



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE  
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

**SEANAD ÉIREANN**

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

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## SEANAD ÉIREANN

*Dé Máirt, 27 Bealtaine 2025*

*Tuesday, 27 May 2025*

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach i gceannas ar 2.30 p.m.

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*Machnamh agus Paidir.  
Reflection and Prayer.*

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### **Visit of Italian Delegation**

**An Cathaoirleach:** I welcome to the Distinguished Visitors Gallery our friend and colleague from the Republic of Italy as we mark its national day, the ambassador, H.E. Nicola Faganello, a name that sounds kind of like Fagan, and the special envoy from the ministry of foreign affairs, Andrea Silvestri, and the deputy head of mission and first secretary, Dr. Edoardo Berionni Berna. My pronunciation was close, or maybe a valiant attempt.

I welcome them here to mark Italy's upcoming national day. We in the Seanad are very grateful for the support of our colleagues in the European Union. We in the Seanad take a deep interest in the issues of the European Union. Italian Republic Day celebrates the establishment of the republic in Italy in 1946.

The Italians, like the Irish, made a deep impact wherever they went around the world - needless to say, in the United States more than anywhere else. Irish monks led by St. Columbanus founded a monastery near Genoa in the seventh century. There is a strong Italian-Irish community here, dating back to the late 19th century and early 20th century. Obviously, it was made famous by its addition of fish and chips to our culinary efforts. Approximately 11,000 Italians live in Ireland, working in the hospitality and technology sectors and in financial services. We also remember that Italy recently celebrated the 700th anniversary of the death of the father of the Italian language, Dante, one of the giants of literature with his famous *Divine Comedy*. For Italy's great friendship to Ireland throughout the centuries, we wish the ambassador a happy Republic Day. I thank him for being with us here today. Go raibh maith agat.

### **Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad**

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

Senator Teresa Costello - the need for the Minister for Health to carry out a full review of processing times for new medicines to be approved by the National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics to ensure waiting times are reduced.

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 Fiona O'Loughlin - the need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the withdrawal of midwifery services in Athy, County Kildare, and their transfer to Midland Regional Hospital Portlaoise.

Senator Maria Byrne - the need for the Minister for Rural and Community Development to make a statement on the development of a national governing body for women's sheds, similar to the Irish Men's Sheds Association, to ensure there is equal access to grant funding.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove - the need for the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment to introduce a minimum wage for all workers.

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

Senator Linda Nelson Murray - the need for the Minister for Education and Youth to ensure faster access for school bus escorts to jobseeker's payments during school holidays and to outline the plans she has to pay bus escorts during school holidays.

Senator Victor Boyhan - the need for the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to give additional powers to the Agri-Food Regulator to compel accurate price and market information.

Senator Joanne Collins - the need for the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality to make a statement on the measures being taken to address the lack of staffing and resources in the disability sector, particularly in respect of summer services.

Senator Robbie Gallagher - the need for the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment to provide an update on securing an end user for the vacant IDA advanced technology building at Knockaconny, County Monaghan.

Senator Joe Conway - the need for the Minister for Transport to make a statement on the progress to date on the Waterford Airport project as set out in the programme for Government.

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

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

### **Community Development Projects**

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**An Cathaoirleach:** I welcome the Minister, Deputy Calleary, to the House.

**Senator Maria Byrne:** I thank the Minister for coming to discuss this all-important issue. In 2021, I organised a meeting of women's shed groups with his predecessor, Heather Humphreys, and they came from throughout the country. I did so because I was conscious that men's sheds are very well organised. They have a national forum and regional forums and are in receipt of funding. We gathered together to look at how we could set up a national forum for women's sheds because there are so many shed groups out there. I compliment both the men and the women on all the work they are doing. In some cases, it helps people with loneliness but it is also about collegiality and learning from one another.

I had been thinking about the recent funding of men's sheds before that meeting and asked myself how we could get women's sheds on the same stream to apply for funding. That is why I have put down this Commencement matter. Women's sheds have set up regional forums but they have not got a national forum. I would like to hear the Minister's thoughts about this and where we can go collectively to make sure that women's sheds have equal access to funding as men's sheds.

**Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Dara Calleary):** I thank the Senator for raising this important issue regarding Women's Sheds. I acknowledge the huge work she has put into this issue over many years and join her in acknowledging the fantastic work being done by women's and men's sheds throughout the country. This area of women's sheds is an important issue to many colleagues across government, in particular, the Minister, Deputy Foley, has been working strongly with me regarding women's sheds. As Senator Byrne said, women's sheds provide a space to women of all ages to come together regularly in a safe, comfortable, inclusive and collegiate environment.

Ireland has long been known for its strong sense of community. With one of the highest rates of volunteering in Europe, community groups play a vital role in people's lives, especially in rural areas. Beyond the social benefits, community involvement contributes to mental well-being, social connection and a sense of belonging. Women's sheds have emerged as an important part of the social inclusion landscape by providing a space where women of all ages and all backgrounds can meet regularly to share and learn new skills, work on meaningful projects, take part in activities, connect with their communities or, as Senator Byrne said, meet, have a chat and combat loneliness. Sheds are welcoming and supportive spaces, a place where women feel comfortable expressing their thoughts, sharing their experiences and, most importantly, connecting with each other. It is estimated there are now approximately 120 women's sheds across Ireland. The movement has been accelerating and gaining momentum in recent years. They have the potential to become even more powerful community hubs to promote lifelong learning, a strong support network and reduce isolation.

The programme for Government contains a commitment to continue to fund men's and women's sheds. As Senator Byrne said, I was delighted to announce last week, along with Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, funding for the Irish Men's Sheds Association, which it will distribute to its member men's sheds throughout the country. Due to the women's sheds being a much newer type of organisation which is still in the early stages of getting structures and procedures in place, I was not able on this occasion to provide funding to women's sheds in a similar way.

I am, however, committed to working with women's sheds to help them on this journey.

Last week, a representative from my office met with members of the women's sheds national forum in Athlone to start this progress. I am absolutely committed to supporting women's sheds to ensure they can benefit from having a strong national representative body to advocate on their behalf in order that they have the correct structures and procedures in place to allow my Department to engage with them on funding opportunities. I can confirm to the Senator that officials from my Department along with colleagues from the Department of Health will be meeting with members of the national forum of women's sheds in the coming weeks to discuss how they might be supported to grow the organisation. Both Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, and I will be focused closely to ensure we have the development of a women's sheds network alongside its men's equivalent to get funding in place for the women's sheds.

**Senator Maria Byrne:** I thank the Minister. This is a good news story because only during the week I received a phone call from the Limerick shed because they have a new management team. When they saw the funding, they were asking how they can go about applying for funding because everything costs money. I compliment the Minister on and thank him for being so committed to this. I look forward to working alongside him. I have a lot of contact with many of the sheds because, when we set it up, people contacted us. I have many contact details that I can check to see if it is okay to share with the Minister. It is a good news story. I am aware they have set up regional forums, so it is about creating that overall arching body soon. I look forward to working with the Minister into the future on this good news story.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** I thank the Senator. I certainly will take her up on that offer. I will ask somebody from my office to engage with her. As I said, we have had meetings and both the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, and I will be having further meetings. In our Department, the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Deputy Foley, the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, and the Minister of State, Deputy Murnane O'Connor, are focused on assisting. We will take the Senator up on her offer.

It is also worth noting, however, that there are other funding streams. Women's sheds are able to apply to the local enhancement programme, which will be worth €7 million in 2025, for running costs as well as small capital works. The Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, and I will shortly be announcing the results of the local enhancement programme for 2025. SICAP supports women's sheds, and for major capital, LEADER is also available. I encourage every local shed to engage with its public participation network and its local development company.

I know we ask volunteers to do a lot. I really appreciate all those who take on the mantle of organising sheds. There are so many people who want them but not too many who are willing to take on the mantle of organising them. We are not insisting on the structure for the sake of it, but it is our experience that a national structure is a much more effective way of funding. It is not for the want of funding, but to get the structure in place. I look forward to working with Senator Byrne to do that.

**An Cathaoirleach:** As there is a vote in the Dáil, the Minister has to go. The Minister of State who is due in for the next Commencement matter has to go to vote as well. We will suspend the House for the duration of the vote.

*Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 2.45 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.57 p.m.*

*Sitting suspended at 2.45 p.m. and resumed at 2.57 p.m.*

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## Medicinal Products

**Senator Teresa Costello:** A clear commitment is made in the programme for Government, on page 90, to be specific, to ensure patients in Ireland have access to innovative medicines and treatments as swiftly and effectively as possible. Several steps were promised. We pledged to increased clinical trials and to better support clinicians, researchers and healthcare staff in these efforts. We committed to reviewing the drugs reimbursement process and implementing the Mazars review recommendations so that the entire approval pipeline would be properly resourced. We promised to explore early access schemes, particularly for rare diseases, and to strengthen co-ordination with European partners like the Benelux agreement to enhance our negotiating power and speed of access. We committed to investing in breakthrough treatments, especially for cancer and other major diseases, to improve patient outcomes and to reduce the burdens that delay places on lives and the healthcare system.

The Irish Pharmaceutical Healthcare Association published a position paper in February and I have read its findings. Under the health Act 2013, the HSE is legally obligated to make decisions on new medical reimbursements within 180 days, exclusive of clock stops. A clock stop, as we know, is when the HSE formally requests additional information, but when delays occur without formal written requests due to internal bottlenecks or other inefficiencies, those are not clock stops under the law. They are simply delays and patients pay the price.

*3 o'clock*

Under the 2021 Irish Pharmaceutical Healthcare Association framework agreement, the HSE further committed to implementing reimbursement decisions within 45 days of approval. However, real-world experience shows a different picture. The corporate pharmaceutical unit, CPU, and the National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics, NCPE, play crucial roles in evaluating cost-effectiveness but this process can take up to a year, which is far too long when lives or quality of life are at stake. Families are waiting and in some cases, such as with Duvyzat, the wait is deeply painful. Duvyzat is a promising treatment that can slow the progression of Duchenne muscular dystrophy, a rare and devastating condition. It offers not just a treatment but a glimmer of hope, a chance at a better quality of life for patients and their families. Right now, however, those families in Ireland are receiving a substandard level of care compared with their counterparts in the UK, where Duvyzat is already available.

The European Medicines Agency, EMA, is expected to make a decision on marketing approval by June or July, yet unless our reimbursement scheme significantly accelerates, there is a real and urgent risk that Irish children will continue to suffer and deteriorate while waiting for access. I have seen at first hand the desperation and devastation the unavailability of Duvyzat has caused to little Archie Ennis and his family in Tallaght. I know that when the medicine is approved by the EMA, his family will be watching the clock on it becoming available in Ireland, as will I.

This is not solely a procedural issue. The impact of delays is significant. Disease progression leads to higher treatment costs, increased hospitalisations and avoidable suffering. Delayed access reduces health gains and can lead to lost quality-adjusted life years. It places a greater burden on the healthcare systems, requiring more long-term care and more intensive interventions, and ultimately, it creates an economic and emotional burden on patients and their families. The numbers tell the story. For orphan treatments, Ireland made nine medicines available in an average of 597 days, compared with 401 days in Scotland and a weighted European

average of 403 days. This puts our system behind those of our European peers. Just 20% of all orphan drugs approved by the EMA are available in Ireland, as opposed to other countries such as the UK, which has access to more than 60% of all medicines approved by the EMA.

The Mazars review identified what patients of the industry already know, namely, that the reimbursement process in Ireland lacks transparency. Months can pass with no communication, visibility on timelines or clarity on the next steps. To address this, have the following reforms been considered: transparent indicative timelines for each stage of the reimbursement process, from rapid review to final HSE decision; structured accountability to ensure compliance with the 180-day statutory timeline; and clinician-led horizon scanning to prioritise high-impact new therapies and expedite submissions? Timely access to medications is not a luxury. It is a necessity.

**Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Marian Harkin):** I thank Senator Costello for raising this issue. I will be answering on behalf of the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill.

The State acknowledges the importance of faster access to new medicines for patients. The HSE has statutory responsibility for medicine pricing and reimbursement decisions, under the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013. Reimbursement is for licensed indications that have been granted marketing authorisation by the EMA or the Health Products Regulatory Authority, HPRA. In making a reimbursement decision, the HSE is required under the Act to have regard to a number of criteria, including efficacy, the health needs of the public, cost-effectiveness and potential or actual budget impact.

HSE decisions on which medicines are reimbursed by the State via public funds are made on objective, scientific and economic grounds and having regard to the advice of the NCPE. Formal processes govern applications for the pricing and reimbursement of medicines, and new uses of existing medicines, to be funded or reimbursed.

The Senator mentioned the external review of the pricing and reimbursement process, the Mazars review, which was published in 2023. While this determined that the pricing and reimbursement process operated in line with international norms, a number of recommendations were made on foot of its findings. In the same year, 50% of applications for reimbursement progressed following a rapid review without the need for a full health technology assessment. Furthermore, 90% of generic and biosimilar medicines were approved for reimbursement within 90 days.

A number of these recommendations have now been implemented. One of the key recommendations of this review was enhancing the capacity across the pricing and reimbursement system, with significant funding allocated for 34 additional staff within the system. These 34 new staff have now been hired, of which 16 additional new staff were recruited and are now in place within the NCPE. This is a significant investment by the State and reflects the Government's commitment to providing access to new and innovative medicines to patients faster. The full impact of additional staffing within the NCPE on the speed of assessment of new medicine applications will become evident in the coming months. This additional capacity will significantly enhance and support the ability to appraise the increased volume and complexity of submissions from pharmaceutical companies for new drugs that are coming through the application process.

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Another recommendation from this review was greater transparency for all stakeholders. A key focus was the implementation of a pricing and reimbursement medicines tracker to be developed by the HSE. The tracker has now been launched, with the initial iteration available since December 2024. In real time, this will show the status of a reimbursement application for a new medicine, from rapid review to a final decision by the HSE. Senator Costello asked about this. The HSE national service plan will continue the trackers' development with the introduction of indicative timelines for each step of a medicine's assessment process. That was the question the Senator specifically asked.

**Senator Teresa Costello:** I thank the Minister of State for her reply. I welcome the recruitment of 34 new staff because time is of the essence when it comes to getting the necessary medication to people. As I said, time is something patients with certain rare illnesses do not have. I fully welcome the 34 new staff and I will be keeping a close eye on the progression and real life impact the additional staff will have in terms of a reduction in timelines.

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** I am pleased to hear the Senator welcomes the 34 new staff who have been put in place and the efforts made to enhance and improve the pricing and reimbursement system, including the significant additional staffing to which we have referred. To fully benefit patients, the pharmaceutical industry must also play its part. Ireland is open for business and encourages timely applications for reimbursement with reasonable pricing offers - that is really important. We are confident that timely engagements and applications from industry for new and innovative medicines to be reimbursed will support faster and improved access to medicines for patients in Ireland.

The State has made considerable investments in new medicines in recent years. In 2023, more than €3.2 billion was spent on medicines by the State. That represents nearly one in every eight euro of public money that is spent on health. I think the Senator can see the level of commitment from the Department on this.

### **Assisted Human Reproduction**

**Senator Nicole Ryan:** I am here to speak of a heartbreaking and unjust case. It is the case of Melanie, a woman whose husband died from cancer. Despite doing everything right, she has been locked out of accessing IVF through the public system. Before her husband, Dylan, died or even began chemotherapy, they froze his samples, following medical advice, to preserve a chance of starting a family. Dylan gave full written consent that Melanie could use those samples in the event of his death. Tragically, Dylan passed away earlier this year and now Melanie, who continues to pay monthly to store the samples, is being told she cannot use them through the public system. There is no protocol, policy or pathway for someone in her position. Melanie has gone through so much, losing her beautiful husband to cancer so young, at just 32 years old, and in the midst of her grief the State has forced her to open herself up to scrutiny and to relive her trauma just to be heard, to fight for a small piece of happiness and to fulfil her husband's dying wish that she might have their child, even if he could not be here to see it. Now she is being told she does not fit the system.

Her story raises a wider issue, which is who gets access to fertility treatment in Ireland and who does not. As someone who is in a relationship, I have access to the public system. It is still not fully or fairly implemented and it is under-resourced and overly restrictive, but the point is that, because my partner is alive, I have access to it. Melanie is not asking for the world; she is

asking for one chance, a chance that I and other Members have. The public model is built on an outdated definition of family: a heterosexual couple coming together and living together. If, however, you are single, are in a same-sex relationship or, like Melanie, are a widow who has legally consented to samples, you are locked out. Ten years ago we celebrated the marriage equality referendum result, a proud day that changed so many people's lives, but the reality is you can now marry who you love but our fertility system tells us not to expect to start a family with them. The message is that love is equal but family is not.

What kind of health system denies someone the chance because their partner has died, even where their partner gave clear consent? What does the Minister of State say to Melanie as she witnesses this debate, as she listens not just as a grieving wife but as someone who is holding on to a last piece of the future she planned with the man she loved? This is not just about one woman; it is about whether our healthcare system reflects the real Ireland we live in today and the families we actually have, not just the ones the system has decided to serve. We need clear, compassionate protocols for reproduction, we need fertility policies that include all families and we need to stop forcing people in pain to navigate policy gaps and silence when what they really need is support. No one should have to go through what Melanie is going through, and certainly not alone.

I look forward to the Minister of State's reply and to hearing what she has to say about this.

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** I thank the Senator for raising this very sensitive matter and for giving me, on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, the opportunity to inform the House of the up-to-date position on the provision of publicly funded fertility services. The Senator and I will both appreciate the fact the Minister cannot comment on individual cases.

As part of the final phase of the roll-out of the model of care for fertility, referrals for publicly funded, privately provided IVF or other assisted human reproduction, AHR, treatment commenced in September 2023. The criteria that prospective patients should meet to access fully funded AHR services were agreed by the Department and the HSE and subsequently approved by the Government in July 2023. The criteria were agreed following consultation with experts in the field of reproductive medicine and include limits in respect of the age of the intending birth mother, body mass index and the number of children a couple already have. These are very much in keeping with those applied in other jurisdictions, even though in most European countries, for instance, such treatments are only partially funded and require often significant out-of-pocket payments by patients. Decisions in respect of any proposed changes to the access criteria and-or the range of services provided through the publicly funded AHR treatment initiative require further extensive consultation between Department of Health officials and colleagues in the HSE and also with relevant specialists in the field of reproductive medicine. This process is under way.

Posthumous assisted human reproduction, PAHR, is defined in the Health (Assisted Human Reproduction) Act 2024 as AHR treatment involving the use of the gametes of a person, or of an embryo created by the use of such gametes, subsequent to the death of such person. The Health (Assisted Human Reproduction) Act 2024 includes provisions which will introduce regulation of PAHR but this legislation has not been commenced to date. A key condition in the legislation for PAHR to be permitted is that the relevant AHR treatment should not begin prior to 12 months having passed from the death of the relevant deceased intending parent. This is to allow for an appropriate period of reflection and mourning for the surviving partner and space for her to be certain that she wishes to proceed with PAHR in the new circumstances of her life.

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The Department of Health understands that, in the few countries which specifically provide for PAHR, there is such a required post-death period. There is also a requirement in the 2024 Act that the deceased person and the surviving partner would have received appropriate counselling and advice on issues in respect of succession rights, for instance, before providing their fully informed consent to PAHR, parentage of an as-yet-unborn child and the implications of same. The provision of treatment related to PAHR is not part of the services currently funded through the publicly funded AHR treatment initiative. I will finish following the Senator's response.

**Senator Nicole Ryan:** It is good to hear that consultations are ongoing. The IVF system currently, even the public one, is not up to where it needs to be. Equally, Melanie is under no illusion that she has to wait 12 months. She knows all of this stuff. The problem is that the consultation has not started. There is no legislation around this. As someone who has a low egg count, she does not have the time to be waiting until the Government decides to start this process. Women's reproductive health, and all reproductive health, should be a priority for the Government. I am really asking to for a timeline as to when this will be proposed. We cannot just leave people waiting in limbo. It is ridiculous to have people sitting there, praying and hoping that legislation will change. She has engaged with consultants and hospitals. They have all said they cannot do anything until legislation changes. They are pushing for it equally.

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** I thank the Senator. As I said, there are potentially highly sensitive and complex factors which arise here and these would need to be fully teased out, resolved and a firm decision agreed upon before it is decided whether, notwithstanding what is permitted in the relevant legislation, the State should fund this very distinct form of AHR treatment. However, I want to reassure the Senator that the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, is focused, through the full implementation of the model of care for fertility, on ensuring that patients receive care at the appropriate level of clinical intervention and then those requiring, and eligible for, advanced AHR treatment such as IVF will be able to access same through the public health system. The Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, is eager to see how we can most effectively grow the scheme further, in line with the programme for Government commitment, whether through broadening certain criteria or increasing the range of services available. The Minister hopes to be in a position to announce a clear plan of action in this regard in the coming weeks.

## Health Services

**Senator Fiona O'Loughlin:** I thank the Minister of State for taking this Commencement matter on behalf of the Minister for Health. I wish to comment on public service community radio. We have a great radio station in Kildare, Kfm. It provides an important public service. That was how I first heard of this particular situation. Some of the women impacted contacted me afterwards. There is a new modern primary day healthcare centre in Athy which provides a great service, including a postpartum service for new mothers. This is important to facilitate checkups for baby and mother, to begin the vaccination programme and to deal with things like breastfeeding support and postnatal depression support. It is a vulnerable time for mums and children. People quite suddenly received texts cancelling their appointments in Athy, in some cases with less than 24 hours' notice. They were told they had to travel to Portlaoise hospital instead. This also impacted women in Monasterevin because they were attending a clinic in Portarlinton that was also cancelled. Many mums may need someone else to drive them or may have to organise babysitting for their other children. During a vulnerable time, it is a real shock to get a text cancelling a service like this out of the blue. The response we are getting is that it

is because of staff shortages. Children and postpartum women should be a priority. There is no timeline for when the service will recommence in Athy and in Portarlington. It supports new mums in Portarlington and Monasterevin. When can we expect this vital and important service to recommence? Is there anything available to support them in the meantime, such as transport for those who do not have access to private transport? Public transport between Athy and Portlaoise is practically non-existent. If this will continue for a time, I propose that transport arrangements be put in place. It should not have happened, especially with such little notice to mums. Getting a text when you are prepared and have put arrangements in place to say that you have to go to another place is not acceptable. Portlaoise is a large town and the hospital is dealing with its own patients. There is a concern that there will be long delays for mums and their babies. It is not good enough. The women I represent in Athy and Monasterevin deserve better. I look forward to hearing the response from the Minister's office and the Department.

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** I thank Senator O'Loughlin for this opportunity to address the House today on behalf of the Minister for Health regarding the provision of community midwifery services in Athy by the maternity unit at Midlands Regional Hospital Portlaoise. I endorse what the Senator said about Kfm. I had the privilege of representing Kildare in the European Parliament for five years. I am well aware of the huge value of the community service provided by Kfm.

Coming back to the Senator's question, the Government recognises the critical role midwives play in the delivery of safe, nationally consistent and woman-centred maternity care. The Minister for Health understands the disruption and distress that the interruption of this service may have caused to women in the area. I think all of us here today do as well. The Minister would like to reassure the Deputy and the women attending this service that measures have been put in place to resume it. The midwifery service provided in Athy Primary Care Centre is a midwifery-led, antenatal satellite service from Midland Regional Hospital Portlaoise for women with normal-risk pregnancies. The service was temporarily paused last week to facilitate unplanned staff leave. The HSE has confirmed that the midwifery-led antenatal clinics will be operating as normal from this week in Athy Primary Care Centre and Portarlington Primary Care Centre. Midland Regional Hospital Portlaoise has been contacting affected women directly about this matter. The HSE has provided assurances that all efforts will be made to continue with the midwifery-led community clinics without interruption, including enhancing recruitment of the midwifery workforce.

This Government recognises the importance of midwifery and community care. This has been underpinned by significant investment in services, both in Portlaoise and nationally. The national maternity strategy is moving into its final years. A total of €28 million in new development funding has been invested through the strategy since 2016. This has enabled the total recruitment of more than 530 full-time staff across the country. These staff and this investment improve women's lives every day. Midland Regional Hospital Portlaoise has directly benefited from investment through the national maternity strategy. Since 2018, 12.5 additional whole-time equivalent staff have been funded at the unit through the strategy, including nine whole-time equivalent midwives and midwife specialists. The unit has benefited from over €150,000 in capital investment through the strategy since 2020, including funding for a home away from home birthing room, scanning equipment and neonatal support equipment. I have a little more to say but will wait for the Senator's response.

**Senator Fiona O'Loughlin:** I thank the Minister of State. Like her, I acknowledge the critical role that midwives across the country play in the delivery of excellent services for mums

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and their new babies. I acknowledge that the Minister for Health has said that she understands the disruption and distress that has been caused. I appreciate that in the Minister of State's answer, she said measures had been put in place to resume the service and that they have confirmed that the antenatal clinics will be operating as normal from this week. That is important news in Athy Primary Care Centre and Portarlington Primary Care Centre. The Minister of State talked about the issue with recruitment, which is obviously important, because every new mum deserves to have the very best. I wish the Minister of State well with the task force that is being established. I stress that it is important to make sure contingency plans are in place so that something like this does not happen again in south Kildare or indeed anywhere else in the country.

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** I thank the Senator. To finish the reply, Midland Regional Hospital Portlaoise is funded for 76.5 whole-time equivalent midwives, which falls comfortably within the recommended staffing levels for the number of births at the unit. In response to challenges with vacancies in permanent midwifery positions nationwide, a national midwifery task force was established in October 2023. It is bringing together midwives, HSE professionals and academic expertise to enhance practices around midwifery workforce planning. In budget 2025, an additional €2 million in new development funding has been provided for the continued implementation of this national maternity strategy. All 19 maternity services now offer a midwife-led supported care pathway.

*Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 3.30 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 3.33 p.m.*

*Sitting suspended at 3.30 p.m. and resumed at 3.33 p.m.*

### **Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad**

**An Cathaoirleach:** Before I call the Leader to outline the Order of Business, I welcome His Excellency the ambassador from Denmark, Lars Thuesen, to the Distinguished Visitors Gallery. The ambassador is most welcome to Seanad Éireann today as we mark the national day of one of our European Union colleagues. The Seanad takes a distinct interest in legislation coming from the European Union. We thank our fellow member states for their support during the Brexit period, when their support was invaluable in ensuring the ongoing success of the Good Friday Agreement and making sure there was no return to a hard border. When I spoke to the ambassador outside, we discussed many of the links between Ireland and the Kingdom of Denmark. Of course, we joined the European Union in the same year, 1973. The other country that joined on the same day, the United Kingdom, did not remain and has left. We work together in the United Nations and have similar initiatives we are concerned about. When we were discussing the national flags of our respective countries, the ambassador reminded me that the flag of Denmark is the oldest national flag in the world, being nearly 1,200 years old, and that it came from the sky in the middle of a battle. There is nothing quite like imitation being the best form of flattery, because the flag of Denmark was copied by some of Denmark's Nordic neighbours, which shows how appropriate it is as a flag for that part of the world. I thank the ambassador for coming here and allowing us to celebrate with him in advance of his country's national day.

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

**Senator Seán Kyne:** I welcome the ambassador and wish him and his people well for their national day.

The Order of Business is No. 1, motion regarding the arrangements for the sitting of the House on Thursday, 29 May 2025, to be taken at the conclusion of the Order of Business, without debate; No. 2, statements on the local democracy task force, to be taken at 4.45 p.m. and to conclude at 6.15 p.m., if not previously concluded, with the time allocated for the opening remarks of the Minister not to exceed ten minutes, group spokespersons not to exceed ten minutes each, all other Senators not to exceed five minutes each, time may be shared, and the Minister to be given not less than ten minutes to reply to the debate; and No. 3, motion regarding proposed approval by Seanad Éireann of the extension to the Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2021, to be taken at 6.30 p.m., with the time allocated for the opening remarks of the Minister not to exceed five 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 five minutes to reply to the debate.

**Senator Fiona O'Loughlin:** I support the Order of Business as outlined by the Leader. On Sunday, I had the immense privilege of meeting Bernie and Jane Sanders in Athy, County Kildare. This came about through the wonderful work of Colm Walsh, who has developed the Made of Athy series and discovered that the ancestors of Jane Sanders came from Athy. As a couple, Jane and Bernie are absolutely inspirational. They have worked so much for people who are vulnerable and marginalised and have done a lot of work in the area of social justice. Revitalising democracy is a big part of what they do, not just in America but also around the world, through engaging with various groups all over. I understand they have been in Ireland several times. I am aware that Senator Sanders is to speak tonight in Vicar Street but I ask the Leader and Cathaoirleach whether it would be in order to invite him to address the Seanad. After all, he is an Independent, so nobody could say we were siding with one side of the House or another. The next time Mr. Sanders comes from the US, I would like to make this proposal.

I noted that last week saw 75 years of the Civil Defence movement. It is a wonderful group of volunteers. I have often had to engage with them on community events in Kildare, where we have a group of absolutely excellent, really dedicated volunteers. This is the case all over the country, no matter whether it involves helping the emergency services or helping local communities. I understand the Civil Defence has 3,000 different duties every year. I want to give a shoutout to the Civil Defence movement all over the country. It was great to see it recognised by the President last week.

We are all watching the news in relation to the Fiona Pender situation. Very sadly, Fiona went missing almost 30 years ago. About six months ago I was in Tullamore and saw the walkway dedicated to her and the memorial. We know she will never be forgotten by the country, especially her family and friends. Sadly, both of her parents have passed away. When thinking of Fiona, I also think of my former neighbour Deirdre Jacob and many others, such as Annie McCarrick, Jo Jo Dullard and Trevor Deely. Every year, there is a national missing persons day. People have been seeking the establishment of a database of unidentified remains. We all remember the circumstances in Galway some years ago when Denis Walsh Jr was identified 25 years after he had gone missing. His body had lain in a morgue for 25 years. We have had advances regarding DNA, so it is really important that there be a call for an official record of

unidentified bodies lying in morgues or graveyards. This needs to be addressed and maybe we could ask the Minister for Justice to come in to talk about our missing persons. There are 860 of them.

**Senator Manus Boyle:** I wish to address the lack of electric vehicle, EV, chargers. People are getting frustrated. Everyone I talk to likes their wee electric car but there are serious problems with the infrastructure. Electric car sales are good and that is good as it shows we are going in the right direction. However, I was approached by a man at the weekend about charging infrastructure. He headed off down to the hospital in Galway and on the way he wanted to charge his car. When he got as far as Ballindine the chargers were full. He went on to Tuam and it was the same. He made it to his hospital appointment, which was great. Then he started looking for a charger but could not get one. He headed back, but when he got to Tuam all the chargers were full again and it was the same in Ballindine. He had to go to Claremorris to find a charger, which added two hours to his journey. There should be chargers on that stretch of road.

When I was in Killybegs a Portuguese man was hooking up his car and I went over to him to chat to him and see how it was going. He was very annoyed. He showed me the map. When you leave Killybegs there is only one charger in Falcarragh, one in Gweedore, two in Dungloe and only one in Glenties. We are taking tourists in here and we are promoting everything, yet we are not putting the infrastructure in for these people to come. I would like it if we could have a debate on it. The EVs are starting to work, but they are not going to work in rural areas like Donegal. I can see us going back to diesel cars because the infrastructure simply is not there. Is there anything the Government can do or can we do something through Europe to get these filling stations funding to put in chargers? The man I spoke to told me there were three chargers for every fuel pump in Portugal. We would be lucky to have three on the whole road from Galway up to Donegal, which is a road the Leader knows. It is something that needs to be looked at seriously. Maybe the Leader could see what he can do for me.

**Senator Joe Conway:** As a Senator who was elected to the House from the cultural and educational panel, I want to delineate a happening in the last while that shows there is a cross-over between politics and culture. The occasion was the winning last week of the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival by Jafar Panahi, an Iranian director who gathered all the laurels at the festival for a film called "It Was Just an Accident". It outlined his experience in detention in Iran. The film also centres on the confrontation by five victims of torture in prison of their former torturer. I look forward to seeing it. Sometimes when we are looking at things like that we get a ray of hope. When he arrived back in Tehran yesterday afternoon there was no governmental attempt to arrest him. He was welcomed by a substantial group of people who could assemble in the airport to welcome him. He made the point it was a blow for freedom and when he came out of the terminal a lot of the protesters shouted "Women, life, freedom". As a people we would like to think we would bring pressure to bear on Iran and indeed all states around the world that countenance and use judicial killings of their own citizens. That was probably the most buoyant message from Panahi in his victory in Cannes. It is something we can all take away. Judicial killings are going on and it is time we spoke out against them.

**Senator Nicole Ryan:** I want to take a moment to address the horrific scenes we witnessed in Liverpool yesterday. What unfolded on the streets was utterly disgraceful, violent chaos that left innocent people injured and a city shaken. There is absolutely no place for such behaviour in any democratic society and we stand in full solidarity with all those affected - the injured, their families and the wider Liverpool community, who will be reeling in the aftermath from hereon in.

I turn to an issue that speaks to the kind of society we do want to build, one that supports, uplifts and empowers young people. Youth work is not a luxury but an essential service that offers young people safe, voluntary spaces to be themselves, grow, thrive and develop the skills they need. Unlike school or social services, youth work is chosen by young people and that choice builds trust, confidence and resilience within them. The Opportunities for Youth strategy promised a clear implementation plan by the end of 2024 but that has not happened. The sector has been sidelined, with funding, participation and youth spaces all hanging in the balance. We were told a project management agency would be procured in early 2025. Has that happened? I am not sure. Has the promised cross-government forum been established yet? Again, I am unsure. I call for a debate with the Minister for Education and Youth on this because the youth sector deserves answers and young people deserve a lot better.

**Senator Teresa Costello:** I had a really positive experience at the weekend attending two Street Feasts in Tallaght. On Saturday, the community of Bancroft came together for what I think was its fourth annual Street Feast. I have watched this event grow year after year from a small gathering four years ago into something we jokingly compared to Electric Picnic. The weather may have been wild but no one was deterred and spirits were high. On Sunday, after our weekly litter pick, Tallaght Village Tidy Towns and Tallaght Community Council hosted another Street Feast, this time right in the main street in Tallaght. Again, the atmosphere was fantastic, with good food, great music, lively conversations and children running around forging the next generation of friendships. As a public representative, it is genuinely uplifting to step back and witness my community be so united, with neighbours chatting, sharing meals and simply enjoying one another's company.

Street Feast is Ireland's national day of street parties and neighbourhood celebrations. Now in its 15th year, it took place across the country on 24 and 25 May, encouraging communities everywhere to gather for food, conversation and connection. Since its launch in 2010, it has continuously grown. Last year alone, over 75,000 people took part. In an age where we are more connected digitally than ever, it is events like these that remind us how important it is to connect in person with the people living right next door to us. That is the mission of Street Feast, to turn strangers into neighbours and neighbours into friends. It does not matter where you live, whether an apartment, a house or shared accommodation. All you need is a willingness to connect and a space. Street Feast makes it so easy to bring people together, even providing free DIY party packs.

This initiative can play a role in tackling loneliness, promoting inclusion and strengthening community resilience, values that align perfectly with our national goals on social cohesion and community well-being. Whether you are in a city or a rural town, Street Feast offers an invaluable opportunity to make your neighbourhood a better, kinder and more connected place. In Tallaght this weekend, we showed how it is done, with heart, humour and a whole lot of community pride. I encourage any community that has not taken part to give it a try next year.

**Senator Alison Comyn:** Colette Campbell, Theresa Morgan and Bernie Cranley are the names of three of the five women who so tragically lost their lives over the weekend on Irish roads. A driver, three pedestrians and a cyclist, these women were killed in counties Clare, Meath, Wexford, Louth and Tyrone, four within an eight-hour period, bringing the number of fatalities on our roads so far this year to 67, including 19 pedestrians and six pedal cyclists. It is clear we have serious concerns and issues we have to address on our roads, particularly when it comes to more vulnerable road users like the elderly, cyclists, pedestrians and the very young. We may never know what happened in each of those separate incidents that resulted in such

heartbreaking loss for each of those five families but, as was said after the tragic death of Garda Kevin Flatley weeks ago, we need a drastic reset with regard to our safety measures and how we view those we share our busy and ever more dangerous roads with.

It is not only down to safety measures and enforcement either. Drivers need to be educated about sharing the road and respecting pedestrians and cyclists. We need to enforce rules against speeding, mobile phone use and illegal parking on footpaths or cycle lanes. We may need stricter penalties for dangerous driving behaviours, particularly in pedestrian-heavy zones. With that in mind, I invite the Minister for Transport, Darragh O'Brien, to the House to debate what measures we need to take to protect the more vulnerable road users, be that through improved lighting, wider paths and cycle paths, longer crossing times at pedestrian crossings or whatever it might take to stop these road deaths in their tracks.

**Senator Victor Boyhan:** I thank the Leader for facilitating and arranging a briefing today with the Minister of State with responsibility for local government, Deputy John Cummins. It is only an hour and a half, which is somewhat disappointing, but I know that is all he has. Given that a very high percentage of Senators are elected by sitting county councillors, it is very disappointing. If we do not complete our work today, I ask we bear it in mind and have another session when we come back after the recess. It is an extremely important subject. I know from numerous emails I got this morning from councillors that they are engaged. They will be tuning in and they are expecting a lot from us. I do not know what the Minister of State is going to say, but the councillors are putting pressure on us, and rightly so, to advocate for them and I do not think we will have sufficient time. I hope we will put in more time at a later date. I am conscious that in the past few weeks, the lack of engagement by some Ministers in terms of their availability and time is an area of concern. There is another mechanism and another forum where I will vent my concerns on that, but I wanted to flag this to Senators, including the Leader.

I ask for a debate on the status and the recommendations of the Housing Commission. In yesterday's edition of *The Irish Times*, there was a story about the €1.3 billion wastewater project for Dublin, although it also impacts on Meath and Kildare. Effectively, there is a slowdown on this project and Uisce Éireann is saying that this is presenting a major difficulty for the roll-out of houses. There is a serious concern that these delays to the greater Dublin drainage, GDD, project, which will serve over 500,000 people, will lead to major roll-out issues for housing, given that it relates to an infrastructural deficit. That has to be a challenge and one on which we need a debate. We also need a debate to tease out all the recommendations. A lot of money, time, effort and expertise went into the Housing Commission and we should at least tease out those issues as part of a detailed debate within this House.

**Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee:** I also raise the issue of Fiona Pender and the search for her body that is under way. Senator O'Loughlin raised this matter. It is a story that has haunted us all. We all want a good outcome for her brother, now her only serving next-of-kin, whereby her body and that of her unborn baby - Fiona was seven months pregnant - are found.

I raise the need for a debate in the House regarding addiction services for women in particular. We know from the statistics that women face specific barriers in accessing services. There is a stigma attached to women suffering from alcohol, drug or gambling addictions, which can be very disruptive in their lives. Women are often reluctant to come forward at an early stage and to seek support because quite often they fear that their children will be taken into care if they do so. That then spirals and huge harms are done to the person and their family. We need

a good debate with the Minister in this House specifically on addiction services for women. I would appreciate it if the Leader could organise this debate.

**Senator Mary Fitzpatrick:** I congratulate the young people, families, staff and volunteers at Cabra For Youth, which is a youth service in Cabra founded over 17 years ago that engages with young people and their families. It operates both a mainstream youth service and a justice youth diversion programme. The service engages with young people from eight years of age right up into their early adult years. Last week, Cabra For Youth launched its strategic plan for the next five years. I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Mary Butler, for making time to come out to the youth service and launch the plan. I am one of the founding directors of that youth service, going back 17 years, along with other founding directors: Joey Furlong, Paul O' Farrell and Niall Counihan. We have new directors now, including Paul Hennelly, Catriona Kenny and Peter Treanor. I thank everybody who worked on putting together the strategic plan, most particularly the young people and their families and the staff. We have an incredible project leader in Mary Carroll, and Anita Meehan, our administrator, is the glue that holds it all together. They are an example of how, when a community comes together over time, with some funding from the State, it can have a direct impact and effect on young people's lives and the lives of their families, their outcomes and their ability to achieve their full potential.

I am proud to say that, over the past 17 years, a number of young people and their families have come through. None of us goes through life without needing help and support at a certain time. Each one of the young people who have engaged have come for different reasons but they have found in Cabra For Youth a place to be themselves, a safe and friendly space, and a place to make friends, develop relationships and to find out who they are. It is really important but youth work is largely undervalued in our society. I would like us to have a debate in the House on future funding of youth work services. It is very important that it seen not as informal, casual, or nice to have but as an essential in our communities.

**Senator Joanne Collins:** I wish to raise an incident that happened in Newcastle West in County Limerick last weekend. Vile videos were sent to me of fighting on the streets between two different groups. They were absolutely disgusting to watch. People were being kicked in the face while they were on the ground. One person was knocked out, jumped on and punched about 20 times while he was knocked out. This happened on the street parallel to the Garda station. I do not know if it is a lack of gardaí. The gardaí in Newcastle West are phenomenal. They work so hard but they cover an area of more than 2,700 sq. km. There are two 24-hour Garda stations to cover the entire place. There are eight Garda stations in areas surrounding Newcastle West but the majority of them are open for one hour on a Saturday, from 10 a.m. to 11 a.m., and there is one that opens from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m. We all know it is in the evening time and at night when this kind of stuff kicks off. From what I have heard, it started in a pub and was pushed out into the street. I would love the Minister to come in to discuss Garda numbers in our rural towns and villages. I keep hearing we need to get more gardaí into the cities but our rural towns and villages really need support. Our gardaí need support, including from administrators in Garda stations taking the calls that are coming in. We need extra gardaí and more patrol cars.

**Senator Dee Ryan:** Yesterday we had the pleasure of welcoming the Minister for Justice, Deputy O'Callaghan, to Limerick. He had a very full and busy day, with a long itinerary that started with inspecting the construction of the new Garda station that is under way at Newcastle West. We expect that development to be handed back to the State in the summer of 2026. He then went on to Limerick City, and I accompanied him on his visit to Limerick Prison and to a

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briefing with gardaí at Henry Street on the community access support team and the results so far from that innovative new pilot programme between HSE mid-west and the Garda. He went on to meet with members of the business community who are predominantly involved in retail and hospitality in the city centre and then on to the Bedford Row project, a voluntary organisation that provides support for the families and loved ones of prisoners. Finally, we finished at Adapt House, on what was my second visit in just a short few weeks. We wanted the Minister to see the fantastic work being done there by one of the largest women's refuge centres in the country.

*4 o'clock*

The common theme across each of the sites we visited was drug and alcohol addiction. The governor of Limerick Prison, Mark Kennedy, and the director general of the Irish Prison Service, Caron McCaffrey, highlighted to us that 80% of prisoners arriving into Limerick Prison are suffering from drug or alcohol addiction, or both. When we went on to visit other organisations with the gardaí, members of the community access support team talked to us about how much de-escalation of situations fuelled by, or originating in, drug and alcohol addiction they are dealing with. The families in the Bedford Row support centre talked about how their children and their lives are impacted by their loved ones going to prison. I ask that we invite the Minister of State with responsibility for public health, well-being and the national drug strategy, Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor, to address the Chamber and update us on the goals of the programme for Government in this very important space.

**Senator Sharon Keogan:** I call for a debate with the Minister for the environment, Deputy O'Brien, to come in to talk to us about the big problems we are seeing with the return scheme. It turns out that 90% of the plastics collected have been shipped overseas because it is just not worth processing them here. In 2024, it is estimated that we sold 1.7 billion cans and bottles, but only about 900 million have been returned. That leaves 800 million cans not returned, but they still get a 20 cent per can or bottle bonus on their year-end balance sheets. This feels like another sneaky tax, since the return scheme pockets all the money from the cans and bottles that do not get returned. We need the Minister in here to explain why we cannot recycle these plastics in Ireland and what all the extra profits from the return scheme will be used for. Consumers are already paying for recycling bins, so this feels like they are getting hit with a double tax.

**An Cathaoirleach:** Before I call the next speaker, I welcome Paul and Theresa Clerkin from Waterford, along with John Clerkin from Dublin and their cousin Vinny; Kathleen, Anthony and Ava; Cindy and Randy Flander; and Terance and Sue Franz from Chicago. I welcome the people from the city of Chicago, and from Iowa. My grand-uncle served as a parish priest in Iowa for 27 years, so I especially welcome everyone from Iowa. They are all guests of Senator Maria Byrne. I thank them for coming to Seanad Éireann today.

**Senator Chris Andrews:** Today we had a very strong dog welfare presentation in the audiovisual room. I thank everybody who came to it. I thank Working Animal Guardians, Greyhound Action Ireland, Greyhound Awareness Cork and Ban Bloodsports, who all attended and were part of the presentation. Working Animal Guardians, WAG, and five other groups took a judicial review against the Government to have an appeals process for the XL bully ban recently, and there still has been nothing from the Government. Where is the review and when will this decision be made? Dog owners are in limbo.

Some of the facts presented by the groups were mind-boggling and staggering. I did not realise that 5% of all racing greyhounds are dead by the time the race is over or shortly after. In

2024, 202 dogs died racing. Some €19 million of taxpayers' money is going to the greyhound racing industry every year. In 2019, "Prime Time" highlighted that 6,000 greyhounds died because they could not run fast enough. The death rate is as high today as it was then. They highlighted at the presentation that traceability is an absolute shambles. In March 2021, there was a commitment that there would be four care homes set up for greyhounds, but only two care centres have been set up since then. In 2024, those two care centres got €291,000. Do you know how many dogs they rehomed? Thirty-six dogs were rehomed. This means the cost of rehoming a greyhound by these care homes works out at €8,000. It makes the bike shelter look like good value. This is where €19 million in greyhound funding is going. This funding needs to be investigated independently.

I ask that there be an investigation and that we have the Minister in to discuss it. You could not make this up. Rescues do a lot better. There were reports recently that a kennel in Roscommon was raided and 50 dogs removed because of the shocking condition they were in. This was reported in the newspapers. Greyhound Racing Ireland knew about the shocking conditions six months ago. This needs to be investigated again but not by the Department; we need an independent investigation into this. There are so many issues we are failing dogs and animals on.

**Senator Maria Byrne:** I rise to welcome my relations in the Gallery. I hope they enjoy their visit to the Houses of the Oireachtas today and particularly to the Seanad.

I raise the issue of BusConnects, particularly in Limerick. There has been a delay in rolling it out. Back in 2021, Limerick Chamber, along with the business park outside Annacotty, commissioned a report which showed there was no bus connection to the business park. The nearest bus stop is 2.5 km from the business park, where there are more than 3,000 people working. Businesses carried out a survey and the chamber carried out a survey. There is huge support for bus connection between this business park and the city in order that people can get to work safely and on time in the morning. However, BusConnects seems to have forgotten about it. I ask that the Minister for Transport come to the House to discuss this all-important issue. It is about job security. Businesses cannot expand if people cannot get to work on time. It is a huge issue in Limerick. I know there is a delay in the roll-out of BusConnects and it needs to happen sooner rather than later.

**Senator Sarah O'Reilly:** I commend the O'Farrell family on the constant and dignified efforts they have made to ensure there is justice for Shane O'Farrell as well as reform in our judicial system. To think that 14 years on the family is only now getting an apology from the Government is heartbreaking. Their son's killer had 40 previous convictions and he should have been in jail when Shane was killed. The Courts Service of Ireland stated that his prison sentences were never served because of administrative error. Shane's killer had 12 convictions from Lithuania but nobody checked his criminal record before he came into Ireland in 2004. This is something that is still a huge issue in this country today. He ran amok for two years, walking in and out of District and Circuit Courts. He consistently broke the law and yet remained free through years of incompetence, negligence and ineptitude by the State agencies. The Courts Service has admitted that, in error, it filed away the appeal papers and the appeal was never heard. Shane's killer never served his sentence. Had this error not taken place, he would have been in custody on the day he killed Shane. It is truly heartbreaking for any parent to have to bury their child. It is a pain many of us would be incapable of understanding. Shane O'Farrell was failed by the courts, the Probation Service, the Garda and the Department of Justice. Those same State agencies are failing this family to this day. The State has been no help. If anything, it has heaped trauma on top of trauma on this family. I welcome the apology

today. However, apologies are all well and good, but accountability is what is needed. We need a public inquiry into Shane O'Farrell's death. This is the only way to bring peace to his family and at last get a meaningful sense of justice for Shane and his family.

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** This morning I noticed the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Simon Harris, made some very strong statements regarding what is going on in Kyiv. We talk about the genocide in Gaza and the war criminality of the likes of Netanyahu. We should be aware that Putin is equally a war criminal. Donald Trump told us during the election campaign that if he was elected, he would have the war ended within 24 hours. We are three months in and there is no sign of that war ending. We need to be aware and discuss the fact that there appears to be absolutely zero intention on the part of Putin and his allies in Iran and the Middle East to end the war. They are quite prepared to see it go on. Hundreds of missiles are being fired into Kyiv and various other cities in Ukraine. Maybe the time has come for a debate on Ukraine again and to put Ukraine front and centre for a short time in this House. While the war in Gaza, and the absolute annihilation of the people of Gaza and their homes, is terrible, what is beginning to happen in cities in Ukraine is similar. It is time we called out Putin for his fun and games claiming he wants peace talks while he is firing hundreds of thousands of missiles. We also need to look at the Iranian regime, which is providing him with drones to attack Ukraine. We have skin in the game because we have provided support to Ukraine. I hope we will continue to provide support to Ukraine but we need to discuss it and up our game in this area. I would appreciate it if the Leader could arrange a debate with the Tánaiste and Minister for foreign affairs.

**Senator Seán Kyne:** I thank all Senators for their contributions. I will start with Senator O'Loughlin, who commented on her meeting in Athy with Jane Sanders and suggested that Bernie Sanders be invited to address the Seanad. It would be a matter for the Committee on Parliamentary Privileges and Oversight, CPPO, at a later date to determine whether that was in the offing. She also commended the Civil Defence on its 75th anniversary and raised the tragic case of Fiona Pender, as did Senator Clifford-Lee. Our thoughts are with Fiona's family nearly 30 years on from her disappearance. We hope there will be closure in that case in the coming days and weeks.

Senator Manus Boyle raised electric vehicle, EV, infrastructure. I appreciate it is an issue. While things have improved, there certainly is a way to go in ensuring there is adequate infrastructure and that the range concerns people have as a deterrent to purchasing EV cars can be rectified. I will certainly ask for a debate with the Minister for Transport and the Minister for environment in that regard.

Senator Joe Conway mentioned the Iranian situation and the awarding of the Palme d'Or to a director there. I will certainly have some engagement with those in the free Iran movement and I wish them well in that regard. The Senator mentioned there was cause for hope and I very much agree.

Senator Ryan has sent sympathies to the people of Liverpool. We all join with the people of Liverpool who are watching over loved ones. Hopefully, all those impacted by the incident yesterday will survive. Senator Ryan also called for a debate on youth and youth work, which I will certainly request. Senator Fitzpatrick also requested a debate on the issues of youth. She talked about Cabra for Youth, the strategic five-year plan and the need for friendly spaces for young people to live their lives in. I will request a debate with the Minister, Deputy Foley, in that regard.

Senator Costello raised the fourth annual Street Feast. I congratulate the people of Tallaght on what sounded like a wonderful weekend. I know a number of Street Feasts will be held in different parts of the country over the coming weeks. In Galway, we have one in Moycullen on 6 or 8 June and I will look forward to that.

Senator Comyn raised road fatalities, particularly among vulnerable road users such as pedestrians and cyclists. Unfortunately, they are all too common. While we had a debate recently on road safety, I will request the Minister for Transport, Deputy O'Brien, to look again at this. It is possibly an issue that can be raised at the transport committee. If the Senator is not a member of that, she can engage with her colleagues in order that the issue can be pursued as a work item there.

Senator Boyhan raised the discussions today on the local democracy task force. He asked for a debate on the Housing Commission reports, which I will certainly request with the Minister, Deputy Browne.

Senators Clifford-Lee and Dee Ryan spoke of alcohol addiction and addiction services for women, and they called for a debate with the Minister of State, Deputy Murnane O'Connor. I will certainly request that with the Minister of State. There is still an issue with some Ministers of State getting their delegated functions, which has gone on for far too long. I have brought this to the attention of the Government. It is hoped that will be sorted soon to allow many Ministers to come to the House to talk about their specific areas of expertise.

Senator Ryan also talked about the visit by the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, to Limerick. It sounds like it was a busy, productive and worthwhile engagement over that day.

Senator Collins raised justice issues and concerns about happenings in Newcastle West. She requested a debate with the Minister for Justice and I will certainly request that as well.

Senator Keogan requested a debate with the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, on the issue of the deposit return scheme. The scheme is certainly well-intentioned. I do not believe the intention was in any way for anybody to make profit out of it but to encourage full recycling of materials. That is why the incentive of the initial levy is there. It is fully recoverable if you return your can or whatever. I can request a debate. However, if the Senator wishes to put down a Commencement matter, she might get a more direct and immediate response.

Senator Andrews raised the issues of dog welfare and animal welfare. I apologise for missing his briefing today. It is an issue in which I am interested. I was at a committee meeting at the time that was on. The State is going to amend the regulations and incorporate an appeals mechanism. That is important in regard to the XL bully, which is banned. I will request that a Minister would come in. Part of the issue is that some of the functions lie with the Department of Rural and Community Development and others, in terms of animal welfare, with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. However, I will ask the Minister, Deputy Calleary, to come to the House to address the issues of the welfare of dogs and dog breeding establishments.

Senator Maria Byrne talked about BusConnects. I am surprised a local business park would not be connected as part of BusConnects. It would appear to be quite an obvious issue. She may wish to put down a Commencement matter to raise the issue. Part of the problem is that Ministers are not directly involved with these matters. The NTA is directly involved and, therefore, it is sometimes not answered by a Minister. It is an important issue. The NTA will

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be before the transport committee today or tomorrow. I do not know whether there will be an opportunity in that regard, but I expect there is a lot of interest in that particular matter.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly raised the tragic case of Shane O'Farrell. I welcome the fact there is to be an apology today. I do not know whether the Minister will make any other announcements. I certainly hope so but I do not know. I cannot speak for him. I welcome the fact the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, is making an apology to the family of Shane O'Farrell.

Senator Craughwell raised the ongoing war in and invasion of Ukraine and called for a debate. I will certainly ask for a debate. Despite all the other incidents across the world, in particular in the Middle East, we cannot forget the situation in Ukraine. The Tánaiste will be in the House on Thursday to discuss the issues in Gaza. I will certainly request a further debate on Ukraine in the coming weeks.

Order of Business agreed to.

### **Sitting Arrangements: Motion**

**Senator Seán Kyne:** I move:

That, notwithstanding anything in the Standing Orders relative to Public Business, the following arrangements shall apply in relation to the sitting of the Seanad on Thursday, 29th May, 2025:

(a) *Statements on Gaza.*

Statements on Gaza shall be taken at 9 a.m. and shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion at 11 a.m. The opening contribution of the Minister shall not exceed 10 minutes, the contribution of Group Spokespersons shall not exceed 10 minutes, all other Senators shall not exceed 5 minutes, time may be shared, and the Minister shall be given no less than 10 minutes to reply to the debate;

(b) No other business shall be taken unless the Seanad shall otherwise order on motion made by the Leader of the House or such other Senator as he may authorise in that behalf in accordance with Standing Order 18.

Question put and agreed to.

**An Cathaoirleach:** I welcome from Galway, Councillor Jim Cuddy, who I believe retired after many years of service. He is most welcome to Seanad Éireann. I thank him for all the cups of tea during the Seanad campaign down through the years.

*Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 4.20 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 4.48 p.m.*

*Sitting suspended at 4.20 p.m. and resumed at 4.48 p.m.*

## **Local Democracy Task Force: Statements**

**An Cathaoirleach:** I welcome the Minister of State, who is a former Senator, back to Seanad Éireann. This is an important debate, as we all know. In the previous Seanad, we had a debate on the future of local democracy, and one of the many recommendations out of that was that there would be a task force established under the next programme for Government to look at all the issues facing local democracy. This related to service delivery, the work of the democratically elected local authority members, the powers that have been slowly but surely eroded and transferred to those who are unelected, the safety of local authority members, a concern we share with them at this stage, and making sure local democracy works for the citizens. I thank the Minister of State for coming here today. He is most welcome.

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy John Cummins):** I thank the Members of the Seanad for extending their invitation to me to attend. I was delighted to accept it. I always welcome the opportunity to engage on the matters related to local government. It is something that I hold dear, having served as a councillor for 11 years and as mayor on two occasions. I am very aware that Members of this House have a huge interest in local government affairs. All Members of this House are dedicated advocates of strong local government and as Minister of State with responsibility for local government, I really appreciate their engagement on matters relating to local government. This is my first opportunity since being appointed at the end of January to address the House on the issue of the local democracy task force, arising out of a commitment in the programme for Government. I was honoured to be part of Fine Gael's programme negotiating team.

As the Cathaoirleach rightly referenced, the establishment of the local democracy task force was a key recommendation emerging from last year's Seanad Public Consultation Committee report on the

future of local democracy. I am pleased to have the opportunity to address progress on this matter. To begin, I will give Members a little bit of background to the establishment of the local democracy task force. The programme for Government recognises the vital importance of local government and states that the Government will convene a local democracy task force with the local government sector to finalise a programme for the reform and strengthening of local government to ensure more effective and efficient delivery of services and the implementation of Government policy for citizens. The programme for Government specifies that the task force should consider the principle of subsidiarity and give consideration to devolving more powers to local authorities for local services. The Seanad report called for the devolution of more powers to local authorities through the legislative process to strengthen and enhance local democracy and the delivery of additional local services. It also states that the task force should examine how to strengthen the framework and powers of municipal districts and area committees. The task force will also consider if there is a role for a small number of town-focused bodies to be introduced on a phased, regional basis to provide a focal point for raising the concerns of large towns and co-ordinating town-focused activities. It is not intended that any proposals in this respect that may be forthcoming from the task force would interfere in the parity of structures and powers at sub-county level across the State.

The programme for Government specifies that the task force should consider granting councillors greater input and control over the development and implementation of local authority budgets and

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mechanisms for enhanced physical autonomy. The Seanad report called for greater revenue-raising powers for local government and I am sure that is something the task force will examine under the finance pillar. The programme for Government states that the task force should examine rebalancing power between elected councillors and the executive to ensure that elected officials have a right to be consulted on a greater range of decisions and a right to know of all other decisions in a timely manner. It also states that mechanisms should be examined to increase the accountability of the chief executive and directors of services to councillors for executive decisions. The programme for Government also states that the task force should examine the timely reporting of the National Oversight and Audit Committee, NOAC, and engagement with public representatives, which is an important piece. NOAC does really good work but unless councillors are provided with information in a timely fashion, enabling them to compare the performance of their local authority with that of others, they cannot hold the executive to account. I expect that to be a significant element of the recommendations coming forward.

Finally, the programme for Government sets out that the task force should consider the proportion of local authority members to population. It also contains commitments to examine how to deliver greater diversity within the sector. A substantial body of work has been completed on this issue, including the Seanad Public Consultation Committee report on the future of local democracy. Other organisations have also carried out extensive research in this area, including the Council of Europe's Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, the 21st Century Councillor in Irish Local Government by the AILG, and the Building Stronger Local Government report by the AILG in November of last year.

It is my intention that the significant body of work that has already been done as part of this will form the basis for the deliberations of the task force that is being established, that the foundations that have, essentially, been put in place will be built on, and that recommendations can come forward to me, as Minister of State, that I will be able to implement. Some may require legislative change and others may not.

I look forward to hearing the contributions from Members. It is important that councillors' voices are heard on that task force. They will be an integral part of it. I know all Senators will have their own views on the membership and the terms of reference, which perhaps I can get into a bit more in my closing remarks. I look forward to hearing what Senators have to say on this task force and the significant body of work that will be undertaken by it when it is established very shortly.

**Senator P. J. Murphy:** I wish to share time with Senator Mark Duffy.

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

**Senator P. J. Murphy:** I thank the Minister of State for coming in to discuss this matter. As somebody who served five and half years as a local councillor in Galway County Council before my election to the Seanad, I greatly welcome that the Government will convene this local democracy task force, which will bring forward proposals to Government to consider for the reform and strengthening of local government.

As the Minister of State outlined, there are a number of focus points outlined for this task force to make recommendations on. I will briefly discuss four of these points. First is increasing the range of reserved functions and consideration of devolving more powers to local au-

thorities for services. Second is rebalancing power between elected councillors and executive officers to ensure elected officers have a right to be consulted on a greater range of discussions and the right to know of all other decisions in a timely manner.

Let us look at the issue of devolving more powers to local authorities for local services. We have had experience with Irish Water taking the responsibility for water services and wastewater services from the local authorities. There have been mixed experiences across the country on that. There was a huge amount of local knowledge within the local authorities on both the water network and wastewater provision. I feel that taking from local authorities and giving to it to national authorities like that is a reprehensible move in many cases.

When it comes to the reserved and executive functions, there is a huge amount of frustration on the part of locally elected councillors with the grey area in between. There is a set number of reserved functions laid out that councillors decide on, and there is a set number of executive functions the executive decides on. In many cases, however, the executive treats everything that is a grey area as an executive function, and councillors feel excluded from the decision-making process in those grey areas. There has to be greater clarity provided on what exactly is a reserved function, what exactly is an executive function, and for those things that are neither, what exactly is the function of both the elected representatives and the executive in that decision-making process.

Third, I wish to look at increasing the accountability of the chief executive and directors of services to councillors for executive decisions. This is often a source of great frustration for councillors and locally elected representatives.

#### *5 o'clock*

Councillors feel they take the hit from the public locally if things do not work out as a result of decisions made by the executive. There are sometimes poorly made and ill-judged decisions that councillors had no hand, act or part in making, but they take the rap on the knuckles from the public on a day-to-day basis. We need a standardised system whereby the chief executive and the directors of services are answerable to elected representatives through a pre-established process. As it stands, many councillors feel they do not have that voice or ability to hold the chief executive and directors to account.

Another issue is the need to strengthen the framework and powers of municipal districts and area committees. During my five and a half years on Galway County Council, it worked very well and very efficiently in terms of the operation of municipal districts. There is a local knowledge of everything that is discussed within the municipal districts. Galway is a huge county, with a two-hour drive from Clifden to Portumna. Councillors simply do not have knowledge of issues happening two hours away from them. Those issues can be discussed efficiently, and decisions on them made efficiently, at municipal district level. However, all those decisions made at municipal district level are only recommendations and must go through to plenary to be discussed. Consideration should be given to installing powers to make binding decisions at that level.

The lump-sum payments to councillors on retirement or the loss of their seat are not made until the retired councillor reaches 50 years of age. If a councillor is first elected at 20, holds that seat for ten years and retires at 30, he or she must wait another 20 years until the lump-sum payment is made. During those 20 years, the payment is not benchmarked and is not earning

interest. It devalues on an annual basis through inflation. This would not be tolerated in any other sector. It is an issue we really must examine.

**Senator Mark Duffy:** I compliment the Cathaoirleach on his work in this area. In the previous Seanad, we had an opportunity to contribute to the work on the task force, for which I thank him. I welcome the Minister of State and thank him for his continued efforts on local government. I wish him well and look forward to supporting his efforts in the term ahead.

I was in the privileged position to work on behalf of my community in the very difficult job of councillor in Mayo County Council. There are many highs and lows to being a councillor, as most of us have experienced. Senator Murphy noted that councillors have a lot of responsibility, and although they sometimes get all the kudos, they mostly get all the blame, but, in effect, they have very little power to change things and be as impactful as they would like to be in their locality. They are the touchpoint and interface with democracy in every local community. We in this House might be in a bubble sometimes but councillors work in their communities every day and are visible and accessible to people. They often go over and beyond in their contribution to their community and society through their volunteerism.

A total of 8% of public expenditure goes on local government. This contrasts with the countries at the top of the chart identified by the OECD, such as Denmark, where the figure is 40%. A paltry contribution is made to local authorities to fund services where there is local autonomy. We still come up with centralised programmes and funds that are imposed in a top-down manner on local authorities with a matched-funding requirement of 10%, 15% or 20%. This puts enormous pressure on local authorities that already live a hand-to-mouth existence.

Councillors need more decision-making powers in their community, particularly in the area of housing. I have raised the issue of decision-making on the zoning of land for residential use with the Minister, with the Minister of State and in this House. In the instance I raised, there was full agreement by planners in the county and the proposal ticked every box that could be requested, yet it was ultimately rejected when it came to the Minister for sign-off. The local comprehension of the situation is not there when that final decision is made. We cannot expect a Minister to have a full understanding of each town and village.

We need to restore the faith of communities in local government by empowering councillors. We certainly also need more accountability. We have brilliant civil servants in our local authorities but it will not always be the case that we have the top-class civil servants. We will sometimes encounter incompetence. If there is incompetence or people are not doing their job, there must be accountability. The salary for councillors is approximately €30,000 and they are talking to people on four times that salary who are not doing the work that is asked of them and, instead, are going off on another agenda. We must decentralise decision-making back to councillors, who are the democratic voice in local authorities, to make sure the civil servants who are paid to do a job are actually doing it. We need mechanisms to do that and to ensure there is accountability. If a chief executive, director of service or any member of a local authority is not doing the job he or she is resourced and paid to do by the State, he or she must be held accountable.

For semi-State bodies that are State funded, such as Transport Infrastructure Ireland, Eir, ESB and Uisce Éireann, there needs to be an orbit within local authorities to ensure overlap and joined-up thinking. In the case of TII's local transport plans for towns and villages, for example, there may be simple, quick fixes that could improve safety, whether by way of an ex-

tension of a footpath for a school or installation of speed ramps. Engineers in local authorities have to wait almost a year for approval for such low-cost safety measures. That could all be devolved to local authorities with the stroke of a pen, as opposed to councils having to beg TII for low-cost measures, which are not a priority for it, such as pedestrian crossings, extensions of footpaths or initiating safe routes to school. Decisions on such matters must all be devolved and kept within local authorities.

I look forward to working with the Minister of State and supporting his efforts in this area. He came up through the local authority in Waterford and he understands the situation in minute detail. We need to be granular and minute to get it right, rather than being lofty in our thoughts. It is about decentralising decision-making within local communities.

**Senator Victor Boyhan:** I propose to share time with my colleague Senator Joe Conway.

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

**Senator Victor Boyhan:** The Minister of State is very welcome. I will not reiterate what others said about his experience as a councillor. Local government remains underutilised, under-resourced and underfinanced. I hope the task force will recommend the devolution of more powers, supports and functions to councils and their elected representatives. I thank the members of the Seanad Public Consultation Committee, including the Cathaoirleach, who worked on this. The committee gave a lot of time to come up with its report. We did not give it enough debate and examine it in enough detail, considering the amount of work that went into it, but we are doing so now. I welcome that a task force will be established.

I thank the Oireachtas Library and Research Service for its impeccable work on this issue. We initiated a scoping report exercise and asked the service to come up with a document. I recommend that everyone get a copy of it before leaving the House today. The service reviewed local government functions from 1993 to 2024. We needed to ascertain facts as to how many powers had been taken back, including under Part 8 of the Planning and Development Regulations 2001 to 2015, and how central government has more and more dragged back certain powers. I recommend the report because it is highly resourced, factual and full of integrity. Everyone should read it.

The report touched on a key measure that I hope the task force will examine, which is sources of income. As we know, there are four key sources of income for local government, namely, Government grants and subsidies, goods and services, commercial rates and the local property tax. We need to re-examine that situation. If we do not address financing for local government, we are going nowhere. I hope the task force will examine and seek to implement the 25 recommendations in the report. There is no point in revolving the wheel here. I thank the AILG, the Local Authority Members Association, LAMA, and other organisations for the various reports the Minister of State mentioned, which are important.

I am an advocate for all councillors but I am particularly an advocate for Independent councillors. I remind the Minister of State, not that he needs a reminder, that there are 193 Independent councillors serving in local government. They do not have party headquarters or the same resources as other councillors have. I hope that will be reflected in terms of the membership of the task force. I do not know but I have heard suggestions and rumours about some of the people who may be on it. I hope it will be an open and transparent process. I strongly recommend people of experience like Noel Dempsey, one of the most reforming Ministers for local

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government we had in my lifetime. I would also like for Senators in this House who have vast experience in local government or Senators who made a huge input into the committee to be considered.

I will flag some issues that are important because time is running out. I would like the task force to have a look at the following issues, namely, the full implementation of the Moorhead report; improved remuneration for all councillors; ending the 20-year cut-off date for gratuity; the possibility of a pension for councillors; increased vouched expenses - it is vouched expenses for which I am advocating; and expand the capacity of local government to deliver efficient services. The Minister of State will be aware of the constitutional provisions under Article 28A of the Constitution. That is an important factor that should be borne in mind by the task force; ultimately, councillors have an electoral mandate.

I ask that the task force look at a number of issues because they are important. I ask it to look at the AILG and LAMA reports. I ask it to look at the auditing powers of local authorities and the need for proper accountancy for and accountability of auditors. I have heard of council meetings where they have dealt with auditor's reports in five minutes. The manager said there is nothing to worry about lads, move on, and it was rubber-stamped. That cannot happen. I am calling for a separate audit committee every year to review the auditors recommendations publicly. I ask for the reform of the joint policing committees, JPCs. As a matter of fact, I saw an article this morning in *The Connacht Tribune* that was published on 26 May with the headline "Government slammed for 'mess' of replacing JPCs.". Little progress has been made and a number of councillors are cited in it. I will send the Minister of State a copy.

We need to look at the Part 8 derogation. We also need to look at security allowances for councillors. I understand from a Commencement matter last week in the name of one of the Minister of State's colleagues that he is looking at that and that is good. If we can make a case for security allowances for TDs, we can make a case for the same for others. I hope some of us in this House with experience will be considered eligible and knowledgeable enough to make a contribution to the task force on many issues. It is an important one.

I want the Minister of State to look again at the municipal districts and the area committees. Many of these do not have funding. For example, in Dublin city and county we have area committees. We do not have municipal districts. I will finish on that. I welcome the fact the Minister of State is here. I ask one other thing, which is the Minister of State might look at the local authority administration Bill introduced by the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, and which fell. It was a good Bill and there were many aspects to it. The Minister of State might have a look at that.

**Senator Joe Conway:** I extend the House's welcome to my Déise Oireachtas colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy John Cummins. Only in the previous two hours, I received an email from one of my councillors but I will not say where. She gave me permission to use part of it in the debate this afternoon. I am using it in anonymised fashion and I will redact some of it. It states:

Dear Senator Conway, thank you for contacting me but this situation has been a real shock to me [she is talking about the lack of remuneration during time off for sickness] and something that left me a bit worried prior to my co-option, even though I took a career break from my permanent, part-time job to ensure I could manage the role. I live with multiple sclerosis - it is 28 years since the diagnosis - so I am an old hack at managing things now.

Thankfully, my health is now reasonably stable due to excellent infusions but occasionally, like anyone, I can get chest infections and they tend to hit me hard due to the impact of infusions on my immune system. As yet, I did not have need for any time off work but it does worry me that if I got a severe chest infection or Covid or such, I might need a few weeks off or some extended time off and I would miss essential meetings and thereby be penalised for non-attendance. Additionally, it is not a given that you can stay on certain infusions forever and should I need to change, my health would not be as stable.

People with long term illnesses and conditions deserve to represent constituents in local government along with all other citizens, but should we not be in a position to attend meetings for a period of time due to illness, we would lose out even if appropriate GP certification is available to prove one is on genuine sick leave.

That is not any news to the Minister of State and I was a victim of that myself back when we soldiered together in the council in 2018. This is a stark and gross injustice to councillors. As far as I know, they are the only group of people - employees is not the word - who serve who are so victimised in that they have no redress when they go out on sick leave because, as the Minister of State and I know, their pay is docked if they go under a certain number of attendances. That is hugely unfair. This is not an isolated incident. This happens to dozens of councillors every year. When the Minister of State and I were on the council together, we often used to say to the city and county engineers it is your job to bring us solutions, not excuses. Routinely, governments have stated that councillors are an exceptional case because they are not really employees and it is a representational allowance. That is balderdash.

If there is a will, there is a way. Má tá toil ann, tá slí ann. If the Government wants to fix this tiny problem in the whole fiscal ambit, it can do it more or less at the stroke of a pen. It is time. It is time because hapless councillors are being penalised, year in, year out, not because they have done anything wrong but because they had the misfortune to get sick. That is not acceptable in this day and age.

**Senator Sharon Keogan:** Hear, hear.

**Senator Mary Fitzpatrick:** I welcome the Minister of State. I thank him for coming to the House and gabhaim comhghairdeas on his appointment as Minister of State with responsibility for local government. He is an excellent choice for the role, having served as a local authority member and knowing the local authority system as intimately as he does. I have great confidence and ambition for the outcome of his local government task force.

If I was to say nothing else to him today, I would tell him to get on with it more than anything. There are 31 independent local authorities in our country. We have had many reports on our local government system, many of them in the recent past. I am very pleased that in the term of the previous Government between 2020 and 2024, we made significant investment in local government. It was in excess of an additional €2 billion and that is not including the housing budgets. It consisted of the urban regeneration and development fund, URDF, the rates waivers and we made progress on the Moorhead report for the councillors. That is all really welcome but if this local democracy task force is to have any meaning, it must be timebound. It must be well informed with strong representation from the elected members of our 31 local authorities. I believe there should be representatives also from both Houses; the Seanad and the Dáil. Many of us have served at local authority level and now have the privilege to work in the Seanad and the Dáil so we can see it from both sides and contribute to strengthening our

local democracy.

Most importantly, the task force should not just make recommendations but in parallel and at the same time, include an implementation plan in the report for those recommendations because urgency is needed. It was my great honour and privilege to have first been elected to serve on Dublin City Council in 2004. It is an enormous privilege to represent your local community. It is an incredible honour to be a voice for the people you live with and the people you get the opportunity to serve. That is in stark contrast to the frustrations of being an elected representative because, as other Members have said, you are the front line. You truly are the front line in the housing crisis, if there is a water crisis, in Covid or if there is a storm. Along with those public servants working in each of our 31 local authorities, local authority members are the front line of our democracy so we need to value them and invest in them. I really believe in the points that have been raised already and agree with the issues around the functioning of the local authorities, the value that is being placed on them, the way the powers have been stripped away - the Library and Research Service have very helpfully documented it over a time - but any of us involved in local decisions know that anecdotally. More important, the people we represent know it, because they come to their local authority when there are moments of frustration and disappointment in their communities. They are dismayed when they find out it is not a matter for the local authority or councillor and that it may be a matter of the NTA, the TII, the OPR or any number of anonymous State-funded organisations that our citizens are paying their tax to fund to provide a service but are at such a remove from the lived experience of the citizens we represent. The task force on democracy needs to consider a rebalancing of the powers.

As other Members have said, in rebalancing the powers it must also examine the funding of our local authorities. There is major frustration among local authorities in that they can identify the issues and, more important, the opportunities to solve the problems. Dublin City Council identified many housing solutions. Then there is the matter of the tortuous and glacial pace at which the opportunities are progressed because of the back-and-forth, due diligence, cost-benefit analyses and all the processes that are going on at a pace that is not fit for purpose. People are living in the real world and in the here and now and they want local, national and international government to respond at the same pace as they live their lives. They expect that. It is not an unreasonable expectation.

When I think of the back-and-forth that goes on, I note the CEOs of our local authorities are paid a very fine salary and pension, which local authority members are not paid. We give the latter very significant resources to come up with plans, including development plans, budgets, housing plans, recreation plans, integration plans, parks plans and traffic plans – endless plans – and then we second-guess them. We bring them back and forth and back and forth, not over weeks and months but over years. That is not good enough and we need to see this change. We need to see recommendations in the democracy task force that will include implementation plans for making the changes to make our local government more responsive and agile.

I want to talk about local authority members. It was huge privilege for me to have been elected to represent my local community. It is a huge privilege for any member of a local authority to be elected. After the moment of celebration comes the immediate realisation of the enormity of the task and the paucity of the resources. Our local authority members – it does not matter if they are Independents, members of Sinn Féin or the Green Party----

**Senator Victor Boyhan:** All of them.

**Senator Mary Fitzpatrick:** -----all put themselves forward for election out of a desire to serve their communities. I do not believe they go forward for any other reason but that. The State needs to support them. Senator Joe Conway described one of our councillors who is suffering with an illness and he said they did nothing wrong. Not only did they not do anything wrong but they did something incredibly generous and great. They gave up their time, talent, energy and life to put themselves forward to serve their local community. At a minimum, when councillors need some help, they should be supported. That is the basic minimum they should be provided with. That they do not get a pension but instead get a gratuity, that the payment of that gratuity is delayed and that it is held in escrow, not gaining anything for them or anybody else for that matter, is inefficient and incompetent and needs to be rectified. Councillors need to be supported with professional services. They need help obtaining independent legal advice and secretarial support, and they need to be equipped to do the job the State is asking them to do. All of them are willing and able and all of them, given the right support, will make an even greater contribution than they are already making.

The Minister of State has our full support. The Fianna Fáil group is delighted to be in a position to be able to contribute. We look forward to working with him and his officials to make the task force successful. As I said earlier, however, we want to see representation from the councillors. AILG and LAMA are the representative bodies and have contributed. I am aware the Minister of State has met their officials but we want to see councillors adequately represented on the task force. We want to see Members from both Houses on the task force and we want to see it time bound. We want to see an implementation plan with the recommendations.

**An Leas-Chathaoirleach:** I believe Senators Collins and Andrews wish to share their time.

**Senator Joanne Collins:** Yes.

**An Leas-Chathaoirleach:** Is that agreed? Agreed.

**Senator Joanne Collins:** I welcome the Minister of State. I welcome the progress towards the local democracy task force. My party has long called for more power to be given back to our local elected members. Ireland has the most centralised system of local government in Europe, with limited democratic decision-making powers and insufficient funding and resources for local authorities. While the EU average for tax revenue spent at local level is 23%, in Ireland it is just 8%. Our overly centralised system means far too many decisions are being made by unelected officials. Local councillors are often the backbone of their communities and should be able to reflect the reality on the ground in policy and action.

There has been talk of creating this task force for many years and the lack of progress is very frustrating. Unfortunately, recommendations of the committee have already not been acted upon. It is four months since the Government was established and it was recommended that the task force be up and running within three. Therefore, it is behind and the Government must really put more focus on progressing it once and for all.

We are concerned that the Government proposal focuses only on rebalancing power between the executive and the elected members. The reality is that autonomy has been stripped away from our local authorities and placed back with central government. That imbalance must also be addressed. We encourage the Government to consider this in drafting the terms of reference for the task force.

We also need to ensure membership is fair and balanced so everybody is and feels properly

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represented. An all-Ireland approach should be taken as we continue planning for and building towards unity. The results of the task force could be long lasting, so it would be good to see thought put into it.

Town councils must be a key focus of the task force. A clear timeline must be produced for their reintroduction. They were an important cornerstone of local democracy that was ripped away by Fine Gael. Citizens, trade unions, local businesses and business associations have been calling for the restoration of town councils. While the town councils of old were not perfect, the solution should have been to reform and rebuild local democracy at town level, not just demolish it. Alongside this, the task force must examine the burden of work undertaken by councillors and the need to consider paying councillors a full-time wage. The Oireachtas has found that councillors spend an average of 32.5 hours working on council work each week. Sinn Féin wants to see greater accountability in local councils. There needs to be a thorough review of local government with a view to increasing powers and responsibilities of both the elected councillors and those who elect them.

We believe local authorities must be reformed. Accountability and transparency must be at the core of what they do. People must be able to access information and we must work to remove the barriers that prevent them from doing so.

The election of the directly elected mayor in Limerick represented good progress, and we need to look at rolling it out further in other cities. In particular, a directly elected mayor of Dublin must be part of the package of reforms that devolve powers from the centre to local government, giving communities more say in how the capital city is run. This would be a big boost for local democracy. The task force needs to focus on real, meaningful ways of decentralising local democracy.

**Senator Chris Andrews:** I thank the Minister of State for coming to the House and I wish him well in his job. I have not seen him since his appointment. It is in everyone's interest that he is successful. I have a couple of observations. I agree with Senator Fitzpatrick that councillors are on the front line. They have their fingers on the pulse of various events and issues that flare up in every constituency. Often, they are the link to the local authority. My local council is Dublin City Council, DCC, and I see the connection between the local councillors and management. In the past four or five years, however, the relationship between councillors and the management in DCC has become increasingly poor. Morale on the council is increasingly poor. As has been said, the money councillors are paid needs to be increased for the hours they put in. While the figure of 32 and a half hours was given, I believe a huge number of councillors do a lot more. It is not a nine-to-five job; they are on call 24-7. They do not get rewarded enough for that.

A few councillors have spoken to me about the morale in DCC and made the point that the housing section of the council is not responding to them. The atmosphere and culture within the staff management is increasingly poor. In fact, one councillor emailed the housing allocations section of DCC a number of times and it has been three weeks since a response was received. Equally, councillors have concerns in respect of the traffic management changes throughout the city. The most recent change is the no-left turn onto Pearse Street, which is causing a lot of difficulty and concerns for people. In the run-up to that change, the management had almost no engagement with local councillors or meetings with residents. They would not facilitate any information meetings with residents.

It is poor that councillors are being treated with disdain. They are the cornerstone of democracy and their role is important. Despite this, in DCC the relationship between councillors and management is increasingly poor. I am not sure if that is the case in all local authorities. While the management says it is a resourcing issue and that it does not have the staff, the staff say it is a management issue. Whatever the reasons are, it must improve. A constituent of one councillor, who also contacted me, had to wait eight weeks to meet a housing adviser. That individual could have been homeless at that stage. It is just not acceptable. While it is not clear whether it is resources, bad management or bad work practice, whatever the reasons are, it is the Minister of State's job to ensure local authorities work well and respond to the local councillors. They give everything for their local communities. It is very deflating when they are treated so poorly by the management in local authorities. I presume that contributes to a lot of people deciding not to run again in elections. It is about respecting councillors and ensuring that management engages with councillors in a real, genuine and meaningful way rather than just railroading them, which seems to be happening more frequently.

**An Leas-Chathaoirleach:** I understand Senators Noonan and Cosgrove are sharing time. Is that agreed? Agreed.

**Senator Nessa Cosgrove:** I welcome the Minister of State. I would also welcome the establishment of a task force. As other Senators have said, recent research into the role of a 21st-century councillor carried out by the AILG revealed, as any of us who have had the privileged position of being an elected county councillor, as I was for a short time on Sligo County Council, will know, that the role is multifaceted. Councillors work on the front line and have many roles, including advocating for local communities, trying to solve problems, trying to fix things and providing a lot of information. Another key finding of this research - anyone who has been a councillor will be acutely aware of this - is that the role of local councillors is changing and developing. As more complex and technical aspects are added into the role, it is crucial councillors are given the training and support they need. A huge part of that, as has come up in every contribution, is a proper wage. Doing the job of an elected representative on a local authority properly is a full-time job. It is a highly responsible job and should be paid as such. If we expect local councillors to hold the local authority to account, we need to be prepared to pay an adequate wage that will attract top-quality people into the role.

I welcome the recognition in the programme for Government of the need to enhance local authorities' fiscal autonomy. A large part of that will be through funding and certainty of funding. What I found so frustrating as a new councillor was being dependent on annual Government grants, whether they were for roads, parks or public spaces, which required the local authority to apply for certain grants under various schemes. This approach introduces more bureaucracy which then distracts from the services by the executive which can be offered to the local authority and impacts on the elected members' ability to prioritise and direct how the council is to deliver its services. I cannot understand why there are not certain levels of funding that are directed, particularly for things like play parks or recreational facilities and their upkeep, which needs to be done every so often.

The enhancement of local authorities' fiscal autonomy is dependent on certainty and stability of this funding. This kind of certainty would lead to an increased congeniality among elected members and improve decision-making as priorities can be agreed strategically and with consensus over the course of the life of an elected council rather than resulting in an annual scramble and the distribution of piecemeal projects which reinforces the concept of clientelism and undermines the vision of a 21st-century councillor, as outlined in the AILG report.

**Senator Malcolm Noonan:** I welcome the Minister of State and I thank him for his time today. Like other Members, I very proudly served as a local authority member. I spent 16 years on Kilkenny Corporation – that is what I call it – and then Kilkenny County Council after another Kilkenny man decided in 2014 to abolish it, unfortunately. This is the premise of some of the other contributions. Kilkenny had a unique place in Irish history. The first minutes of Kilkenny Corporation date back to 1231, to the *Liber Primus Kilkenniensis*, and Kilkenny was granted city status by charter in 1609. The abolition was detrimental to the urban authority. While not wanting to look back, when we look at the important future challenges facing local government, such as climate action, the nature restoration plan, active travel, public transport, community policing, sustainable drainage systems, nature-based solutions and all of these broad, big issues with which local authority members must grapple, we need that dedicated tier of urban authority, and a network of them. It is important that once you are part of that network, you are part of a European network that can be tapped into for sharing projects and best practice.

The issue of directly elected mayors has been mentioned. We cannot row back on the commitment. It is working well in Limerick. With regard to the Minister of State's role, we need to have a directly elected mayor in our capital city. That is absolutely vital. That issue needs to be dealt with by this task force. We need to grapple with that. Currently, our town hall has been ripped out for a tourist attraction. What happens if we decide to reinstate the city council? It is just so unfortunate. We must look at that. Each local authority needs to have in place a dedicated EU unit where it can tap into EU partnership projects and funding.

**Senator Sharon Keogan:** Hear, hear.

**Senator Malcolm Noonan:** That is hugely important. The other thing I worked on in my previous role was dedicated heritage teams. That is starting to roll out, whereby we have archivists, archaeologists, architectural conservation officers, ACOs, and heritage officers.

Crucial to all of this, however, and this goes back to the comments other Members have made, is around the role of elected members and the responsibility. Sometimes, bad decisions which are pushed by the executive fall back on local authority members. As we have discussed previously, that element of participative planning and moving out of that token consultation really has to be fundamental to how local authorities work. It makes for better decision making, more inclusion and everybody feeling that their voices have been heard on the issue of the spending of public money. The experience I found, from talking to elected members as I was out on the Seanad campaign trail, was that they feel demoralised. The issue of pay has been mentioned but their workload is really so demanding right now. It is weekdays, weekends, holidays and it is non-stop. We need to look at the other elements of the Moorhead report that have not been grappled with, particularly with regard to that policy-making role and trying to ensure there is a better work-life balance for elected members.

It is important to acknowledge the incredible role that local authorities play in our daily lives, from our library services to our arts and heritage officers. All of that makes a really positive contribution to the daily lives of people that perhaps communities themselves do not realise. Local authority members should feel very proud of the role that they play on a daily basis in ensuring that grants go to local communities and should feel supported in the efforts they are making around community heritage initiatives.

Generally, I welcome the establishment of this task force. I urge the Minister of State to be brave and radical. We need to look at new funding mechanisms for local government and

consider the establishment of energy supply companies. Could local authorities be involved in that? There has to be more devolution of revenue-raising powers to local government so that members can feel they have a hand and part in shaping the future of the communities they serve. Collectively we are all agreed here that our local government system is broken. It does fantastic work. Local authority members and staff do fantastic work but there is something fundamentally and deeply flawed when we continually look at taking away more powers, centralising power and having a clientelist system between the executive and councillors who are waiting for scraps from the table in order to make decisions that the executives want to push through. That has to be addressed. The elected members need to feel that their voices are heard, that they are representing their communities and that they have a work-life balance that makes them want to continue in local government. That needs to be at the core of what this task force looks at. Again, I know that the Minister of State has reform at the core of what he is trying to achieve and I urge him to be brave and courageous about it. If we continue the way we are going, we are just not going to attract good people to stand in local elections. That is the real challenge we have, right across the country. The political parties here know that it is very hard to find people because it is a very tough business to be in. There is an awful lot of online abuse and general abuse of local authority members.

We have all had that experience but for me, it was an enriching one in my political career. I was a councillor for 16 years and while I was the only Green in the village for a long time, I still found it to be a very enriching experience. It gives us a political grounding to enable us to come into this Chamber or into the Dáil Chamber to continue our political work on behalf of the communities we serve. I wish the Minister of State well. He has our full support for all of the efforts he has set out over the next number of years.

**Senator Fiona O'Loughlin:** I thank the Minister of State for the opportunity to have a discussion on a really important topic that has an impact on all of our lives. 1898 was the year that local government came into being and local councils were set up. My grandfather, Joseph O'Loughlin, was on the very first Kildare County Council. He died when my father was only seven, so we did not know him but 20 years after that, my father was elected to serve. Many years after that I was elected to serve in another area so I can say, with great pride, that three generations of my family served in three centuries. It is because of that background that I learned about how important local democracy is and how important it is to listen to people and be able to bring their concerns and challenges to the office of what was formerly the county manager, now chief executive, to the door of officials and also to the Chamber. We all know that some issues are better dealt with outside of the Chamber.

We have excellent public representatives who represent us right around the country, both party members and Independents. The organisations that serve them deserve mention. AILG, which represents and supports the role of our elected councillors, is a very strong voice for local communities through its work. It has produced two excellent reports, *The 21st Century Councillor in Irish Local Government*, published in December 2023, and *Building Stronger Local Government*, which was published in November 2024. We all need to take note of what those reports say. Limerick Councillor Kieran O'Hanlon, the current president of the AILG, and his team do really excellent work. The Local Authority Members Association, LAMA, is also deserving of mention. All of the political parties had meetings with LAMA recently. The Fianna Fáil group had a meeting with Brian Lawlor, Damien Ryan and Michael Anglim from LAMA about two weeks ago. It does a lot of good work. One of the really important things it does is showcase the very best of what happens in local authorities around the country in terms

of their national awards. That is something that I would like to see brought here to Leinster House because it is important to showcase good examples and see how we can inspire others.

There is no doubt that local government is not just the cornerstone but the beating heart of our democracy. It is responsible for so many of the essential services that we depend on but it also helps to build communities around libraries, arts centres, playgrounds and leisure facilities, and by facilitating LEOs and all of the work it does with local businesses. Strong local government is absolutely essential for the future of our democracy. I would go further and say that weak local government undermines democracy because that reduces accountability, limits citizen participation and makes it harder for residents to engage with their local representatives. That leads to an inadequate resource distribution. One of the areas that I would really like to see the task force looking at is section 149 of the 2001 Act which provides that every act of the local authority which is not a reserved function is automatically an executive function. Time after time, and I experienced it myself as a councillor, we hear that X is not a reserved function and so it is nothing to do with the councillors. The relationship between management, staff, officials and councillors is important but most certainly we need to empower the councillors in terms of their functions and resources. We need to support them by ensuring they have adequate resources and supports, both financially and in other ways.

The terms of reference are currently under consideration, as is the membership of the task force. It is really important that the task force has members who are also members of local councils, so that they can speak on their behalf. That would probably be best done through the AILG and LAMA. We all voted on the principle of subsidiarity in the context of the Maastricht treaty. That principle is about decisions being made as close to citizens as possible. A rebalancing of power between the elected councillor and the officials and restoring town councils must be a priority.

**An Leas-Chathaoirleach:** There are five speakers left and about 15 minutes on the clock, so I propose that each speaker will have three minutes. Is that agreed?

**Senator Sharon Keogan:** No, it is not agreed. This is a really important debate on the task force.

**An Leas-Chathaoirleach:** I know, but I have to bring in the Minister of State at 6.05 p.m.

**Senator Sharon Keogan:** It is a pity we were only allocated an hour and a half for this debate. If it is agreed, it is agreed.

**An Leas-Chathaoirleach:** Is it agreed by the House? Agreed. There are five speakers with three minutes each, including me. I call Senator Lynch.

**Senator Eileen Lynch:** Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire. It is important that we discuss the local democracy task force today and the important role of local government across the country. The programme for Government recognises that real democracy begins at local level. It was in this spirit that the Seanad's local democracy task force produced its reports. The findings were clear: local government in Ireland is underpowered, under-resourced and in urgent need of reform. Having served as a councillor on Cork County Council from 2019 until February this year, I am acutely aware of the continual erosion of the powers of local representatives since the introduction of the Local Government Reform Act 2014, including the abolition of urban district councils and town councils. I acknowledge and commend the work of our councillors. It is an alleged part-time role that in reality is full time. Too often, the role of councillors is misun-

derstood or underestimated. They play an instrumental role in delivering housing through local area plans, supporting local communities, advocating for better roads and water infrastructure and providing a voice for many. The programme for Government committed to establishing a task force on local democracy. It is vital this commitment is now implemented. We need to rebalance the relationship between local and central government. Councillors have a large burden of work yet hold less power and authority than many of their European colleagues. They face online abuse and harassment and security concerns but continue relentlessly to represent their localities to a very high standard. We need to provide greater remuneration and support for councillors and ensure they have meaningful autonomy over key areas from housing and climate resilience to economic development and heritage protection. I noticed during the Seanad campaign a great discrepancy in the powers and functions exercised by councillors from local authority to local authority. Some seem to have much greater input into county development plans and local area plans than others. Some local authorities provide discretionary funds for councillors to allocate and others do not. This is not good enough. We need a national conversation, as was mentioned, about subsidiarity. We need to place more trust in our councillors. I ask the Minister to outline a timeline for the establishment and implementation of the local democracy task force as promised in the programme for Government. I ask that it be centred on the lived experience of councillors. We have had enough of reviews and consultations. We need to take action.

**Senator Sharon Keogan:** I rise not just as a Senator but as someone who, like many Senators, has worked on the front lines of local government. I say without hesitation the treatment of our local government and the continued centralisation of power is a disgrace. Successive Governments, including on the other side of the House and the Green Party, stripped communities of their voices, representation and ability to shape their own futures. It was done in the name of efficiency but we lost democracy. We were promised reform but what we got was centralisation. We need more councillors with more decisions made locally and less power handed to unelected executives. Let us look at one example, which is last year's abolition of joint policing committees. They were perfectly good forms for co-operation between local authorities, elected representatives and An Garda Síochána. In their place, we have been given local community safety partnerships, the roll-out of which has been a mess. Local community safety partnerships are touted as more directly involved with local communities yet they circumvent those same communities' elected and democratically accountable representatives. Our systems are marred by confusion and imbalance. In Ireland, the chief executive is appointed not elected. They make decisions. Councillors, the people's representatives, are left to rubber-stamp budgets and pass motions that can be ignored. That is not democracy; that is a two-tier system where the elected are left to explain decisions they did not make. We could help to rectify this situation tomorrow. For instance, councillors have no access to experienced advisers and we do in the Oireachtas. I propose the appointment of independent legal, planning and financial advisers for all councillors, to be appointed by the council chair every five years. Another inequality in our democracy is the cap on councillors, limiting them to gratuity payments for no more than 20 years of service. No such cap exists in these Houses. Either place on a cap on years of service for all or allow councillors to serve and be recognised for as long as their constituents continue to elect them. This mess and confused half measure must end.

Another issue is the vouched expenses of €4,200. This can be used for admin support. However, it is not enough. It needs to be increased twofold. Even that would give councillors nine hours of administration support per week. It gets worse. Let us also consider the fact, which I have tried to raise in this Chamber for some time, that councillors are not even exempt

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from commercial rates. Can you believe it? There is no councillor on the Housing Agency yet there are chief executives.

I call on the Government to clarify membership of the local democracy task force and on what basis and criteria its composition will be determined. On this issue, we cannot be treated like mushrooms, kept in the dark and fed manure. I welcome the establishment of the local democracy task force but I say to the Government, be bold. Do not tinker around the edges. Do not give us another report that gathers dust on a shelf. Give us real reform. Restore town councils, empower councillors, rebalance the relationship between elected members and executives and give local government the power it needs to serve the people. Independent councillors are the third-largest elected body. To leave them out would be unwise. Please be inclusive of Independent councillors.

**Senator Seán Kyne:** I welcome the Minister of State. I wish him well in his endeavours and with the local democracy task force. I acknowledge the work by his predecessors John Paul Phelan, Deputy Peter Burke and senior Ministers on the Moorhead report. We need it fully enacted. I commend representatives of LAMA and the AILG on their work on behalf of elected members lobbying and making representations. Will the Minister of State provide clarity on town councils? I think he said they would not interfere in the workings of the municipal area. There are large towns that a case could justly be made for but there were town councils with a quota for election of 78 and an electorate of 1,000 in 2004. There were also large towns with thousands in population that did not have a town council. Town councils were not fair but that is not to say they would not have a role. There was concern at the time that the areas surrounding the town councils outside the town boundary suffered and did not get their share when there was a strong town council. As the population continues to grow, will councils continue to increase and at what number do they become unwieldy?

The salaries of mayors and cathaoirleach changed in 2014. They need to be looked at again. It is a disincentive to taking up what should be an honourable position. In some cases, they are full-time positions and councillors may have to give up their jobs or cut down hours to take on the role of mayor or cathaoirleach, particularly. I am sure Dubbin City Council and Cork City Council may be different but in other local authorities it is a disincentive. City area chairs in some areas such as Cork city do not get an allowance to chair area meetings. No one has ever raised this issue with me but I have experienced it. It is more of an issue for local authorities but I raise the idea of drivers for cathaoirleach. In a county the size of Galway, someone could be driving from Portumna to Clifden or Carna to Williamstown. He or she is preparing for the next meeting, thinking and may be rushing, within the speed limit, of course. The least cathaoirleach should have is a driver or the option to have one. They may not have to use them every day but perhaps it could be explored in possible reforms. Auto-enrolment for pensions is coming in. Why are councillors not included? Newer members need the certainty of having a set pension.

*6 o'clock*

**Senator Sarah O'Reilly:** Local government is the closest form of government to the people. Its finger is on the pulse of what people need. The Minister of State is aware it is under-resourced, underappreciated and overburdened. He should be aware of the previous report that stated that Ireland has one of the most centralised governments in Europe. It is time to reverse the dominance of central government over local government and the dominance of chief executives over councillors. Councillors are crying out for more powers and councils are crying out for more devolved powers.

Councillors should be entitled to decent pensions. The maximum gratuity needs to be increased from 20 years to 30 years, and Departments are micromanaging from Dublin.

This House voted in the past to reduce the powers of councillors. Much to the disbelief and surprise of many of us, it voted against letting us go on JPCs, ETBs and university panels. We need to preserve and increase autonomy for councillors in the local authority system.

Remuneration for councillors needs to be looked at again. The Moorhead report, which I read, does not consider that a councillor's job is a full-time job. It is a full-time job. It is 24-7, weekends, Christmas Day and Easter Sunday. It is all days.

There needs to be a mechanism for local authorities to be able to raise revenue powers locally. A good functioning democracy is a good functioning local authority.

The Minister of State mentioned the area committee. What are these, and will they be elected? Chief executives are very powerful in councils and they are not elected. Would this be another group of unelected people? I wish to get clarity on that question.

**Senator Frances Black:** I welcome these statements on the local democracy task force. I was proud to be a member of the Seanad Public Consultation Committee in the previous Seanad. We heard some very powerful testimonies from all over the country, from councillors and local government representative organisations North and South, who work at the coalface of their communities, to party leaders, former Ministers and many different experts in local government. The process was very valuable to us as Senators and members of the committee as we heard from a diversity of voices in the Chamber. From this shared experience and expertise, we were able to create an excellent report, which was published in October of last year. One of the outcomes from those hearings was that the committee agreed to the establishment of this local democracy task force. Also within the report were 25 recommendations. Included in the recommendations were potential support for councillors, changes to powers and functions of local authorities and a review of the financing of local government.

The setting up of this task force and implementation of the recommendations are imperative to help strengthen local government. An area that was highlighted repeatedly within these discussions was the deeply unfair and challenging conditions councillors have to face when trying to serve their communities. Councillors' roles within representing their communities can be extremely difficult. I know from speaking to councillors, within my capacity as a Senator, the challenges they face day to day without the support they so badly need.

One of the outcomes from the feedback I received from these sessions and that I introduced in November of last year was the Local Government (Support for Elected Members) Bill 2024. The Bill will provide administrative support for elected members of local authorities to assist in the performance of their duties. These supports are long overdue. I call on all Oireachtas Members to support this Bill as it goes through the legislative process within Leinster House.

It is important to keep the governing of communities at a local level to protect decision-making and planning by local councils, and to move away from any type of centralised system or power. It is vital. We need to value the input we received from a range of stakeholders on this topic. It is to be hoped this new task force can help implement all these positive changes to local government functions.

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## Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad

**Senator Seán Kyne:** I move: “That notwithstanding anything in the Order of the Seanad today, statements on the local democracy task force shall conclude at 6.20 p.m., if not previously concluded.”

**An Leas-Chathaoirleach:** Is that agreed? Agreed.

### Local Democracy Task Force: Statements (Resumed)

**Senator Cathal Byrne:** As this is my first interaction with the Minister of State in the Chamber, I wish him the very best of luck. He brings an enormous amount of experience to the role, having served at local authority level, in this Chamber and now in the Dáil as a Minister of State. I sincerely wish him the best of luck.

I wish to make a number of points, particularly given my experience of having been elected to Wexford County Council on two occasions. The point has been made repeatedly in this Chamber that being a councillor at local authority level is a full-time job, and I wholeheartedly agree with that, having operated as a councillor for almost six years.

I wholeheartedly support the remuneration increase that has been highlighted by previous speakers in this Chamber. I also highlight the fact that, as a Senator, I am entitled to the equivalent of a full-time member of staff to assist me with secretarial work, which is welcome. There should be a greater support put in place for local authority members to support their work with the volume of queries they are receiving, especially now in an era after the Covid pandemic when most contact is made via email. Councillors are finding their inboxes are overwhelmed with the number of emails they receive daily. It is only right and proper they are supported. The current vouched scheme of secretarial support of up to approximately slightly more than €5,000 is simply not suitable for the volume of administrative work that is required to be a successful member of a local authority. I support the previous calls made for a pension system to be brought in and put in place for local authority members, particularly one that is index linked.

It is important we reflect the diverse nature of society and the people who represent us at local authority level. It cannot simply be a fact of life in this country that our local authority members come from one sector of society or from one age bracket. That is simply not suitable.

I support the call for town councils to be reintroduced. I am thinking that, in my own county of Wexford, if the limit was brought in that town councils were restored at 10,000 population as per the last census, that would mean town councils in our two larger towns of Wexford and Enniscorthy. I think that is a model that could work well, provided there is a devolution of powers from central government down through the local authorities and subsequently to town councils. We do not want town councils to be simply a talking chamber. We need them to be chambers that are empowered to make key decisions about the towns they represent.

I highlight the need over this Oireachtas term for more devolution of powers, especially in the area of planning. I note the Minister of State has responsibility for that area. Given his background and expertise in it, I encourage him to devolve more powers back to the local coun-

cils, who understand the issues on the ground better than anyone.

**Senator Maria Byrne:** I thank the Minister of State for coming to discuss this all-important topic.

I come from a local background, having served on Limerick council for 17 years, served as mayor and been an Oireachtas Members for a number of years. The workload has increased tenfold through the years, I think, certainly for councillors. I think back to when I was first elected compared with when I was finishing up as a councillor to come to the Seanad, and the work has increased. The position of a councillor is a full-time role and I too support the call for an increase in salary as well as in pension terms. People are paying PRSI - I paid it myself for 17 years - and getting nothing for it. You are paying a different class of PRSI but yet you are being charged the PRSI, so councillors are very worthy of that.

The directly elected mayor in Limerick has been referred to. While it is working to some extent, there are areas of it that possibly need tweaks in the legislation. I would like the task force, when it is up and running, to look at that in depth. The Minister of State has met with councillors and the mayor, so I know he is aware there are some issues to do with powers and the devolving of powers. It is something that needs to be looked at, and the review possibly needs to be brought forward so we can get that balance right. I believe in the process of a directly elected mayor. I was very proud on the day the plebiscite was passed in Limerick and that we did deliver a directly elected mayor. It has to work but it cannot be at the expense of the councillors either, in that they cannot afford to lose any more powers. There are some powers that should be looked at with regard to giving them back to local authority members.

On the task force, I ask the Minister of State to outline when exactly it will be up and running. Many people are interested in seeing when it will be up and running.

With regard to the discretionary money councillors have, it is hugely beneficial to communities. Talking to local authority councillors, they can give money either to a football club or their local community, be it for a footpath or a small bit of sports gear. Councillors have a feel-good factor when they are able to give back to their community, and I would like to see that being looked at as well. I know it has increased in recent years but perhaps there is scope for more flexibility with it.

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Seán Kyne):** I thank the Senator. The Minister of State has ten minutes to conclude.

**Senator Sarah O'Reilly:** May I correct the record?

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Seán Kyne):** Yes, go on.

**Senator Sarah O'Reilly:** I referenced ETBs, and ETBs were not included.

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Seán Kyne):** All right. I thank the Senator.

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy John Cummins):** I thank the Acting Chair, and I thank all the Senators for their contributions this evening. It was a really useful exercise to hear from them. A total of 17 Senators contributed to the discussion this evening and that shows the interest this Chamber has in local government, as I have myself.

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I will start by addressing elements of the questions raised by Senators around the urgency of establishing the task force, and determining its make-up and timing. A number of Senators raised that. Then I will do my best to go through some of the individual items that have been raised by councillors.

With regard to the membership of the task force, it is my intention that it will be made up of no more than 14 members. It will consist of a number of bodies and representative groups. It is important to say, with regard to councillors' input into that, that I met the AILG and LAMA and I assure them that the terms of reference I am bringing forward on this will reflect the membership make-up they requested, in terms of their own membership in the AILG and LAMA. There will also be representatives from the executive, the National Oversight and Audit Commission and the local government audit service, a member of my Department and independent experts. The chairperson will be announced following approval by Cabinet. I hope a memo will go before Cabinet next week in regard to this, and that we will have the task force up and running quickly thereafter.

I share Senators' concerns regarding this being an elongated process. That is why I will be proposing that it will be timebound so as to be able to bring forward recommendations that are implementable by me, as a number of Senators have referenced. That is important, as is the task force drawing on the reports that have already been commissioned from the Seanad consultation committee and the monitoring group report from the EU - I met that delegation yesterday in the Custom House along with members of AILG and the Irish delegation for the monitoring group - and the two reports already commissioned by the AILG. It is important to say, as I said in my opening remarks, that we are not starting from scratch with this. We are starting with a significant body of work that I hope the task force will be able to draw on, analysing all of the items across four pillars. I hope it will be able to bring recommendations forward to me within nine months.

I will move to some of the items raised by Senators with regard to councillors. I also want to put on record my thanks and appreciation to every person who is representing their local community on a council. They give of their time and they are essentially the first responders on the front line of local democracy. I know from a personal perspective that I certainly would not be able to perform my function as a TD for Waterford without the support of my eight Fine Gael councillors there. The work done by councillors of all parties and none, including Independents, is very important and it is important that we acknowledge them.

Senator PJ Murphy raised a number of items but he touched on the gratuity piece, as did a couple of other Senators. It is important to say that while it is not index-linked, it is related to the remuneration at the time the member will turn 50. That is an important clarification.

Senator Duffy raised items relating to planning, which I know he is very passionate about, and he gave a number of examples. I will continue to engage with him on it.

Senator Boyhan raised the issue of libraries and research, and I join him in complimenting them on the excellent work they carry out. It is important to say, with respect to the work the Seanad has done on this, that I see a role for engagement with Members of the Seanad by the task force. I do not want to go into too much detail because, obviously, those proposals will go to Government next week.

Senator Joe Conway raised issues regarding local authority members who may be subject to

illness. It is important to advise that, with regard to a local authority member who is temporarily unable to fulfil their duties due to illness, the Local Government (Remuneration of Local Authority Members) Regulations 2021 provide that a member of a local authority may be absent for up to six months without any reduction to their remuneration payment, and that was a significant change that was made.

I hope Senator Fitzpatrick will agree that I am getting on with it, in terms of what I have outlined there with respect to the task force and its make-up.

Senators Collins and Andrews and a number of other Senators raised the matter of town councils. It is important that we acknowledge the former town councils were imperfect. There were 80 town councils that represented approximately 14% of the population. We now have 95 municipal districts that represent 100% of the population, with Cork, Dublin and Galway having their own area committees. That is something the task force will examine.

Senator Noonan touched on the EU unit within local authorities. There is a role for joined-up thinking between the assemblies with regard to maximising the drawdown of EU funding. There is a common theme in what Senator Cosgrove and others said regarding financial autonomy, and that will be examined as part of the task force.

As regards the remarks of Senators Lynch and O'Loughlin, I outlined the make-up of the committee. Senators Keogan and Kyne also referenced town councils and I hope I have addressed that issue for them.

Senator Black is right in referencing the huge body of work that was done by the Seanad consultation committee. As I said, it will form a basis for that. With regard to the comments by both Senators Byrne, we need to ensure that we support the work of councillors. There is scope in the task force terms of reference to make recommendations in that respect.

Suffice it to say, a really important body of work is going to be conducted over the next period. I am passionate about local government. However, I need recommendations to come forward that are practical, implementable and that will strengthen that relationship for local councillors to ensure the principle of subsidiarity is maintained and strengthened in our system of local democracy. It is also important to ensure councillors are engaged at the earliest point in decision-making regardless of whether it is a reserved function or an executive function and that councillors are empowered to be able to hold the Executive to account by getting data that they are able to utilise. I referenced that in my opening remarks.

I thank all the Members for their contributions. I wish the task force well with its work when it is approved by the Government, hopefully within the next week. I thank everybody in advance for their service on the committee because they have an extensive body of work to do.

*Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 6.21 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 6.33 p.m.*

*Sitting suspended at 6.21 p.m. and resumed at 6.33 p.m.*

27 May 2025

**An Cathaoirleach:** The Minister of State is most welcome to the House.

**Senator Robbie Gallagher:** I move:

That Seanad Éireann resolves that the period of operation of sections 1 to 7 and 9 of the Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2021 (No. 14 of 2021) be extended for a further period of 6 months, beginning on the 1st day of June, 2025 and ending on the 30th day of November, 2025.

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Niall Collins):** I am here to introduce the resolution to extend the sunset clause in the Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2021. The extension of this Act will allow the hospitality sector to continue to provide the sale or supply of intoxicating liquor in outdoor seating areas. Senators will be aware that the Act was introduced in July 2021. The provisions of the 2021 Act were in place until 30 November 2021, and have been further extended seven times by resolutions of each of the Houses of the Oireachtas, in November 2021, May 2022, November 2022, May 2023, November 2023, May 2024 and October 2024. On 8 May 2025 the Minister, Deputy Jim O’Callaghan, brought this motion before Dáil Éireann and it was agreed to renew these provisions for an additional six months until 30 November 2025.

Section 9(4) of the Act provides that the relevant provisions of the Act can be extended for up to six months at a time if a resolution approving its continuation has been passed by both Houses of the Oireachtas. On 6 May 2025 the Government agreed the extension of the Act for a further six months. The Government took this decision in recognition of and in response to the ongoing demand for such facilities to allow businesses to operate with clarity and certainty with regard to the law on outdoor dining services. Therefore, I am bringing forward a proposal that the Act should continue in operation until 30 November 2025. The measures provided for in the 2021 Act were put in place to facilitate licensed premises to provide outdoor seating in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. These measures also allow An Garda Síochána to regulate and enforce these provisions in the course of its ordinary responsibilities enforcing licensing laws, providing An Garda Síochána with the power to direct licenceholders to comply with this legislation as it relates to outdoor seating areas, facilitates the enforcement of the Act and is an important safeguard.

The House will agree that it is essential An Garda Síochána continues to have clarity with regard to its powers for public order purposes, and equally that licensed premises owners understand their obligations to maintain order in outside public areas where they are selling alcohol. Although Covid-19 is less prevalent, it has not been eliminated. The Government considers it to be in the public interest to provide for the sale or supply of intoxicating liquor in certain circumstances in seating areas located outside licensed premises. It allows licensees of such premises to conduct business and operate in these outdoor seating areas. It is important to extend this operational period for a further six months to give clarity to licensed premises, local authorities and An Garda Síochána.

The increased availability and popularity of outdoor dining and socialising has been welcomed by many. Its innovation is reflective of the demand for more variety and choice in the ways in which we socialise and in the types of venues and social spaces that are available. It is also crucial to the viability of many businesses across our towns and cities. The extension

of these provisions clarifies the position of licenceholders who wish to sell and serve alcohol adjacent to licensed premises in an area approved by the relevant local authority. At present, these premises have no remedy to extend their licence to include that area under existing legislation. Senators will be aware that the Minister secured Cabinet approval on 6 May to publish the Criminal Law and Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2025. This Bill will include provisions to put outdoor seating on a permanent statutory footing and, going forward, will remove the need for continued renewal of these provisions by resolution every six months. However, it will not be possible to bring these provisions into operation prior to 31 May 2025.

The Government is also mindful of the need to support An Garda Síochána with regard to enforcement of the licensing framework and ensuring that public safety is protected. Accordingly, it is proposed to extend the operation of the Act for a further six months until 30 November 2025, to allow for the ongoing certainty of all those operating in the licensing trade, their patrons, local authorities and An Garda Síochána.

In summary, we are here to deal with one element of our current licensing system that needs our attention, namely, the extension of the outdoor seating provisions, which have proven to be popular with the industry, local businesses and patrons. I am pleased to confirm these provisions will be included in this year's Criminal Law and Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill. I commend the motion to the House.

**Senator Robbie Gallagher:** The Minister of State is welcome back to the House this afternoon. This is a straightforward motion, one which my party is very happy to support. It is one of the positive developments that have flowed in recent years. It is great, particularly during good weather, to see so many licensed premises have this outdoor space available to them. It creates a nice vibe and buzz in a town, especially when the weather permits. The past number of weeks have been positive in that regard, and it is great to fly through towns and see people sitting outside enjoying themselves and having a good time. It is a great sight to behold.

This is a six-monthly procedure for us but, as the Minister of State outlined in his contribution, the Minister has now indicated his intention to bring legislation forward that will do away with us having to come back here every six months. That makes perfect sense. It also brings clarity to gardaí on how they do their job, which is vitally important as well.

There is no need for me to rabbit on too long on this. I welcome it and it is very positive. I look forward to the legislation being introduced later this year that it is hoped will put this on a permanent footing.

**Senator Victor Boyhan:** I wish to share time with Senator Keogan.

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

**Senator Victor Boyhan:** I am pro-enterprise. I am very supportive of businesses and it is great to see them out on our roads and public spaces. However, I have spoken to my local authorities and the Disability Federation of Ireland, and I spoke to the Irish Wheelchair Association today. There are huge concerns about the policing. The key words here are that An Garda Síochána will regulate and enforce the provisions in the course of their ordinary responsibilities. That is what the Minister of State told us here. An Garda Síochána does not even have a car in some places. In some places, it has no resources. Let us not be coddling ourselves here. The reality is that vulnerable people with a disability are being told to eff off when they have confronted people in the restaurant and pub business. That is the reality, that is my experience

and that is why I am here to share it.

We have elderly people who are on perambulators and supported wheels trying to navigate some of our heritage streets. I think of Dalkey, Dún Laoghaire and Monkstown, where I live. I think of Malahide, where I was last Sunday, and again was told by people and business they had the same experience. I think of people in Kerry, Limerick and elsewhere. We have to be mindful of people who are vulnerable and who do not have this ability. I am former director of the Irish Guide Dogs for the Blind. People who are blind and visually impaired cannot navigate some of our streets. They are bad enough as they are.

We have little public realms. We have to talk about the democracy around the public realm. The public realm, in many cases, is these spaces that are shared between private and public. They come at a cost, and we need to treat everyone equally. My concern is that I have spoken about this year in, year out and nothing has been done. When people with a disability and in a wheelchair cannot get through and confront a restaurant owner, they say they are there to make business. They are shut Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday and only open on Thursday, Friday and Saturday to do business and make money. I understand all of that. We have to have regard, however, to vulnerable people who are navigating our public streets.

I am happy to support this motion. I have been in touch with my own local authority. Only last Friday I had a meeting with the disability access officer, who also shares concerns. We cannot be in a vacuum and only think of one person. We cannot come in to this House and talk about disability matters and supporting vulnerable people navigating their towns and villages if we are bringing in legislation that does not have some regard. I do not want a nanny state or a police state but I want someone to enforce it. I ask the Minister of State to write to the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, about it. I ask him simply to send a letter - no legislation. Let us cut the nonsense. I want to communicate with the 31 chief executives of our local authorities and tell them the Minister of State is mindful of the challenges faced by people with a disability, whom he, I and others represent, in navigating towns, villages and streets, and to tell them to enforce the matter. It is collaboration. We do not have many cases, whether it be joint policing, community services or whatever, because that is just a mess at the moment. I have been asking them.

I am sorry if I sound a bit animated or agitated, but I am deeply concerned because of experiences of people who have come to me in my office regarding people with disabilities, young children in prams, elderly people who need support wheels to navigate our streets, people with disabilities in wheelchairs and visually impaired people. We must keep our streets open. It is a question of managing our public realms and our public space with the local authorities. There are 30 chief executives and one secretary general in Limerick. That is not too much to ask anyone. I ask the Minister of State to commit to writing that we are mindful that we want to support outdoor business, communities and all the benefits – I enjoy them too – but we also have a responsibility to more vulnerable citizens that these spaces are kept open and accessible. It is a combination of synergy and working between An Garda Síochána and the local authorities to ensure that happens over the next six months.

**Senator Sharon Keogan:** I thank the Minister of State for coming in. I support the motion to extend outdoor dining yet again, but let me be clear. This is not how we should be legislating in a modern state. This Act, introduced during the pandemic, gave legal clarity to something that was already happening – people enjoying a pint or a glass of wine in an outdoor seating area. It was a lifeline for small businesses, particularly in hospitality, that were trying to survive

under impossible conditions, and it worked. It brought life to our towns and villages, supported jobs and gave people a safe social space to gather.

However, here we are, four years later, still kicking the can down the road with a six-month extension. This is not sustainable. It creates uncertainty for small business owners who are trying to plan ahead, investing in outdoor infrastructure and hiring staff, and many are treading water as it is. These are the very people we claim to support, yet we leave them in limbo every few months.

The Government has had ample time to make this law permanent. In fact, the general scheme of the sale of alcohol Bill was published back in 2022, yet it still has not made it to the Statute Book. Why? What is the delay? Is it bureaucracy? In any case, it is not good enough. We cannot keep governing by temporary measures. It is lazy, short-sighted and damaging.

Small businesses need certainty. They need to know the rules will not change every six months. They need to know the investment they make today will still be valid tomorrow. Making the law permanent will send a clear message that we value our local businesses, that we support vibrant public spaces and that we trust people to enjoy a drink outdoors without the sky falling in.

Of course, there are many issues to be asked about in making this law permanent. There are questions of how they impact accessibility on public roads and pathways, especially for those with mobility issues, as highlighted by Senator Boyhan. There is a question of whether small businesses with no indoor seating will have adequate toilet facilities for their customers. We need to ask whether this will take away too much from public parking space. Ultimately, however, all these questions and issues are resolvable. What is more important is that we create a permanent law that will give businesses a sense of responsibility for these spaces and give them reason to invest in their long-term viability and maintenance.

I will be supporting the extension, but let this be the last one. I call on the Minister of State to stop dithering and to bring forward permanent legislation without further delay. Our communities, businesses and, frankly, this House deserve better.

**Senator Gareth Scahill:** I wholeheartedly support the extension of the Act. It allows for the responsible consumption of alcohol in designated outdoor seating areas. I welcome that it allows businesses to operate with clarity and certainty. It is pro-business. It is important we protect businesses and give them that clarity. It is also essential that An Garda Síochána has clarity with regard to its powers of public order service, and we need to be seen to be supporting it. What began as a temporary solution during the pandemic has proven to be a lasting and welcome transformation. Let us be honest. It spreads a new life into our towns and villages. It creates a buzz, a vibrancy and a new sense of place, and we should be building on it.

I support Senator Boyhan's request for a letter to the CEOs of the local authorities. Permanent enactment of this measure should be done with a clear focus on accessibility reports for all of our towns, and I think that would be supported across the House. It would be a great way of serving two purposes with one Bill.

I support this motion and I support Senator Boyhan's suggestion.

**Senator Nicole Ryan:** Sinn Féin supports this legislation. It is practical and welcome for the hospitality sector and is in response to a very real need of business and communities that

adapted innovatively during the pandemic and have continued to operate successfully under this arrangement.

Like Senator Keogan pointed out, however, this is emergency legislation. It was introduced under extraordinary public health circumstances. Four years later, we are still relying on emergency laws to govern what is now an everyday practice, and that is not acceptable. We have had promises of permanent legislation, and there needs to be a sense of urgency to actually pass it. The delays have left local authorities and hospitality businesses operating in a legislative grey zone. The outdoor seating provisions were a lifeline for our businesses during Covid, but we now have to have a much broader conversation on what kind of spaces we want in our towns, villages and cities. As was pointed out, this should not be treated in isolation. It should be part of a comprehensive, national strategy for place making, local economic development and building vibrant, livable and accessible communities. Outdoor hospitality boosts footfall, supports small businesses and adds the character and culture to a place. However, to support it we need to invest in public spaces, tackle dereliction and ensure our towns and villages have infrastructure to support that outdoor activity, such as public toilets, waste management, lights, accessible seating and lots more.

We cannot forget rural Ireland in this. Too often our rural towns are left behind in these conversations. If the Government is serious about rejuvenation, outdoor hospitality needs to be part of a wider plan that includes public realm investment, reliable transport and all the other services that rural areas need. While we support this extension, we want this to be the last one. We need the permanent legislation that has been promised in order that we can give our hospitality sector the certainty it deserves and give our communities the kind of places and public spaces of which they can be proud.

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Niall Collins):** I thank all the Senators for their time and their contributions. We hope the extension of the Act until 30 November 2025 sends out a message about our determination to continue to support and provide clarity to business, An Garda Síochána and local communities. This is an important extension, which clarifies the position of licence holders who wish to sell and serve alcohol adjacent to a licensed premises in an area approved by the relevant local authority. With the extension of this Act, continued certainty is provided to licensees.

I reiterate that the Minister acquired Cabinet approval on 9 May last to ensure these measures are put on a permanent statutory footing in the Criminal and Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2025. This will remove the need to apply for these extensions every six months. As I previously indicated, it was not possible to do that before this point in time.

I think we can all agree that these measures will successfully address the relevant issues that arose for licensees and that they have worked effectively and will continue to do so for the period ahead, with the support of the Houses. Outdoor dining spaces boost the appeal and attractiveness of our cities and towns. They inject a new energy and a dynamism to local areas as well as providing much-needed support for local businesses. Having come through the past few difficult years, it is wonderful to see we are in a position where we can share our lively bars and restaurants with many new and returning visitors to our country.

With regard to the issues raised and echoed by Senator Boyhan and others regarding mobility and people with disabilities, I will convey the request to the Minister regarding communication to the CEOs of local authorities.

Question put and agreed to.

**An Cathaoirleach:** When is it proposed to sit again?

**Senator Robbie Gallagher:** At 10.30 a.m. tomorrow.

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

Cuireadh an Seanad ar athló ar 6.53 p.m. go dtí 10.30 a.m. Dé Céadaoin, an 28 Bealtaine 2025.

The Seanad adjourned at 6.53 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 28 May 2025.