence on the death of my sister. They are very much appreciated.

In fairness to Senator Ahearn, he has always been an advocate for councillors' needs across Ireland. We know how challenging it is being a councillor. Many councillors are now full time because of the seriousness of the work and the amount of work they have to do. Therefore, making allowances for security measures can be quite challenging in terms of the existing supports. Clearly there is a recognition that the scheme that was introduced is not enough. That is clear from the take-up of the scheme, which I will outline shortly. I understand the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, and the Minister, Deputy Chambers, recognise that. We will get movement on this as soon as possible.

Local government plays an important role in the life of the nation. It is responsible for the delivery of a wide range of services. Elected councils provide a vital forum for the democratic representation of local communities. All elected representatives should be free to carry out their functions and representational role without fear of harassment or intimidation. Heightened adversarial attitudes to elected representatives are corrosive to democratic participation. They risk deterring potential new candidates and inducing existing representatives to withdraw from political life. The Senator touched on this when he mentioned encouraging new people in to politics. It is in this context that a security allowance for councillors was introduced in September 2023. Under the current scheme, elected members can claim a maximum of €2,500 or 50%, whichever is the lesser, of the cost of home-security measures that have been recommended in a report made by their local crime prevention officer.

In light of a recommendation in the report of the task force on safe participation in politi-

cal life to review the security allowance for councillors, my Department surveyed the 31 local authorities to ascertain the uptake of the allowance by councillors, and to identify any obstacles to this. The findings are pretty stark, as the Senator alluded to. It showed that only 23 of the 949 councillors availed of the allowance in 2024. Challenges reported by local authorities in relation to the uptake and administration of the scheme included the requirement of councillors to meet half the costs of the works as well as, in some areas, delays in obtaining a report by a crime prevention officer. Engagement with the Association of Irish Local Government, AILG, and LAMA on this issue indicated that the biggest obstacles to the scheme's uptake is the requirement of councillors to contribute 50% of the cost of the expenditure. They also indicated that the €2,500 maximum was insufficient to meet the needs of all councillors.

On foot of this review, my colleague, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, recently approved a business case for a revised allowance that reflects the feedback received. This was submitted by my Department to the Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform, whose approval is required for any revision to the scheme. Any revision to the allowance would also need to be introduced by the making of ministerial regulations under section 142 of the Local Government Act 2001, countersigned by the Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform. I understand that the business case is being considered by that Department and that there will be further engagement with my Department on this proposal shortly.

There is an urgency around this. The Senator will see in the response that there is also a small legislative requirement. I do not think that will be too burdensome or will slow the process too much. The Senator's point is well made. We need to encourage more people in to politics. There is, anecdotally at least, an increase in harassment incidents and safety concerns for councillors and local representatives. The Senator has always been an advocate on this issue. I will work with the relevant Ministers to make sure we get this measure introduced as soon as possible.

**Senator Garret Ahearn:** I thank the Minister of State. He is right that 23 councillors out of 949 applying for the scheme means that there is something wrong with it. This has been recognised by the Department of housing and it has acted quickly. The Minister of State noted that the business case is being considered by the Department of public expenditure. I acknowledge the importance of this. However, councillors would say that there was a business case put forward for Oireachtas Members before Christmas. That was reviewed and decided upon within 48 hours. If the Department of public expenditure can make the decision for Oireachtas Members in this building in 48 hours, we can certainly do it quicker than four weeks. The business case has been with the Department for the past four weeks. What we do not want is for it to go into or past the summer without a decision being made. I know the Minister recognises the urgency of it. The Government is aware of the importance of security. We cannot have a situation where we are able to sort out things for TDs and Senators in 48 hours but not for councillors.

**Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan:** I get the need for urgency. The fact that the Senator has raised the matter will further emphasise the urgency. I have been assured that in recent days officials from both Departments have been in touch on progressing this matter. Yes, it can and should be done quickly, and it is very important that it is. I stress that the option to avail of €2,500 is still open to councillors. If they do so, it does not preclude them from availing of further funds if the grant amount is increased under the new proposals. I cannot go into details on the proposal and what is being discussed, for obvious reasons, but we want to see something

that is enhanced and that removes the obstacles that are evidenced by such a low uptake. We will come back as soon as we have any indication that progress has been made in this regard.

### **Renewable Energy Generation**

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Victor Boyhan):** I welcome the Minister of State to the House. It is good to see him again.

**Senator Eileen Lynch:** I thank the Minister of State for being here this morning. I want to speak on an issue of urgency and strategic importance, not just for our national climate goals but for rural communities across the country, particularly in my own county of Cork. In north-west Cork there is currently potential for the development of a biomethane plant in Kilvoultra, a rural community just outside Macroom. There is a clear and pressing need for the Minister for the environment to provide a firm commitment to publish national guidelines on the locations of biomethane plants, as part of the national biomethane strategy. Biomethane has enormous potential to be a cornerstone of Ireland's transition to a low-carbon economy. It is a renewable, home-grown energy source that helps us to cut greenhouse gas emissions and provides a productive for farm and food waste. Nowhere is this opportunity more relevant than in counties like Cork, with a strong and diverse agricultural sector, where farmers are looking for sustainable ways to future-proof their livelihoods. As well as energy potential, there is potential for the use of the digestate as an organic fertiliser, which would be an alternative to mineral fertiliser use. This is an opportunity for our rural economy, environment and energy security but only if done correctly. Being done correctly has to be the guiding principle. There is no national guidance as to where biomethane plants should be located. This is leading to confusion, frustration and legitimate concern, particularly from communities living near proposed sites, many of which believe they are being left in the dark, particularly when consultation is at best lacking and at worst non-existent. We have already seen this tension emerge in Cork. In some areas, proposed locations have raised serious questions about road access, residential proximity and environmental impact. People are understandably worried about increased heavy traffic on rural roads that were never designed for such loads and about plants being sited far too close to homes. Regarding the proposal I mentioned in Kilvoultra, 200 residents are living within a 2-km radius of the proposed site.

The reality is that our local authorities are doing their best but county development plans vary significantly across the country when it comes to the location of biomethane plants. Cork County Council may take a more cautious or supportive approach than councils elsewhere but without national guidelines, there is a lack of consistency and co-ordination that risks undermining community confidence and industry investment. We cannot have a piecemeal approach. I am, therefore, calling on the Minister to urgently publish comprehensive national guidelines on the location of biomethane plants that consider proximity to homes, road and infrastructure capacity, environmental sustainability and alignment with local development plans. These guidelines must also reflect the needs and perspective of rural counties like Cork where there is significant potential for biomethane and biogas but also a need for balance, fairness and proper planning. If we want to unlock the potential of biomethane for our farmers, protect our communities and deliver on our climate commitments, we must give local authorities, developers and residents the clarity and guidance they need to move forward. We need to provide a clear national framework as to where these plants can and cannot be located and we need to get this right. It is vital for rural Ireland and for our shared environmental future.

**Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Alan Dillon):** I thank Senator Lynch for raising this important topic, which is particularly important for her constituency in Cork. It is an important issue. I recently attended the all-Ireland summit on the bioeconomy. This was a really important summit that brought together key industry partners, academia and those working in the bioeconomy, the biomethane sector and the circular economy. There was significant discussion around where we can improve our circularity and how the Government has committed to delivering up to 5.7 TWh of indigenously produced biomethane by 2030.

Delivery of this target and the use of biomethane in our energy system will have multiple cross-sectoral benefits for Ireland's economy, energy security and emissions profile. I think Senator Lynch agrees with that initiative. A first step to realising this ambition was the publication of the national biomethane strategy. The previous Ministers for the Environment, Climate and Communications and Agriculture, Food and the Marine published this strategy in May 2024. Subsequently, we have seen the most recent publication of the national planning framework. This will set out our sectoral climate targets across many of the regions across Ireland and will enable regional assemblies to formally look at strategic sites and planning to deliver on this ambition.

The biomethane strategy sets out the necessary policy and regulatory measures and provides a roadmap to developing a biomethane industry of scale in Ireland. The development of the strategy focused on a framework of five interlinking pillars seen as critical to target delivery. They are sustainability, demand for biomethane, the bioeconomy and the circular economy, the economics of biomethane, and enabling policy requirements. Each pillar has been aligned with 25 key strategic actions. Each action looks to address the challenges and support the opportunities anaerobic digestion and biomethane production have to offer.

Although this is a very well established technology in Europe with over 20,000 plants in operation, biomethane production and anaerobic digestion, AD, plants are considered a new form of technology in Ireland. A clearer understanding of AD technology and consistency of approach by planning authorities when assessing AD projects will improve our planning and permitting processes. Priority deliverables under the strategy include the development of planning guidelines - I know this is one issue Senator Lynch wants to be raised - to support local authorities when assessing AD planning applications and a review of resourcing requirements of our key Government agencies to support development of the industry. These guidelines will be developed by the biomethane implementation group, which is chaired by my Department, in close collaboration with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage along with Teagasc and the SEAI.

I met recently with Gas Networks Ireland, GNI, which is committed to decarbonising our gas network by repurposing it to transport renewable gases - ultimately, hydrogen and biomethane. GNI has established a dedicated biomethane team. We are working through the guidelines in the biomethane implementation group. We have not yet published them but we will certainly work towards the objective of publishing them later this year.

**Senator Eileen Lynch:** I thank the Minister of State for such a comprehensive response. I really welcome the confirmation that these planning guidelines are in the ether. I would appreciate hearing if there is any particular timeline. I am very much in favour of biomethane and biogas. It is well established technology in mainland Europe but it is not necessarily something we have investigated here. It has many benefits from energy, climate and agricultural

perspectives. If we want to meet our targets and introduce these plants around the country, it is important for us not to split communities and drive the public against these measures. It seems mad that when this national biomethane strategy was published 12 months ago, there was no reference to planning guidelines. This led to differences between country development plans and different local authorities and a lack of consultation with communities. I am not against biomethane and I recognise its importance but these guidelines need to be published and published soon so that we are not splitting communities and driving the public against these necessary measures.

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Victor Boyhan):** Before I call the Minister of State, I welcome the students and my council colleague. They are very welcome here today. I hope they enjoy their stay. We are dealing with Commencement Matters - basically a number of topics submitted by Senators. Four are picked each day and four have been picked today, so we are at the conclusion of this section. This is an important part of the Seanad's deliberations where individual Senators raise topics of interest to them, their constituents or organisations with which they are involved.

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** Priority deliverables under the biomethane strategy include the development of planning guidelines. Many communities, not just that of the Senator's in Cork, deserve the right to engage in the planning process so that there is extensive consultation, they have oversight of any environmental assessments being undertaken and that in respect of this engagement between the local authority and the developer if it is private, there is a community dividend in terms of a community fund being established for these key infrastructural projects because they are significant and have an impact on the environment, the biosphere and local communities. Therefore, it is only correct that they require and undergo the full planning and permit process to ensure considerations in a range of areas and factors, including location, visual impact, land zoning plans and ecology, are factored in. I will work with the Senator to expedite these guidelines over the next number of months to ensure there is a centralised plan across the country.

*Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 11.20 a.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 11.32 a.m.*

*Sitting suspended at 11.20 a.m. and resumed at 11.32 a.m.*

### **An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business**

**An Cathaoirleach:** Before I call the Leader to outline the Order of Business being proposed, I welcome St. James's Primary School from Basin Lane in Dublin 8. The pupils are most welcome to Seanad Éireann. Thanks for the wave. As is protocol, there is no homework for the class for the rest of the week for coming to Seanad Éireann. What did they get in the Dáil Chamber? Did they give you anything like that? No. I see. I thank our guests from for coming.

**Senator Seán Kyne:** The Order of Business is No. 1, motion regarding the proposed approval by Seanad Éireann of the Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2022 (Section 9(2)) (Amount of Financial Contribution) Order 2025, to be taken at 1 p.m. and to conclude at 2.15 p.m., if not previously concluded, with time allocated to the opening remarks of the Minister not to exceed eight minutes, group spokespersons not to exceed ten minutes each, all other Senators not to exceed two minutes each, time may be shared, and the Minister to be given



not less than seven minutes to reply to the debate; and No. 2, Private Members' business in the name of the Sinn Féin Senators, Equality (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2025 – Second Stage, to be taken at 3 p.m., with the time allocated to this debate not to exceed two hours.

**Senator Fiona O'Loughlin:** I support the Order of Business as outlined by the Leader.

I thank Kfm, my local radio station, for its excellent service in public broadcasting and bringing issues of concern to all our ears. This morning, I learned through Kfm that there was a cancellation of midwifery services in the primary care centre in Athy. Many expectant mums were given less than 24 hours' notice and were told that they would have to travel to Portlaoise hospital for subsequent services.

Maternity services are hugely important. It is a sensitive and happy time for many. It is also challenging. We have to protect them. Athy has a large population. That these services would be cancelled literally overnight is simply wrong. I ask that this be brought to the attention of the Minister for Health. I will be tabling a Commencement matter next week on it.

I also raise the issue of DEIS. We all know that DEIS is meant to reduce educational disadvantage and promote equity across our schools. Of course, equity is different from equality and it is important that we try to promote it. The success of this programme has been clear. Schools in the programme have significantly closed the gap with non-DEIS schools.

There was an OECD report last July in which the resourcing of schools to address educational disadvantage was reviewed. Ireland got an excellent score. It was found that we had an educational system that consistently outperformed many other countries and also established socioeconomic fairness. While that is good, many schools are left out of the programme. I think particularly of Scoil Na Naomh Uilig in Newbridge, which is the largest and newest school and has the most socioeconomic challenges, yet it has been left out of the past two schemes. There is a situation in Edenderry and other parts of the country where there is a girls primary school and a boys primary school but only one of the schools is in the DEIS scheme. It is important that we ask the Minister for education for a new plan. I note the programme for Government committed to a new DEIS plus scheme and to expanding the home school community liaison co-ordinator. We also need more flexibility to support schools in addressing problems as they arise. I would like to see a debate on the DEIS scheme with the Minister for education.

The last thing I wish to ask for a debate on is the EU-UK summit, which happened on 19 May. We are led to believe it was progressive. There are two issues in terms of co-operation, those being, fisheries and energy. The present plans are finishing next year. It is important we have a debate in the House on that summit with the Minister.

**Senator Mark Duffy:** I wish to raise an issue that is popping up in towns and villages all across the country, that is, vaping shops. I raised it previously with the Minister for Justice when he was in the Seanad. We need to amend the existing legislation - the Public Health (Tobacco Products and Nicotine Inhaling Products) Act 2023 - to have more stringent and stronger repellents and barriers for the sale of vaping products, in particular the targeting of young people. In one example in my home county of Mayo, we have a shop that sells vapes and candy together, enticing young people and encouraging them to use vaping as a stepping stone. It is abhorrent to see that level of cynicism from businesses that are trying to encourage young people to vape. I would encourage a discussion on this matter. I intend to work on tightening the legislation to stop the proliferation of these shops across towns and villages. We have made good strides on



the sale of cigarettes in terms of their branding, their packaging, and how they have to be kept behind the counter and not advertised, whereas vapes, vaping products and the accessories that go with smoking and vaping seem to have proliferated across all towns and villages. There are quick fixes we can make to amend the existing legislation to stop the product placement and the association with candy or sweets and other things young people would be attracted to in vaping. It is shocking to see it like that. We should also put stringent fines in place for shop owners who flout these rules, if we can get this addressed. I encourage a debate on it.

I congratulate the Relay for Life Mayo organisation, which hosted an incredible weekend, raising money for cancer research and charities. More than €130,000 was raised. The great weekend and weather helped an awful lot. It was fabulous to see many different people in the community getting out and celebrating those who survived cancer but also remembering those they had lost. It was a great way of raising hopes and spirits and obtaining money for a great cause. I compliment two local county councillors, Peter Flynn and Brendan Mulroy, who did an incredible job of raising much-needed funds for cancer research. I also compliment the community in Westport and County Mayo generally for getting behind a brilliant event.

**Senator Victor Boyhan:** I wish to highlight the significant win yesterday at the Chelsea Flower Show by one of our greatest Irish horticulturalists who exhibited a microcosm of Kells Bay in the beautiful county of Kerry. The display took a gold medal, which is very prestigious. It was a massive undertaking. It meant the shipment of many ferns that grow in that most beautiful part of the world overlooking the Dingle Peninsula. The Cathaoirleach knows it well, as do others here. Our participants at London's Chelsea Flower Show are hopping with excitement. This morning they are looking at an award from this most prestigious horticultural event. Of course, it has gone to Billy Alexander from Kells Bay Gardens. It is a fantastic achievement. In those gardens can be seen the famous *Dicksonia antarctica* ferns and all the Irish ferns he grows there. Mr. Alexander is a great advocate for Irish horticulture and garden design. I strongly recommend that people visit Kells Bay. The gardens are open, and they are wonderful.

That leads me next into giving a plug for Bloom, which starts next Thursday, 29 May. It is our equivalent of the Chelsea Flower Show. Bloom is fast coming up to that pace and standard, and I wish the event well. Tickets are currently on sale at [www.bordbiabloom.com](http://www.bordbiabloom.com).

**An Cathaoirleach:** Now, Senator, you cannot be advertising-----

**Senator Victor Boyhan:** It is important. Bord Bia is a wholly Irish organisation.

**An Cathaoirleach:** I know.

**Senator Victor Boyhan:** It promotes Irish horticulture, which I also continue to promote in this House. In the area of horticulture, I also acknowledge the wonderful work of the National Botanic Gardens. This is a wonderful horticultural gem, where I was a student many years ago. The gardens are free for everyone to visit, and I ask people to go there. I request a debate on horticulture because it is important, particularly in the context of ornamentals and fruit and vegetable production.

I give thanks to Sharon Devlin, the creative director of Tallaght Community Arts, who came to the audiovisual room yesterday at my invitation for a film presentation. Many of the Senators will have missed it, but what a treat we had. The film was entitled "We Will Not Sit Down and Be Quiet", and how moving and inspiring it was. The audiovisual room was packed to capacity, with more than 40 advocates present. These were people who lived in institutional care and

shared their personal experiences and stories. It is a most moving film. The participants spent more than two hours here and met with several politicians afterwards to advance what they call their human rights, the dignity they want to be afforded to them and the independence to enable them to live in communities. I am circulating this film today to every Member of the House. I strongly encourage everyone to have a look at it and, possibly, to engage and go back to the organisation. Big thanks go to Councillor Alan Edge, who facilitated, organised and initially thought up the idea and suggested we bring it to these Houses, and to Sharon Devlin, creative director of Tallaght Community Arts. It was an amazing and moving day. I urge everyone to have a look at this film.

**Senator Maria McCormack:** I speak today about one of the most shameful ongoing failures of this Government, namely the persistent and unlawful delays in completing assessments of need for children with disabilities. I have just come from outside Leinster House where I talked with the father of Cara Darmody. They are all exhausted. This is a 14-year-old girl who has to sleep outside Leinster House to fight for services for children with disabilities.

Under the Disability Act 2005, it is not a suggestion but the law that an assessment must be commenced and completed within six months of an application being made. However, the reality is very different. Across this State, the legal right to which I refer is being violated every day. We have families waiting 12, 18 and even 24 months or longer simply to get initial assessments. This is not just an administrative delay; it is a denial of people's rights and has real and irreversible consequences for our children. Early intervention changes lives. A delay in assessment means a delay in therapy, in support at school, in speech and occupational therapy and in mental health interventions. All this is happening while children regress and families are left in limbo.

As the mother of a child with additional needs, I know the toll this takes not just on the child but also on the entire family. I refer to the anxiety, the exhaustion and the constant advocacy just to get what your child is legally entitled to. Assessments of need are now overdue for 15,296 children. That is 15,296 families. The Government knows the system is broken. We now have a growing backlog and understaffed children's disability network teams, CDNTs. There is just a complete lack of transparency regarding how the Government intends to meet its legal obligation. As Cara said to the Taoiseach outside Leinster House, you are breaking the law. Where is the accountability? Where is the emergency plan to clear these backlogs? Where is the leadership to stand up and say that children with disabilities deserve better than this?

I call on the Government to immediately publish a clear national plan to bring the State back into compliance with the Disability Act 2005, to fully staff and fund all the CDNTs and to stop relying on agency cover and temporary workarounds, provide real-time reporting on waiting lists and hold senior management accountable when timelines are breached. Children with disabilities are not optional and their rights are not negotiable. This Government is just failing them and is breaking the law by doing so. We cannot accept this situation. Emergency funding needs to be put into Cara's fund now.

**An Cathaoirleach:** Before I call the next speaker, I welcome to the Distinguished Visitors Gallery, and rightly they are there, retired members of our Defence Forces. I can see from their badges that they all served with the United Nations. I thank them for that service. They are all from Cork and Midleton. Quartermaster Tommy McCarthy brought them here today. I thank him for bringing former members of the Defence Forces who served with distinction with the United Nations and all across the world to the Seanad Éireann today. Go raibh míle maith

agaibh. I call Senator Stephenson.

**Senator Patricia Stephenson:** This is Traveller Pride Week. In recognition of this, I request that we have a debate on Traveller rights in Ireland. Traveller rights are human rights. As a result, this is an issue we should all be speaking about across the Oireachtas. The Traveller community has a rich and resilient culture that has endured and contributed a great amount to Irish life, despite generations of exclusion, discrimination and erasure. On Monday, I attended the launch of a photography exhibition called “Unfiltered” in Kilkenny by Gypsy Ray. It explored and captured the lives of the Kilkenny Traveller community over the last decade.

While this week rightly honours the Traveller identity, we do need to acknowledge the continuous challenges the Traveller community faces. Just 1% of Travellers progress to third level education. Life expectancy for Travellers remains shockingly low compared with the settled population, as much as 15 years lower. Suicide rates are six times higher among Travellers than the settled population. Those are pretty grim statistics. Worse still, even when funding is allocated to address inequality, it has often gone unused. The Irish Traveller Movement has highlighted the persistent underspending of Traveller-specific budgets by local authorities and Departments. This is shocking in light of the inequality the community faces.

I will spend the rest of my time today acknowledging the work of local Kilkenny poet Samantha Joyce by reading her poem “Pavee Lackeen”, which speaks volumes to the discrimination and resilience of the Traveller community. It reads:

I am a proud Pavee Lackeen,  
even though you may not see.  
When it comes to discrimination, it ain't no game with me.  
I am a proud Pavee Lackeen, can't you see?  
Despite the animosity, I'm a proud Pavee Lackeen.  
I wish the world would seek to understand me.  
I am proud to be me regardless of society,  
and what faces me.  
I know I've got the backing of my community.  
Being individual is hard, but I will always seek to be unique  
in a world where being different is wrong .  
I was always taught to stand out and be strong.  
My life sometimes prevents me,  
But I will always fight for what is right  
And for my right to not have to fight  
to be me.

In a world where my unity unites me

I strive to be the best version

of Pavee Lackeen Me.

**Senator Eileen Flynn:** As Senator Stephenson said, this is Traveller Pride Week. Many members of the Traveller community and many children within the Traveller community have fewer opportunities to be successful within Irish society. Last week, a study showed that young Travellers start off on a very good footing and it is all positivity when they go into primary education. However, by the end of primary school, they say they are not good enough to be in education. I know exactly what that feels like, namely not feeling good enough coming through the education system and not feeling good enough when applying for a job.

Yesterday, I was in Jobstown speaking to teachers about the yellow flag programme and talking about some of my experiences. I worked in a nursing home in Chapelizod for three weeks on work experience from Ballyfermot College. The manager told me there was a job going and that I would be absolutely brilliant for it. I put in my CV and as soon as they saw my address, that job was no longer going. When I first moved to Donegal, I put in for numerous jobs. My CV outlined the work I had done through the Irish Traveller Movement, Pavee Point and various women's organisations. Straight away, I was discriminated against. That is not too long ago. It is still happening today for members of the Travelling community. There are many Travellers working in our health system and in our education system as teachers and principals in schools. People are afraid or ashamed to express their identity because we have to do what we do to survive. To live in that state of shame in today's society is absolutely not acceptable.

I am looking for a debate and accountability from the Government for the failures in delivering in respect of Traveller accommodation, Traveller mental health, Traveller education, which is really important, and employment for members of the Traveller community. I know the committee has been set up and will meet tomorrow. I wish the Chairperson every success, and I look forward to being a passionate Vice Chairperson on that committee. I will be putting myself forward for Vice Chair. However, actions speak louder than words. We could wallpaper both Houses with legislation and policies that are meant to make Travellers' lives better. The problem lies with lack of implementation. I call for a debate in this House to allow for statements from everybody who takes part. I am very proud to see Senator Stephenson standing up in order that the pressure is not all on the members of the community.

**Senator Paul Daly:** I welcome that last week the Minister for agriculture included black-grass on the list of noxious weeds under the noxious weeds legislation. It joins a group of other weeds, including broad-leaved dock, common ragwort, creeping thistle, spring wild oat and winter wild oat. They are all invasive species and are very destructive on agricultural land. The onus is on all landowners to remove these species, and that includes local authorities and roads authorities. However, on reading the small print, the farmer is obliged to look after it under the good agricultural and environmental condition, GAEC, 8. If farmers do not fulfil their duty under that condition, they will suffer deductions to their area-based payments. Farmers do not need that stick. Even without that stick, farmers are good custodians of the land. Reading the condition, what it says about the non-agricultural landowners, which includes local authorities and the roads authorities, is that if noxious weeds are reported and found on non-agricultural land, then an assessment will be conducted by a Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine officer. If there is no threat to agricultural land, then no enforcement or further action should

be taken.

Seeds and pollinating honeybees do not know the difference between agricultural land and other land. If there is ragwort on the side of a road, we can be sure it will end up inside nearby fences and hedges. The very same responsibility and onus is on local authorities and roads authorities. A Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine inspector going out and saying that there is no threat to agricultural land from a noxious weed because it is on the side of a road is pure and utter lunacy. The authorities in question need to be treated the very same and need to shoulder the same responsibility.

**Senator Mike Kennelly:** I wish to advocate on behalf of those seeking the implementation of a dedicated Bus Éireann secondary school transport route to Tralee from north Kerry, specifically servicing the communities of Lixnaw and Abbeydorney. In these communities, 19 families and 29 students face significant challenges due to the absence of a structured reliable transport service. At present, parents are forced to pay out of their own pockets for private transport arrangements. This is placing an unnecessary financial strain on households. Beyond the cost, families must drive miles to reach scattered pick-up points just to ensure their children can access education in Tralee. This is an unfair and unsustainable burden on rural families.

In addition, population growth in Lixnaw and Abbeydorney indicates that demand for school transport will continue to rise. If action is not taken now, these problems will only worsen. This will leave more families grappling with logistical and financial difficulties. An important aspect of this issue is that many of the affected children attend Gaelcholáiste Chiarraí in Tralee which is the Irish language school available to them. Under existing entitlements, they should have access to a designated bus service and yet this rise is currently being overlooked. These students and their families deserve the same consideration and support as those in other areas where transport routes are provided.

I urge the Minister for education to act swiftly to ensure this service is put in place by the next school year. Families cannot afford another year of financial strain and logistical difficulties just to access basic education. An immediate collaboration with Bus Éireann and local stakeholders is essential to provide a structured solution without delay. Councillor Aoife Kennelly is supporting this group and is advocating for it to deliver this route that is needed. As I said, 19 families and 29 students have no transport to get into Tralee for education. Will the Leader invite the Minister to come to the Seanad with a detailed response, hopefully in support of this critical route?

**Senator Aubrey McCarthy:** Three years ago, our nation was shaken by the brutal murder of Aisling Murphy, a young woman who was taken away when her whole life was ahead of her. It certainly struck a chord all across Ireland. We had hoped it would be a turning point across society when it comes to violence against women by males. We had hoped it would be confronted with urgency, honesty and a lasting change. Women's Aid recently reported that women are no safer today than they were the day Aisling was murdered. Since 1996, 275 women have been violently killed in the Republic. Some 66% of them were killed while within the protection of their own homes and 55% were killed by their partners or ex-partners. In the past year alone, An Garda Síochána responded to 65,000 incidents of domestic abuse. That comes to 1,250 such incidents every week.

The statistics are awful. Even since Aisling died, 30 more women have been killed. This cannot go on. One life lost is one too many. We must adopt a zero-tolerance policy towards



all forms of male violence against women. This means more than just words. It means investment, not only in the justice system but also in the education system. We need to look at some uncomfortable truths. In our society, 70% of incidents of domestic abuse involve alcohol. Our alcohol strategy is not geared to making a difference in this regard. Violence against women is not women's problem; it is a whole-of-society problem. It seems to start at a very young age, as we have seen recently with "Adolescence" on Netflix, which was the latter's top downloaded series. If we are talking about serious change, it is time we stopped waiting and mourning at funerals and started acting in this area.

*12 o'clock*

**Senator Dee Ryan:** I rise today on a joyous occasion in Limerick to congratulate the fourth-year students at Castleroy College who graduate from transition year today. The programme is all about the development of thinking, caring, articulate and self-confident young people. I congratulate the principal, Brian O'Donoghue, transition year co-ordinator, Geraldine McGrath, and all the TY students and their families on completing the year.

Transition year is such an important year in the life of a young person. It is designed to act as a bridge between the junior certificate and leaving certificate programmes, and each school around the country designs its own programme, within guidelines, to suit the needs of its students. It can include volunteering with groups, often includes entering competitions like The Big Idea or trying new activities and sports such as, for example, rowing, horse riding, surfing or whatever the school is able to facilitate, and, importantly, trying out new subjects which the students may wish to opt for during the leaving cert programme. Importantly, the ESRI has confirmed that students who complete transition year achieve higher results in their leaving cert and, therefore, while it is not for every student, it is something that should be facilitated and encouraged.

However, it can be a very costly year for parents and indeed for many families. The average cost is somewhere between €500 and €1,000 for the school fees and, in addition, there are bus transport fees, activity transport fees and optional activity fees throughout the year. It is a real pressure on parents. I ask the Leader to invite the Minister for Education to the House for a debate on the benefits of transition year and a discussion on what subsidies, bursaries or supports can be put in place to ensure this year is available to students throughout the country.

**Senator Nikki Bradley:** I rise in solidarity with Cara Darmody, the 14-year-old-girl who is currently outside and has been since yesterday. She has been mentioned in the Chamber already, but I am going to run through a couple of things again. She plans to protest for 15 hours. I want us to take a moment to visualise this situation: a 14-year-old-girl is sleeping in a tent because she feels she has no choice but to take this drastic measure to get our attention. She is doing this on behalf of her two brothers and the people of Ireland who do not have a voice. I want to say publicly that I support her. After this I will be going outside to bring her some snacks, because it is warm out there, and I want to make sure she is okay. I absolutely and unbelievably admire her. I urge anybody who has not listened to her interviews to take the time today to listen. She is such an eloquent speaker. She is incredible, but we need to do more. It is simply not good enough. It is projected that the waiting list will go up to 25,000 by the end of the year. That is simply not good enough. I encourage the Minister to come to the House to debate this issue.

**Senator Sharon Keogan:** I rise to speak on an issue our Government must urgently ad-



dress, namely, the recent threats from the European Commission that Ireland must introduce new so-called hate speech legislation or face legal action from the EU. As of the time of speaking, we have only six weeks to respond to these infringement proceedings but, so far, we have heard nothing from the Government regarding its plan of action. I therefore call on the Minister for Justice to appear before this House to inform us what options the Government is considering and to discuss and answer questions on these plans.

Are we going to follow the order and implement these draconian restrictions? Are we going to resist and defend the right of our nation to preserve free speech? If we resist, will we do so through legal or political action? These are all things the people deserve to know. We live in turbulent times. Relations between the EU and the US are tense, and this is an opportunity for Ireland to become a middle ground for both blocs. To follow the EU's diktat would be to preclude this and drive away many of the US tech companies that are based in Ireland.

More important than economic benefit is the moral case for the preservation of our free speech laws. We as a nation are making waves for our stance on Gaza, and many Irish people abroad are paying the price. We recently heard of Germany deporting two citizens of ours for attending pro-Palestinian protests. We have even heard of German police arresting Irish citizens for speaking Irish. How can we condemn Germany's crackdown on free expression when it happens in Berlin yet allow the same Government the audacity to demand via Brussels that we implement those same laws? It is vital our Government makes a stand. The Minister needs to come to the House and inform us where he stands on this.

**Senator Manus Boyle:** I raise the issue of pressure on home care workers. The demand for home care services is increasing daily. Every day there is somebody on my phone looking for additional hours. We have an ageing population, we are all getting older, nobody is getting any younger, and that puts increased demand on home care services. Working conditions are challenging and every house is different. You come up against different problems. Carers are very compassionate and want to spend time with the person, but they are not getting the right hours. Most people get about 30 minutes and that is barely time for a carer to get the basics done.

We need to get more qualified people working as care workers. We need to get the services going better. I know, from them having spoken to me, that there are people, for example, who have to travel from Bruckless to Donegal town. Carers spend more time on the road than they do looking after people. Tackling this would also free up hospital beds, because people are happier at home. I would be happier at home. In a rural community in Donegal, the carer coming in may be the only person an individual sees in the day. There are people isolated up there. The postman no longer goes up and knocks at the door; there is a box at the bottom of the lane. The carer coming in may be the only person a person might see for the whole day. Therefore, we need to refocus on the home care package.

**Senator Chris Andrews:** I acknowledge the campaign of 14-year-old Cara Darmody, campaigning for improvement in the waiting list for assessment of needs. A total of 15,000 families are now waiting on an assessment of need. It is completely unacceptable, and I find it really difficult to listen to Government party Senators telling Cara how wonderful she is when it has been under their Government that the waiting list for assessment of needs has increased to 15,000. Rather than congratulating Cara, the Senators' time would be better spent tackling their own Minister and ensuring the Government adheres to the laws it has in place in respect of assessment of needs.

I also raise the situation in a special school, Enable Ireland Sandymount School, where the children have severe disabilities. They have been waiting more than a year and a half for repairs to be carried out on the roof. I understand there are still two rooms unavailable to the children there. Because of the severe disabilities they have, one of those rooms is a soft play room. The children need this room during the day to stretch, relax and take a break. Those rooms are out of action and therefore the school is cramped and far from ideal for the children. We need the Minister to come to the House to explain why Enable Ireland Sandymount School has had to wait more than a year and a half to have two rooms that have been out of action put back in place.

**Senator Joe Conway:** In this House we often hear on a quotidian basis about groups which are discriminated against. I want to talk about a very small cohort of people in our country who are discriminated against in matters of employment and remuneration, that is, our 950 sitting county councillors. They must be the only cohort of workers in this country that are not recognised for payment of sick leave benefit.

I always eschew the sad stories that people tell about their own cases and using the House for that but, just to point out that in 2018 I had surgery and I was advised by my consultant to take complete rest for three months. I did and, as the House can see, I am a fine, fighting-fit figure of a lad at this stage. It came as a great shock to me in mid-spring 2019 that my representative allowance was cut by Waterford City and County Council. That was not anything the council wanted to do, but simply because it was provided for in the rules. I think 43 of us in this Chamber are elected by these self-same people. The vast majority of Senators have a moral duty to those people who elect them to make sure they do not continue to be the only people in this State who are disadvantaged because they get sick. The Leader often tells us that the Order of Business is not the right time to raise this and to table a Commencement matter. I tried to do that but maybe I did not nuance the words as well. I promise, maybe with the Leader's support, I will make a Commencement matter request and I will nuance the wording because I asked about county councillors being disadvantaged because they got sick. That is really the essence of this.

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** There are two men in Iran today, Behrouz Ehsani and Mehdi Hassani, both of whom are political prisoners, both of whom have been turned down for a judicial review for the third time and both of whom will be executed by the regime in Iran. Iran has murdered 1,100 political prisoners since the summer of last year. That tendency is beginning to increase. Iran is at the heart of supporting organisations such as Hezbollah and the other group in Gaza, Hamas. It is time that we followed the example of the House of Lords and the House of Commons and prescribed the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, IRGC, as a terrorist organisation. This organisation does not operate just within Iran; it operates throughout the world. It is a terrorist organisation and it needs to be seen as a terrorist organisation. We had lots of talk here yesterday about Israel and everything that was said was 100% correct but Hamas and Hezbollah are on the other side and they are being supported and funded by the dying regime of Iran that has nothing left but the murder of its own citizens in order to remain in power. I ask that the Leader organises a debate on the IRGC at his earliest convenience to see whether we can organise to follow our neighbours in prescribing that organisation as a terrorist organisation.

**Senator Rónán Mullen:** We need 6,000 GPs in this country to provide adequate primary care services to people. We only have approximately 4,500. The country has a shortfall of 1,500 GPs. Meanwhile, 30% of newly qualified GPs are emigrating, seeking better working conditions and opportunities. This haemorrhaging of doctors and nurses to the US, UK, Canada

and Australia is a crisis. The Irish College of General Practitioners, ICGP, annual conference heard at the weekend that three quarters of GPs were not accepting new medical card patients and just over two thirds were not taking private patients in 2023. There are approximately 2,000 nursing and midwife positions currently unfilled in the health sector, with 53% of nurses currently practising here having been trained abroad.

One immediate way to address this crisis would be to reserve, say, 50% of all medical places in college for people who would sign contracts expressing a willingness to work in Ireland for up to ten years after graduation. The other 50% could be reserved for Irish or international full-fee paying students. Failure to honour the commitment would require that people pay their fees back in full. Drastic times call for drastic measures. The notion that we can be training people at a cost between €120,000 and €200,000 per person, which is a cost to the State, and letting them then go abroad with their expertise, given we have a crisis at home, is nonsensical. There are many students, with maybe 400 to 500 points in the leaving certificate, including from non-traditional medical backgrounds, who would love to serve their fellow citizens if they could get a shot at medical school. The shortage of medical personnel, and particularly GPs, makes drastic action imperative. Similarly with nursing places, there are so many who would happily stay to serve in Ireland if they were accepted in nursing college. There may be other places in the economy with critical shortages where we need to take effective action. My point, on which I request a debate, is that we need to stop wasting taxpayer money on highly expensive education programmes. We are not delivering the number of medical professionals that our people need and there is something that can be done, which we must do.

**Senator Gareth Scahill:** I wish to again raise the school transport scheme. I have made a number of representations to Bus Éireann regarding the efficiency of some of the routes. We are getting to that busier time of the year when the demand for it is going to build up. Unfortunately, the responses from Bus Éireann are weak if not delayed indefinitely. They are not receptive enough to the voices of public representatives expressing the opinions of their constituents. I call for a debate on Bus Éireann's service and potentially reviewing that to examine efficiencies that we, the publicly representatives on the ground, through listening to our constituents, have identified and are able to point towards. It would lead to the delivery of a better service for students.

**Senator Cathal Byrne:** I want to highlight a meeting that I attended with the representatives of the Irish Postmasters Union, IPU. The tradition of the post office is very close to my own family. My grandfather served his entire working career as both a small farmer and the local postman where my mother is from in north-west Cork. This morning I met with Sean Martin and other representatives of the IPU who highlighted the urgent need for increased levels of Government investment. At the moment, the Government through the Minister is funding the post office network to the tune of approximately €10 million in direct intervention. The IPU representatives are seeking an increase of €5 million to €15 million a year. The contract is due to expire at the end of this year. They have highlighted to me the fact that of the 900 post offices that we currently have across the country, approximately 300 are at risk of closure. They produced the report from Grant Thornton to validate this. It highlighted the incredible value of the post office network on a social and economic basis to the economy of between €344 million and €776 million. I ask that the Minister comes to the Chamber to explain and give more detail on his plans once the current arrangement concludes at the end of this year. What is to replace it? The IPU representatives also highlighted that because of the increases in inflation and increases in costs faced by postmasters, some of the Government grants, such as the power up grant, were

not available to them given the nature of the work that they do. I encourage a debate on this issue and the Minister might give us his thoughts on it going forward.

**Senator Seán Kyne:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach agus leis na Seanadóirí go léir as ucht an mhéid atá ráite acu.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin talked about the cancellation of maternity services at Athy Primary Care Centre. I will raise that with the Minister of Health. The Senator may wish to table a Commencement matter on that topic to get a more immediate response. She also talked about the success of the DEIS programme. We will have the Minister for Education and Youth in the House in early June for a debate on all education matters. The Senator should be in a position to raise matters regarding DEIS at that point. She also called for a debate on the EU-UK summit, which we will certainly pursue.

Senator Duffy raised issues relating to vaping, the proliferation of vaping shops and product placement. I will raise these with the Minister. These matters were debated some time ago in the context of the public health Bill. The Senator referred to various amendments that may be necessary, another matter I will certainly raise.

The Senator congratulated the Mayo Relay for Life on its work in raising funds for cancer research, and commended local councillors Peter Flynn and Brendan Mulroy.

Senator Boyhan congratulated Billy Alexander on achieving gold at the Chelsea Flower Show. We pass on our congratulations to Mr. Alexander and wish all those who will be participating at Bloom, which starts next week, well. The Senator commended the National Botanic Gardens on the work being done there.

Senator Boyhan also commended a Tallaght community group on the film “We Will Not Sit Down and Be Quiet”, which was shown yesterday in the audiovisual room.

Senators McCormack, Bradley and Andrews referred to assessments of need. The reform of assessments of need is absolutely vital, particularly as they are not working for the children involved. That said more than 4,100 assessments were completed in 2024, an increase of 30% on the previous year. Recent data shows that this upward trend is continuing, with more than 1,400 assessments completed in the first three months of this year. That represents a 65% increase compared to the same period last year. However, at the end of March, there were more than 15,000 assessments overdue for completion. This is not good enough. The current model means that therapists spend up to a third of their time carrying out assessments rather than delivering therapies to children. This is an area that needs to be reformed. It is a top priority for the Government. I will certainly ask the Minister, Deputy Foley, or the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, to come to the House to debate this matter.

Senators Stephenson and Flynn commented on Traveller Pride Week and called for both a debate and accountability on this matter. I will also request a debate with the Minister, Deputy Foley.

Senator Daly talked about blackgrass being placed on the list of noxious weeds and the responsibility of local authorities in this regard. I agree that the onus falls on farmers under GAEC 8, but given that there can be a proliferation of seeds from noxious weeds into farmland, there is also an onus on local authorities. Irrespective of the list, it is evident from touring around the country that there are noxious weeds which are not being dealt with, whether it is

ragwort or thistles. There is a job of work to be done there as well. I will raise this matter with the Minister for agriculture. The Senator may wish to table a Commencement matter on the subject as well.

Senators Kennelly and Scahill referred to the school transport scheme. Senator Kennelly referred to the north Tralee route that serves the Lixnaw and Abbeydorney areas and that is relied upon by 19 families and 29 students. The Senator also referred to the advocacy of Councillor Aoife Kennelly in respect of this issue. I suggest that he table a Commencement matter on the topic. I will request a debate with the Minister, Deputy McEntee as well. Senator Scahill also raised this issue in the context of local knowledge. I encourage him to engage with local inspectors on where the demand lies. I know they try to manoeuvre routes as best they can, but that is certainly the first point of engagement. I will also request a debate with the Minister, Deputy McEntee, on this aspect.

Senator McCarthy talked about the depressing statistics regarding women who have been killed in this country. Some 275 women were violently killed between 1996 and the murder of Aisling Murphy three years ago. The Senator is correct; these are awful statistics. He called for a debate on the matter. There is work being done by Cuan, the new agency under the remit of the Department of Justice that is dedicated to tackling and reducing domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. The former Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee, prioritised, pushed for and supported the setting up of the agency. I wish Cuan all the best with the very important work it does. We will request a debate on the matter.

Senator Ryan referred to the transition year experience for students throughout the country. In the main, transition year is a positive experience and it is important that it be used in a positive fashion. It should not be there as a gap year or a doss year. Great suggestions have been made as to what could be done in transition year - whether in respect of driving lessons, Safe Pass courses or different things relating to placement in industry or businesses - to allow students to mature and use their experiences in a positive fashion for the future. The Senator also talked about the cost involved. The Minister for education will be here in the coming weeks. The Senator might wish to raise this topic at that point.

Senator Keogan spoke about the hate speech legislation. I imagine the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, is assessing the advocacy from the European Commission on this matter. We have a number of weeks to respond. I am sure we will hear the Government's view in the coming weeks. In the meantime, the Senator may wish to table a Commencement matter in order to see if the Minister can provide a more up-to-date response.

Senator Boyle raised the important issue of home care packages and the demands on home carers. Some of our elderly and, indeed, not so elderly may have the luck of having loved ones and family around who can be of assistance. Some do not, however, and are totally reliant on home care packages and home care assistants, who can be under a huge level of pressure with regard to times allocated and the amount of travel in which they have to engage. The Senator is right in that someone can spend more time travelling than providing care to an individual. I will certainly request a debate regarding home care packages. There have been issues in the past relating to funding, but it is more likely now that there are issues as regards getting staff to fulfil the hours allocated. That is a very important issue.

Senator Andrews referred to the Sandymount special school and the two rooms that are out of action there. I request that he put down a commencement matter in order to obtain a more



immediate response on that.

Senator Conway talked about the important role of city and county councillors and the fact that they are not recognised when it comes to payment for sick leave. This is a valid point. The Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, will be here next week to discuss local democracy. That will give the Senator an opportunity to raise the matter. I will alert the Minister of State in advance to the fact that the Senator may wish to raise it.

Senator Craughwell raised the issue of the Iranian regime. He referred to the fact that he met with representatives of local groups here in Ireland and the UK that are advocating for a free Iran and against the regime there. It is harrowing testimony regarding what is going on in that country. I will raise the matter with the Tánaiste. I am sure the Senator will also raise it at the joint committee on foreign affairs.

Senator Mullen raised the issue of GPs, nurses, midwives and those who, quite rightly, benefit from a high standard of education and who wish to use the education they receive elsewhere. This is a difficult one in that you cannot prevent someone from leaving. However, you can certainly incentivise people to stay. There may be other issues as to why people wish to leave, some of which may relate to the crisis relating to housing. It is fair to say that the latter may be a consideration. It is a valid point, and I will raise it with the Minister for Health.

Senator Byrne referred to post offices and his meeting with the postmasters' union. I will request a debate with the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, on that. I believe the Minister is still waiting for the transfer of delegated functions relating to his Department. I will certainly request that he come to the House to discuss the issue of our post office network.

**An Cathaoirleach:** Before I propose that the Order of Business be agreed, I welcome the boys and girls from Kilrane National School in County Wexford. They are guests of the Ceann Comhairle, Deputy Verona Murphy. They are most welcome to Seanad Éireann today. I thank them for coming in. I love the colours, and I hope they will back in Croke Park soon. As is tradition, there is no homework for the rest of the week for any visiting school to Seanad Éireann. That is always a popular one.

Order of Business agreed to.

*Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 12.29 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 1.03 p.m.*

*Sitting suspended at 12.29 p.m. and resumed at 1.03 p.m.*

### **Visit of UK Delegation**

**An Cathaoirleach:** Before we commence, I welcome and give a cead míle fáilte to the delegation from the British House of Commons Procedure Committee, led by the Chair of the committee, Cat Smith MP. I thank the delegation for being here. Its members have a busy itinerary. We discussed various issues in the antechamber, including the ongoing impact of Brexit, which used to consume us in this House, by the way. Considering the problems of the world today, Brexit seems like a very small issue. I welcome James Asser MP, Sir Christopher Chope MP from the Conservative Party, Lee Dillon MP, a Liberal Democrats MP, and Mary Kelly Foy MP of Labour. Is that the Kellys from Mayo? No, Galway, which is a nice part of the world, too. I welcome the Right Honourable Richard Holden MP, Michael Wheeler MP of Labour and



21 May 2025

the clerk to the committee, Gavin Blake, and the assistant clerk, Melissa Walker. I also welcome our colleagues from the UK Embassy, George Moore and Ellen O'Donoghue Oddy. You are all most welcome to Seanad Éireann. We are delighted to have our friends from the United Kingdom here. If you have any recommendations on how we might do our business better, we are always open to suggestions.

### **Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2022: Motion**

**Senator Robbie Gallagher:** I move:

That Seanad Éireann approves the following Order in draft:

Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2022 (Section 9(2)) (Amount of Financial Contribution) Order 2025,

a copy of which was laid in draft form before Seanad Éireann on 14th May, 2025.

**An Cathaoirleach:** I welcome the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, back to the Seanad. We are delighted to have you back again, Minister.

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan):** I am back here with such frequency that it will not be long before the Cathaoirleach is looking for a barring order against me to get me out of the place.

**An Cathaoirleach:** No, I was going to make you an honorary Senator.

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** Fair enough. Like the Cathaoirleach, I welcome the distinguished guests from the Procedure Committee of the House of Commons. You are all very welcome to the Upper House of the Irish Parliament.

The Cathaoirleach will be aware that the motion before the Seanad in effect seeks a resolution concerning the accommodation recognition payment. In short, I am asking the Seanad to approve a reduction in the payment of the accommodation recognition payment from €800 to €600. Senators will be aware that, in 2022, the Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2022 was enacted. The first part dealt with the issues that had arisen as a result of the illegal invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Regrettably, that war is still ongoing and, as a result, it is still necessary for us to provide Ukrainians who have fled Ukraine with the status of being a beneficiary of temporary protection. As the House knows - this may be of interest to our colleagues from the United Kingdom - since the war started in Ukraine, approximately 117,000 Ukrainians have come to Ireland. We did our best to provide them with shelter and accommodation. It was a difficult task considering the accommodation issues we faced in our country. I do not think there would be much disagreement from any part of this House that there was a very strong and generous response to the crisis by the Irish people and their elected representatives.

In order to try to overcome the difficulty of identifying accommodation, section 9 of the 2022 Act designated what would be provided as a payment known as an accommodation recognition payment. The purpose of this payment was to give recognition and some small financial contribution, recognising the charitable contribution of many Irish people who had provided Ukrainians with accommodation. Of course, this was not in any way a tenancy agreement. In many cases, it was people who had holiday homes who decided to provide those homes for the

benefit of Ukrainian people who had fled the war.

The specific terms within the legislation stated that the sum of €400 would be paid to the person who owned the property if he or she took in beneficiaries of temporary protection, namely, Ukrainians. The benefit and consequence of this was that people would only receive one payment per accommodation unit. Even if someone took in four beneficiaries of temporary protection - Ukrainians, as I will call them from now on - instead of one, the person would still only receive €400. It was not dependent on the number of people taken in. If the Government wanted to increase the payment, section 9 allowed us to do so through an order made by the relevant Minister, which at that time was the Minister for children. However, for an order for an increase or decrease in payment to be effective, we would have to pass resolutions in both Houses of the Oireachtas. The purpose of the statutory scheme that facilitated increases or decreases in the payments was that it would enable the Houses of the Oireachtas to have a supervisory role and to have input in respect of the payment. This is what we are doing today.

Members will be aware that, approximately a year after we introduced the €400 payment, the then Minister for children came back before the Houses of the Oireachtas and said that he wanted to increase the payment from €400 to €800. This was agreed to by the Dáil and the Seanad. What I am doing today and what has been mooted and indicated by Government previously is that we believe now we should reduce the payment, reducing it from €800, as I indicated previously, to €600. I thank the Members of the Seanad for meeting today to discuss this motion concerning the order I propose to make to reduce the monthly financial contribution for hosts of temporary protection beneficiaries from Ukraine under the accommodation recognition payment scheme. As Senators are aware, the Act I have identified requires us to look at the change and resolutions that are put before the Houses of Oireachtas. As Senators will also be aware, in March this year, the draft order under consideration proposing a reduction from €800 to €600 was announced. If this resolution is approved by this House and Dáil Éireann, it will have effect from 1 June. In practical terms, it will mean that the people who are receiving payments for hosting Ukrainians will have their payments reduced in July by the Department of Social Protection. My colleague, the Minister, Deputy Foley, has already sought and received the consent of the Minister for Social Protection and the Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform. She also consulted me in respect of it.

The scheme was introduced in 2022 and was increased to €800 on 1 December 2022, recognising the challenge the State faced at the time in respect of ensuring we provided accommodation for Ukrainians. From the launch of the ARP scheme in July 2022 to date, 23,900 hosts have availed of the contribution in respect of 54,500 beneficiaries. In March this year, when the extension of the scheme was being considered in this House, many Members reflected on the many positive aspects of the scheme. They acknowledged it as an innovative measure which has generated emergency accommodation out of largely unused housing stock. The scheme tapped into the generosity of the Irish people. As of 18 May 2025, more than 38,700 were being hosted under the scheme. This now exceeds the number in State procured accommodation, which is 24,100. Notwithstanding the success of the scheme, there must come a time when it is going to be reduced, and there will definitely come a time when the payment is going to be removed completely.

A number of concerns were raised by Senators in this House in March regarding the potential impact of the scheme on the private rental market. That is part of the reason we are proposing to reduce the payment from €800 to €600. The reduction seeks to mitigate any unintended impact of the ARP on the private rental sector. While there are no definitive findings of

any impact, I am mindful of the concerns expressed by Senators and Deputies, and I hope the reduction will go some way towards alleviating those concerns. We have a lot of data on the ARP which undertakes and provides an assessment on the impact in respect of housing. For example, a property that is RTB registered might also fall within the remit of the ARP, as a tenant may apply for ARP subject to the consent of the property owner and other tenants. There are also likely to be cases of RTB property registrations which were terminated for a range of reasons, such as sale of property or change of use, in respect of which an applicant is in receipt of the accommodation recognition payment.

It is an important decision we have made to reduce the payment. It is not being reduced back to €400. We are going from €800 to €600. It is a sensible thing to do at this stage, but obviously I will listen carefully to the contributions of Senators.

**Senator Robbie Gallagher:** The Minister is very welcome back to the House for the second time today. We are delighted he has rejoined us in the House.

At the outset, the people can feel rightly proud of this country's response to the illegal invasion of Ukraine by Russia. The way people opened up their hearts and their houses to help the Ukrainians in their time of need is something we all can feel rightly proud of. It is even more noteworthy when many people opened up their own private dwellings to let people into rooms that might have been vacant, and that is before payments came in. That has to be recognised and appreciated.

Unfortunately, we are now into year three of this invasion. A resolution to this still seems a bit away, although it would appear that progress is being made but it is very slow. It is disappointing. As the Minister said in his contribution, up to 117,000 people from Ukraine fled here back at the beginning of the war. As of February 2025, that figure has reduced to approximately 78,000. The figures have gone down. Interestingly, I have come across a few statistics. Of that figure, something like 24,000 are in employment, 17,000 are either at primary or secondary school, and up to 13,000 have gone on to third level institutions. Many have integrated here. It is true that many have gone home as well but many remain and it is good to see them contributing to society, at work or going to school. It is good to see.

The accommodation recognition payment has served a purpose. I know people who had holiday homes and did not rent them out in the open rental market, but when this came along, they decided to use their properties to accommodate Ukrainian people. It has proved quite successful at a time when it was an emergency situation and we needed an emergency response. Many property owners put their foot forward in that regard. The payment initially crept up. It is currently €800 and we are proposing to reduce that to €600 as and from 1 July 2025. I welcome that because there are instances in different locations where it did have an impact on the private rental market. Many people were competing for properties. Some of these properties were out of bounds, and while not all by any means, there was an element of people who perhaps availed of this scheme because the €800 was tax free, which is itself in some areas very attractive, whereas normally people are taxed at 50% of what they receive. It is a fairly hefty tax bill at the end of the day. Rents have moved on that much now that, whereas initially it might have been very attractive, it is perhaps less so today. The Government did and does recognise that there was a bit of an issue in that regard and have moved now to reduce this. That is very much welcome. It has served a good purpose but it is maybe less so now than before. Thankfully, many Ukrainians are working and are in position to contribute. Many of them do want to do that, which is very welcome.

I am happy to support the motion as outlined by the Minister. I look forward to the rest of the contributions from my colleagues in the Seanad this afternoon.

**Senator Garret Kelleher:** Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire as ucht teacht chun an tSeanaid arís chun an t-ábhar seo a phlé. Is dócha go bhfuil sé mínithe go soiléir ag an Aire agus ag Seanadóir Ó Gallchobhair díreach cad atá i gceist againn anseo inniu.

As the Minister outlined in his opening remarks, following the illegal invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Ireland has been very strong and generous in the response to the invasion. We have seen more than 117,000 Ukrainians come to Ireland. Of those 117,000, almost half of them - slightly over 54,000 - have received accommodation from those who have benefited from the scheme. It was the correct and appropriate action to take. It is a scheme that has been very successful. It has served us well to recognise the enormous contribution made by host families. As the Minister outlined, there are now concerns about the unintended potential impact of the accommodation recognition payment scheme on the rental market. This is something we are looking to address today. On the whole, the Fine Gael group in the Seanad is happy to support the resolution approving the order in the House today. It is something we would be very much in favour of.

**Senator Nicole Ryan:** I move amendment No. 1:

To insert the following after “on 14th May, 2025”:

“: provided that future financial contributions under Accommodation Recognition Payment (ARP) Scheme shall only be paid after the Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2022 has been amended to provide for the following:

- existing recipients with respect to the beneficiaries of temporary protection currently benefitting from the scheme where those beneficiaries of temporary protection have satisfied a means test similar to those applicable for other housing assistance payments;

- new applicants who propose to host a beneficiary of temporary protection in their property which is also their own primary residence and who have not availed of the Rent-a-Room Scheme in the previous 12 months; ensuring that the ARP does not further distort the rental sector; and

- recipients who are not in receipt of any additional or ‘top-up’ payments from a beneficiary of temporary protection”.

**Senator Maria McCormack:** I second the amendment.

**Senator Nicole Ryan:** I wish to share time with Senator McCormack.

**An Cathaoirleach:** Is that agreed? Agreed.

**Senator Nicole Ryan:** Having spoken on this a while back, I acknowledge and commend all the people who offered their homes and their generosity when people were fleeing from war in Ukraine. The solidarity was, and continues to be to this day, an expression of the very best of Irish hospitality and kindness. However, good intentions cannot hide the policy failures that have emerged. The Government is now seeking to reduce the ARP from €800 to €600 and claims this move is to mitigate any unintended impact on the private rental sector. This comes after months of denying there was such an impact and despite Sinn Féin’s repeatedly raised

concerns and the presentation of evidence, particularly from the Border, west and north-west regions, where rental costs are traditionally lower. What we are seeing is that some landlords in the private rental market are availing of tax-free payments because it is more financially attractive than renting homes to Irish citizens. There is an extraordinary incentive for landlords with no requirement to enter formal tenancy agreements, no security for the tenants and no transparency.

We in Sinn Féin have tabled a responsible and clear-eyed amendment to the motion. This is not to oppose support for those who need it but to ensure the scheme is no longer used as a back door to the rental market without the rights and protections that formal tenants should have. Our amendment calls for three things. The first is means testing. The beneficiaries of temporary protection should be subject to means testing in the same way as others who apply for other housing supports, such as the housing assistance payment, which has always been means tested. The second proposal is a primary residence requirement so new applicants must be hosting in their own homes, not in investment properties. The ARP should not be a substitute for tenancy and it should not reward landlords who are using it as an alternative to renting to lower-income Irish tenants. The final point is to ban top-ups. The payment must be in full and must be the only contribution from the beneficiary. Anything else can open the door to exploitation and skew the rental market even further.

We are not calling for a cliff edge. No one should be at risk of homelessness. What we are calling for is fairness, a rebalancing of the housing support system and an end to unfair practice that allows for some and not for others. We need a system that distinguishes between people opening their homes to those who are fleeing war and looking for refuge, which we commend and support, and landlords trying to capitalise on the scheme. If we want to retain public confidence in our housing system, we need transparency, consistency and fairness, and the amendment provides that. If the Government refuses to accept the amendment, it will be a missed opportunity to fix the broken system and remove an inequitable part of our housing response.

**Senator Maria McCormack:** The ARP scheme is actively distorting the rental sector and creating serious inequalities. Let us call it what it is: the ARP in its current form is deeply unfair. It was introduced in good faith to support people opening their homes to those fleeing war. Let me be clear. We commend every family and individual who did just that but the scheme has spiralled beyond its original purpose.

Sinn Féin has consistently raised red flags. We warned that without reform, this payment could create an incentive for landlords to opt out of the regular rental market, and that is exactly what is happening across the country. I am hearing from landlords who say the ARP is a more lucrative option. They get a guaranteed payment from the State, often with top-up payments from tenants and with none of the responsibilities that come with formal rental agreements. What is worse is the complete lack of accountability.

The Minister has not commissioned any proper assessment of the impact this scheme is having on the rental market. We need data because I am hearing that it is distorting the market. We have seen the payment lurch from €400 to €800 and now €600 without any explanation or logic. Taxpayers need to know how their money is being spent.

The core issue that cannot be ignored is that there is no means test for beneficiaries. Someone in a secure, well-paid job can access this support while others in greater need of housing supports are left behind. That inequality breeds resentment, which is understandable. It is a



recipe for division. In addition, some ARP recipients are receiving unregulated top-up payments. We have heard from landlords who say this is widespread and as long as these top-ups continue unchecked, the payment reduction from €800 to €600 will make no real difference.

Sinn Féin is not calling for a cliff edge. We are not looking to put anyone at risk of homelessness. What we are calling for with this amendment is a fair, balanced and workable scheme that supports genuine hosts without undermining the rental sector. That is why we have brought forward this amendment. I urge colleagues to support it. The amendment would introduce a means test for beneficiaries, like every other housing payment in this country. It would limit new applications to primary residents to ensure we are supporting people who are genuinely opening their homes and not enriching private landlords. It would ban top-up payments to stop exploitation and protect the integrity of the scheme.

These are reasonable, necessary changes. Without them, this House should not and cannot support the extension of the ARP in its current form. This is about fairness. It is about protecting the housing market and using public money responsibly. I urge Members to accept the amendment and we can get this motion passed.

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Colm Brophy):** I thank the Senators for their contributions and for taking the time to consider the motion to reduce the amount of the monthly contribution under the ARP scheme to people hosting beneficiaries of temporary protection. As provided by the Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2022, the draft order laid before both Houses cannot be made law until a resolution approving the order has been passed by each House. Therefore, approval of the motion in Seanad Éireann today is essential to ensure that the monthly contribution will be reduced from €800 to €600. This will allow for a more standardised and sustainable response and address possible impacts on the rental market, and is also for reasons of equity. The reduction will allow for an orderly wind-down of the scheme as we advance towards the end of the temporary protection directive in March next year.

While the impact of the reduced contribution is impossible to predict, I believe many hosts are involved in the ARP scheme for humanitarian reasons, as has been borne out by Irish Red Cross research. As the Minister, Deputy O’Callaghan, mentioned, beneficiaries whose hosts wish to end their involvement in the scheme, for whatever reason, and who may require support will be provided with support. In recognition of the significant integration efforts, there will be many others who will make their own way into the communities in which they have become integrated. My Department will continue to track the scheme activity levels, with assistance from the Department of Social Protection.

I acknowledge the concern raised by Senators today, particularly in relation to the possible displacement effect that the scheme has on a private rental market that is under extreme pressure. I note the proposed amendment put forward by Sinn Féin Senators which seeks to limit the extension of the scheme to beneficiaries of temporary protection covered by the scheme who satisfy a means test. It is also proposed to restrict the scheme to applicants intending to host beneficiaries in their own residences and who have not availed of the rent-a-room scheme in the previous 12 months so as not to affect the private rental sector. In addition, it is proposed to extend the scheme to applicants not in receipt of any additional or top-up payments from a beneficiary.

I oppose the amendment. I note that a similar amendment was tabled in the Seanad in



21 May 2025

March, when the matter of the scheme's extension was being considered. As the Minister, Deputy Foley, indicated at that time and as is acknowledged in the amendment, the matters raised in the proposed amendment to the ARP scheme would require an amendment to the primary legislation that established the scheme, the Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2022. They are, therefore, not matters that have a bearing on the motion under discussion, which is simply to reduce the financial contribution.

On the issue of means testing for beneficiaries, it is important to note that the ARP is a goodwill payment to recognise the contribution of those who have opened up their homes to people fleeing the war in Ukraine. The payment is not intended to substitute rent and it is not available where there is a rental agreement in place. The legislation is very clear in this regard.

With regard to so-called top-ups, the ARP does not create an obligation for the beneficiaries, such as a payment of rent or provision of services. However, a beneficiary may agree to contribute towards costs such as utilities. Such agreements are matters between the parties themselves.

The Senators' amendment to limit the scheme to those hosting in their primary residence would result in reduced availability of accommodation for beneficiaries in need of shelter. It would preclude unoccupied homes offered through the offer a home scheme such as holiday homes, which have been a valuable source of accommodation.

It is clear that the scheme has been responsible for introducing an accommodation stream that would not have been otherwise available and which has been a vital element in the State's response to the Ukraine crisis in providing shelter to families in need. The ARP is acknowledged as an effective instrument of public policy and its extension to next March was recently approved by the Oireachtas. We now need to fine-tune the scheme in a balanced way to respond to the concerns raised. I hope Members will support this motion.

As the Minister, Deputy Foley, confirmed when consideration was being given to extending the scheme, its operation will be the subject of monitoring across relevant Departments. Its future will need to be aligned with efforts to ensure proportionate supports in the wider context of ending the temporary protection directive.

I thank those in our communities who have welcomed Ukrainians into their homes and provided them with a safe space, support and stability. I record my appreciation of the work of the Irish Red Cross and its partners in mobilising and retaining pledged accommodation and supporting hosts and beneficiaries through their newsletters, webinars and casework support.

I confirm that I am not in a position to accept the amendments to the motion proposed by Sinn Féin. The draft order being considered cannot be made law until a resolution approving the order has been passed by each House. Therefore, approval of the motion by the Seanad today is essential to ensure the level of the monthly contribution under the ARP scheme is set at what is considered to be a more equitable rate and to better serve the public interest.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Motion agreed to.

**An Cathaoirleach:** I welcome, all the way from Hawaii, State Representative Amy Perruso. Amy, you are most welcome to Seanad Éireann today. Amy has just gone through a tortur-

ous session, which, I believe, finished a few weeks ago. The session there starts in January and finishes in May, after which state representatives go back to their other full-time job as well as that of legislator. Thank you, Amy, for coming all the way from Hawaii to visit Seanad Éireann.

*Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 1.33 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 3.05 p.m.*

*Sitting suspended at 1.33 p.m. and resumed at 3.05 p.m.*

### **Equality (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2025: Second Stage**

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Anne Rabbitte):** I welcome Tara Doherty, Craig Byas, Nessa Vaughan, Paul Ginnell and Rebecca O’Gorman to the Visitors Gallery. I thank Senator Andrews for bringing their presence to my attention.

**Senator Chris Andrews:** I move: “That the Bill be now read a Second Time.” I will share my time with Senator Maria McCormack.

I thank the Minister for coming in. Before I begin, I will acknowledge the absolutely Trojan work done by IHREC, the #AddThe10th Alliance, ATD Ireland, EAPN Ireland and the Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed, whose representatives are here with us today watching proceedings. Many other organisations have also put in a great deal of work in advancing this issue over the years. I also acknowledge the residents of south inner-city Dublin, who have fought for this issue for generations. Without these individuals and organisations pushing this issue forward for the past two decades, this Bill would not exist and we would not be having this conversation on the realities of socioeconomic discrimination.

The purpose of the Bill is to amend Irish equality legislation, particularly two equality Acts: the Employment Equality Act and the Equal Status Act. These Acts currently legislate for nine grounds for discrimination covering marital status, family status, age, disability, sexual orientation, race, religion and membership of the Traveller community, thereby ensuring that people are not denied equal treatment because of their demographic or social identity. This Bill intends to add a further tenth form of discrimination to the legislation, that is, to expand the protections of both Acts to prohibit discrimination on the basis of disadvantaged socioeconomic status to ensure that people can no longer be discriminated against on the basis of their class or economic background.

Socioeconomic disadvantage is defined as belonging to a community that suffers from poverty, unemployment, insufficient access to education, poor housing, deprivation or any other form of socioeconomic marginalisation. It is an unfortunate reality that people in this country are faced with stigmatisation and prejudice based on nothing more than their accent, address or perceived social class. In countless communities across the State and particularly in inner-city Dublin, working people are routinely denied employment, housing, social opportunities, service provision and simple equal treatment from both private and public organisations. This systemic issue dates back generations for many people living in flat complexes, who report high levels of generational and present-day social exclusion and discrimination that is directly or indirectly due to their socioeconomic background. They are treated as second-class citizens simply because of where they come from, how they speak or how their perceived disadvantaged background defines them as people.

I will give an example from my area, in the constituency of Dublin Bay South. A man from a flat complex very close to here reported to me that, after submitting a video application for a job in a large multinational company, a drinks company, he was contacted by a concerned employee who informed him that fellow employees involved in the hiring process had exchanged text messages mocking this young individual's inner-city Dublin accent, with one questioning how a knacker like him could be qualified for the position. This incident directly led to him not being able to take the opportunity to advance his career. This is despite him holding a master's degree, having years of relevant experience and being fluent in Portuguese, as was required for the role. He was more than qualified. That is horrendous treatment for anyone to receive and yet the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, advised him that he had no legal resource due to the lack of legislation on this form of discrimination. Hence, we are here today.

We may recall a similar issue highlighted by our colleague Senator Ruane in 2017 regarding admission practices at DIT, which is now TUD, in which students from disadvantaged backgrounds on an access programme were required to be Garda vetted while other students had no such requirement. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds were unfairly deemed to be dodgy and required to be vetted by the Garda before being allowed to join the rest of the college community, imposing a needless obstacle on them accessing education. This is blatant discrimination designed to reinforce the inequalities in our society, and if we are serious about allowing people the opportunity to succeed, we must ensure that social or economic disadvantage does not prevent someone from bettering his or her life and improving his or her community.

Ireland is a country with significant inequality and inflexible social strata, copper-fastened by socioeconomic disadvantage and how people's opportunities are considered by the prejudice of others. In 2024, Social Justice Ireland estimated that 559,850 people were living in poverty, of whom 176,912 were children. Similarly, the CSO concluded in 2023 that 17.3% of the population were experiencing enforced deprivation, meaning that they were unable to afford or access two or more basic necessities.

Article 40.1 of our Constitution states that all citizens should be held in equal regard before the law, yet these people lack the legal protections provided to other marginalised groups. The Bill offers a mechanism for people to fight back against this. For example, if the Bill is enacted, employers will not be able to legally discriminate against a job applicant or current employee because of his or her accent or the disadvantaged socioeconomic status of the area where he or she comes from. Further, it would not be legal for service providers to deny access to people because of socioeconomic status or where they live.

The introduction of a disadvantaged socioeconomic status ground will give people who experience discrimination on this ground the practical means to challenge their experience with a rights-based approach, as is the case with the other nine protected grounds. It will also be of very real, symbolic importance for the State, including the Government, to make clear to society and the people who face this discrimination that it will not be tolerated. By continuing to exclude socioeconomic status from our equality legislation, we are creating a hierarchy of equality in which we recognise certain forms of discrimination while failing to prohibit discrimination pertaining to disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds and accents.

This is vital legislation and is long overdue. A decade ago, the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission submitted a report to the United Nations on the need to enshrine a prohibition on socioeconomic discrimination in Irish equality legislation. Citing the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the UN observed that Ireland was failing to meet its

civil rights obligations by not providing for protection against socioeconomic discrimination. Over the past 20 years, there have been countless reports and recommendations from civil society groups, public bodies and international organisations calling for this gap in the legislation to be addressed. Unfortunately, nothing has been done.

As I alluded to, this proposal is in no way new. Our colleague Senator Fiona O'Loughlin and the now Minister, Jim O'Callaghan, introduced a near-identical Bill in 2017, which was supported in the Dáil by Fianna Fáil and other Opposition parties. I applaud them for that, and I hope they will support this Bill today.

I introduced this Bill in the previous Dáil. Unfortunately, the Government parties chose to kill it off through an amendment that delayed its reading by 18 months. The reason given was that further time was needed to examine the introduction of disadvantaged socioeconomic status as an additional ground in the context of the review of Equality Acts that was then under way. That review has now concluded. Unfortunately, there is no mention of socioeconomic discrimination in the general scheme and heads of Bill arising from this review. The Minister for equality signalled that the Government did not oppose adding this definition of discrimination to the Equality Acts, but I find it incredibly disappointing that it was absent from this incoming legislation as well as from the programme for Government.

I understand that the Government has tabled an amendment to once again de facto kill off this Bill. I hope that all of us in the House do not let this debate be sidelined again. The danger is that this can continue to be kicked down the road with no end in sight. This is an urgent issue and one that countless people across the country have been waiting for many years to be addressed. They have waited too long for protection, and it is time that we get serious about fighting for the rights of the disadvantaged and marginalised.

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Anne Rabbitte):** I welcome Fine Gael members from Newbridge, guests of the Minister, Deputy Heydon, to the Gallery, along with Philippa Dunlop, a TY student who is here with Catherine Ardagh.

**Senator Maria McCormack:** I rise with pride to speak in support of the Equality (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2025, introduced by my colleague Chris Andrews. This is important legislation, simple in its construction, yet powerful in its intention. It seeks to do one vital thing, namely, to finally recognise socioeconomic disadvantage as a ground upon which discrimination can occur and outlaw it under equality law. Right now, it is not illegal to discriminate against someone because he or she is poor, because of his or her address, because he or she is on social welfare or because he or she has a regional accent. We have laws that protect people on the basis of gender, race, religion and disability but not poverty. This is a glaring omission, and it is one that the Bill seeks to right.

Let us be clear about what socioeconomic discrimination looks like. It encompasses a child from a disadvantaged community being told he or she is not the right fit for a school; a woman from a Traveller or working class background being denied a job because of where she lives; a man in a homeless shelter being laughed at for using a prepaid card or being charged extra because he has no bank account; and families being told to wait at the back of the housing queue, not because they do not qualify, but because of a stigma that follows from generation to generation. This is not theoretical. This is real and it is happening every day.

The Bill does several important things. It amends the Employment Equality Act 1998 and

the Equal Status Act 2000 to include socioeconomic disadvantage as a protected ground. It provides a clear legal definition covering things like poverty, source of income, homelessness, education level, employment status and even regional accents. It acknowledges that discrimination does not happen in a vacuum, it intersects, and the most vulnerable people often carry multiple disadvantages, compounded and reinforced by systemic neglect. This kind of discrimination is often invisible. It slips through the cracks because it does not fit neatly into the existing nine grounds of our equality legislation. However, if you grow up poor in Ireland, it can feel like the system is designed to keep you down. We see this in Laois and all over the country. I have met young people who are leaving school early, not because they do not have the ability, but because the supports are not there. This is particularly relevant to a Laois Traveller group that I met recently. I am thinking of particular youths in that group who were keen to go to further education and to progress in school, but because they were from the Traveller community, they felt discriminated against. I have stood with people who survived addiction and were trying to rebuild their lives but faced discrimination every single time they walked into a job interview or applied for a rental.

This Bill does not fix all of that, but it sends a powerful message that their experience is real and the State will no longer stand by and turn a blind eye. Some might say this is too complex, that poverty is too hard to define or that it is not the job of equality law to address social class issues, but we say this: if we are serious about equality, we must be serious about economic justice. France, Belgium and other European countries already include socioeconomic status in their equality legislation, so why not Ireland? We have the data and the stories. We now need the will.

I commend Senator Chris Andrews on his leadership on this issue and all the organisations involved, especially those here with us today, the legal experts and the communities who have campaigned for this for years. Organisations like the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission have long called for this reform, as have legal academics, anti-poverty groups and community development networks. This is not a radical proposal but one that is long overdue. Let us be brave enough to challenge discrimination where it lives, in systems, in attitudes and, yes, in our laws. Let us stand with the young man from the council estate, the woman in emergency accommodation and the families struggling, not because of lack of effort but because the odds were stacked against them from the start. Let us call this what it is - discrimination - and let us pass this Bill to end it.

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Anne Rabbitte):** Before I move to the Government side, I thank the Minister, Deputy Foley, and her team for being with us for this Private Members' Bill. I call Senator Margaret Murphy O'Mahony.

**Senator Margaret Murphy O'Mahony:** I move amendment No. 1:

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

- "Seanad Éireann resolves that the Equality (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2025 be read a second time on this day 12 months, to allow for further consideration of issues arising in the Bill."

I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important issue today. Equality is one of the fundamental principles upon which our society is built. It is not just a legal concept. It is a societal aspiration, one that demands vigilance, commitment and action. As legislators, we



have a duty to ensure fairness and opportunity for all, particularly for those who face barriers due to their socioeconomic status. Fianna Fáil welcomes this debate and supports the request from the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Deputy Foley, who is with us today, to introduce an amendment providing that this Bill be returned for debate in 12 months. This is not a delay; it is an opportunity to ensure the introduction of disadvantaged socioeconomic status as a new ground in the Employment Equality Act 1998 and the Equal Status Act 2000 is done thoroughly, responsibly and effectively.

The proposal to expand our equality laws is a significant step forward. Such a change must be approached with clarity and precision, however. The additional time for review will allow us to define “socioeconomic disadvantage” properly, thereby ensuring its inclusion as a protected ground is legally robust and practically implementable. We must consider the impact on workers, employers, service providers and individuals alike. Legal protection is only meaningful when it is workable and ensures businesses, institutions and society at large understand their obligations and responsibilities. This time will allow us to assess how best to embed this new ground without ambiguity to ensure effective enforcement and real impact for those most impacted by socioeconomic inequalities.

Ireland has long been a leader in enshrining equality protections in law. The Employment Equality Acts and Equal Status Acts, first introduced by Fianna Fáil in 1998 and 2000 respectively, have shaped our legal and social landscape, prohibiting discrimination in employment and in the provision of goods and services. These laws protect individuals based on nine grounds, sending a clear signal that discrimination on these bases will not be tolerated. While enforcement can sometimes be difficult, the existence of this legislation is powerful. It sets the tone for how employers, institutions and service providers interact with individuals right across all sectors. Expanding this framework to prohibit discrimination on the ground of socioeconomic disadvantage would be a natural progression in strengthening protections for those most vulnerable. We must, however, do so thoughtfully. We must ensure the legislative language is clear, the enforcement mechanisms strong and the protections genuinely impactful.

Some may ask why legal protections matter when tackling discrimination. The reality is that discrimination, whether intentional or unconscious, creates significant barriers for individuals in accessing opportunities and services. We have seen the positive impact of existing equality legislation, which has helped to reduce discrimination and change perceptions over the years. When we send a strong legislative message it forces reflection and promotes change, not just in individual attitudes but in the structures and systems that shape our society. Making socioeconomic disadvantage a recognised ground for discrimination will not eliminate inequality overnight. It will, however, create a foundation upon which further protections can be built, thereby ensuring equal access to employment and essential services regardless of people’s backgrounds.

Advancing equality is not the task of one Department alone; it is a whole-of-government issue. We must address inequality from multiple angles, through education, social policy, employment initiatives and legal protections. Progress has been made across several fronts but challenges persist. We still see disparities in access to education, employment opportunities and public services. We still hear stories of individuals who face barriers due to their economic background, whether in hiring practices, treatment by institutions or access to essential resources. Fianna Fáil believes social mobility and inclusion must be central to our policies. The Government remains committed to driving progress and ensuring that Ireland continues to grow as a welcoming, fair and inclusive society.

Further to this commitment, the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Deputy Foley, will bring forward her proposals within the equality and family leaves (miscellaneous provisions) Bill 2025. These proposals are designed to strengthen protections for individuals facing socioeconomic disadvantage, reinforcing our national commitment to fairness and equality. The timed amendment allowing the Bill to return for a debate in 12 months is critical in ensuring the Government's proposals are fully developed, thoroughly examined and properly finalised. We must take the time to get this right and ensure the legislation introduced is effective, clear and enforceable.

This is more than just a legislative discussion. It is an opportunity to build a fairer, stronger and more inclusive Ireland. The Government is committed to ensuring this process is well researched and comprehensive, bringing forward strong legal protections that will help to address socioeconomic disadvantage in a meaningful and lasting way. Fianna Fáil supports this measured approach, allowing time for thorough reflection, refinement and careful implementation. Let us work together to ensure Ireland continues to lead on equality and inclusion, thereby creating a society where opportunity is available to all regardless of our background.

**Senator Nikki Bradley:** I welcome the Minister to the House and thank her for her time. We appreciate it. I also welcome our guests and hope they are having a good day. Hopefully, it continues the way it started. I thank my colleagues for bringing forward this important Bill. The principle at its heart, that socioeconomic disadvantage should not be a basis for discrimination, is something we can and should support. This is not a new conversation. In fact, the need to examine the inclusion of socioeconomic status under the Employment Equality Act 1998 has been acknowledged by successive governments, including one in which Fine Gael played a leading role. The programme for Government in 2020 explicitly committed to exploring this and the public consultation that followed received more than 580 submissions. This was clear evidence that people cared deeply about this issue.

As a Senator from County Donegal, I feel strongly about this issue. Too often, our constituents feel left behind, not just economically but politically. There is a real sense of disconnect from national policymaking and from the protections others take for granted. People in rural areas, especially in counties like mine, know exactly what it feels like to be judged by the assumptions people make when we say where we are from. This Bill seeks to protect people from that kind of prejudice. The proposed legislation defines "socioeconomic disadvantage" in a clear and thoughtful way. It includes factors like poverty, educational level, housing, employment status and, yes, even social or regional accents. This matters. In this House, we recognise disadvantage is not just about income. It is about perception, access to opportunity and an overall lack of inclusion. While the Government has proposed a 12-month deferral to continue work on this issue, I believe we should use this time wisely and constructively. This will allow the respective Departments to engage with stakeholders and affected groups.

On this issue, there are international precedents from other EU countries. In addition, just last year, the United Nations specifically called on Ireland to include socioeconomic status in its anti-discrimination laws. We have a chance here to show leadership both at home and abroad. This is not about rushing legislation; it is about pressing it with care and credibility. We need to make sure any changes to the existing policy are workable in practice, consistent with our legal framework and enforceable. These areas will need additional consideration before any version of this Bill is fully considered on Committee Stage. That said, we must not lose momentum. People who live with socioeconomic disadvantage, especially those in communities that feel under-represented, deserve more than recognition. They deserve real legal protection.

I acknowledge and thank the Senators who brought this Bill forward. I support the intention behind it fully and look forward to engaging in a spirit of collaboration to ensure that we deliver meaningful and lasting change.

**Senator Victor Boyhan:** The Minister is very welcome. I thank her officials, who put considerable work into this. I acknowledge the proposers of this Bill, namely Senators Andrews, Nicole Ryan, Conor Murphy, Collins, Tully and McCormack. I support the Bill. Having looked at it, I realise that it has been a long time in gestation. I thank the Oireachtas Library and Research Service, which prepared a very interesting paper in advance of this debate. The service is full of integrity. It provides independent validation and gives us the confidence to stand here and discuss the legislation in the proper context as well as its background.

As other Senators indicated, this is not altogether new. Today, we are dealing with the Equality (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2025, a Private Members' Bill in the names of Sinn Féin Senators. I wish to set the context. When we are discussing things here, many of these programmes are fed out on "Oireachtas Report" at night. If it is halfway through something, people may not be quite sure what is going on. The purpose of the Bill is to introduce a new ground for discrimination into Irish equality law on the basis of disadvantaged socioeconomic status, which is important. In that context, on 13 May last, Senator Andrews initiated the Equality (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill in the Seanad. Generally, both here and afterwards, he got considerable favourable support, but that is politics for you. People will tell you on the corridor that they will support you, but when you look around you ask where they have gone. Other people are doing other things today at various committees. I respect and accept that.

The purpose of the Bill is to expand the protection of the relevant Acts, namely the Employment Equality Acts 1998 to 2021 and the Equal Status Acts 2000 to 2018, to prohibit discrimination on the basis of disadvantaged socioeconomic status. Let us set the legislative context for this. Currently, discrimination is prohibited under the Employment Equality Acts 1998 to 2021 and the Equal Status Acts 2000 to 2018 in respect of employment and access to goods and services, respectively, across nine grounds, which the Senator already set out and I will not repeat them.

I looked at the previous Private Members' Bills on this. A similar Bill, the Equality (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2021, was initiated in Dáil Éireann on 27 January 2021. It was sponsored by Senator Chris Andrews, who was then a TD, and Violet Anne Wynne. On 1 March 2023, Dáil Éireann passed an amendment which stated:

Dáil Éireann resolves that the Equality (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2021 be deemed to be read a second time this day 18 months, to allow for time to further examine the introduction of 'disadvantaged socio-economic status' as an additional ground in the Equality Acts in the context of the Review of Equality Acts currently under way in the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

The Bill then fell because of the dissolution of the Thirty-third Dáil. The point I am making is that there has been a long lead-in time.

I accept that the Minister, Deputy Foley, is new to her post. I also accept that there are new dynamics, a new Government, a new programme for Government and new priorities and that it is not possible to get everything through in a programme for Government. As a result, the Government has to recalibrate its priorities. Politically, it is a coalition Government. which means

that compromises have to be made as well. That is political pragmatism, and I understand how it works.

Going back further, on 28 June 2017, the Equality (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2017 was also initiated in Dáil Éireann. That Private Members' Bill was sponsored by the now Minister for justice, Jim O'Callaghan TD, a fine legislator, a fine Minister and a fine politician with vast experience in legislation and the preparation thereof. He was very happy to put his name to that Bill, to speak on it and to endorse it. Fiona O'Loughlin, then a TD and now here in the Seanad, supported that legislation. The point I am making is that there has been a long lead-in. I will not push it too much other than to say that in 2024, as the Minister will be aware, the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recommended that Ireland should adopt comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation that includes explicit references to all prohibited grounds of discrimination, including socioeconomic status. Enough of that; enough people have spoken.

Given the amount of lead-in time and in light of all the promises made, the focus should be on getting the legislation through. Are we all committed to getting this legislation across the line? I would like to think that we are. The timeframe may be different for different people, and there may be reasons for that. I have yet to hear what the Minister has to say. I look forward to hearing what she has to say because that will form an important part of my consideration. We need robust legislation. We need to have absolute clarity about the legislation and we need to make sure we cross off any unintended consequences of the legislation.

Those are three important facets. The Minister will know other competing issues relating to some of them that we may not be fully aware of. I would like to think that we could shorten the period from 12 months to, possibly, three. That may be too much to ask; maybe there is too much lead-in time. The Minister knows her resources. She knows the expertise and the people available to her for this legislation, which is only one segment of many pieces of legislation that she is championing and pushing through the Houses. I wish her well with all that.

We need to send out a clear message that we all support this legislation, the timeline relating to its implementation and its robustness. It needs to be thoroughly examined so that it erases any concerns. As this is a two-way process, if there are shortcomings with the legislation, I would like to hear what they are. In essence, I am supportive of the legislation. I am just not sure whether we can reach a compromise between what is being suggested and the Minister's amendment. We have now had two or three in the past two or three weeks, which is a bit concerning. I have been a Member of this House for ten years. I am amazed that we should have so many time amendments in a very short period of time. It is not something I am familiar with or used to. I would not like to see it becoming a habit. Those of us in opposition in these Houses have a role to tease out legislation respectfully and robustly, and I know that is a two-way process.

**Senator Nessa Cosgrove:** The Minister is very welcome. I am delighted to support the Bill introduced by my Sinn Féin colleagues. The idea that socioeconomic disadvantage is inherited is not a new or radical idea. A 2022 report from the ESRI indicates, "Past research strongly indicates that individuals who experience poverty in childhood face an increased risk of experiencing poverty as adults." To state the absolute obvious, poverty is never the fault of a child born into poverty and it is not the choice made by a child. Socioeconomic disadvantage bears a strong resemblance to six of the nine grounds for discrimination. Generally, we accept the logic that aspects of our lives over which we exert no control should not be aspects of our lives

on which we are discriminated against. On the basis of that logic alone, there is a compelling case for supporting this legislation.

We also need to recognise that people who experience discrimination on any other grounds are also likely to experience socioeconomic disadvantage and frequently multigenerational poverty. In Ireland, this is particularly evident among members of the Traveller and Roma communities.

I wish to use my time to highlight a particular aspect of discrimination relating to socioeconomic disadvantage that directly affects Members of the Dáil and Seanad and that consequently impacts on the lack of diversity we see in both, not only among Members but also among the staff. This is a topic I hope to address next week in the form of a Commencement matter and one I will be returning to in much greater detail when we deal with the National Minimum Wage (Payment of Interns) Bill 2022, which was introduced to the Seanad by my predecessor as Labour Party spokesperson on workers' rights, Marie Sherlock. Unpaid internships are a vehicle through which discrimination against those experiencing economic disadvantage is driven at high speed. Who can afford to work for one month or six months a year without any wages? Only those who already have a significant advantage, whether it is their own personal wealth or the support of a family who can afford to support an unwaged adult for a period of time. I know that since starting in the Seanad I have been approached by a number of young people or organisations acting on their behalf asking that I consider employing an unwaged intern. Working for a TD or a Senator can be very exciting and we all know that there is plenty of meaningful and valuable work we can find for an enthusiastic graduate or student to do. The same applies to unpaid interns in media, fashion and film-making. All are attractive and desirable areas within which to build a career and all of which have a deeply embedded concept and acceptance of unpaid internships. We know that an experience such as this is also likely to benefit that young person in their future career, so it is often very easy to justify. I am sure many parliamentary administrative assistants in these Chambers started their careers as unpaid interns and many have risen in the ranks to become parliamentary assistants and then continued on to become TDs. We all get that phone call asking us to consider this. When we are taking on someone as an unpaid intern, we have also to think of the people who are being excluded from consideration not just for an internship role but potentially from a career in a role that might suit them perfectly.

Unintentionally, through the use of unpaid interns we exclude people from a background of socioeconomic disadvantage and we reinforce a system which replicates itself and magnifies the normalisation of privilege. Incidentally, much of the corporate world has abandoned the practice of unpaid internships. It has recognised the potential talent being excluded from consideration. It is time for us in the Houses of the Oireachtas to do the same. Although the role of interns is not directly addressed in the Bill we are discussing today, it illustrates just how ingrained is the exclusion of those experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage and how often that exclusion is perpetrated at every level, generation after generation. I am delighted to support this Bill. I agree with my colleagues in opposition in hoping it can be pushed through sooner rather than being delayed for another 12 months.

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Anne Rabbitte):** I welcome Councillor Paul Ward and his guests to the Visitors Gallery. I call Senator Collins or Senator Tully. Who wishes to go first?

**Senator Pauline Tully:** Senator Collins is delayed at the moment but Senator Ryan wants to use the time.



21 May 2025

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Anne Rabbitte):** Absolutely, with the agreement of the House? Agreed.

**Senator Pauline Tully:** Senator Collins may come in and take a couple of minutes of the time.

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Anne Rabbitte):** Absolutely, that is fine. Not a problem.

**Senator Pauline Tully:** I commend my colleague, Senator Chris Andrews, on introducing the Equality (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2025.. This Bill proposes to add a tenth ground of discrimination to the nine grounds that already exist. It is to prohibit discrimination on the basis of your address or your accent - your socioeconomic background. Every city or large town has areas that are associated with poverty and discrimination. There is often intergenerational poverty so it is very difficult for people to actually get out of that poverty. They need support. We know it is used against people living in particular areas within a town or a city, especially.

I was speaking recently to a teacher and he told me that when he started out seeking jobs and applying for positions in different schools, he was staying temporarily with his sister in an area of Dublin and was using her address. He was not getting called for interviews, so he asked himself what was going on. He changed the address he was using and the next thing he was called for interviews. I am not going to say where it was but his sister's address was in an area of Dublin that had received a lot of bad press relating to poverty and deprivation. It was obvious that it was the address that was going against him being called for interviews. Things like this really do happen. If we go back to when sectarianism was rife in the North, people's addresses were used to ensure people from a certain background were given the jobs in an area. If somebody came from an area that was perceived to be a Catholic area and was therefore supposed to be nationalist or republican, every effort was made to ensure they did not get that job. It even came down to a name and the spelling of the name. We often thought about how Martin McGuinness spelled his name differently from Ken Maginnis and they were from very different backgrounds. Something like that was used. It happens all the time. We need legislation to ensure it does not continue to happen. It is disappointing that the Government has sought to delay this Bill for 12 months. I ask, as my colleagues have, that it is reconsidered.

**Senator Nicole Ryan:** I wholeheartedly commend Senator Andrews on bringing this Bill forward. We are so delighted to support him. Socioeconomic background is something that is not factored into the grounds of discrimination. We know so many people in both our society and our community, who are living in socioeconomic deprivation. I have been a victim of that too. I am in rural Ireland but come from a council house, so there has been discrimination around that. It is something people cannot control. I echo what Senator Boyhan said, that this is not going to be a trend experienced by the Opposition where very good legislation that has been given time and has been read is continually pushed back. We in the Opposition have brought forward very good legislation. It seems to be a trend that it keeps getting pushed back when it comes from the Opposition benches. I cannot fathom how something as complex as parole can be pushed back six months for a second time but something that has been in the Chambers through the years is pushed back 12 months. I hope that does not continue. I again thank Senator Andrews for bringing it forward.

**Minister for Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Norma Foley):** Go raibh maith agaibh as ucht an t-am agus an deis seo a thabhairt dom.

I thank the Sinn Féin Senators who have brought forward the Bill. I sincerely appreciate their motivation and intention here. When listening to the contributions across the House, I can tell there is a very keen understanding from Senators of the impact of socioeconomic discrimination on some of the most vulnerable people within our society. That is also the understanding of the Government

It is fully recognised here today that, despite the great progress we have made on many social issues, individuals in Ireland can still often face barriers on the basis of their backgrounds. The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul reports that experiences of postcode discrimination is also common among the people it assists. Senator Tully has referenced that as well. This could mean not being able to access a public service or employment due to your geographical location, or being refused services such as insurance because of living in a poorer, or what is perceived to be a poorer, neighbourhood. That is something we need to tackle. As someone with a background in education, I will always appreciate the importance of people being given equal opportunities. It can be life-changing for them. We have to make sure every child - every person - in every part of this country can show their talent and showcase their ability and do so equally.

Nelson Mandela, a leader who did so much in his life to advance, equality of opportunity for the people of South Africa, once remarked, “I am influenced more than ever before by the conviction that social equality is the only basis of human happiness.” I know the Senators are all involved in advancing a whole variety of aspects of equality through their work in this Chamber and beyond. I want to mention briefly in his absence Senator Victor Boyhan, who organised a screening of a film “We Will Not Sit Down and Be Quiet” in the audiovisual room in Leinster House yesterday to highlight the rights of people with disabilities which was an important showcase. I thank the Senator for that.

The previous programme for Government included a commitment to introducing a new ground of socioeconomic discrimination into our equality legislation and, in November 2024, the Government approved in principle the introduction of a new equality ground of socioeconomic disadvantage in the equality legislation. The Government is anxious to progress this work and officials are working on carrying out the necessary assessment of the potential costs for the Exchequer and the potential impact on small and medium enterprises of such a move.

The most significant challenge in introducing a new ground for discrimination into the equality Acts is in ensuring that it can be understood by everyone. The public and businesses, small and large, need to be clear on what the ground is and what it covers. As the Senators will be aware, the proposed introduction of this ground has been the subject of a number of previous Private Member’s Bills, which have been referenced. Past attempts to legislate in this area have been held back by difficulties in defining terms such as “socioeconomic status” or “disadvantaged socioeconomic status” with the degree of absolute clarity and lack of ambiguity necessary for the Statute Book. I recognise that a lot of thought and work was put into drafting the definition in the Bill. It is appreciated that this was not an easy task. The work has been of great assistance to officials in the Department of equality in their ongoing consideration of this important issue. I acknowledge that.

The definition of “socioeconomic disadvantage” in this Bill is where a person or group suffers from disadvantage resulting from one or more of the following criteria: poverty, source of income, illiteracy, level of education, address, type of housing or homelessness, employment status, social or regional accent, or any other similar circumstance. In July 2023, a report was

published under my predecessor on submissions received as part of a consultation on Ireland's equality legislation. Of the submissions concerned with the potential introduction of a socioeconomic equality ground, the vast majority were supportive. However, not all submissions welcomed the proposal. Significant concerns were raised about the potential for such a ground to give rise to unintended consequences and have significant implications for employers and employees.

Extensive work has been carried out by officials in the Department to scope and develop policy on what a new ground should and could encompass. This ongoing work is intended to ensure we can bring forward a proposal that gives absolute clarity as to everyone's rights and obligations under the law. There is a long-standing Government policy, known as the SME test, of checking the impact of any new measures that will directly or indirectly impact on small and medium-sized enterprises. This is in recognition of the importance to our economy of the more than 300,000 SMEs that employ in excess of 1.1 million people. Officials are currently engaging with key business organisations to seek their views on the potential impact on SMEs of this proposal.

Once that work is completed, I intend to bring forward a legislative proposal as part of the wider legislation arising out of the Department's review of the equality Acts. That review has already led to a general scheme and heads of Bill, which were approved by the Government in November last year. The equality and family leave (miscellaneous provisions) Bill has been given priority for drafting by the Government, and I intend to refer the general scheme shortly to the newly formed Joint Committee on Children and Equality for pre-legislative scrutiny. The planned reforms included in the general scheme aim to improve the effectiveness of the equality Acts in combating discrimination and promoting equality for all.

While the Bill under consideration today is in line with Government policy in this area, it is crucial the potential costs and, equally, the proposed wording are carefully considered to ensure there are no unintended consequences. The purpose of the amendment to the motion is to allow time for the Government to complete work on the proposals. It is vital this happens to ensure we can stand over any proposal and be absolutely confident it is fully tested.

Discrimination on the basis of disadvantaged socioeconomic status should be unacceptable in today's Ireland. As I referenced earlier, links between poverty and discrimination are well documented and discrimination on the basis of socioeconomic status has been frequently raised as an issue by individuals and organisations working in the field of equality law. The Government is committed to addressing poverty and social exclusion. Introduction of a socioeconomic ground will not address many of the root causes of disadvantage on its own. When combined with social inclusion measures, however, it can be one important step in tackling the discrimination faced by very marginalised members of our society and can encourage change.

It is always good to remind ourselves in these Houses of the stirring words of the 1916 Proclamation:

The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all the children of the nation equally...

Historians such as Diarmaid Ferriter have rightly pointed out that the reference to cherishing all of the children equally was intended to reassure the Protestant minority of their place in the

new republic. However, those words have been taken as inspiration ever since for the need to do better and be better for our children and our people. I welcome the opportunity to work with Senators on these proposals. I recognise that, despite the great progress we have made, many social issues and barriers remain for individuals in Ireland. We must do more to support them. We all share a common objective to protect all people living in Ireland from discrimination in their daily lives.

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Anne Rabbitte):** I apologise to everybody in the House for the noise of my phone. I welcome the guests of Senator McCarthy in the Visitors Gallery: Gerard and Virginia Lane from the Philippines, former Irish honorary consul to Indonesia; and Stephanie Woolard from Melbourne, Australia. Also most welcome are the following visitors in the Public Gallery, whom I did not introduce properly earlier: from All Together in Dignity Ireland, Tara Doherty, Craig Byas and Nesson Vaughan; from the European Anti-Poverty Network Ireland, Paul Ginnell; and from the Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed, Rebecca Gorman. I thank them for being here for the entire proceedings this afternoon.

**Senator Chris Andrews:** I thank colleagues for their contributions and the Minister for her comments. I know she cares deeply about equality and I sincerely hope the Government makes progress on this urgent issue. However, I am deeply disappointed that, once again, we see the Government tabling an amendment to attempt to kill these legislative proposals. More than two years ago, the then Government passed a near-identical amendment to stop the progression of an identical Bill. That amendment stated that 18 months were needed to examine the matters arising from the Bill over the course of an ongoing review. That was 26 months ago and the review referred to is now finished.

The Government declined to use that opportunity to take action and has hypocritically decided it needs another 12 months to examine this very straightforward proposal. It is not a new proposal. Senator O'Loughlin and her Fianna Fáil colleagues were happy to support the proposed reform back in 2017. I simply do not see how they cannot, in good faith, do the same today. We are all aware of how scarce Private Members' time is in the House. Delaying the Bill by 12 months is designed, in effect, to kill it. The amendment is a cynical way for the Government to kill the Bill without opposing it. I am confident that the vast majority of Senators support the legislation. I hope we will all vote on the Second Reading based on what is the right thing to do.

Not allowing the Bill to proceed to Committee Stage will do absolutely nothing to promote equality. It sends a message to people living in inner-city communities, flat complexes and disadvantaged communities that the Government does not care about their lives and the reality they face and does not see ensuring their well-being as a priority. The Government is kicking the can down the road once again. I said the exact same two years ago. It is deeply disappointing the Government has failed to use the time since to make progress on ending discrimination against our disadvantaged communities.

Allowing the Bill to advance to Committee Stage is not contrary to the Government's intention to reflect on and refine it. The very point of Committee Stage is to allow for such reflection and refinement. Legislators have an important role to play in ensuring the quality of Bills. The Government should not disregard this House and its ability to scrutinise legislation. If it is serious about ensuring Bills are fully considered, it must allow this legislation to proceed to Committee Stage. That will take considerable time to progress, by which point the SME test review will be complete. An arbitrary 12-month delay is meaningless. Delaying the Bill is a cynical

move to avoid taking action, driven by the notion that a good idea cannot be had by anyone not sitting on the Government benches.

I regularly hear that the Seanad is about consensus and collegiality. That is absolute nonsense. The Government is only into consensus and collegiality if we on this side of the House agree with it. Proposals by the Opposition are blocked straight away. It is a nonsense to say the Seanad is some sort of nice debating society. It is used by the Government to block good legislation.

*4 o'clock*

The legislation we have proposed was supported by the Minister's colleague, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, who put something almost identical before the Dáil and Seanad, yet the Minister is now voting against it and kicking the can down the road. That SME cost review could have been done 24 months ago. My Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael colleagues are saying we must make sure we get it right and that there are barriers there. We heard that it is not a delay but an opportunity. They have had the opportunity to get this right for 20 years but they have failed every time. They have neglected inner-city communities. Not only are individuals neglected and discriminated against individually, housing policy also neglects and discriminates against those living in flat complexes. We see that week in and week out. We see that families and individuals are left in appalling conditions in inner-city communities because of discrimination by Government. I know this is not directly related to this Bill but there is a sense that inner-city communities are neglected, forgotten about and discriminated against on an ongoing basis. The Government has had plenty of time to get it right. This is just an excuse. We have to pass this legislation. It is too important that, in 2025, we would not have this passed.

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Anne Rabbitte):** Before we move on, I welcome the Front Line Defenders award winners who are in the Public Gallery and are guests of Senator Stephenson. They are very welcome.

Amendment put:

The Seanad divided: Tá, 31; Níl, 19.	
Tá	Níl
Ahearn, Garret.	Andrews, Chris.
Boyle, Manus.	Boyhan, Victor.
Bradley, Nikki.	Collins, Joanne.
Brady, Paraic.	Conway, Joe.
Byrne, Cathal.	Cosgrove, Nessa.
Byrne, Maria.	Craughwell, Gerard P.
Casey, Pat.	Flynn, Eileen.
Clifford-Lee, Lorraine.	Harmon, Laura.
Comyn, Alison.	Higgins, Alice-Mary.
Costello, Teresa.	Keogan, Sharon.
Daly, Paul.	McCarthy, Aubrey.
Davitt, Aidan.	McCormack, Maria.
Duffy, Mark.	McDowell, Michael.
Fitzpatrick, Mary.	Murphy, Conor.



*Seanad Éireann*

Gallagher, Robbie.	Noonan, Malcolm.
Goldsboro, Imelda.	O'Reilly, Sarah.
Kelleher, Garret.	Ryan, Nicole.
Kennelly, Mike.	Stephenson, Patricia.
Kyne, Seán.	Tully, Pauline.
Lynch, Eileen.	
Murphy, P. J.	
Murphy O'Mahony, Margaret.	
Nelson Murray, Linda.	
Ní Chuilinn, Evanne.	
O'Donovan, Noel.	
O'Loughlin, Fiona.	
O'Reilly, Joe.	
Rabbitte, Anne.	
Ryan, Dee.	
Scahill, Gareth.	
Wilson, Diarmuid.	

Tellers: Tá, Senators Garret Ahearn and Paul Daly; Níl, Senators Chris Andrews and Nicole Ryan.

Amendment declared carried.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

**Senator oirleach:** When is it proposed to sit again?

**Senator Seán Kyne:** At 9.30 a.m. tomorrow.

**An Cathaoirleach:** Is that agreed? Agreed.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar athló ar 4.19 p.m. go dtí 9.30 a.m., Déardaoin, an 22 Bealtaine 2025.

The Seanad adjourned at 4.19 p.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Thursday, 22 May 2025.