



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

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

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SEANAD ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 10 Iúil 2025

Thursday, 10 July 2025

Chuaigh an Leas-Chathaoirleach i gceannas ar 9.30 a.m.

Machnamh agus Paidir.
Reflection and Prayer.

Teachtaireachtaí ón Dáil - Messages from Dáil

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Dáil Éireann passed the Statute Law Revision Bill 2024 on 9 July 2025, considered by virtue of Article 20.2.2° of the Constitution as a Bill initiated in Dáil Éireann, to which the agreement of Seanad Éireann is desired. Dáil Éireann passed the Mental Health Bill 2024 on 9 July 2025, to which the agreement of Seanad Éireann is desired. Dáil Éireann passed the Planning and Development (Amendment Bill) 2025 on 9 July 2025, to which the agreement of Seanad Éireann is desired.

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: The Cathaoirleach has 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 provide funding for Ex-Well classes to ensure all people are given the opportunity to take part in physical activity.

Senator Eileen Lynch - The need for the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality to provide ring-fenced funding for transport services for those in receipt of adult disability day services to transport them to and from their service.

Senator Aubrey McCarthy - The need for the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment to make a statement on his plans to develop and publish a comprehensive national strategy for the effective utilisation of surplus renewable energy.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick - The need for the Minister for Finance to make a statement on his plans to legislate to give local authorities greater revenue raising powers, including his response to the proposal from Dublin City Council for the introduction of a tourist bed tax.

Senator Chris Andrews - The need for the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to

provide an update on his proposals to promote the welfare of greyhounds.

Senator Joe O'Reilly - The need for the Minister of State with responsibility for the Office of Public Works to make a statement on the proposed provision of a national children's science centre; and the possibility of a collaborative development of the new centre with the existing Explorium science centre in Sandyford, Dublin 18.

The matters raised by the Senators are suitable for discussion. The Cathaoirleach has selected those raised by Senators Teresa Costello, Eileen Lynch, Aubrey McCarthy and Mary Fitzpatrick 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

Health Promotion

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins, to the House and thank him for coming in to discuss these important issues.

Senator Teresa Costello: I welcome the opportunity to raise the matter of ExWell Medical. It is a transformative, medically supervised exercise programme supporting people right across our communities. ExWell was founded in 2019 by Dr. Noel McCaffrey, following on from an initiative at Dublin City University. Since then, it has grown and now serves more than 7,500 participants weekly across 48 centres nationwide, including several in south Dublin. The programme often operates in community centres and local authority venues. Its aim is simple but profound: to reverse the physical and social deconditioning that occurs with chronic illness through structured, safe and supported exercise.

What makes ExWell different is its medical grounding. These are not just fitness classes but clinical interventions. Participants are inducted, assessed, monitored and supported by over 70 clinical staff. The benefits are clear, and include improvements in cardiovascular health, strength, balance, mental well-being, reductions in isolation and, ultimately, less demand on our acute hospital services. This is the essence of preventative healthcare. It is Sláintecare in practice, being community led, inclusive and person-centred. Cost barriers are, however, placing access to this programme at risk for many of those who would benefit most. At centres like Citywest, classes were fully funded until 2022, but are now charged at €10 per session or €70 to €80 a month. For pensioners attending twice weekly, this is up to €40 per week, which is an unsustainable cost for many on a fixed income. A report in *The Echo* newspaper last year featured older residents in my community who had to reduce their attendance or stop altogether once HSE support was withdrawn. They described the programme as a lifeline, not only for their physical health but for their mental health and social connection. While some local authorities have been able to partially subsidise the programme, this varies hugely by region. We now have a postcode lottery, where access to preventative health supports depends on where people live and whether they can afford to pay.

We know that exercise is medicine. ExWell is delivering measurable clinical outcomes that reduce pressure on hospitals and GPs, but we cannot expect it to succeed if we continue to

treat it as an optional extra rather than a core public health service. I ask that the Department of Health and the HSE engage with ExWell Medical to review the funding structure, with a view to reinstating or expanding central support, especially for in-person programmes where medical supervision and social engagement are so impactful. I also ask that the Department request greater transparency on cost structures across centres so we can better identify gaps and target supports to those most in need. Preventative healthcare should not be a luxury.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Niall Collins): I thank the Senator for giving me this opportunity to speak on behalf of my colleague, the Minister for Health, and outline the progress being made by the Government in this area. The promotion of physical activity for health is a priority under the Healthy Ireland framework, Ireland's national strategy for improving the health and well-being of the population. This was evidenced by the publication of the national physical activity plan in 2016. Substantial progress has been made in the implementation of the 60 actions set out in the plan, co-led by the Department of Health and the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport. They are supported by a cross-sectoral implementation group that includes a range of other Government Departments and agencies.

Healthy Ireland has used this collaborative approach to inform its support for Sport Ireland, which targets initiatives that promote population levels of physical activity and those with a health dimension. The Department of Health also directly supports national governing bodies for walking, cycling, swimming and running, as well as organisations to promote physical activity such as Parkrun, Age and Opportunity and Men's Sheds. Increasing physical activity levels in children and young people is a priority. The Departments of Health, education and sport and their respective agencies are collaborating extensively to promote and access physical activity and sport in schools. This joined-up approach is crucial to the roll-out of continued development of the active school flag programme.

The first iteration of the 2016 plan has now reached the end of its timeframe. A successor framework and action plan has been developed and is in the process of being submitted to the Government for approval and publication. The framework seeks to put in place a range of longer term aims and objectives underpinning the need for consistent and coherent policy responses across a broad range of stakeholders to 2040. This recognises that the drivers of behavioural change are complex and challenging. The achievement of the objectives of this framework will be driven by a series of action plans. The first national physical activity action plan will cover the period to 2029 and sets out 59 commitments across a range of stakeholders and sectors.

ExWell is one of a range of organisations providing community-based exercise classes for chronic disease populations. These include patient support organisations, not-for-profit organisations and the publicly funded network of local sports partnerships across Ireland. The HSE works in partnership with many of these organisations to ensure access to exercise provision for adults living with chronic disease. Occasionally, the HSE has established formal working and funding relationships with ExWell Limited to provide access for patients to its exercise programmes. The cost structure of any programme administered by ExWell is a matter for that organisation.

The Department of Health is also working closely with the HSE on the design and implementation of a physical activity pathways in healthcare model of care, which will provide a structured physical activity programme for people with chronic disease or long-term health conditions, with a focus on building their skills and confidence to engage with and maintain

recreational sport participation independently. Any future engagement with ExWell Medical will be considered in the context of these structures.

Senator Teresa Costello: I thank the Minister of State for his response. In the next iteration of the national physical activity plan I would like to see a focus on exercise for older people. The benefits to people of being more active are a no-brainer. People in my community are worried about being able to afford their ExWell sessions. They are living on a pension and trying to make the positive change we all talk about. Cost is a barrier. The Minister of State mentioned that the HSE has occasionally established formal working and funding relationships. These are *in situ*. I know the physical activity pathways in healthcare model of care. I would be interested to see if that mirrors or is similar to the service provided by ExWell. If something is already working, we should use it to the fullest of its capabilities.

Deputy Niall Collins: As the Senator mentioned older adults, I will outline what my colleague, the Minister for Health, has been doing to make physical activity opportunities available to this group. Physical activity for older adults is promoted by Age and Opportunity, a national development organisation working to enable the best possible quality of life for this population group. This organisation is a key stakeholder for Healthy Ireland and is supported by the HSE and Sport Ireland.

Age and Opportunity has a number of dedicated physical activity programmes, which I will mention. For example, the physical activity leaders, PALs, training programme is provided for anyone interested in physical activity initiatives in their community. Similarly, CarePALs training programme is available for those working or volunteering in care settings to lead suitable physical activities with people in their care. FitLine is a volunteer-led telephone mentoring service, which provides callers with information about clubs, groups and facilities in their area. Healthy Ireland is working with Age and Opportunity and other partners on developing walking football for older adults. This is becoming increasingly popular and has great potential for further development. I again thank the Senator for the opportunity to provide this important information to the House.

Disability Services

Senator Eileen Lynch: I thank the Minister of State for being here. I raise this matter because I believe it is incredibly important. It is the need to provide ring-fenced funding towards transport for those in receipt of adult disability day services. Currently, children in special schools who are in receipt of disability day services can receive transport to and from their service until they turn 18 years of age. At that point, when they graduate from special schools to adult disability day services, there is no longer a provision for transport services. This makes services inaccessible to a lot of those with disabilities. It is incredibly unfair that a service that is available before you hit 18 is then taken away when you hit 18. People are unable to access their services because of this. These are some of the most vulnerable people in our communities. It is vital that this service be made available to them.

Access to transport to avail of these services can in certain cases be the difference between a service user being in day services or residential care. In cases where parents or care providers cannot provide transport, and given that many of these service users cannot use public transport, the possibility of residential care at that point has to be examined. I am aware of many families, particularly elderly care providers and parents, who are in that situation because transport is not

available.

Carers are already under pressure. Often, when they are looking after a child or adult with a disability, they have other obligations in their household. They may be looking after elderly parents or have other children in the household. That this transport is not available for those in receipt of these services is grossly unfair in this day and age. These are some of the most vulnerable in our society. I come across a lot of these cases in my area of north-west Cork. Last week, I had a call from a lady whose son turns 18 in August. As a result, he is no longer able to go to the special school he is attending, even though some of his mainstream peers will be going on to do the leaving certificate. He will then be in receipt of adult disability day services. Thankfully, he has been able to receive a service, but the lack of transport means he may be unable to access it. There are so many cases like this around the country. This young man's mother said that if it was the case that his disability disappeared when he turned 18, she would be absolutely delighted but obviously that is not going to happen. Why then will his transport facility and funding disappear when he turns 18?

Deputy Niall Collins: The Minister of State with responsibility for disability, Deputy Naughton, thanks the Senator for raising this important issue, and I am responding on her behalf.

The HSE provides specialist disability services, including day services and rehabilitative training, to people with disabilities who require such services. While day service funding does not include transport, some transport supports are provided by the HSE and funded agencies on a discretionary basis, and a variety of transport solutions are pursued in different regional health areas. These include travel training to enable public transport to be used, where appropriate, local transport such as Local Link, private bus transport and taxis. Some service providers provide transport where capacity exists.

In general, day service users are in receipt of disability allowance and are automatically entitled to the free travel pass. The HSE has been working with the National Transport Authority on the issue of transport to day services through the open routes project. Open routes is based on the idea that transport to HSE services, such as day services, would be best served by accessible local public transport, such as Local Link transporting people to their day services, but also serving the wider local community with enhanced public transport provision. This approach is being piloted in County Leitrim. The National Transport Authority advises that the integrated pilot project was developed in close collaboration with the HSE, with a revised network that is designed to meet the needs of mainstream public transport users as well as the transport needs of passengers with disabilities and those accessing health care services in the county. To date all feedback with regard to the pilot from stakeholders such as the HSE, day service providers, external stakeholders and passengers has been very positive. In addition to the positive feedback, passenger numbers on regular rural services have grown considerably since the introduction of the revised TFI Local Link network for County Leitrim. This is a model that could be considered by the National Transport Authority for application elsewhere as appropriate. The forthcoming National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030 will feature transport and mobility as a key pillar, acknowledging the important role that reliable and accessible solutions play in supporting the economic and social inclusion of disabled people.

Senator Eileen Lynch: I thank the Minister of State for his reply and appreciate that this is not his Ministry. I find the reply incredibly disappointing. As the Minister of State has noted,

there are transport services available on a limited and discretionary basis. There are no guidelines. There is not even a means test in place. I have thankfully worked closely with some of the fortunate recipients and from what I can see, it is available on a “he or she who shouts the loudest” basis. The idea that the funding is there on a discretionary basis with absolutely no guidelines is not good enough. It falls between Departments. I previously raised this matter through the HSE South forum and Cork County Council. Health told me to go to transport and transport told me to go to health. This is falling between two or even three stools, with the Department of disability as well.

I welcome the update about the open routes project. While it is a really good project, I am not sure how applicable it is in very remote and rural areas. I note the pilot is in Leitrim and seems to be going very well. As well as those to whom it is not available in terms of geography, there are also those who would not have the ability to independently access public transport. I know that open routes is a more accommodating way of doing this. For the more severe kids and adults who are starting off with their disability day services, they may not be able to use that. A public transport-based system, even if it is something like open routes, is not going to be accessible to them, which makes their service less accessible.

Deputy Niall Collins: The ambition of this Government is to bring about a step change in the services for people with disability in Ireland. The Minister of State with responsibility for disability and the Government are committed to the expansion and reform of disability services in order to maximise people’s independence and help to support them to live their lives on the same basis as all other citizens. In addition to the open routes project already referred to, during 2024 the Department of Children, Disability and Equality supported two transport-related initiatives. First, it sanctioned a one-off funding measure of €3.6 million to be used for the upgrade and replacement of transport vehicles in day services, building on a similar approach to addressing the issue of ageing vehicles in disability residential and respite services in 2021. This funding was specifically aimed at supporting the provision of vehicles for transport to day services where other transport solutions were not available or where an ageing fleet existed. Second, there was funding through the Dormant Accounts Fund for an in-school travel training pilot in the former CHO 3 mid-west area to support young people transitioning to a HSE-funded day service to undertake travel training in their final year at school. In line with the whole-of-government approach to supporting mainstream services to better support those with disabilities, which is reflected in the national disability inclusion strategy, the Department of Transport has responsibility for the continued development of accessibility and availability of accessible public transport, and for developing proposals for better co-ordination of transport and mobility supports for people with disabilities. A transport working group was established to make progress under the relevant action of the strategy. The group’s final report has been published and contains valuable proposals to inform future policy and action. It will be incumbent on all Government Departments and agencies with responsibility for transport and mobility supports to consider the proposals in the context of the next steps.

Energy Policy

Senator Aubrey McCarthy: I am rising to speak about an issue that is pressing but that also has a moral dimension, namely the need for a national comprehensive strategy for the effective utilisation of surplus renewable energy in a manner that prioritises individuals and households experiencing energy poverty. We are seeing in various news reports that families

are starting to choose between heating their home and eating. That should not be a reality in modern Ireland in 2025. According to the most recent ESRI report, 550,000 households in the Republic of Ireland had that choice in the last year. Fuel poverty is not just about discomfort; it carries profound health consequences as well. Cold homes contribute to respiratory illness and poor mental health, and exacerbate the existing vulnerabilities of older people and younger children, and those living with illness.

It is not an abstract policy that I am talking about. I have personally witnessed the pain of fuel poverty through the homeless organisation I am connected with, which I founded in 2006. Working in that sector, I have met families trying to keep their children warm in overcrowded accommodation or accommodation that is not suitable. I have seen individuals doing all they can to rebuild their lives from marginalisation but unable to afford basic heat. The stress, shame and all of that would erode dignity. The suffering is made more unacceptable when we consider that Ireland has wasted more than €2.1 billion worth of renewable energy over the past eight years. That is 7,022 GWh of clean wind energy, enough to power billions of hot water tanks which are currently left unused. While families shiver in cold homes, we are turning off clean energy at source. That is not just inefficiency; it is questionable and possibly indefensible.

A national strategy is urgently needed, one that champions surplus renewable energy being directly focused towards those experiencing fuel poverty. I am asking the Minister to commit to publishing a strategy with measurable targets for how surplus energy can be deployed to support the vulnerable households I mentioned. From my own experience, it is not abstract or wishful thinking innovation or distant climate goals. It is about justice and compassion and makes total common sense. When we waste energy, we lose more than just efficiency. We lose the opportunity to help the people I have mentioned. Such a strategy would incorporate social equality such that everybody would be treated equally on all energy planning nationally. Climate action must be for everyone, not just those who can afford it. The programme for Government promised to explore these solutions but now it is time to act, not with another report but with real policy change. Let us ensure that no family is left in the cold. As an approved housing body in Greystones, Tiglin has accommodation for individuals. We work with EnergyCloud and have set about reusing surplus energy. It has worked amazingly. If that could be put into a national plan, it would be amazing.

Deputy Niall Collins: I thank Senator McCarthy for the opportunity to address this important issue. Ireland's climate action plans recognise the need for the electricity sector to become more adaptable and flexible, in response to the ever-increasing volume of distributed renewable energy sources on the grid. To ensure reliability in such a distributed energy system, as well as to minimise the network upgrades needed to accommodate peaks in demand, it will be vital to align our electricity use with periods of plentiful, low-cost renewable generation. Ireland's citizens, including energy-poor and vulnerable households, can play a central role in this transition by flexibly managing their energy assets in response to the level of renewable energy on the grid and, by doing so, can lower their energy bills and reduce their carbon footprint.

Renewable energy generation poses unique challenges to the electricity network - for example, when the wind stops blowing or the sun goes down - which greatly challenge the capacity of the grid to continually maximise the incorporation and delivery of the renewable generated electricity. To operate the grid using increased volumes of variable renewable energy sources, the grid needs increased amounts of specialist services, referred to as "system services", to ensure grid stability.

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Electricity storage systems are well placed to provide system services in an efficient, controlled, safe and regulated manner. Electricity storage also has the ability to charge at times of surplus renewable generation and discharge again at times of high demand, thereby utilising surplus renewable electricity effectively. This, in turn, will assist in securing the supply of green renewable energy to the Irish consumer, reducing the need for costly fossil-fuel generation.

As the electricity network grows to meet Ireland's future supply and demand requirements, the strategic location and operation of electricity storage systems will help to maximise renewable integration and alleviate grid issues, such as surplus renewable energy. This, in turn, will reduce the levels of surplus renewable energy.

The programme for Government acknowledges the pressure that increased energy costs place on households and businesses and seeks to lower prices while accelerating the pace of renewable deployment.

The Department has established the accelerating renewable electricity task force to accelerate and increase the deployment of onshore renewable electricity generation and support flexible network infrastructure to ensure that indigenous renewable power reaches our homes and businesses.

Renewable electricity helps lower the cost of electricity for households and businesses by reducing reliance on volatile fossil fuel markets and increasing price stability. Enhanced energy security through domestically produced electricity reduces dependence on imported fuels, making Ireland less vulnerable to global energy price shocks.

The national energy affordability task force has also been established to identify, assess and implement measures that will enhance energy affordability. The ongoing work of the task force will include a full review of cost drivers within the energy sector and the development of an energy affordability action plan, which will include recommendations for structural reforms to benefit consumers.

Senator Aubrey McCarthy: I thank the Minister of State for his response. I welcome that it recognises the importance of surplus renewable energy in shaping a fairer energy future for us all. However, I have to express concern that, without a defined strategy or measurable targets, we risk missing a crucial opportunity and wasting over 7,000 GWh of clean energy while hundreds of households going without heat or affordable bills.

I urge the Minister of State to commit to a cross-departmental national strategy that prioritises the needs of those most impacted by fuel poverty. We have the technology, the resources and the mandate from our climate commitments. What is needed now is leadership and urgency. I believe the ambition. Let us turn it into action and ensure that no one goes cold while clean power goes unused.

Deputy Niall Collins: The rapid expansion of renewable sources of energy is critical to lowering costs and protecting those in or at risk of energy poverty. As we move to higher levels of variable renewables, it will be necessary for electricity demand to become much more flexible to match when renewable electricity is plentiful and prices are at their lowest.

The Department is leading on a new cross-Government energy affordability task force

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that aims to identify, assess and implement measures that will enhance energy affordability for households and businesses operating within the broader policy context set out by the programme for Government and the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021. A key output of this task force will be to develop and publish an energy affordability action plan, which will identify a comprehensive range of solutions, including potential demand-side solutions for households to allow them to adjust their energy demand and avail of low-cost or otherwise surplus renewable energy.

Tax Code

Acting Chairperson (Senator Malcolm Noonan): Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: I welcome the Minister of State and thank him for coming to the House this morning.

My Commencement matter this morning calls for the Minister for Finance to make a statement on the proposal from Dublin City Council for the introduction of a tourist bed tax and for the Minister to make a statement on his Department's proposals to legislate to give local authorities revenue-raising powers.

The Minister of State will be aware that the introduction of a bed tax, accommodation tax or tourism tax - there are many ways it is referred to - is an idea that has been spoken about for many years but the concept of a visitor tax in the capital is one that Dublin City Council has been progressing. It is the norm in many other large international cities. Amsterdam has one, as do many other European cities.

The Dublin City Council proposal is for the Government to give powers to the local authority to, at the latter's discretion, introduce a local visitor tax. The idea from Dublin City Council is that it would have the power to raise its own revenues and would use those additional revenues to address issues in the capital, such as street cleaning, public space maintenance, the public domain, enhancements in infrastructure, and investment in culture, heritage and entertainment in the city.

I acknowledge when raising this issue that there are significant and record levels of funding being transferred from central government to local government. It is over €750 million this year alone. I also acknowledge the announcement last week of the adjustment to the local property tax, which will result in an additional €19 million in funding for Dublin City Council in 2026. That is really welcome. However, if the Minister of State comes with me and walks along the streets of Dublin, he will conclude, as I have done, that the place is filthy most of the time. It is unacceptably dirty. I appreciate that Dublin City Council has a challenge. It is a really busy city with heavy footfall, but we need a cleaner city. We need the public spaces to feel safe and clean.

We also need investment in our culture, heritage and entertainment. There are incredible works being done in the city in terms of culture - everything from the people down in The Complex in Smithfield, Stoneybatter Festival, Phizzfest, The Five Lamps Arts Festival, the Gate Theatre, and even Style in the City, which is being promoted over the weekends and whereby, on Henry Street and Grafton Street on alternating Saturdays, we will have catwalks, fashion shows and all sorts of style.

The city council, DublinTown and many others are doing great work but the Dublin city councillors themselves feel that they need the power to introduce a visitor tax that they can use to further enhance the city experience. I hope the Minister of State can advise the House on the work his Department has done to examine their proposal, his intentions and his Department's intentions to give powers to the local authorities to have revenue-raising within their own jurisdiction, how that might potentially work and the timescale for same.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Robert Troy): I thank the Senator for raising this issue, which has been raised recently in national media.

As the Senator will be aware, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage has responsibility for the financial well-being and effective financial management and accountability of local authorities. Where a policy change in relation to local government finances and funding is sought, the first consideration will be by that Department.

The Senator will be aware that the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy James Browne, and the Minister of State with responsibility for planning and local government, Deputy John Cummins, announced the establishment of the local democracy task force to finalise a programme of reform and strengthen local government in Ireland on 5 June.

One matter that the task force is to consider is that of granting councillors greater input and control over the development and implementation of the local authority budget and mechanisms to enhance the fiscal autonomy of local authorities. Both the Senator and I served on our own local authorities, and certainly one could be frustrated at times by the restrictions placed on our powers by the unavailability of funding.

The task force will report to the Government in 2026. Under its terms of reference, consideration will be given as to ways in which local authorities could increase fiscal autonomy through own resources, including wider variation options for local property tax, by reviewing existing revenue-raising and debt management options and matched funding requirements. The key here is new or alternative revenue-raising powers, which could potentially include an accommodation levy. In the event that the task force suggests that local authorities be given powers to put an accommodation levy in place, this matter can be considered in the first instance by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

As the Senator will appreciate, there are a range of policy issues that could arise from any new levy or charge to be set by local authorities and that would need to be considered before a proposal could be discussed by the Government.

On foot of advice from his Department, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage may choose to bring a proposal for an accommodation levy to the Cabinet. Any such proposal would examine the range of policy considerations, including the possible impact on tourism as well as the design and scope of such a levy. This would include consideration of what flexibility local authorities would have in setting an amount for such a levy and whether it was applied universally to all visitors every night. Whether such a levy would apply a single rate or whether it would facilitate different bands of rates is another issue that might require consideration.

I expect that, in developing any policy proposal in this area, the Minister, Deputy Browne, will consult with his colleague, the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment, Deputy Peter Burke. The latter's Department would be in a position to advise on any implications such

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a proposal would have on tourism, as well as being in a position to provide observations on the impact on businesses in the sector.

Any proposal on funding for local authorities would also need to be considered by the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation in the context of all other expenditure priorities and as part of the annual Estimates process. From previous engagement with the Senator I am aware that she has already engaged in consultation with that Department. Any questions on the work of the local democracy task force are for the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage in the first instance.

To summarise, the key here is the task force that has been established. I encourage Senator Fitzpatrick, with her colleagues on Dublin City Council, to make a submission to the task force to show there is a desire and willingness to work on a potential new levy. The task force could consider that and ultimately report to the Government.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: I appreciate the Minister of State's response and that this matter falls to the Minister for local government. I will take up the issue with the local democracy task force. I am the Fianna Fáil spokesperson for local government and I look forward to engaging with the task force.

One point that is very clear from the Minister of State's reply is that no action will be taken by the Department of Finance on the introduction of new revenue-raising powers for local authorities before the local democracy task force reports, which will not be until 2026. That is a very important piece of information for councillors to take into account.

In going forward, the local democracy task force is incredibly important for elected representatives, and not just in this area, as there are other issues that need to be addressed for councillors and other elected representatives in terms of the fine balancing of powers between councils' executive and elected functions. There is a real opportunity for the Government, with the local democracy task force, to work with elected representatives to deliver stronger local government in each of the 31 local authorities.

I thank the Minister of State for his time today. I will engage with the local democracy task force.

Deputy Robert Troy: Senator Fitzpatrick said the task force would not report until 2026. Perhaps I am wrong, but it seemed like she was saying that is a long time away. It is not really.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: I mean for budgetary purposes.

Deputy Robert Troy: Budget 2026 is probably only 12 or 13 weeks away. Preparations for it are well advanced in my Department. We are meeting various groups to hear pre-budget submissions and work is under way. If we could get something agreed in the task force, a realistic timeframe would be for budget 2027, given that it is only 12 or 13 weeks to budget 2026. I do not need to tell Senator Fitzpatrick what to do because she is acutely aware of how to do her work, but I encourage her to focus her efforts and work with the local authorities to make a submission to the task force. If the case is not made to the task force, then it may not be part of its proposal. That is what should happen in the first instance.

As someone who served in local government for nine years, I welcome the task force. I always took pride in the work of local government, but I am not blind to the need for it to be

more efficient, transparent and accountable, not just to the elected politicians, but to the people they serve. This task force is an opportunity to do that. I will happily work with the Senator on putting forward real, tangible proposals that will enhance and strengthen the role of local government because citizens deserve that, as do the local politicians who serve on the councils.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 10.14 a.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 10.33 a.m.

Sitting suspended at 10.14 a.m. and resumed at 10.33 a.m.

Minute's Silence for Victims of Srebrenica Genocide

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: We will now have a minute's silence to commemorate the Srebrenica massacre. As Members are aware, this month marks the 30th anniversary of the genocide. Today we commemorate and honour the victims of the genocide, the 8,000 men and boys killed and all those who were impacted by the atrocity. I ask Members to stand for one minute's silence to commemorate the victims of the genocide.

Members rose.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I am delighted to congratulate France and its people on their national date, known as Bastille Day, which we will celebrate on Monday, 14 July. I welcome the ambassador, H.E. Céline Place, who is accompanied by an Cathaoirleach, Senator Daly, the convener of the Irish-French parliamentary friendship group, Deputy Barry Ward, and staff from the embassy. They are all very welcome to the Distinguished Visitors Gallery. I hope they enjoy their day. I extend best wishes to all in France for Bastille Day.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I add my voice of welcome to our distinguished guests from France. We look forward to celebrating with them on Monday.

The Order of Business is No. 1, motion regarding proposed approval by Seanad Éireann of the Data Protection Act 2018 (Section 60(6)) (Defence Forces Tribunal of Inquiry) Regulations 2025, to be taken on the conclusion of the Order of Business, without debate; No. 2, statements on various transport matters, including BusConnects, the regional bus network, the western rail corridor and increasing capacity at regional airports, to be taken at 11.45 a.m. and to conclude at 1.15 p.m., if not previously concluded, with the time allocated to the opening remarks of the Minister not to exceed ten minutes, the time for group spokespersons not to exceed ten minutes, that of all other Senators not to exceed four minutes, and time may be shared, and the Minister to be given not less than eight minutes to reply to the debate; and No. 3, Planning and Development (Amendment) Bill 2025 - Second Stage, to be taken at 1.30 p.m. and to conclude at 3.30 p.m., if not previously concluded, with the time allocated to the opening remarks of the Minister not to exceed ten minutes, the time of group spokespersons not to exceed ten minutes, that of all other Senators not to exceed four minutes, and time may be shared, and the Minister to be given not less than eight minutes to reply to the debate.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: On behalf of the Fianna Fáil group, I join in the welcome to our distinguished guests. We stand in solidarity with the victims and families of the genocide

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in Srebrenica and we renew our call for an end to the genocide in Gaza.

On domestic matters, I welcome the announcement by the Minister for justice of his intention to bring a memorandum to Cabinet next week, on 15 July, regarding the personal injuries guidelines. I am sure his communication yesterday will be welcomed and not only by other Members of the House. I commend Senator Nelson Murray. Senators have worked very hard to support small businesses and enterprises throughout the country and address this issue. The Minister was constrained and compelled by legislation to bring forward a memorandum but he does not need to seek approval for a resolution and he has indicated this is his intention. I welcome that. It is a very welcome reprieve for small businesses throughout the country.

I congratulate the team at the Gate Theatre at the top of O'Connell Street. It is part of the Rotunda complex. Last night, it had its opening night of the Martin McDonagh play *The Pillowman*. The play is an exceptional production with exceptional acting. It is a unique piece of theatre to be staged in Dublin. It is not for the faint-hearted. The acting is superb. It is incredibly witty and delivered with great emotion. Very weirdly, it examines the deepest and darkest elements of the human condition. I encourage everybody to support the Gate Theatre and see the play. It is an exceptional production. I wish it well with the run.

Senator Linda Nelson Murray: I very much welcome our distinguished guests to the Gallery. They will enjoy sunshine at the weekend. The weather is looking good so they are very lucky.

I feel the need to speak today because the rejection yesterday of the personal injuries guidelines was momentous for every hard-working small business and for every community group, festival about to be organised, sports club, GAA club and motorist. It was the right decision. I thank the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, for that decision. I thank the subcommittee on insurance, which met yesterday. I thank my Fianna Fáil colleagues and Senators Byrne and Crowe who stood up on this issue. It took a team, including Sinn Féin colleagues and Independents. Everyone stood up and had a go at the personal injury guidelines because we could all see it was the right thing to do. Yesterday would have been wrong time for this to happen, when businesses are under such immense pressure with the increased cost of doing business and everything they are faced with.

The proposed increase probably would have been rounded up to 20% by insurance companies. I had messages from people saying if their insurance were to go up any more, it would be detrimental to their business. That is not to take away from the fact there are many businesses, groups and festivals that still cannot get insurance. We still have a lot of work to do on insurance reform. For example, the play centre sector, which I am involved in, organised a group scheme about six years ago. If we did not have a group scheme, there would not be a play centre insured in Ireland. We all have to come together - there are more than 100 centres involved - and get insurance that way. It is still not sorted out and there is still a lot of work to do but I welcome what happened yesterday. We can see the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, did his due diligence and thought about what he was doing. He made the right call. I raised the issue about 11 times in the House - I was not counting, I swear. I really appreciate this decision, My Fine Gael colleagues and I brought a motion on this issue four weeks ago, which had the full support of the House. I thank Senators for that.

It would be remiss of me, in my last 20 seconds, not to wish the Meath GAA team the best of luck this weekend as we face Donegal in the men's senior semi-final and also the ladies who

are playing the following week. I urge everyone in Meath to come out for both the men and women. They are both equally important. The best of luck to them.

Senator Tom Clonan: Bienvenue en Irlande to our French allies and great friends. Vive la France. It is great to celebrate France and Ireland; the liberté, égalité, fraternité, and now sororité, that exist between our countries. Today also marks the anniversary of the massacre at Srebrenica. I was proud to serve in former Yugoslavia with the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe and to be part of the peacebuilding in the former Yugoslavia, in Banja Luka and Prijedor. This reminds me of the genocidal actions of the Israel Defense Forces in Gaza. The Israel Defense Forces are a multiconfessional army. It has Sunni Muslims, Shia Muslims, Bedouin Arabs, Druze and Christians. Criticism of the Israel Defense Forces is not criticism of Jews or Judaism; it is criticism of war crimes. The femicide, infanticide and mass murder - the slaughter - of the innocent in Gaza are war crimes. Netanyahu is a war criminal. We remember that today. Hopefully, we will see some movement towards a ceasefire, and a permanent one at that.

I raise the issue of more than 100 members of the Air Corps in Baldonnell who have died prematurely of different types of cancers, such as pancreatic, bladder cancer, and other unexplained illnesses. That is 100 dead out of a workforce of 1,000. This is a serious issue. If we think that a couple of miles to the east, Dublin Airport has thousands of passenger jets landing and taking off every year, millions of passengers transiting through and aircraft maintenance and we do not have those fatalities, there is something amiss in Baldonnell.

This week, a 56-year-old flight sergeant passed away from pancreatic cancer. In the past three years, we have had two deaths from pancreatic cancer and one from bladder cancer. We speak repeatedly about threats to Ireland from the war in Ukraine and elsewhere but if a chemical weapon had killed one tenth of our Air Corps, we would rightly demand that no stone be left unturned to get to the bottom of this. That is what is happening to our loyal service personnel in Baldonnell and their families. To think if losing a father, husband or brother at the age of 56.

We plan to recruit hundreds or thousands of personnel and acquire new aircraft but we have to ensure we can guarantee their safety. I ask for a debate, possibly in the autumn term, with the Minister for Defence, Deputy Harris, on what measures can be put in place to protect our people.

Senator Joanne Collins: As the House knows, the Ryder Cup, a world renowned event, is coming to Adare, County Limerick, in 2027. It would be remiss of us not to look at the tourism prospects this could bring to Ireland. In County Limerick, we have what is called the Desmond trail. It has Adare Castle, Askeaton Castle and Desmond community centre in Newcastle West.

Adare Castle only opens from June to September, with limited space so you will see minibuses going in there. Askeaton Castle has been closed for the past three years until further notice, even though we opened a new parklet a couple of weeks ago in Askeaton town. Askeaton also has an impressive Franciscan friary which would bring an awful lot of tourists to the town.

We need to look at building a tourism plan off the back of the Ryder Cup to ensure tourism is boosted, not just around the time of the Ryder Cup but also in the future. We need to look at OPW sites to see what we can do to get them back up and running all year around. In somewhere like Adare they could be open all year around because it is a big tourist village.

Senator Patricia Stephenson: I also pay my respects to the victims of Srebrenica and their

families. It is particularly difficult to stand for a minute's silence when we know there is also a genocide happening in Gaza. While standing I was asking myself what day we will be standing to commemorate all the Palestinians who have been slaughtered.

This week, *The Journal* investigates team published figures after analysing the wait time for people who had been diagnosed with cancer from diagnosis to the start of their treatment. The target of the national cancer control programme is to start treatment in 90% of cases within 15 days of receiving a diagnosis. To read that in Carlow and Kilkenny, which are served by St. Luke's Hospital in Kilkenny, these targets are being met in only 65% of cases is really shocking. Kilkenny and Waterford hospitals are two of the lowest performing hospitals in the country and both serve large swathes of the south east. Therefore, across the region, cancer services are seriously underperforming. When people get a cancer diagnosis, their world stops. They have panic, all the concerns that come with that and the confusion and fear for their own lives, and for their families and friends. Their whole life is thrown into disarray and all they want is to get started with treatment as soon as possible. We all know the quicker people get treatment, the better their health outcomes. Delayed treatment is not just delay, it is inextricably linked to how successful that treatment will be. The CEO of the Irish Cancer Society said, "This is not just a delay - it can be life altering."

I want to make clear I am not in any way criticising the staff of St. Luke's Hospital or any other hospital. They do Trojan work in extremely difficult circumstances. Again, the Government is letting people down. We need a debate in the new term on the waiting times for cancer patients. We need an update from the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, on what urgent steps are being taken to address these delays and we need to have a discussion on regional disparities for cancer and other treatments. If these waiting times get longer, we risk the health outcomes of people across this country. In a country as rich as Ireland, this is simply not good enough.

Senator Ollie Crowe: I highlight that the first ever under-23 all-Ireland camogie final will take place this Saturday in the Gaelic Grounds in Limerick. It is a battle between Galway and Cork and throw-in is at 2 p.m. I encourage anyone in the area and from my county to attend and see history in the making, as the camogie association has rightly marketed it. I wish both teams well, although I am hoping the cup's first trip will be westward.

Similar to Senator Stephenson, I raise the reporting done this week by *The Journal* on the failure of our hospitals to meet treatment target times for cancer patients. Hospitals have a target to start treating 90% of patients within 15 working days on medications such as chemotherapy. From a Galway perspective, figures compiled by *The Journal* show that, although the figure for UHG was 91% in 2023, it fell to 76% in 2024. So far, the figure to date for 2025 is 73%. At Portiuncula hospital, Ballinasloe, the figures went from 53% in 2023, which was considerably low, to 74% in 2024, and has increased slightly to 75% this year. The issue has affected hospitals throughout the country. Many others have worse rates than those in Galway. Indeed, *The Journal* found that "since 2023, all but one of the public hospitals offering these life-saving treatments missed the HSE's monthly target at least once". Meeting these targets is critical for our patients. This is not like the delays in other areas, which are inconvenient. Delays in starting cancer treatment can be massively life-altering.

We need to quickly examine how we can best address this. It will likely require additional investment in some form ahead of budget 2026. This needs to be priority. I would be grateful if the Leader were able to raise the issue with the current Minister for Health and if she could

attend the House at her earliest convenience.

Senator Manus Boyle: I want to raise an issue I brought up in the past but have got no feedback on it yet, namely, the issue of the benefit-in-kind scheme for the National Ambulance Service. The Minister, Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill, said she passed it on to the Minister for Finance. The Revenue Commissioners have to make the decision on this. It has been four months since first I brought it up in this House, which is plenty of time for them to make a decision on it.

At the end of the day, do these people not understand rural Ireland? Not all of us live in cities.

Having that vehicle at the side of the house means that, when a 999 call comes in, people who are off-duty are still able to respond and go to their local communities, like GAA clubs. These workers are a great benefit to the country, to be honest. It is a small issue that needs to be sorted out. It would provide great value for the rural communities. In Donegal, for example, we could be an hour and a half away from the major hospital in Letterkenny. There is no cover at the weekends. These people are turning out. I have seen them and have heard stories that they were not even on duty but they turned out. We need to get on top of this and try to get the Revenue Commissioners to make a decision on it in order that we know where it is going.

I wish Donegal all the best on Sunday. I hope we will be in the final.

Senator Aubrey McCarthy: I echo the concerns of my fellow Senators regarding what is happening between Israel and Gaza at the moment. Yesterday, I had a visit from the Ukrainian ambassador and officials from her embassy. She said that it seems that Ukraine is forgotten about. Overnight, there were drones and attacks in Kyiv again. In recent months, Russia has launched more than 1,000 missiles and drones, devastating homes, hospitals and essential infrastructure. An estimated 700,000 Russian troops are currently active in Ukrainian territory. The scale of the destruction is vast. Entire cities have been reduced to rubble. The true toll in civilian numbers is unknown. It is not merely a geopolitical conflict; it is a grave humanitarian crisis.

Ireland really played its part and we have certainly welcomed more than 100,000 Ukrainians into Ireland. Ukraine must not be forgotten. It is defending the border of Europe. Ireland must continue to stand firm with Ukraine, not just in spirit, but in real, tangible support. Our role in humanitarian assistance was complimented by the ambassador yesterday, but she is asking for advocacy for international accountability in this conflict. Ukraine's fight is a fight to preserve the principle of freedom and sovereignty within Europe, as well as the democratic values that all of us in this House share. I urge the Leader and fellow Senators to reaffirm our commitment to supporting Ukraine during a very dark hour, through aid and solidarity as well as an unwavering voice for peace in Europe.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I raise the issue of Portiuncula hospital and the moving of high-risk pregnancy and antenatal care from Portiuncula to University Hospital Galway or to the Midlands hospital in Portlaoise. While I understand that we must put the care and protection of the mum and the baby and the risk elimination front and centre at all times, it is important that I also raise that we were in this situation in 2018. A report in 2018 identified an awful lot of the same issues then as were raised yesterday by the Saolta group. I have my concerns as to why we have found ourselves back here again. I have concerns regarding the capacity of other

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hospitals to be able to cater and support high-risk pregnancies and antenatal care. I also have a query. If all the critical cases and high-risk care are removed, what is the capacity to retain the staff to ensure their skills are kept up while the review is ongoing? At the same time, in terms of what fell short in 2018 in relation to governance and oversight, I have to query where the governance and oversight from the clinical side fell down on this particular case.

The programme for Government commits to a review of the maternity strategy. I would like to hear from the Minister as to where we are going with the maternity strategy. When will it be brought forward to be reviewed? I also acknowledge the support of the Minister for Portlincula in the past six months since she came into office. There are critical concerns and a lot of upset today on our side of the county.

Senator Mike Kennelly: Today, I have two issues. The first is to seek a clear and urgent update following the Minister of State, Deputy Hildegard Naughton's recent visit to St. John of God services in St. Francis's Special School and St. Mary's of the Angels in Beaufort, County Kerry. There is a need for new respite day services in Beaufort. That visit gave families, staff and the wider community some hope that the State and agencies, such as the HSE and St. John of God, are finally listening. We now need them to turn that hope into action. What is needed is not just the restoration of services but also the development of a new purpose-built respite day service on site in Beaufort. The demand is growing, the need is undeniable and the local commitment from staff and families is unwavering. Respite day services offer more than just relief to families; they offer dignity, routine and quality of life to those with complex needs. These families are not asking for extras but for basic support that should be the bedrock of any compassionate society. I am asking for the Minister of State to come to the floor of this House with a comprehensive and successful report on that, now that the stakeholders are meeting, which is good.

Second, I am looking for clarity and urgency on a matter that is not just critical for the north Kerry area, where I come from, but for national energy security and the status of the LNG project. As we all know, Ireland currently has no gas storage solution. That is an extraordinary and, frankly, unsustainable position for any modern economy, especially at a time when geopolitical tensions and energy market volatility are the new norm. I understand, very importantly, that Gas Networks Ireland has opened the door to private ownership of the proposed €900 million Shannon LNG terminal. This marks a significant shift, with the potential to begin the project's real momentum after years of delay and uncertainty. Equally noteworthy is that they are willing to consider a power-purchase agreement or lease agreement with a corporate partner, signalling a move away from the State-owned floating storage model. That could accelerate development, encourage private investment and, most important, secure our energy supply on the Shannon Estuary. What we now need is clarity for the investors and communities. I call on the Minister to outline the Government's current position on the Shannon energy project. Has there been meaningful engagement with potential private partners? What timelines are we working toward? What supports will be provided to ensure this project can move from planning to production? We are in the summer recess now. I call on the Minister to come and give us an update on that.

11 o'clock

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Go raibh maith agat.

Senator Mike Kennelly: May I finish? I hate to be the last person here to speak about their

county. The Kerry senior football men are coming back up to Dublin to represent a very proud county in football terms. I have heard the Donegal and the Cork anthems in the past couple weeks. I have kept quiet until now.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: The Senator missed mentioning Meath.

Senator Mike Kennelly: Yes. I wish the Kerry boys all the best on Saturday.

Senator Chris Andrews: Israeli citizens can enter Ireland without a visa, yet yesterday 33 children and 14 mentors from Palestine GAA had their dreams of visiting Ireland in a couple weeks pulled from under them when their visa applications were denied by the Irish immigration service. It is a painful double standard that those living under apartheid are burdened with yet another layer of exclusion and discrimination while those enforcing it are welcomed with no restrictions. Clearly, the Government's so-called claim of solidarity with the people of Palestine only goes so far. How can our Government say they are pro-Palestine when their actions prove to be pro-Israel? These are children who have barely left their refugee camp, never mind their country. They have never been to the beach, or on a plane or a train. They have never known what it feels to be truly free. They live in constant fear of being bombed, shot or imprisoned without trial. They live in fear of taking the wrong road or just being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The trip was going to be two weeks' respite for them. My head spins when I hear the Tánaiste and Government Ministers get up and say they support Palestine and support sanctioning Israel, and yet their actions lead to the rejection of 33 children coming here to play GAA for two weeks during the summer. Palestinians are, unfortunately, used to being let down by others. Ireland cannot be another one to let them down. We owe them that much. Give them their visas. Let them in, just like the Government lets in Israeli citizens. It is important that the Minister for Justice comes in and explains the logic for refusing 33 young kids coming here to play sport for just two weeks in the summer. It is completely unreasonable and unfair. It highlights the double standards between the Government's talk and claims and its actions.

Senator Aidan Davitt: I ask the Deputy Leader to call the Minister of State with responsibility for local government, John Cummins, to the House. A topic I had discussed and have been working on for quite a while is the security allowance for councillors. I am delighted there has been movement on it. I praise the Minister of State and the senior line Minister, James Browne, on this. Much of it has been aired in the media so far. The various councillors are asking us questions about the circular and looking for the nitty-gritty details, but we do not have the exact answers. We could do with a bit of clarity on it. We could delve through the detail in it. It would be worthwhile to bring the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, to the House to talk about his good news announcement so we can get it rolled out with the councillors. This came about on foot of the serious concerns of gardaí regarding security for elected representatives. I am delighted the Minister of State has followed up and is taking this seriously. It is a worthwhile debate. We should have it soon; next week if possible or, if not, when we return in the autumn.

Senator Gareth Scahill: I rise today following a meeting yesterday with the Irish Hotels Federation, IHF, which is a representative body that represents more than 900 hotels and guest-houses employing approximately 66,000 people nationally. We in this House are all familiar with their ask with regard to the VAT rate. However, I wish to look a bit further and call for a discussion in this House on how we can support them in training up their staff. There is no training fund for that sector. Many of the institutes have to pay for that out of their own funds. It is a very important sector. We have invested heavily in our tourism sector in this country and

we need the IHF to provide the bed nights and the other services to our visitors to make use of and value our investment. I call for a discussion on training but also on sustainability, and supporting that sector in accessing sustainability funding so that it can reduce its carbon footprint and costs. Like every business, this sector is under significant pressure. I would welcome a discussion on that. It is possibly too late for next week, but we could discuss it early in the next term.

While I am standing, I also mention the personal injuries guidelines. I compliment the Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, and the subcommittee on insurance reform. I compliment all the Members of this House who raised this issue in recent weeks and months, especially Senator Linda Nelson Murray. It is great to see that the Minister has listened to the representations and has supported the businesses that this would have a big effect on.

Senator Joe Conway: We often have heard the expression than an Englishman's home is his castle. If that be the case, many of us feel that an Irishman's or Irishwoman's home is their birthright. I think that is engendered by the fact that most of us were lucky enough to grow up in secure homes. They would not have been palatial, but they would have wrapped around us not just walls but the wall of love that we all grew up in. It distresses me when I talk to the younger generation and hear them say, with resignation in their voices, that they do not think they will ever own a home of their own.

To that point, I read an interesting article by Eoghan Dalton in *The Journal* this morning about 80 homes in Portlaoise that are ready, finished and impeccably turned out, but the people who have bought them cannot move in because of lack of capacity in the ESB substation in Portlaoise. We have talked a lot in the past few weeks about planning and balanced planning. That strikes me as the nadir of planning - that houses are fitted out and finished but the people who have bought them cannot move in. They are not sure if they will be able to move in for Christmas now, having been promised last January. I would like to solicit the assistance or interest of the politicians in the Seanad and the other House, particularly from the Laois-Offaly constituency, to get on to the ESB to see what the heck is going on. It is not a very seemly manifestation of how we are planning for the housing crisis.

In the few seconds left to me, I would like to pick up on what Senator Paul Daly said yesterday when he spoke up for farm safety. I did not get the time to do so yesterday, but it would be well worthwhile if we could give great publicity to that. I would say everybody in this House knows somebody who has lost a life on a farm. It is important that it be underscored.

Senator Margaret Murphy O'Mahony: I rise to welcome the announcement by the Minister, Deputy McEntee, of a commission of investigation into historic sexual abuse in day schools and boarding schools. When one thinks of abuse, one is inclined to think of the homes that were going at the time. They forget that it happened in boarding schools and schools, just because a child was going to school and going home at 3 p.m. Between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m., in many schools, many bad things happened. I welcome that the Minister is doing this. I would like to bring her before the House so she can go through the terms of reference and what she intends doing with the whole thing. It is very important we get this right and acknowledge the awful things that did happen in regular schools and not just homes. I would like that she come before us, please.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: To add a comment to the other topics, in relation to the electricity connections, we need to talk a little bit about data centres given the rolling cuts we all

saw yesterday and the fact we have had a massive escalation in energy and electricity demand from it, over 200% of an increase. It is an elephant in the room and it needs to be addressed. Even in Portlaoise, where there is apparently a difficulty in connecting houses, there are new data centres going in there. We have to be honest, that if we bring in something that is using 21% and might use 30% of our electricity, that is having an impact on our electricity security and needs serious, genuine thought and action.

Regarding visas, I hope we can have a compassionate approach over the summer. We are seeing too many situations in relation to medical visas and student visas for travel. These are students from Palestine who hope to start in September and who are still waiting for their visas and to make transport arrangements, and, of course, it relates to the planned GAA tour. I am genuinely hoping these will be addressed. I really urge Government members to press the Minister so that we would not have a rolling series of heartbreaks over the summer but actual humanity shown to the extremely small numbers who have managed to find a possible way to travel and to live normal lives in these horrendous times.

I want to quickly speak to the cost of fees and the changes relating to them. We know Ireland massively underspends on higher education. We are at 3.2%. The European average is 4.5% with many countries well over that. The cost and the knock-on effect of the gap that has been identified in terms of higher education funding has come to press those who are working in the institutions through the insecurity of their contracts but also, crucially, the impact is being felt by students. Bearing in mind we are meant to have free higher education in Ireland which was the goal many years ago and the breakthrough, the idea is that taking fees from €3,000 to €2,000 was made as a cost-of-living measure and that it would now be removed when we know the cost of living has not gone down at all, particularly not for students in terms of accommodation. Research from NUI Galway found student accommodation costs in Ireland and Dublin are among the highest in the European Union. The general cost of living for Ireland is also one of the highest costs in the European Union. Students are incredibly burdened by the cost of undertaking education. The Minister, Deputy Browne, said there would be no exemptions or supports from the reforms in rental pressure zones. Landlords will be able to raise rents as they see fit for all new tenancies. PhD students, who are carrying out some of the most important research here in Ireland, are often receiving just €22,000 per annum or €1,830 per month to survive and live on. I appeal that we have, even at this late stage, a debate on this before we rise for the recess. The idea of layering an extra €1,000 a year on students who are already struggling means we will have students losing out and we will lose out on the diversity of those taking part in higher education, and that has a knock-on effect for society which is deeply negative.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: We began with Senator Mary Fitzpatrick, who spoke about the decision announced yesterday by the Minister for justice on the recommendation that came from the Judiciary regarding a rise of 16.9% in personal injuries awards. He made the decision before the subcommittee met that he would not be recommending it. It is very welcome news, I have no doubt there was possibly an interesting voice note left for Fine Gael Senators and parliamentary party members in relation to that. I have always had belief in the Minister's judgement in terms of doing the right thing and he certainly did. It is not without its risks either. There is a concern that the Injuries Resolution Board may be bypassed now because payments will not be keeping in line with inflation and claims will go straight to the High Courts and bring costs up. We do always have to try to bring a bit of balance into it. To be fair, there is a concern regarding the action plan on insurance, which was successful at a level, and I commend the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, on it and I know he is working on the second action plan now,

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that the cost reductions that have been achieved have not been passed on to the consumer. We have to work collectively to ensure it is the consumer, the businessperson, the individual who gets the benefit of the cost reduction. That is really important.

Senator Fitzpatrick also recommended we all go to see *The Pillowman*. Conor McPherson is an incredible playwright, and we are lucky to have someone of his calibre. I must check out how long *The Pillowman* is running for at The Gate and possibly take the opportunity to go.

Senator Nelson Murray also spoke about the Minister for justice's decision of yesterday. The Senator, along with many of my colleagues, did raise the issue and did a lot of good work in relation to the leisure business. I know Tracy Smullen has taken that on. I know Tracy and she is someone who had been in regular contact in that regard. There are a lot of people who rely on having a robust, effective and affordable insurance scheme to be able to keep their businesses going. It is important.

Around this time of year, we all wear our tribal jerseys. We have had good wishes to a lot of different teams. May the best team win is what we will say about all of them.

Senator Clonan spoke about his own peacekeeping work, along with the Defence Forces. I commend him and all of those who have served in peacekeeping. He spoke about the slaughter of the innocents which is shocking on every single level. He also raised an issue about Baldonnel and that 100 members of the Air Corps, which is a very significant - 10% of those who are there, have passed away from cancer. Our deepest sympathies go to the latest gentleman who passed away during the week. I am not doubting Senator Clonan but obviously a lot of research needs to go into this particular allegation, but we will bring it to the Tánaiste's attention as Minister for Defence, ask for information on it and look for a debate on it in the autumn.

Senator Collins spoke about the Ryder Cup coming to Adare, which is a beautiful village, the great potential for tourism in Adare and around Limerick, and mentioned the fact that a number of the local castles have been closed for periods of months and years. We will ask the OPW and the Minister to look at this. The Senator is right that there is great potential there and it needs to be taken up, particularly in that part of the country.

Senator Stephenson spoke about a *Journal Investigates* article, and Senator Crowe spoke about this, about a national survey and targets for starting treatments for cancer patients not being met at all. Senator Stephenson pointed out it concerned women in particular. I totally appreciate that when someone gets a diagnosis, that person's life is in disarray. There are so many different things to organise and plan. It is life altering. All that person wants to do is start treatment as soon as possible. There are regional disparities. We will look for a debate with the Minister for Health on that.

Senator Crowe also mentioned that Ballinasloe needed to be a priority and that, in Galway, the figures went from 91% in 2023 to 76% in 2024. The figure for this year is approximately 73%. He mentioned that, for the first time ever, there would be an under-23 Camogie final in Limerick. We will wear our tribal colours for Galway versus Cork. I am sure Senator Rabbitte will also be shouting for Galway.

Senator Boyle spoke about the ambulance service, which he raised previously, and the fact the Minister for Health had referred the matter to the Minister for Finance. He asked whether these people understood rural life. Both those people are Fine Gael Ministers, so I assume he has taken the opportunity to speak to both. We all support what he is looking for. It needs to

be sorted out. Donegal needs a good ambulance service, as does everywhere in the country.

I understand what Senator McCarthy is saying. He spoke about the Ukrainian ambassador being concerned that Ukraine was being forgotten about in the heat of Israel and Palestine. There was an interesting presentation from European Movement Ireland at the European Affairs committee yesterday. It commissioned a survey, which was carried out by Amárach. Ukraine was third on the list of concerns people had. Out of the top five areas of concern - I questioned this - Gaza was not there at all, which really surprised me. It was first in Northern Ireland for those who participated in the survey, but Ukraine was No. 3. We absolutely have to reaffirm through solidarity. We certainly hope that war of aggression by Russia ends soon.

Senator Rabbitte spoke about Portiuncula hospital, high-risk pregnancies and antenatal care. She is right that we have to have the best care and best protection for mum and child. This was raised in 2018, when a particular survey was done. I understand from what the Senator said that what is being suggested is potentially moving those mums to another hospital. She raised a concern about the capacity to then retain staff. It is a key issue. As she said, there is a commitment to a review of the maternity strategy in the programme for Government. We will look for the Minister for Health to come in on the national strategy and ask her to address the situation at Portiuncula.

Senator Kennelly spoke about the new respite day services that are needed in Beaufort. Apparently, there is a very good service there, which the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, recently visited. There is a clear demand and a growing need. It is certainly undeniable that the quality of life of the individual, and his or her family, is improved so much when there is respite care. In that context, we will ask for a full debate on respite care. We will ask the Minister to reference Beaufort in that. It is an issue that impacts on many throughout the country.

Senator Kennelly also mentioned the Shannon energy project and the need for security of energy supply, which is crucial for everything. The supply of energy gives us many answers to many challenges and issues. We need clarity. We will ask about it, but I suggest a Commencement matter, maybe next week, would be worthy in that regard.

I share Senator Andrews's dismay that those visas were not allowed. As he knows, I spoke about this earlier in the week and about another group from Lahiya, which is in the West Bank, whose members hope to come over. They have had delays and have now put out their time-frame for a longer period. I spoke to the Minister's office after I raised the matter. The Senator is right that we need to have a compassionate, humanitarian approach. At the same time, over the past few years, the public we represent have been very clear that they want to ensure there are checks and balances regarding anybody looking for a visa to come to this country. We are clear that we need to have a robust system. From talking to the Minister's office, my understanding is that, unfortunately, the paperwork was not up to scratch. It was not the Minister's decision, but the officials decided the paperwork that was presented was not robust in this particular situation. It is a question of balance. We need a humanitarian approach but we also need checks and balances for visas, no matter where anybody is coming from.

It was also a very frustrating situation, when I worked with Special Olympics and we were organising the World Games in 2003. The biggest headache was that process of trying to ensure people got visas, especially for underdeveloped countries that we really wanted to come and have a very positive experience in Ireland. Some just did not get visas. I remember having the task of telling eight host towns, which put in two years' work to prepare, about four days

before the games started that those countries were not coming. I will always remember the disappointment and having to do that because of the whole visa system. It is very regrettable, but we will send the message that it is very important to have a humanitarian, compassionate approach to that.

Senator Davitt spoke about the need for the Minister for local government to come to the House to talk about the security allowance for councillors. I do not know the detail on it but I understand there was an announcement on this yesterday. It is very important. All of us worked collectively on that. Sadly, we are living in a difficult world where people think that any public representative is fair game. It is important that if we as Members of the Oireachtas can get a security allowance, then councillors can also have that opportunity. It certainly is very welcome news.

Senator Scahill spoke about the meeting with the Irish Hotels Federation, which represents a sector that employs 66,000 people nationally. He raised a very good point. I was also there and while the VAT issue is important, Ms Mary Fennin-Byrne from Clanard Court Hotel, Athy, which is an excellent hotel, raised the issue of staff training with me. I spoke to the Minister, Deputy James Lawless, about it last night. He is willing to look at that, to look at the sector and to look at what we can do to support it. Ms Fennin-Byrne raised the point that it was now quite difficult to attract chefs. Whether it is the hotel industry, restaurants or coffee shops, we need to support our hospitality trade because when we attract tourists, that is what they come for. They come for good food and good service, and we need to be able to deliver that. The Minister is certainly willing to look at it to see what he can do. We will look for a debate with him on that in the autumn. Senator Scahill also raised the situation in respect of insurance.

Senator Conway spoke about the issue of connections in Portlaoise and that the ESB had not connected houses. It is appalling, but the Minister, Deputy Browne, is looking into the situation. We have to have that. The Senator also spoke about farm safety. I understand from my colleague, Senator Rabbitte, that the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Healy-Rae, launched a tractor safety scheme last Monday. Looking at the number of farm deaths around the country, we cannot be too careful. I know Senator Daly raised the issue the week before the last and I heard some of the radio debate about young people being able to drive tractors at 16 years of age. While not wanting to take away from the licence aspect, it is important that there be mandatory training for young people. Tractors are very powerful vehicles. The first vehicle I drove was a tractor, although I may not have driven it too far. Having been brought up on a farm, I know it is very important that we have mandatory training.

Senator Murphy O'Mahony spoke about the investigation the Minister, Deputy McEntee, announced. It is certainly very welcome but it is important that we have the opportunity to look at the terms of reference, etc. We will ask the Minister to come to the House in the autumn.

Senator Higgins spoke about the increase in the number of data centres. While I understand what she is saying, at the same time, if we are going to support the AI revolution and try to become a leader in innovation, technology and the changes taking place in the business world, we need to have data centres. Going back to the point about LNG and the Shannon terminal, it is about being able to provide energy and having that wider debate.

Senator Higgins also spoke about the cost of fees. The new limits for SUSI mean grants, including accommodation grants, are available to families with an income of up to €115,000. That is very significant and we cannot lose sight of it. The vast majority of young people go-

ing into higher education would be able to avail of those. When we are talking about the cost of higher education, we also need to factor in more than just the cost for students. Obviously, we need to do everything we can to support students but it is also about the investment in our campuses and staff. When I was chair of the Oireachtas education committee, we spent a long time considering the Cassells report, which was about the investment needed in capital and IT infrastructure in our third level colleges. The Minister, Deputy Lawless, announced welcome and much-needed investment in four universities three or four weeks ago. A balance is needed between what we can do for students, which we need to do, and State investment in the organisations that are providing third level education.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I welcome to the Visitors Gallery Deputy Michael Murphy from Tipperary South and his guests, Seamus Doherty, Martha Kerton and Mary Harrington. I hope they enjoy their visit to Leinster House and the Seanad. They are very welcome.

Order of Business agreed to.

Data Protection Act 2018 (Section 60(6)) (Defence Forces Tribunal of Inquiry) Regulations 2025: Motion

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I move:

That Seanad Éireann approves the following Regulations in draft:

Data Protection Act 2018 (Section 60(6)) (Defence Forces Tribunal of Inquiry) Regulations 2025,

copies of which have been laid in draft form before Seanad Éireann on 2nd July, 2025.

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 11.33 a.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 11.45 a.m.

Sitting suspended at 11.33 a.m. and resumed at 11.45 a.m.

Transport Policy: Statements

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister back to Seanad Éireann, albeit only temporarily. I thank him for taking this debate.

Minister for Transport (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirligh agus a Sheanadóirí. I thank Senators for the opportunity to engage with them on the topics of public transport and aviation. I am looking forward to their perspectives and input. I am confident that we all agree it is essential that the Government continue to invest in our public transport services and network and that we are supportive of the Government's commitment to delivering an accessible, affordable and reliable public transport network throughout the country. I also look forward to discussing aviation and the strategic importance that the Government places on all of our airports, including our regional airports, particularly Shannon as regards the

mid-west region and nationally.

This Government is progressing a number of major projects that will significantly improve Ireland's public transport system, including BusConnects in all of our cities. BusConnects is a transformative programme of investment in the bus system, providing better services for our citizens and removing barriers to work, education and leisure across our cities. In Dublin, the main infrastructural element comprises the core bus corridor schemes. These corridors will provide over 200 kilometres of enhanced bus and cycling infrastructure in our capital city. I am pleased to say that An Coimisiún Pleanála has approved all 12 core bus corridor applications in Dublin. Construction on the first of these core bus corridors, which runs between Liffey Valley and Dublin city centre, is set to start later this year. It is a significant milestone that we can see BusConnects and the core bus corridors going into construction.

BusConnects is already providing improved sustainable services to commuters in Dublin through the roll-out of redesigned routes and electric buses. The preliminary business case for BusConnects Cork is with my Department and under review. As a significant project, I expect to bring it this autumn to the major projects advisory group at the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation and then to the Cabinet for approval. In addition, the redesigned bus networks for Galway and Limerick were finalised in December 2023 and for Waterford in January of this year. I expect to see them rolled out in the coming years as resources allow.

Our national aviation policy commits to optimising the operation of the Irish airport network to maximise Ireland's connectivity to the rest of the world. The connectivity of our network is essential for our continued economic development, for attracting and sustaining foreign direct investment, and for facilitating tourism while also keeping us connected with our friends and family abroad. I am pleased to share with the House that Shannon Airport is on a strong growth trajectory, with passenger figures from January to June showing a 7% increase on the same period last year. This builds on the growth of passengers in 2024, with passenger numbers recorded at about 2.1 million. This represented a 7% increase on the previous year and was the first time in 15 years that over 2 million passengers were reached at that airport.

I am aware there have been calls for the Government to seek to redirect traffic from Dublin Airport to the possible benefit of other airports. Traffic distribution rules are governed by European regulations and, under those regulations, following consultation with interested parties, including air carriers and airports, member states may look to adopt such rules between airports that meet specific conditions. Several member states have adopted such rules where they have cities or conurbations served by multiple airports, for example Amsterdam, Milan and Paris. However, our airports at Dublin, Cork and Shannon would not meet the conditions to distribute traffic in accordance with this EU regulation. Therefore, the operation of air services to, from and between these airports remains a commercial decision for airlines in Ireland.

This is an important opportunity to restate the Government's position on aviation. The aviation sector is critical for this country. We punch way above our weight as a small island nation, not just within the European Union but worldwide as well. Dublin is the fifth-best connected airport in Europe and operates as a transport hub. We can grow numbers at all our airports and we should do that. We are seeing Cork Airport grow substantially, with a €200 million investment announced for it. Dublin Airport is growing as well, and I expect very shortly a decision from An Coimisiún Pleanála with regard to the night flights. That is a very important decision that we await with anticipation. That will clear one of the two blockages that are there.

Colleagues will be aware of the programme for Government commitment with regard to the removal of the cap at Dublin Airport. That cap is stayed right now due to the ECJ case. We have invested heavily in Dublin. I remember back to 2008, when the second terminal in Dublin Airport was built. I attended that opening. There were many critics, both at political level and across society, who said the second terminal would be a white elephant and would not be used and that we would not be able to receive additional business in through it. We see now that Dublin Airport will need to continue to grow to facilitate passenger numbers. With the second runway now not fully operational but built, it gives the ability for Dublin to grow to 60 million passengers a year. This year we expect those passenger numbers to be more than 36 million. It is not growing one airport at the expense of another; we have to continue to support Shannon, Ireland West Airport Knock and Cork.

With regard to rail, my Department and the Department for Infrastructure in the North led the All-Island Strategic Rail Review, which was published in July of last year. It is a ground-breaking report and sets out a strategic vision for the development of the rail system right across the island of Ireland. I am pleased to say that included among those 32 recommendations is the reinstatement of the western rail corridor between Claremorris and Athenry. The reinstatement of this line has the potential to support both rail passenger and rail freight services, allowing a direct route for freight services from Ballina and Westport to ports on the south coast that avoid the more congested part of the rail network. This route would also reconnect Tuam to the railway and enable direct passenger services between Galway and Mayo, thereby supporting regional development in the area. The Department of Transport is working with a range of stakeholders to bring forward the rail review's recommendations for further analysis and progression. In this context, my Department is supporting Iarnród Éireann's ongoing assessment of the western rail corridor from Athenry to Claremorris, and I expect to receive a report on the matter this year. We are also working with the European Investment Bank and other stakeholders in considering how best to sequence and implement the recommendations of the rail review, with a view to optimising their development for passengers and wider society. This work with the EIB has included the preparation of a project prioritisation strategy. That strategy has been broadly agreed by the project steering team and will be published later this year.

As regards the regional bus network, we are strongly committed to providing all citizens with reliable and realistic sustainable mobility options, and public transport plays a key role in the delivery of this goal. Under the Connecting Ireland programme, 240 towns and villages have been connected to the wider public transport network since 2022. As part of the capacity, punctuality and reliability plan, Bus Éireann has reviewed in excess of 200 routes since January of this year to improve the punctuality and reliability performance on all routes and will continue to monitor service delivery levels across our bus network. The Bus Éireann Limerick fleet transitioned to full electrification operation of the city network from 27 April this year, including full electrification of the city fleet and the depot.

I thank Senators for this opportunity to speak about the public transport system and the aviation system. We are in the midst of fundamental change in our public transport system that will give people right across the country so much more freedom and opportunity for their education, their work and even their free time. We saw last year record passenger numbers and public transport journeys of about 330 million, and we want to build on that further. We are seeing an expansion of the public transport offering, particularly in rural Ireland. We know we need to do a lot more there. BusConnects will be critical with regard to our cities, and all 12 of those schemes are now through planning, five of them unencumbered. Seven of them are held up by

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way of judicial review, and infrastructural projects continue to be held up because of objections. I ask those people who look to object or who do object to those projects, some for very valid reasons, to look at the bigger picture, the wider picture. Yes, there will be disruption from time to time. We also expect very shortly a decision from An Coimisiún Pleanála on MetroLink, which will be the most significant national project to be delivered in decades, servicing the north County Dublin area right the way through the airport and into the city. We expect that decision to be made in the coming weeks.

I look forward to the contributions from Senators. I thank them for tabling this item of business and I look forward to the engagement today.

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call on the next speaker, I welcome the daughter of Senator Evanne Ní Chuilinn, Peigí, who is in the Distinguished Visitors Gallery. Peigí, you are most welcome to Seanad Éireann. You might come here yourself as a Seanadóir, b'fhéidir, lá éigin.

Anois, glaoim ar an Seanadóir Imelda Goldsboro.

Senator Imelda Goldsboro: I welcome the Minister to the Chamber and compliment him on the work he has achieved to date. He has hit the ground running. As spokesperson on transport, I look forward to working with him on several issues which he is aware of in Tipperary.

As an island nation with a dispersed population and an open economy, good connectivity is essential to foster continued economic growth for communities and our tourism industry. By investing in public transport, we will enhance connectivity across urban and rural areas, giving people more choice and supporting sustainable growth. Fianna Fáil is committed to a fundamental change in our transport system. Necessary improvements in climate measures impact air quality as well as our physical and mental well-being. We demand that public transport is better and, most importantly, more accessible for all. Likewise, a modal shift towards sustainable public transport is necessary for Ireland to meet our ambitious emissions reduction targets, including the target of 50% emissions abatement in the transport sector. We are taking action. Budget 2025 allocated €3.9 billion for the Department of Transport, an increase of over €418 million from 2024. This allocation means the public transport roll-out can continue apace across the country.

I need to raise a number of issues in south Tipperary, first of all our rail lines. We need to review this as a matter of urgency in Clonmel, Tipperary town, Carrick-on-Suir and Cahir. We have the facilities but, unfortunately, we do not have the upgrades that are required to make these more user-friendly and more feasible and to provide investment to allow them to become more accessible. Currently, you cannot purchase tickets at a number of these stations. People are unaware of the timetables. The number of trains passing through needs to be increased. Tipperary is a large county and the south has little connectivity with larger cities. People would avail of a regular service if provided. Many people travel for education, work, hospital appointments, etc. The current frequency is not feasible for a large percentage of users, and we need to promote and plan the potential of these areas.

12 o'clock

The Government's Connecting Ireland rural mobility plan seeks to improve mobility in rural areas by providing better connections between villages and towns, linking these areas with an enhanced regional network and connecting cities and regional centres nationwide. The plan has seen unprecedented progress, with over 100 new or improved bus services across rural Ire-

land launched so far. The annual patronage on the TFI Local Link services has seen a sevenfold increase since 2018. Continued investment in projects such as Connecting Ireland will benefit rural communities through expanded services on the PSO bus services across the country, as well as expanded services through the TFI Local Link network.

In Tipperary South, we have several villages that have this service and it is proving to be a lifeline for so many people. Unfortunately, it does not exist in all our villages. I am looking for funding to be applied so that the service can be expanded into the areas that do not have any public transport. In Tipperary South, taxis are not very common. This is leading to an increase in social exclusion and rural isolation and, unfortunately, it is causing an awful lot of loneliness for our elderly and vulnerable due to the lack of contact with the outside world. We acknowledge the great services that have been introduced and are very successful, such as the route 891 connecting Carrick-on-Suir to Kilkenny city, which commenced in January 2025. Route 356 Dungarvan to south Tipperary hospital has been particularly successful and is now operating eight daily return services. The CL1, CL2 and CL9 are operating in Clonmel. They have transformed our town. Route CL9 provides an early morning and late night service to facilitate onward travel to Kilkenny, Dublin city and Dublin Airport, and improved connectivity to the wider TFI network. I ask the Minister to look favourably on increasing these services in Tipperary South, and that he would review the existing rail timetable.

Senator Mark Duffy: The Minister is very welcome. I thank him for his work in an exciting period in Ireland's ambitions for transport. As he outlined, there are many exciting and ambitious projects being proposed at different stages across the country. BusConnects will be a very positive measure in improving connectivity and access for people across the cities. The improvements to the regional bus networks have been welcomed, while the expansion of rail services to different regions across Ireland and the reduction in fares have seen a pronounced increase in users of the services.

The Minister outlined the many ambitious plans for rail that were at different stages. Metro-Link is a real statement of intent, if it can proceed as we would like, to transform the city centre and connectivity from Dublin Airport into the city. Another key project the Minister outlined coming from the all-island rail review was the western rail corridor. Being from Mayo and understanding the importance of transport infrastructure to rural communities, I cannot overstate the importance of the delivery of the western rail corridor in that first phase from Athenry to Claremorris. The track - about 33 km - is there and in public ownership. Various estimates have been made and evolve all the time because of inflation. That investment would be value for money, given that the land is in public ownership and can connect the western seaboard, a region that has been identified as lagging in terms of investment and is ranked sixth from the bottom in European regions for transport infrastructure. The west needs positive discrimination and investment. The western rail corridor is a project that can help revitalise towns and villages across the west. The land is in public ownership and can have a massive benefit for the region as a phase 1 project. In time, I would love to see it being connected to Sligo. If we can move at speed to deliver the western rail corridor in the coming years, we should set out metrics to determine whether it is feasible for the Sligo line. If and when the western rail corridor is reopened, I believe it will prove to be hugely successful and will push the business case for the continuation to Sligo.

On regional airports, in County Mayo we have Knock Airport, which is a roaring success. I compliment the team there, including Joe Gilmore, who is leading the line. Some 834,000 passengers went through Knock last year. That is an incredible figure for a regional airport. It

is supporting and complementing the impressive figures from Shannon, which are at about 2 million passengers per year. Improved connectivity on our roads can also help take pressure off the likes of Dublin Airport, where travel times to the airport are being reduced constantly because of improvements in road infrastructure. The connectivity east to west from Mayo to Dublin is improving and the travel times are decreasing. The Scramoge to Ballaghaderreen road will be a great addition for improving the attractiveness of Knock Airport as a destination for people to fly from.

This is an exciting moment for transport. There are significant projects that can help connect and bring communities and people closer together and to our key infrastructure and our towns, cities and villages. I compliment the Minister's work.

At a more granular level in our towns, local transport plans have been created. I understand that, through the NTA, a lot of funding has been spent on active travel measures. Perhaps that is more the case in cities, but these towns have created local transport plans to connect schools, workplaces and communities. They need to be supported in their delivery of them. In my own town of Ballina, and as the Minister will know well, we have a local transport plan that has recommendations to help unlock the congestion challenges, which are a big issue in the town, and to do with road infrastructure like the N26, tying us closer to key pieces of infrastructure in key cities like Dublin. Key airports like Knock can have a significant and positive economic impact.

Regarding the western rail corridor and the west's connectivity, the pharmaceutical company Hollister in Ballina announced just last week an €80 million investment, supported by the IDA. Coca Cola is also based in Ballina and we have pharmaceuticals in Westport and Castlebar that can benefit a great deal from the freight lines all the way down to Foynes Port. This can have a positive impact from an economic point of view as well as for passenger connectivity.

I welcome the Minister's work in such a consequential Ministry that affects many people's lives every day. The Government is taking key steps to support what the Minister requires financially to make the transformative change on our island. Projects such as the western rail corridor, MetroLink and BusConnects, along with supporting regional airports, could have a greatly transformative effect on our whole economy and the quality of life of our citizens. The Minister has my full support for anything we can do to advocate for and support the delivery of these projects.

Senator Joanne Collins: I will share time with Senators Tully and Andrews.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Joanne Collins: It is great to have the Minister here. I will speak on a number of key areas in transport that would begin to address the great regional imbalance that is choking Ireland's potential. The regions outside Dublin must finally be given a fair share of investment and opportunity. The M20, the motorway between Limerick and Cork, is not a luxury; it is a necessity. This stretch of road, at present the N20, is not only outdated and dangerous but it is actively stifling the economic potential of the entire southern region. Towns such as Charleville are choked with congestion while dangerous bends and poor road conditions have resulted in far too many lives lost. The figures are stark. Every year, 118 accidents could be prevented and €12.4 million could be saved. This is the human and economic impact of inaction.

Beyond safety, the M20 is about regional transformation. A Cork to Limerick motorway is

not only tarmac; it is the backbone of a twin city powerhouse that could support 300,000 new jobs in the region. This is how we reverse rural decline. It is how we attract foreign direct investment, empower local businesses and build balanced prosperity throughout Ireland. Yet, this vital project is progressing at a painfully slow pace. The proposal to toll the entire motorway undermines the project from the get-go. The Government needs to think seriously about the approach to the M20 project.

Let us turn to regional airports. Last summer's High Court stay on Dublin Airport's passenger cap was not just a legal event; it was a damning symbol of a broken aviation strategy. Why has Dublin Airport been allowed to reach the crisis point it has, while the airports in Knock, Shannon and Cork remain underutilised? A smart all-island aviation policy would redistribute traffic, support tourism, enhance national connectivity and relieve pressure on Dublin but this would require vision and a Government that sees the entire country and not only the east coast.

Let us speak about rail, the forgotten piece of our national transport puzzle. The western rail corridor from Galway to Sligo and beyond is not a pipe dream. It is a strategic asset and it is high time we treated it as such. Reopening the line as part of a wider Atlantic economic corridor would help to tackle regional imbalance, offer real climate action and unlock the true potential of the west and north west. However, all of these projects, and others such as Metro-Link in Dublin, are seemingly forever out of reach due to the design, planning and construction timelines. Something has gone badly wrong with our delivery of infrastructure. The timelines are out of control, taking decades in some instances. The processes are broken and with every brand-new Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Government, the more things change, the more they stay the same. Sinn Féin is clear that we will back the M20 to completion, deliver a cohesive regional aviation strategy and fully restore the western rail corridor. Real regional development is not about one-off projects; it is about a connecting vision for Ireland's future.

Senator Pauline Tully: I come from County Cavan. We have no rail network and nor do Monaghan, Tyrone, Fermanagh and Donegal. The entire area has no railway. We did but the Government at that time, some 60 years ago, had no foresight and decided to end the rail service to Cavan. Not only did it do that but it allowed people to build over the rail line, take it up and sell the sleepers. I know Cavan is included in the all-island strategic rail review, and there are proposals for a connection from Portadown to Monaghan and Cavan but it is way down the line. This leaves us dependent on the roads. The road structure is very poor and is deteriorating more and more.

There is a large rural network of roads in Cavan. There is probably 3,000 km of roads. Approximately 10% of the roads should be repaired every year but there is not sufficient funding provided to do this. A minute amount is provided for local roads. I know this does not come under the Minister's current portfolio but it came under his previous one. The funding was not provided in sufficient amounts to repair the roads and keep them up to date. We had a history of poor roads in Cavan and we are going back to it. We had pothole candidates elected 20 years ago.

The 109 and 109X bus routes provide a regular hourly service from Cavan to Dublin. Some of the services go to Dublin Airport also, which is very welcome. It needs to be reliable but that is not always the case. It is frequently late and there are serious capacity issues on the 109X route returning from Dublin to Cavan in the evenings. Passengers are often left standing at a bus stop because there is not sufficient capacity on the bus. This has been raised time and again with the National Transport Authority and it still has not been rectified. It needs to be reviewed

on an ongoing basis and extra capacity supplied where needed.

The Local Link network is very welcome. It continues to expand and connect local towns to a main town or to bus networks servicing other towns and larger areas outside the county. We want to see this continue to expand and facilitate more people. Stops between villages are not allowed and this is very frustrating. In the area where I live, a service goes from Cavan to Ballinagh to Kilnaleck. It stops in each of these towns but not between them. People have to go into the nearest village to get the bus so they might as well take the whole journey to Cavan in their car. If stops could be facilitated between villages, it would be very welcome.

The nearest airport to me is Dublin Airport. It is such a busy airport. We have to drive there, then park and get a shuttle bus, and then walk for a long time to get from one part of the airport to the other. When I was a child Shannon Airport was utilised far more. I recall going to Shannon Airport regularly to meet or leave relatives at the airport who were returning to the United States. I have used Knock Airport, even though it is little bit further away from me, and it is a convenient airport because people can park right beside it and walk in. Belfast airport is the same. It would be very welcome to see investment in our regional airports so they could have more capacity.

Senator Chris Andrews: Public transport is a very important issue for everyone in the city and throughout the country, with thousands relying on buses and trains to get to and from work and to go about their daily lives. However, our transport network has been let down by successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments, which have promised much and delivered little. Nowhere has this been clearer than with regard to the metro in Dublin, which seems to have been going on forever. Since 2002, the project has been delayed multiple times, with countless Ministers announcing that the metro is on its way only for nothing to happen. The city needs urgent action on public transport to create a safe, affordable, reliable and accessible public transport network. We need the delivery of the metro and the Luas expansion to be accelerated, as well as improving the bus network to better serve communities with cheaper fares and more regular services. I hope BusConnects will help with this.

The Luas to Ringsend has been consistently delayed by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. Ringsend is an area with a rapidly growing population, particularly with 3,500 new homes to be built on the glass bottle site. There will be 10,000 new residents. The previous Government kicked the decision to deliver the Luas out by ten years. While I hear some Government backbench TDs speak about a 15-minute city, the reality is the decisions and actions of the Government will not make this possible. Expansion needs to be delivered in advance of the glass bottle site development being completed. We need the Government to think ahead and not neglect the issue and have to try to play catch up.

We also need public transport to be safer. The lack of dedicated transport police results in serious and often criminal antisocial behaviour, leaving passengers and transport workers in fear. I ask the Minister to comment on this. We all have many stories about people who are afraid to travel on the DART. The red line on the Luas can be chaotic but people have a view that the DART is safe. I know from having spoken to many people that they regularly feel unsafe and threatened on the DART.

Cycling infrastructure also needs to be significantly improved to ensure safer, more accessible options for active travel. Dublin deserves a modern, efficient and safe public transport system. The time for empty promises is over and it is time for real investment and action.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire. I am going to return again to the matter of the western rail corridor and the other examples of significant underinvestment and neglect relating to the rail network in the west and north west. I will be echoing much of what Senator Duffy said. Most of these matters I have raised in one form or another since I have been in the Seanad and the transport committee. I could be called a trainspotter at this stage. However, the trouble with being a trainspotter in the north west is that you are restricted to one line, from Sligo to Dublin. If you happen to be based at the end of the line, as I am in Sligo town, there is nothing to spot travelling from east to west before 9 o'clock in the morning and from west to east after 7 o'clock in the evening. All joking aside, the reinstatement of the western rail corridor and the expansion of rail services on the Dublin–Sligo line will have a huge and positive impact on the life of those living in the north west.

I wish to address three specific issues, two of which can be addressed immediately and at very little cost in the budget. The third will take a little more time. I recognise that the Minister of State, Deputy Seán Canney, has made encouraging sounds about what is possible. He has been speaking to senior management in Irish Rail, with which I have corresponded, about the catering services withdrawn from all the services on the rail network at the start of the Covid pandemic. We are aware that they have been reintroduced on the Dublin–Belfast and Dublin–Cork lines. We were promised reinstatement on the Sligo–Dublin line by the start of 2025 but that commitment has not been delivered upon. Irish Rail is blaming the NTA for the failure to deliver a sufficient budget, and Irish Rail and the NTA both assert that the catering service is a loss-making service. I do not buy that because a small, independent catering cart has been set up in Dromod, County Leitrim. If an independent person is trying to make money out of it, I do not see how it could be loss-making. Can we just figure this out? It would be a very easy win for the north west.

Another matter that could be fixed very easily concerns the fact that no train arrives into Sligo before 10.15 a.m. on a weekday. This is not good enough. We have a big problem with student accommodation for the wonderful Atlantic Technological University in Sligo. Most people start work between 8 a.m. and 9 a.m. but if the train does not arrive until 10 a.m., they will not be able to get it. It also affects people with hospital appointments. It has been suggested that a train could leave Sligo empty at 4 a.m., go to Longford and then come back at 8 a.m. Irish Rail has assured me it is working towards providing an hourly service on the line and I am aware that two additional staff are to be employed in Sligo. Could these be a priority? The ATU, hospitals and general workers in Sligo claim it would be transformative if a train arrived in Sligo at 8 o'clock in the morning.

Let me talk about the western rail corridor, or the spine of Connacht, as we call it, and its reinstatement. The all-Ireland rail review states the line will be extended from Athenry to Claremorris, but can we add the line from Claremorris to Sligo? Senator Duffy and I are like broken records here talking about this. Is there an opportunity to re-examine this? Just because there is a rail review does not mean the thinking is set in stone. Can the extension be reconsidered? It is only 75 km. Since 2019, the north west has been downgraded by the European Commission to a lagging region. If we are really talking about balanced regional development, the line will be transformative. Reinstatement of the western rail corridor, the spine of Connacht, would be a wonderful legacy for the Minister to go out on. Ar aghaidh leis an obair.

Senator Patricia Stephenson: That is a hard act to follow.

We know public transport outside our major urban centres is, to one degree or another, poor

or practically non-existent. I want to raise serious concerns about the issue of rural transport, particularly in Carlow and Kilkenny, where families are being let down time and again by a system that is underfunded, pretty complicated and failing in many cases to realise its basic purpose. In April this year, a private provider, JJ Kavanagh and Sons, removed stops at Castlecomer, Crettyard and Athy from the 717 route, which is the Clonmel–Dublin Airport route. This decision was made with no public consultation and has left several communities completely cut off from having a bus route through their towns. I have written to the NTA about this and have heard absolutely nothing in response. The State's overreliance on private operators for what is supposed to be a public service is now generating challenges and costs for individuals who rely on so-called public service transport routes. A private provider can decide at any moment, unilaterally, to pull a route. The results for communities are isolation for older people, disruption for workers and considerable additional car dependency, which is not in line with our climate targets. We face €26 billion in fines. The Environmental Protection Agency said recently that we may reach only 23% of our emissions target, not the 51% reduction required. Instead of accepting that fines might come, maybe we should be investing some of the equivalent moneys in advance to lower our emissions.

The NTA points to Local Link, which is a really good resource, is welcome and has resulted in much access for rural communities; however, it is not necessarily sufficiently resourced to fill the widening gap left when a private provider pulls from a public route because it deems it not to be profitable. Without a properly funded national transport strategy, Local Link cannot provide a genuine alternative.

While it does not necessarily concern the Minister's Department, there is an ongoing issue with school transport and children not getting places. Even though they are guaranteed or entitled to spaces, they are just not available. This is an ongoing issue for rural communities.

I would like to touch briefly on the issue of the train. I live on the Waterford–Dublin line. It is a really busy line and is at capacity daily in the morning and evening, with passengers standing. I do not believe it was subject to review in 2024, despite its being an incredibly busy link. We have an issue in Kilkenny at MacDonagh Junction, where the platform is too short. This is what I believe is curtailing the provision of additional carriages on the entire route. An extension is desperately needed to increase capacity on the route.

When we talk about transport, we should ask about its purpose. It is so we can go places without being in our cars. Senator Collins talked about vision and having a vision. The starting point entails asking how we use public transport. I am a train user. On a Tuesday morning, I drive to my local train station, at Bagenalstown, Muine Bheag, park my car, get the train to Houston and then get the bus here. I go back again on a Thursday. That would be a whole lot easier if the train left after 8 p.m. I realise new services have been provided but it would be lovely to be able to see my family for dinner in Dublin and then get home by train instead of having to drive home on such an occasion. This would reduce the awful congestion we see on the M50 and N7. I would love to be able to go directly to Galway or indeed Tullamore by train from where I live, but instead I must get the train to Dublin and then go from Dublin elsewhere. It would be amazing in Ireland to have the option of travelling around the country meaningfully by public transport, or of going on holiday by public transport, but that is just not what we have. I am aware it is not an easy fix but when we talk about vision and what we would love to see in the next 15 or 20 years, we should talk about rail and bus routes that actually help us, make our lives better and allow us to live in a way that is more climate friendly, sustainable and better for everyone. I actually do not believe anyone wants to be sitting on the N7 in bumper-to-bumper

traffic for two and a half hours.

Public transport should be the future and should be the now. We can look back on the decisions in the past when Ireland thought it was modernising by ripping out all its rail routes. We can all agree that this was not modernisation. We need to think about long-term vision when it comes to public transport. I urge the Minister to be brave and bold in long-term planning, particularly insofar as it relates to rail routes. This country would be such an amazing place if we had reliable, predictable and sustainable transport options.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: The Minister is very welcome to the House. If he delivers the track to Sligo, I would like him to be the one who puts the shovel in the ground for the ring road in Galway.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I would like that, too.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: That would be the one piece that I would really like to see happen.

There is no doubt that we are completely congested at this stage. I will share the following little anecdote with the Minister. I love it when Ministers come to Galway. We have to go into the university hospital to meet them and then they ask me for the quickest way to get out to another part of the city. There is nothing like putting them across the Quincentenary Bridge to get them caught for at least an hour to experience what every other person living in the city is experiencing on a daily basis. Anything the Minister can do in this space would be welcome.

It is regrettable that it is stifling from an economic growth point of view. I worry about that because we have fantastic hospitals and universities but it is a turn-off to go into the city. It is a turn-off for people to bring in the CEOs of their companies. While they have great transport coming in, either to Shannon Airport or Ireland West Airport Knock, the trouble is they might meet them in a hotel in a surrounding area or try to bring them in earlier in the morning or later in the evening to visit their sites because of the congestion. Whatever the Minister and his Department and officials can do would be greatly welcome.

I will lend my voice in support of the western rail corridor. I will not rehash it, but it needs to happen. Covid taught us one thing, namely, that what we need to do is reinvest in the rail. This is definitely the case as regards the connection from Claremorris into Athenry. That connection is there and ready. It is unfortunate that a big bridge will need to be constructed at Ballyglunin but I have no doubt that the Minister's team is looking at this as part of the report that will come back to him.

The part of east Galway that I come from does not have BusConnects, airports or much rail. I depend on good road infrastructure and the Local Link. Local Link makes a significant difference a significant difference for the young people of the area going to college in Limerick, Athlone or Galway. It was great to get the news yesterday of the Local Link connection from Loughrea to Ballinasloe and straight on to Athlone. That gives choice to people. That service runs four times a day. That is the sort of service that is needed. Where children decide they are doing third level, they have choice. They can continue to stay at home. It is not only that, though. It also provides flexibility. They do not need to buy that first car straightaway only to get down to Limerick or Athlone.

When we talk about good roads, the N65 leads into Portumna but we have been on traffic lights at Heathlawn for the past 12 months because we are waiting for the TII to draw up a little

bit of a design to put into a proposal. We need consultation to move that project along.

I compliment the Minister on the positivity of his opening contribution as regards. We also need to tell the TII to stop making objections. Where the local authority grants planning permission to a young farmer on the road to Kinvara where he or she is developing the business but the TII will not allow the farmer to build a house on his or her land with his or her own gate, that is wrong. The farmer is looking to see what the next steps after the local authority gives permission only for the TII to object.

Overall, the officials handling Ceannt Station and the people on the ground in Local Link are doing phenomenal work in supporting people who sometimes feel forgotten. They are not forgotten at this stage.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Before anyone else speaks, the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, is taking over for the second half of the debate. He is in the anteroom. I will be leaving.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I thank the Minister very much indeed.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I have taken notes and we will be responding.

Senator Gareth Scahill: I was going to say, "Happy birthday".

Senator Mark Duffy: Happy birthday, Minister.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I thank the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer.

Senator Gareth Scahill: I welcome the Minister of State, once again, to the Chamber. The Minister of State always seems to come in just before I speak but I thank him for coming in again.

In the Minister's opening statement, he mentioned the passenger cap at Dublin Airport. While I was planning to talk about balanced regional investment and the north west, I recall speaking following St. Patrick's weekend to a hotelier here in Dublin whom I was staying with and asking how busy the hotel was. The turnover was similar due to costs, but footfall was down 25% and the hotelier was blaming that directly on the passenger cap at Dublin Airport. I welcome the Minister's comments that he is addressing that and he hopes to have a solution shortly.

Numerous other Senators, especially from the north west, have been speaking about our rail line, but few have mentioned the rail line from Heuston to Westport and Heuston to Ballina. It is an important service. It is a service that taps into many urban areas along the way that there has been significant investment in. It is a highly utilised service as well. While I echo Senator Cosgrove's call for the catering car to be included on that service again, what I would actually like to see is additional carriages on that service. I have used the service quite regularly since I was appointed to the House and, although I book my ticket, I am not one of these people who will try to move somebody out of the seat, just in case that person is a constituent, so I have often found myself standing in between carriages for a whole journey from Dublin to Castlereagh. I believe there are the numbers to justify additional carriages. Senator Duffy spoke about Hollister's investment of €80 million in Ballina. By improving the services and the experience of people using these services, we will continue to attract more investment to our areas. That is one of the matters I wanted to mention.

Knock airport has been mentioned. It is expected to have in excess of 900,000 passengers this year. Last year, it had a bumper year of 834,000 passengers. It is located in Mayo but we must not lose sight of the fact that Knock airport services Roscommon, Sligo, Leitrim and Donegal and is highly utilised. There has been great investment in the roadways around Knock airport but we need to improve public transport to it, including access by train. That is why I welcome everyone's submission with regard to the western rail corridor.

Senator Stephenson mentioned something about a long-term vision and being ambitious. We should not only be looking at Athenry to Claremorris. We should be looking further afield at Athenry to Sligo. We should also be looking at reintegrating the north west into the national rail network, that is, Dublin to Derry and Derry to Letterkenny. If my colleague, Manus Boyle, were here, I am sure Letterkenny is what he would be solely talking about. Donegal is a beautiful part of the country. I visited a railway museum in Donegal when I was utilising services there and enjoying a summer holiday, but we should not be looking at the railway network as a part of history in Donegal. We should be looking at it as a utility to access and get more people up to that particular area. Senator Blaney is here and I am sure he will mention this as well.

We need to be ambitious. We need to look at this long term. I welcome this conversation.

Senator Dee Ryan: I welcome the Aire Stáit to the Chamber and thank him for coming in to listen to us today. I also thank the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, for his opening remarks and for his intense listening when he was here in the Chamber.

When I thought about today and what I would like to speak about, I had a multitude of projects that I could have chosen to focus on. I could have spoken about the junction 28 Mackey roundabout improvement scheme that is badly needed in Limerick to open up access to the IDA business park there and the University of Limerick. I could have spoken about the great potential that we have for metro rail in Limerick. It requires relatively little investment in order to enable the final piece of double-tracking to be put in place and platforms to be put in place across the city, which would really give us a jolt in terms of developing our core density. I could also have spoken about or highlighted the motorway to Cork and the important economic links that enables and, indeed, the links that exist that justify it. I have written to the Minister on all of those projects and asked for his consideration to support all of them in the national development plan review but there was that chicken-and-egg dilemma as to what I would talk about. Listening to the contributions of Senators around the room, they were focusing on these links and how they could improve our regional economy, but I was asking myself where the rooster was in this debate. The Minister of State, with his background and area of expertise, does not need me to tell him that the rooster is, indeed, our international connectivity. It is our air access to the EU marketplace - 450 million individuals with whom we have the ability to trade tariff-free. Those who are not familiar with business and with our economy may be excused for thinking our economic growth is due to our success within the country. In fact, it is our membership of the EU and our ability to trade into the EU marketplace and to support foreign direct investment and make Ireland the home place for multinationals trading into the EU marketplace that have allowed us to see the economic resurgence we have seen the past decade or more and reap the benefits of growing PAYE and corporation tax receipts. If we do not look after the rooster – our international access – I am afraid we do put our economic success and further growth at risk.

I ask the Minister of State, as I did the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, to consider providing support for Shannon Airport. Dublin Airport has daily business connectivity into the holy trinity of air access in respect of business connectivity and economic development, namely, Frankfurt,

Paris and Amsterdam. There are multiple flights daily from Dublin into the holy trinity. Cork Airport also has multiple daily flights into Amsterdam and Paris, and flights into Frankfurt multiple times per week. Shannon Airport, I am afraid, was only recently given, for the summer period from March until October, two flights a week into Paris. Our region is trading and operating at a marked competitive disadvantage because this does not allow our regional economy to achieve its potential. It does not allow us to achieve the population growth figures we want to achieve when we think about Ireland in Ireland 2040 and managing our spatial strategy and economic growth strategy, and managing where people will live into the future. We have set as an objective that only 25% of the 1 million additional people we expect to be living in Ireland by 2040 will be in Dublin. We only want one quarter of those to be in Dublin. Limerick and the mid-west stand ready to accept higher population growth, but we need PSO connectivity to a business hub, one of the holy trinity, and support for our regional airport.

Senator Seán Kyne: I commend the work done by the Northern and Western Regional Assembly on the disparity of investment between the north, west and north west and the southern and eastern regions. It is explicit and telling with regard to the investment of projects of more than €1 million or more than €20 million. Despite having 17.6% of the population, the share of investment of tenders over €20 million is 5.7% in the northern and western region. The eastern and midlands region, with 49% of the population, has a 75% share of that investment. Obviously, the capital city and certain areas will always get higher rates of investment, but there is a huge disparity between the eastern region and the west and northern region. That should be addressed through additional investment as part of the national development plan but recognising as well the importance of balanced regional development, which would be good for the northern and western region but also for Dublin. That needs to be recognised.

Connectivity is hugely important in any country for moving large numbers of people on a daily basis. It is fundamental to any developed economy in the modern world. We have to move large numbers of people in an efficient and sustainable manner, and that is not possible in large parts of the west and north west. The region ranks 218 out of 234 for transport infrastructure in the EU regional competitive index. That is a stark finding. The eastern region, by contrast, is ranked 24th. We need to address this imbalance in the national development plan.

We are all aware of the problems as they have been talked about for long enough. We need investment in solutions in a number of projects. The Galway city ring road has been talked about for so long and has been in the planning system. There is a Government commitment to it. It is necessary not just for those driving and using the roads but also to free up Galway city for public transport infrastructure. That is important, as is cycling and pedestrianisation.

Many Senators mentioned the western rail corridor. I again lend my support to that project. We have seen the success of phase 1, Galway to Limerick. Phase 2, Athenry to Claremorris, is a vital project from a passenger and freight point of view. It would also connect Mayo to Galway with a new, sustainable public transport service through Tuam, the largest town in the county, easing traffic on the approaches to Galway. If that project is not committed to in the NDP and if it does not start or is not completed in the lifetime of this Government, we might as well fire our hats at it. We are talking about it for long enough. It is a no-brainer. It is real investment in the region, it is sustainable and environmentally beneficial and it is good for the economy of the area. We have to commit to it and see action on it. We have had enough talk and reports. We have had all-island reviews. There are, I have heard, officials in the Department who would rather see this pushed out again for another decade or two. That is where Ministers come in and say, "No, that ain't happening; this project will be delivered in the lifetime of this Government."

Phase 3 is the Claremorris to Sligo section. Again, connecting to Sligo has to be part of the vision, as does, as Senator Scahill said, connecting onwards to Donegal as well.

Regarding the Luas, we had a presentation recently on light rail and very light rail. There is potential in Galway and I ask the Department to continue to look at the possibilities of Luas for Galway.

Senator Alison Comyn: I thank the Minister of State, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and the Department for all the incredible work carried out, even in the short time the current Government has been in office, to improve connectivity, reduce transport and commuting costs, improve EV charging, increase train and bus options, and, especially in my home town of Drogheda, effectively cutting the cost of a ticket to Dublin by half. We know the DART service is well on target to extend to the town.

I speak once again, as I did in my first weeks as a Senator in February, about something very real and urgent to the people of Drogheda. Anybody who knows me knows I am like dog with a bone when it comes to issues close to my heart, and I will not let this one go. I raise again the need for a second railway station on the north side of the town and the immediate start of phase 2 of the port access northern cross route.

Let us start with the railway station. As I have mentioned before, Drogheda is the biggest town in Ireland and growing fast, especially on the north side, with an estimated 7,500 houses on the way and planned. However, we still have only railway station, located on the south side in a densely populated area. It is already hugely over-capacity, with a serious shortage of parking spaces. We have thousands of commuters heading into Dublin and Belfast every morning, many of them forced to drive across town or into the centre of town to try to catch their train. It is causing traffic chaos and gridlock. It is bad for the environment and it is making daily life hard for families. A second railway station on the north side, close to phase 2 of the port access road, would ease pressure, cut commuting times and encourage people to leave the car at home, which is what we are aiming for. It is not just a convenience; it makes real common sense.

Phase 2 is the port access northern cross route, or the PANCR road. Phase 1 was delivered. We were delighted to welcome the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, to cut the ribbon on that. It has already made a massive difference. However, without phase 2, the job is only half done. HGVs are still going through residential areas. Our town centre is clogged up. Housing and other developments are being held up. We have done the planning and the route is mapped out. It was scheduled to begin work in January of this year, so now we really need to see shovels on the ground. Drogheda is ideally placed to be almost a regional hub. The road is vital for opening up land for housing, as otherwise new developments will be landlocked, for supporting the port and for keeping Drogheda moving. It is about future-proofing the town, not just five years from now but right now.

I ask the Minister of State and all involved to make these two projects, a second train station and phase 2 of the PANCR, a priority. I understand they need to be included in the national development plan. They need to be seriously considered. Drogheda is not a little town on the outskirts of Dublin anymore. It is a fledgling city right at the heart of this region and a vital part of the M1 corridor. It deserves to have the infrastructure to match. I ask that it is given consideration and for an update on what is happening with the second phase of the port access route.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I welcome the two groups present in the Public Gallery and

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Visitors Gallery, who are guests of Deputy Carrigy and the Minister of State, Deputy Harkin. I hope they enjoy their visit to Leinster House.

Senator Joe Conway: I wish to speak for a few moments on the géarchéim that is attaching to Waterford Regional Airport. I have many misgivings following a recent meeting that took place between the Minister, local TDs, Ministers of State and the chief executive of Waterford City and County Council in Waterford. When we heard the Minister was meeting representatives and the chief executive, our hopes naturally spiralled high and we thought we were going to get good news. Alas, it was another damp squib. We were told the airport would have to produce yet another business case to promote the further development of the airport, which involves widening and extending the runway to accommodate passenger jets and mid-range jets, such as the A320 and Boeing 737, which are currently in use all over Europe.

The summer of 2007 was one of international flight in Waterford and showed what could be done. That summer, we had a successful service down to Malaga and Faro with a short take-off and landing British Aerospace 146 jet, which got in and out of Waterford gan aon stró ar bith. It was immensely popular with the people in the south east because they could avoid the hassle of going to Dublin or Cork and get on the plane almost directly and fly down to the south of Europe in a couple of hours.

This was a short-lived facility because it did not go any further. Since then, we have been relying on dribs, drabs and scraps, with the airport having several carriers servicing the UK that come and go. We also now have the R117, the search and rescue helicopter, and the airport gets occasional visits from the Air Corps and executive flights. That is the extent of the traffic in Waterford.

The south east is the only region in the country that does not have an operational passenger airport. I go back to the theme we have been debating over the past month, that of balanced regional development. How are we ever to aspire to this if the south east and Waterford specifically are left with an airport that is but a shadow of its former self? I appeal to the Minister of State to use his good offices on this. From the conversations I have had with the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, in the past, I suspect he is well disposed towards Waterford and would love to see the airport operational. I sense from reading between the lines, however, that he is coming across an adverse wind in Cabinet and that is why the more robust business plan has been asked for. It is to silence the naysayers in Cabinet who are not in favour of giving Waterford the go-ahead because of possible competition reasons.

I am flying the flag for the local airport. It deserves to be given the funding. The land and the planning permission has been acquired and everything is in place. All we need is the few million. In contrast to the €200 million given to Cork, which I do not begrudge, one tenth of that would see us out through the gap and into the skies.

Senator Niall Blaney: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, back to the Seanad. I am delighted to see him being recognised for his Trojan work over the years, with him now being a Minister of State. I wish him well in his term.

I wish to raise the issue of the A5. All of today's discussion has been around bus and rail - I will come back to the rail aspect in a bit - but following the national development plan roll-out post 2000, the one route left out was the A5. There has been much lobbying over the years and I have constantly been on this since the year 2000. Eventually, Bertie Ahern and Tony Blair put

money in place in 2007 and I remember being told by my two Oireachtas colleagues in Donegal in 2014 not to worry because the then minister, Conor Murphy, was in charge and this would be delivered. They instead pulled out of Stormont in 2016 on the back of an Irish Act that still has not been delivered and no one has put any beef on the bone on this.

We are now in a situation where, a little over a year ago, Sinn Féin called for the Government to provide funds for the A5. The Government has done that and it is very welcome but now, but this is a result of the incompetence of Sinn Féin and its ministers in Northern Ireland. I say “its ministers” because John O’Dowd must take more responsibility for this than the current minister, given that John O’Dowd is the man who signed off on it, knowing his own policy had been in place since 2022. It is telling that no Sinn Féin representatives are in the House today. It is telling that Pearse Doherty made a statement in the Dáil last week in which he lectured the Government on the need to spend more on rail but did not even mention the A5, which affects all of us in the north west because we have to cross the Border along the way.

It is despicable what is happening in Northern Ireland. It is time there was an approach at Government level with the UK Government. There is an awful lot of incompetence going on at present and a lack of accountability regarding our ministers in Stormont and their officials. The result of this is the A5 will be put back at least two or three years. Some of the rail Deputy Doherty called for on a cross-Border basis will also likely be pushed back to the same degree. This will leave us further behind and with fewer opportunities for development. People talk about the opportunity for balanced regional development but we certainly have not received that for many decades in the west and north west, and this situation will now prolong that situation. Some of those who portray themselves and act as though they want to see development are of the very party opposing it. It is disgraceful manoeuvring by Sinn Féin. I would like to see what our Government can do to rescue the situation because it is in need of rescuing.

With regard to rail, the House will know there is no connectivity in Donegal. The cheapest and smartest option for connectivity in Donegal, in the short term and in line with the all-island rail review, would be the upgrade of the Belfast-Derry route. This currently takes two to two and half hours of travel time. The shared island fund should be used for this . It is not that big of a stretch to have connectivity from Derry and back into Letterkenny in Donegal to bring rail services back to the county. This would give the whole north west connectivity to Belfast city, Newry, Dublin and all the other cities across the country, accommodating and adding to the all-island economy. I would welcome the Minister of State taking this back to the Department of Transport to see if it can be looked into.

Senator Garret Kelleher: Ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil leis an Aire Stáit, an Teachta Buttimer agus an Aire, an Teachta O’Brien as ucht bheith i láthair sa Seanad inniu chun cúrsaí iompair a phlé linn. Mar atá déanta ag Seanadóirí eile, ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh an mbeirt acu.

I have listened with interest to all the contributions to the debate thus far and there is a common thread among many of them. This was something that was raised in a debate we had previously on balanced regional development, that is, the disproportionate lack of investment at a large infrastructural level in projects in the north-western and southern regions. Listening to the contributions of my colleagues regarding projects like the A5, the M20 Cork-Limerick motorway and the western rail corridor as well as investment in our regional airports, I sincerely hope today’s contributions are looked at when it comes to the NDP.

1 o'clock

It is vital, as Senator Blaney said previously, to try to counteract the disproportionate investment we have seen in the eastern and midlands regional areas and to have “positive discrimination”, which is the term that was used, towards the two regions that have been neglected.

In the same vein, I begin my contribution by raising the proposed introduction of the Luas light rail system in Cork, of which the Minister of State will be well aware. I have no doubt that when this service is delivered, it will prove to be transformational for our city and its suburbs and will give families and households in Cork the chance to have one car outside the door, or perhaps none at all, instead of two or three. While I appreciate I am stating the obvious, for the Cork Luas system to have maximum impact in getting cars off our roads and reducing traffic congestion, it must fully serve our most densely populated areas, schools, key community facilities and large centres of employment.

The published emerging preferred route of the light rail system is an 18 km line from Ballincollig town centre in the west, through Cork city centre and on to Mahon Point in the east. The fact the current proposed service ends in Ballincollig town centre is a massive error as it will not adequately serve the population of our local community or make sufficient provision for future population growth in our area. It is commonly accepted that for a light rail service to be considered a viable transport option for a local resident, a stop must be located within 1 km of that person’s home. Based on the 2022 census, the current preferred route would serve approximately 11,700 people in the Ballincollig area or 58% of our town’s population. In other words, it would not adequately serve 8,500 people or 42% of the current population in our community. If we then factor in the expected future population growth in the Maglin area in the south of Ballincollig, where it is expected that approximately 3,500 new homes will be built in the coming years with an expected population increase in the region of 11,000 people, the shortcomings of the proposed system are even more stark.

I had hoped to raise another issue, but I have just realised that I am running short of time, so I ask the Leas-Chathaoirleach to indulge me. It is the issue of the disparity that exists between a private bus operator and the public transport system, especially with the proposal to extend free travel to the under-nines. Given that private bus operators operate services in areas where there is no public transport alternative, I sincerely hope that the matter can be looked at and that private transport operators, 87% of whom operate outside the Dublin area, will be brought under the remit of the proposed extension to the free travel.

Senator Sarah O’Reilly: I thank the Minister of State for coming.

This subject is close to my heart. When I became a councillor in 2016, I realised that the two biggest issues in our county were a lack of roads funding and a lack of public transport. Since then I have not stopped banging on doors looking for what the people of Cavan deserve in infrastructure. I live in Bailieborough. It is the second largest town in the county and we had one bus service, a Link bus service, that left the town to go to Kells at 9.30 a.m. That departure time meant that it was not a service for students or people going to work, so I do not know what it was. I therefore started a campaign to expose how badly served the county was with public transport, bearing in mind that Cavan does not have any rail network.

I was informed by the NTA in 2021, after four years of campaigning, that Bailieborough would get a Local Link service connecting the local towns of Shercock, Cootehill and Baili-

eborough with a regular bus service in Virginia that serves Cavan and Dublin. That was never implemented because the NTA decided a whole-of-Ireland rural mobility plan would be started. I felt at the time that if we were going to do it, we might as well do it right and appreciated it would take another few years. Cavan County Council held a special meeting with councillors in December 2021 and we put together submissions for the entire county. I was the lead on that and along with other councillors I also made individual submissions and encouraged local groups, such as development associations, men's sheds and hen's sheds, to do the same. I also assisted the community and enterprise section of Cavan County Council to put together its submission, which clearly showed the huge gaps in public transport in our county. There was huge engagement by people. Cavan made 53 submissions to the public consultation while Longford made three and Monaghan made six. Cavan was to the fore in getting opinions out there about how under-served we are. The connectivity is very poor.

The list of proposed new enhanced routes was launched with the Connecting Ireland Rural Mobility Plan 2023. It included six routes for Cavan, which was a high percentage of the planned routes. It was great news and we felt that it would be implemented. I had seen many plans come and go and felt this one really would happen. Of the six routes proposed for Cavan, only three have been implemented and are operational. I have a document that set out the timelines for when the other three services were to be implemented. They still have not been implemented although the date they were to be operational was quarter 3 of 2023.

I therefore have a question for the Minister of State. There is still no direct route to Dublin from Bailieborough and there is no express or direct route from Cavan to Dublin either. When will the enhanced route 108, the proposed extension from Bailieborough to Canningstown and Cootehill be operational? I want a timeline for its commencement. It was proposed the new Local Link service from Cootehill, Shercock and Bailieborough to Virginia would commence in quarter 3 of 2023 and it is still not operational.

I support Senator Blaney in what he said about the A5 and N2 routes, which are extremely important for the north west as well.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I will give Senator Boyle two minutes before we hand over to the Minister of State.

Senator Manus Boyle: The Minister of State is welcome.

I tabled a Commencement matter about this but I did not get it through yet. To add to what my fellow Senator said, the A5 is a big disappointment to us in Donegal. For decades, we have been waiting for it. We are really isolated in Donegal and we thought this was the way forward. I attended the football game a few Saturdays ago when Donegal and Tyrone were playing. I was inundated with people asking me what will we do and how we can fix the A5. From when I was a child, all I have heard about is the A5. People have to realise that people who come from rural parts of Donegal have no other access except through the A5 and that area coming into Tyrone. It is crucial for us to move forward. We have to rescue it, however it is done.

Whoever dropped the ball on this dropped it big time. What will happen to the Ten T project in Donegal, which includes the Ballybofey-Stranorlar bypass, the Letterkenny-Lifford road and the Bonagee link? Can they progress or are they stalled now too? This has a big knock-on effect on a rural county such as Donegal. The Minister of State knows County Donegal well and is due to visit in the next few weeks. I cannot understand why this is not going ahead. We have

been waiting for this for 40 years. Who dropped the ball? Was it the Irish Government or the Northern Government? Whoever did needs to stand up and be accountable.

On another matter, I thank the Government for the Local Link. The service is going well in Donegal and we are appreciative of it, but there are places that need to be added to it. Towns such as Ardara, Glenties and Portnoo need a daily service. Once a day is of no benefit. Pockets have been left behind such as Mountcharles and Doorian, my area and places around Gaoth Dobhair. Will the Minister of State have a look at them and see what he can do?

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I welcome Deputy Neville from Kildare and his guests to the Gallery. I hope they enjoy their visit. I call an tAire Stáit.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Jerry Buttimer): Cuirim fáilte roimh cuairteoirí an Teachta Neville. Ar an gcéad dul síos ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil agus comhghairdeas a dhéanamh leis na Seanadóirí a bhí páirteach sa díospóireacht faoin gcóras iompar poiblí agus earnáil na heitlíochta. Díospóireacht an-tábhachtach agus láidir a bhí ann ar mhaithe leis na ceantair ar fad. Tá an ceart ach go háirithe ag an Seanadóir Ó Céilleachair that the national development plan is the roadmap of travel and the trajectory we are going to be on. Therefore, it is imperative that within any balanced regional development, we have at its core communities, people and that overarching theme of connectivity. I thank the Members for the opportunity to come to the House today to speak on behalf of many different projects. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, was here earlier to discuss the importance of public transport and the strategic importance the Government places on connectivity, for example, at Shannon Airport. Senator Conway spoke about Waterford, and Senators Boyle and Blaney raised the issue of the A5. I would not mind being in Gweedore today as it would be nice in that part of the world, in fairness. Senator Comyn referred to the scale to which Drogheda has grown.

Senator Ryan spoke of the importance of Limerick. It just shows the importance of the M20 at one level, although we are perhaps partisan about that in Cork and Limerick. Senator Boyle spoke about going to or coming from the match. We have seen it coming from Limerick on the evening of the Munster hurling final and it shows the need to bypass Charleville, Mallow and Buttevant. We have seen the growth from Galway down to Limerick, so it is an option we cannot miss.

I thank the Senators. I did not hear all of the contributions as I was not here earlier. Their contributions show the depth of commitment by all in the House to meet the challenges, but also to seize the opportunities and recognise that we have travelled some distance as a country. There are young people in the Public Gallery. They have grown up in an Ireland where we have the Luas, motorways and enhanced public transport. I remember that going on a train as a young person was like going on an aeroplane today. I am making the point that we have grown and evolved as a country. However, we all agree that we have challenges that we must meet. All of the speakers have articulated a fine case for their own areas. It is about having strong public transport. It is about the network being able to meet the demands of a growing population but also the needs of people. We must remember that everything we do, as politicians, as community activists and as legislators, is about putting people first, whether rural or urban.

Senator Ryan referred to international connectivity, which is pivotal. I emphasise that the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, the Minister of State, Deputy Canney and I are deeply committed to ensuring that we provide all people with reliable, convenient and suitable public transport

and mobility options, as in the programme for Government. We also recognise that, as Senator Kelleher said, whereas there might be one or two cars at a house today, we need to reduce it to one or none in the context of the 15-minute city. We have to give those young people in the Gallery an opportunity to live in a world where we are not car dependent. That is why the programme for Government is strong in this regard.

It is also why BusConnects has been a central tenet of the National Transport Authority programme to improve public transport, and not just for Local Link, Rural Link and so on. I do not have the information for Senator O'Reilly today, so I ask her to contact the NTA in that regard. I very much welcome the commitment of the National Transport Authority on BusConnects. We have seen it in Dublin in terms of the approval of the 12 bus corridors by An Coimisiún Pleanála and the wider plan for BusConnects around the country. I know Deputy Neville, who is in the Gallery, has been a strong advocate for County Kildare in the context of progressing that kind of "beyond the Pale" mentality and joining up the dots on connectivity.

As a Government, we are firmly of the view that we need and must have balanced regional development. That means looking after Galway, Limerick, Waterford and the town of Drogheda, which was mentioned earlier, but also recognising that redesigning our bus network will be challenging and will present difficulties for everybody. That is why we have to work with people when we make our submissions. As a former student of Maynooth University, I would like to ensure that the 66 bus service takes me into Dublin quicker or that there are many transport options, for example. When I go back to Maynooth, I can see the train service there now. When I was a student in Maynooth, there might have been one or two trains to Dublin a day whereas, today, there is a conveyor belt, which is great.

The Leas-Chathaoirleach and Senator Ryan referred to Shannon Airport. I was there recently and had a very good meeting with the chief executive and members of his team. The national development plan recognises and calls for a regional airports programme that befits our country in terms of getting people in and out. The example that Senator Duffy has always championed is Knock Airport and its success illustrates how important our regional airports programme is. That means supporting smaller regional airports, looking at the schedule of passenger air services, and that the aviation sector cannot just look at Dublin. The Minister spoke about the cap. I know that airlines vote with their feet but it is not all about Dublin. That is why it is important that the regional airports programme takes cognisance of, for example, Cork and Shannon. I congratulate Cork Airport on winning the best airport in Europe with under 5 million passengers category award. It is not about being in competition with anybody. It is about all of us working within the parameters so we can all achieve a certain amount of the travelling public. I was impressed by Shannon Airport's plans on sustainability and its new solar farm, and that it has seen such a growth in passenger numbers. It is important that we all look at how we can support each airport in the development of the next iteration of the regional airports programme.

We recognise that the decision by Ryanair to have a fourth aircraft at Shannon Airport is very important. It is about the winter and the off-season, but it is also about the positive proactivity of the management of Shannon Airport with airline partners. I was very impressed by that determination on the day I was in Shannon, in particular the determination of the board and the chief executive regarding their ambition for the airport in terms of growth, passenger access and the passenger experience.

The western rail corridor was raised by Senators Kyne and Duffy, who made strong com-

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ments. It is part of the all-Ireland strategic rail review that was undertaken by the Department of Transport in co-operation with the Department for Infrastructure in the North. The review's final report, published last year, has 32 strategic recommendations to enhance and expand the rail system in Ireland and the North. The recommendations relate to transforming the quality of the rail system and include the reinstatement of the western rail corridor between Athenry and Claremorris.

In the time remaining to me, I would like to make reference to the points raised by Senators Blaney and Boyle regarding the decision on the A5. Senator Boyle had a Commencement matter that referenced the A5 extensively. It is an important project. The Senator is right that somebody dropped the ball. There is a commitment by the Government to deliver that project. It is of huge importance, as the two Senators articulated very eloquently. It is about informing the Northern Ireland Executive and both Governments of the need to bring the project to fruition, but also the strategic importance of it for the people of Donegal. I will be in Donegal in the coming weeks and look forward to further engagement with people there.

I think we are all in agreement that our public transport system matters. It is about it being affordable, accessible and reliable. It is not just about getting people from point A to point B but also, as people have said in the House today, about encouraging investment, putting in housing and putting in a plan around it. It is about giving those young people in the Gallery today the freedom to go wherever, to go home or to work, and it relates to the piece about remote working. It reduces stress. Through BusConnects, Connecting Ireland, the all-island strategic rail review and the national aviation programme, we are making a difference in Ireland. We are investing in the regions.

I thank all the Senators who spoke for their contributions. We will listen and engage. The national development plan is the way forward. I encourage Members to put their projects and thoughts to the different Departments because that will be the blueprint for the future. I thank the Leas-Chathaoirleach for her work in the Chair. I know she represented the Oireachtas with distinction this week in a different institution. I thank her for that. My information is that she was a wonderful ambassador for the Houses of the Oireachtas, so gabhaim buíochas for that.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 1.21 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 1.30 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.21 p.m. and resumed at 1.30 p.m.

Planning and Development (Amendment) Bill 2025: Second Stage

Question proposed: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan): I am pleased to bring the Planning and Development (Amendment) Bill 2025 before the House. The main purpose of the Bill is to provide for targeted measures on a temporary basis to address unactivated permissions that are due to expire shortly, to ensure that the updated housing requirements in the revised national planning framework, NPF, can be incorporated into the planning system as quickly as possible, and to give clarity to the sector that this can be done under the Planning and Development Act 2000 while the Planning and Development Act of 2024 is being commenced.

Members will recall the size of the Planning and Development Bill 2024, which was enacted last year. The implementation of this Act is a key priority for the Government because the planning system needs to remain agile and responsive to issues. This is why I am bringing this Bill forward today. Before I get into the details of the Bill, I would like to set out the work that has been done since the 2024 Bill was enacted. Given the scale of the 2024 Act, it is necessary to implement it on a phased basis to facilitate the transition from the arrangements under the current Act to those under the new Act. Two key areas of the Act have been commenced so far. First are the provisions to enable the establishment of An Coimisiún Pleanála, which introduced a comprehensive organisational restructuring that will result in a modernised planning body, fit for the 21st century and with clearly defined roles and responsibilities. Separately, provisions to enable the identification of sites for urban development zones, UDZs, provide for an updated and more flexible approach to the planning and delivery of areas with significant potential for large-scale development and the associated necessary infrastructure, replacing the current provisions on strategic development zones, SDZs. Further key areas of the Act will be commenced over the remainder of this year, particularly Part 3 relating to the national planning framework, NPF, national planning statements and development plans.

Behind the scenes, my Department is preparing new regulations to accompany the 2024 Act and working closely with local authorities and other key stakeholders. An implementation plan has been published that includes a commencement schedule for the Act and a range of initiatives to support training and engagement for the planning sector in preparation for the phased transition to the new legislative framework. While reforming our planning legislation is key, resourcing the planning system is being addressed in parallel. A ministerial action plan is being implemented, with five key theme areas to enhance the capacity of the local government system and An Coimisiún Pleanála as well as other key measures. Following approval of the revised NPF, which will facilitate the delivery of in excess of 50,000 additional new homes per annum, it is important to ensure the updated housing requirements are incorporated into the planning system as quickly as possible. Local authorities will be required to update their current development plans over the coming months.

This brings me to the measures I wish to introduce through this Bill. The Government is committed to enabling the delivery of housing and addressing any issues that arise as quickly as possible and in a proactive manner. There is evidence that a significant number of planning permissions for housing are due to expire shortly that have not yet been commenced. While planning permission is an essential step in any project, there are other factors that may impact on the commencement of a project, such as the availability of development finance, other economic factors such as market viability, infrastructure constraints, or phasing. Permissions of all types have also been delayed due to judicial review proceedings which were outside the control of the holder of the permission. In many cases this has resulted in a minimum time left to commence the development once a judicial review has concluded. This Bill will address expiring permissions to encourage their activation through focused and time-bound measures.

I will now outline the main provisions of the Bill, which consists of three Parts. Part 1, namely sections 1 and 2, contains provisions of a general nature including definitions. Part 2, comprising sections 3 to 15, inclusive, amends the principal Act, which is the Planning and Development Act 2024.

Section 3 is a transitional measure that provides for any guidelines issued under the Act of 2000 and continued in force under the Act of 2024 on the commencement of Part 3 to be regarded in decision-making processes under the Act of 2024.

Section 4 provides for a report to the relevant regional assembly setting out progress made with regard to the regional spatial and economic strategy. This ensures that local authority reports continue to be prepared once a year in advance of a regional assembly report.

Section 5 is a transitional measure to provide for a regional spatial and economic strategy made under the Act of 2000 and continued in force under the Act of 2024 on the commencement of Part 3 to be regarded in decision processes under the Act of 2024.

Section 6 disapplies section 56 of the Act of 2024 for development plans made or varied under the Act of 2000 and continued in force under the Act of 2024.

Sections 7 to 9, inclusive, are related. They allow for the assessment of any variation to development plans made under the Act of 2000 and continued in force under section 68 of the Act of 2024, or any development plans made or varied in accordance with section 69 of that Act. This will allow variation of such plans to be assessed with respect to the variation only rather than the criteria in the Act of 2024. Sections 8 and 9 make consequential amendments to sections 64 and 65 of the Act of 2024 to update cross-references.

Section 10 is a transitional measure to provide for a development plan prepared under the Act of 2000 and continued in force under the Act of 2024 on the commencement of Part 3 to be regarded in decision-making processes under the Act of 2024.

Section 11 provides that where the making of a development plan or a development plan variation has commenced under the Act of 2000 prior to the commencement of Part 3 of the Act of 2024, it may continue under the Act of 2000, notwithstanding its repeal, and it is to be regarded in decision-making processes under the Act of 2024.

Section 12 deals with local area plans and provides that when the making or amending of a local area plan is commenced under the Act of 2000, before the commencement of Part 3 of the Act of 2024, it may continue under the Act of 2000 and that variations to existing local area plans that are continued in force under the Act of 2024 may be made, subject to the provisions of the Act of 2024. It also provides that local area plans shall be regarded in decision-making processes under Act of 2024.

Section 13 relates to judicial reviews. This section extends the pause of the duration of permission during judicial review proceedings to permissions granted under the Act of 2000 and subject to judicial review under that Act. It provides that where a permission was or is subject to judicial review, the holder of the permission may seek a suspension of time for the period the judicial review was or is ongoing. Applications for suspension of duration may be made provided that the person applying declares that development did not substantially commence, which excludes works for the maintenance, security or protection of the development site, while the judicial review is ongoing.

Section 14 amends section 303 of the 2024 Act to clarify that the application of sections 50, 50A and 50B of the 2000 Act to decisions under the 2024 Act cease to have effect on the commencement of the relevant provisions in Part 9 of the 2024 Act.

Section 15 is consequential to section 16 and updates cross-references.

Part 3 amends the 2000 Act and provides for the extension of duration of permissions.

Section 16 amends the 2000 Act to enable an extension of duration of up to three years to

permissions for housing developments that have not yet commenced and have less than two years remaining on the duration of permission. To encourage activation of housing development, the application for the extension must be made within six months of the commencement of the legislation and the development must commence within 18 months of the commencement of the legislation.

In line with existing provisions, a further application for an extension of up to two years may be made once the development is substantially complete. An extension of duration may only be granted where environmental impact assessment or appropriate assessment would not be required for the proposed extension.

Section 17 is a technical amendment to ensure references in the 2000 Act include references to similar terms in the 2024 Act on commencement of Part 3.

I will bring forward a number of amendments on Committee Stage, the majority of which deal with transitional arrangements arising from moving from the 2000 Act to the 2024 Act. I will also bring forward amendments relating to the new apartment guidelines that were published this week.

The Government is committed to ensuring that housing is delivered as quickly as possible and that we do everything we can to support developments that already have planning permission. In this regard, certain modifications to existing permissions that are in accordance with the provisions of the new apartment guidelines will be deemed to be permitted modifications. The permitted modifications will be limited, with no change to the scale or mass of a development. Changes to the internal layout will be allowed in line with the new guidelines and certain limited external modifications to align with the internal changes will also be permitted. Developers will need to inform the planning authority of the proposed changes, and provided that they are in line with what is set out in the amendment, the modified permission will be allowed. This will be a timebound provision for two years only, to encourage the activation of existing permissions, rather than developers having to seek a new permission in such cases.

With the support of the Houses, I hope to have this Bill enacted before the summer recess. I will seek to respond to any specific questions and engage further on Committee Stage.

Before I commend the Bill to the House I stress that this is a necessary piece of legislation. The Minister, Deputy Browne, constantly says we need to use every tool at our disposal to ensure an increased supply of housing in a quick and efficient way, and to continue to give regard to the right of the public and individuals to have an input into the planning process.

The Bill is necessary and timely, considering the challenges we face with the provision of housing. I look forward to listening to the contributions from Senators today. They will certainly be taken on board. I also look forward to Committee Stage where certain amendments will be introduced. I commend the Bill to the House.

Senator Joe Flaherty: I welcome the Minister of State to the House. It is probably not his first time in here but I have been off for some months so it is my first time to see him here. I congratulate him on his role. It is great to see him getting to grips with it so quickly.

If the weather was not so good I would have come out in a cold sweat when I saw the Bill on the schedule for today because, like Senator Boyhan, I spent 122 hours in committee trying to get this Bill to where it is at. I see some of the beleaguered officials are still here and still

toying with the Bill. If memory serves me right, it was the second largest Bill in the history of the State, so it is a significant piece of legislation and very much in line with the fact that we must mobilise every lever as we try to tackle the current crisis in housing.

The Minister, Deputy Browne, has rightly said that everything humanly possible will be done. This is an important piece of infrastructure around which many of the levers will be activated. It is good to see the move to An Coimisiún Pleanála. That is significant. It has been a bone of contention for many people in this Chamber and among the general public for many years. What the public want to see is the commitment to more staff happening quickly and that the Minister and the Ministers of State in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage will stay in constant contact with it. We need to see radical and sweeping change from An Bord Pleanála and manpower will be needed to do that. We need to see that happen quickly.

From what we have heard from the Minister in recent weeks, he is challenging local authorities to up their game. He is going to introduce a league table. This would be a bone of contention for many rural local authorities in that they were always very much at the coalface when it came to delivering houses. The biggest bone of contention is with the performance of the Dublin local authorities, particularly Dublin City Council, which has been lethargic. Its actions in trying to mobilise housing have been unforgivable. Several apartment blocks within the confines of the Dublin City Council area have been fitted out and are ready to be furnished but the council is holding them up because it insists that they do not conform with building regulations. Despite numerous mediation meetings, we still do not have a resolution. It is very much the case that someone in the planning department is taking an almost tsar-like approach to it. It makes one wonder sometimes if the people in the Custom House and the confines of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and in other satellite offices realise there is a housing crisis. They certainly seem immune to it given the way they are frustrating developers and, more importantly, communities, nationwide.

Rural local authorities could certainly up their game. A case in point is affordable housing in Longford. We finally have a first affordable housing scheme in Longford. It took the lifetime of the previous Government, five years, to get a commitment from the Department to eventually allow Longford County Council to go ahead with the first 25 affordable houses in the county. When the houses are built, they will be the first commercial development of three-bed semi-detached houses in the county in 19 years. That tells its own story: there has been a lethargy in the Department and it has not grasped the seriousness of the situation.

Everybody, across the floor in this House, is all too aware of the housing challenges. Invariably, 90% of the calls we get every day are about housing: people on the verge of homelessness and people who are frustrated at trying to get onto the local authority housing list. We cannot but empathise with them.

When the Minister speaks about challenging local authorities, the biggest challenge for him and for the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, is to challenge the Department itself. Nobody had a bigger role to play in the current crisis than the officials in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. I accept that we have made changes and that the local authority process now only involves one phase to activate a capital project. I do not think that is going to happen. It sounds very good but I still have reservations about the commitment of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to deliver what is needed to try to resolve the existing issues.

As much as the Minister is going to challenge local authorities – sometimes I feel they are an easy target – he must also challenge staff in his Department. Everyone here would attest to the fact that one of the biggest impediments to resolving the housing crisis has been the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage itself. It has been cumbersome and slow to get anything through. Local authorities tell us that, on occasion, it is taking them two and a half years to get approval for even a scheme of 12 houses. That is simply not good enough. It is indicative of the frustration that local authorities have felt. It is very easy to do a league table of local authorities but if we drill into it, we invariably find that the source of the hold-ups and what has frustrated them is, in fact, the Department and that must be resolved.

Many in the House would not like to say it, but we need to look at incentivising people to go back into the property market. When we had the crash, we lamented section 23, but if we look across many counties now, we are damn glad we had section 23. If it was not for it, the housing crisis would be significantly worse. When the crash came in 2008, there were 2,500 empty houses in County Longford, most of which were section 23 properties. Every one of those houses is now full. They were the only housing stock we had available to us in the county in the past 20 odd years because there was no building after the crash. We need to bite the bullet on this, and we need to incentivise small-scale investors, much like mom-and-pop-people, to go back into the market again and to engage in a different variation of section 23. That is very important.

Infrastructure is a huge challenge for us. Uisce Éireann, much like with the Department of housing, has very much been a laggard in this regard and it has frustrated local authorities. A case in point in rural Ireland is the delivery of upgraded and new sewerage schemes. We spent the five years of the previous Government looking for a breakthrough on a sewerage scheme for Ballymahon. In recent weeks, Uisce Éireann has published notice of CPO that will move that project forward.

The difficulty with Uisce Éireann's position on the delivery of infrastructure and the frustration for local authorities is that we have a stand-off. If a developer wants to build 20 houses in a rural town or village, they will apply to the local authority. The local authority will refuse to give permission on the basis that there is not sufficient capacity because there is no sewerage system. That is fine and technically the correct position. What we need is a circular from the Department of housing to all local authorities giving an undertaking that they can give permission for developments provided the developer provides an interim, developer-led sewage system and also provides a bond that will cover the costs of any remedial works on that. That is one of the quickest ways to leverage a start in house-building because, with the best will in the world, Uisce Éireann is never going to catch up. It will be a laggard at the end of this Government and it will be a laggard in the next Government. Unless there is a fundamental and ideological change within Uisce Éireann, it is not going to catch up. That is another easy, quick win the Department can achieve. The technology for sewerage systems has evolved. Many Irish companies now produce them, including Butler Manufacturing Services in Longford, which sends them around the world. It is exporting to over 50 countries and is a market leader in this area. The technology is there to do this. As the Minister said, we need to look at modern production methods. This is an easy fix for us.

Labour issues are huge for builders at the moment. The houses built during the Celtic tiger period would not be built now because standards are so high, and rightly so. We had the apartment defects and mica, which came at a huge cost to the Irish people and the Government. We need to ensure the houses we build now are state of the art, and certainly to a B energy rating if

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not to an A standard. In many cases, it is not regular plumbers but engineers and very skilled people who are needed to develop those projects. These people are simply not out there. Likewise, bricklayers and others with skills are not available.

When Lough Ree power station in Lanesborough, which has since closed as we escalated decarbonisation, was built, a firm was brought in from Turkey to complete the project. At the time, 600 workers were brought in, although we had plenty of workers in Ireland at that stage. I do not know why they were brought in then. We have to be creative. The Government needs to go out and identify companies abroad, be it in Turkey or on the margins of eastern Europe, and if they have the skill set we need, we should bring those workers in and allow our building contractors to access them.

It is very easy to roll out target figures and say what we are going to achieve and for the Minister to say all the levers will be activated but creativity is required. The Minister needs to challenge his Department and move beyond the bounds of what was done before. If officials in Departments did not do something last year, they will not do it this year because they do not like to do things differently. There needs to be a realisation within the Department of housing that we are in a housing crisis. I genuinely feel it is the only Department that does not realise we have a housing crisis.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I welcome the Minister of State and his officials, who are well known to us at this stage following the previous planning Bill.

It is worth putting in context for those tuning in that we are dealing with the Planning and Development (Amendment) Bill 2025. We are now amending a 2024 Bill that still has not been translated into Irish. There have been queries to the legal services because if there were to be a legal challenge to the Act, which the Minister has not yet given full effect to, the courts have determined that people have the right to litigate in their native language, that is, as Gaeilge. That is an important point I would like the Minister of State to bring back. What is the delay? I have raised this issue three times in the Seanad and we are told we cannot get the Act translated into our native language. I know it is a long Act. I took the time to look at the *Áras an Uachtaráin* website to see the date on which the President signed the Act. We were told it was emergency legislation and certain sections would be immediately enacted. This legislation was guillotined in the Dáil and Seanad, supported by the parties in the current Administration. It is hard to believe that they, in some shape or form, have been in Government or supported Government in some ways. That is interesting.

A previous Senator spoke about infrastructure. I too raise the need for infrastructure. I read in the national press this week of elected Members from the Government parties who oppose major pieces of critical infrastructure. That is on the record. It can be seen on *boards.ie* and elsewhere. It is reported in this week's papers that members of Government parties are frustrated in relation to infrastructure. They have a valid right to raise issues of concern, but the Government needs to be consistent in their message.

This Bill comprises 17 sections in four Parts. I note there is no general scheme. There was no regulatory assessment done before the Bill was published. The Bill did not undergo pre-legislative scrutiny, albeit on the basis of a request made to the Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage and it is its prerogative to agree to that. However, that practice should not continue. Regulatory impact assessments should be done on all legislation.

I advise the Minister of State and his officials to get a copy of the Bill digest. I acknowledge Dr. Deirdre Halloran, a senior parliamentary researcher in law, who provided the Bill digest. I want to share some of the comments it makes on this legislation, as otherwise we will be wasting a resource at our disposal. Dr. Halloran makes some critically important points in a more concise way than I could possibly make them. To provide some background, the purpose of the Act was to introduce a mandatory decision-making process. Dr. Halloran refers to the reorganisation of An Bord Pleanála. This all relates to the Act of last year. We are still no further on regarding those reforms of An Bord Pleanála. We talked *ad nauseam* here last year about those reforms. I read the Official Report of the Dáil and Seanad and noted many Members' amendments and contributions. We got all sorts of promises. The devil and all was happening. We were getting more resources. We were going to investigate serious accusations of corruption in An Bord Pleanála. None of it has come to anything. What is the public beginning to say about it all?

The digest refers to greater alignment with the various planning decisions and the judicial review process. I want to put to bed, for once and for all, this suggestion that judicial reviews are causing problems. It is an interesting point. This digest confirms there are more than 50,000 apartments in Dublin alone that have planning permission but have not commenced construction. What is that telling us? There are 50,000 units with planning permission that has not expired, which are not under construction. We are told the developers cannot make enough money and it is all price sensitive. They are making too much money in some cases. We have to start coping on to ourselves. We have to stand up to vested interests and get these units built.

The viability gap is another argument that is constantly spewed out in relation to these matters. Only 7,500 of the 50,000 unstarted units are held up in judicial review. Let us put the correct facts and figures on this and this research paper has told us what they are. Construction costs are not addressed in this Bill. The digest from the Library and Research Service tells us there is no mention of it in the Bill and it is not addressed in it.

2 o'clock

Funding availability and funding issues, which are also argued by Government party spokespersons, are not addressed in this Bill. That is confirmed in this research paper. Market demand is not addressed either. It is all people spewing out stories about the problems but not really getting us anywhere. We have to deal in facts.

I am a realist and a pragmatist. I have been around politics a long time. I absolutely support the need to build houses. On a positive note, this Bill is an agile initiative that will, or should, ensure additional time is given to active planning permissions. I accept that. Nobody wants to see vital housing projects that are compliant with best practice and fully aligned with the principles of proper planning and sustainable development blocked. We need to extend planning permissions for a limited and reasonable period. To enlighten the Minister of State a little more, I spoke to Dr. Deirdre Halloran before I came to the Chamber. She confirmed she was not in a position to analyse the additional measures he announced this week in respect of new guidelines around apartment sizes, which I said I would point out here. She was not in a position, in preparation for the Bill and this briefing prepared for us, to add those guidelines into the mix. That was a particular pity.

I will draw the Minister of State's attention to a few issues I will touch the edges of. His party has a number of councillors on Dublin City Council. I was very interested in their contri-

butions, and those of other Government councillors, last Monday, when that council passed an emergency motion on the new guidelines for apartments. It cited overreaching by the Government on plans to scrap mandatory community facilities in new apartment schemes, which it saw as undermining local planning rules, reducing housing quality and prioritising development interests over the greater good. Councillors who contributed to the debate spoke passionately about maintaining and utilising existing housing stock. It is a disgrace, when walking around our city, to see the amount of housing stock, both public and private, that is in a derelict state. The council also advocated and supported the demand and need for new housing. I absolutely support new housing but I support it on the basis of proper planning and sustainable development, with good design principles. Would the Minister of State like to live, because I certainly would not, in a very small box facing north? I am opposed to single-aspect units. As many planning design experts will tell you, they do not advocate we should put people living permanently in single-aspect units. If a unit faces north, energy will be used to heat it. If it has a single south-facing aspect, energy will be needed to cool it down. It simply does not make sense.

An issue and concern also raised by these Dublin City Council councillors last Monday was that communal and community or cultural facilities within apartment schemes will not be required. I saw in today's press that Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council planners sought money, more than €400,000, in lieu of open space requirements and internal spaces. There is an issue here. We cannot incentivise local authorities to take money - albeit, let us be clear, legitimately - in lieu of what are quality spaces, be they public or private.

My takeaway from last Monday's meeting of Dublin City Council is that it wants to engage. It includes members of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, the Labour Party and Sinn Féin, as well as Independent councillors. They want to meet with the Minister for housing. Will the Minister of State take back that message? It is important that we have dialogue. We have got to work together to resolve the issues around housing and the housing crisis. My appeal is, on behalf of those councillors, that the Department and the Minister reach out to engage with the elected members of our city council.

It is important that we maximise the full potential of existing planning permissions to realise new homes. I support that. It is important that we provide reasonable and fair extensions to planning permissions for housing developments that are nearing the end of their duration, or that can be completed within a reasonable period. I support that. On the judicial review period being discounted as part of the life of a planning permission, I support that - surprise, surprise. I do not have a problem with the substantive issues around the Bill, but we need to get back to the table. Let us stop deflecting people. The case is clear. There are 50,000 units in the city of Dublin that currently have planning permission. We need to do something about that.

If we are committed, we need communication on every aspect of this. I say that to departmental officials as I say it to the Minister of State. We need to communicate the messages. We need to engage with the local authorities. Let us not scapegoat them and tell them they are failing. The Minister of State was a member of a council, as I was. We know the difficulties. I genuinely wish him well on this. I want to be practical and supportive because anything that brings about new homes has to be good.

Senator P. J. Murphy: I welcome the Minister of State and his officials to the Seanad. Having studied this legislation over the past number of days, I believe it to be a real common-sense and very necessary Bill that will facilitate the building of more homes and streamline extensions to planning permission timelines during this current housing crisis we are all expe-

riencing.

Of the 17 sections in the Bill, I will focus on three in particular, namely, sections 13, 16 and 17. Section 13 deals with the time that is lost for the live planning period due to judicial reviews. Bearing in mind that the number of judicial reviews taken against planning decisions has more than trebled over the past six years, this is a very important section of this legislation. Section 13 extends the pause in the duration of permission during judicial review proceedings to permissions granted under the 2000 Act and subject to judicial review under that Act. It provides that where a permission was or is subject to judicial review, the holder of the permission may seek a suspension of time for the period the judicial review was or is ongoing. Retrospective applications for suspension of duration may be made in respect of active permission where a judicial review has concluded, provided that the person applying declares the development did not substantially commence, which excludes work for the maintenance, security or protection of a development site while the judicial review is ongoing. A lot of delays are currently experienced by developers. The prevention of further loss of time by stopping the clock ticking while a judicial review is going on is to be very much commended.

Section 16 amends the 2000 Act to enable an extension of duration of up to three years to permissions for housing developments that have not yet commenced and have less than two years remaining on the duration of permission. To encourage activation of housing development, the application for the extension must be made within six months of the commencement of the legislation and the development must commence within 18 months of the commencement of the legislation. In line with existing provisions, a further application for an extension of up to two years may be made once a development is substantially complete. An extension of duration may only be granted where an environmental impact assessment, EIA, or appropriate assessment, AA, would not be required with regard to the proposed extension. Again, given the delays in the acquisition of finance for large developments, the labour and skills shortages we very often face within the construction sector and the large number of other delays and unforeseen setbacks developers face in staffing large development projects, this is very common-sense legislation. For people who have concerns about the changes in environmental legislation from when the planning permission may have been granted to the date that an extension may be requested, that is very much covered within this section. That is a very good and much-needed measure in this legislation.

I will move on to section 17 and the amendments to apartment guidelines. I am very supportive of these amendments to those guidelines in respect of minimum sizes. We can all aspire to having very large minimum sizes under the guidelines for apartments but, if these large minimum sizes are simply not financially viable for developers, units simply will not be developed. That is what we are seeing in the market at the moment. Aspiring to have very large minimum apartment sizes is no good to anybody if apartments are simply not being built. The proposal that existing planning applications could be altered to make them more financially viable without the loss of any time and without the need to go back to the planning system is very wise and well thought through and must be commended. I believe this to be very common-sense legislation. I commend the Bill to the House.

Senator Chris Andrews: I have not met the Minister of State in here before so I will congratulate him on his new role. I welcome this opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Planning and Development (Amendment) Bill 2025. Sinn Féin is not opposing this Bill but we do have serious concerns with some parts of the legislation and with the manner in which it is being rushed through these Houses. Planning legislation is inherently complex and technical.

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Waiving pre-legislative scrutiny for a Bill of this nature is not good practice and should not become the norm. While my Sinn Féin colleagues in the Dáil did not oppose the waiving of pre-legislative scrutiny in this instance, we want it noted on the record that we are not satisfied that this is the right way to proceed with this kind of legislation. This kind of shortcut undermines the quality and scrutiny of our legislative process.

While we acknowledge the technical need for the changes proposed in this Bill, the fact remains that the Government told us that the 2024 planning Act was a once-in-a-generation reform and rewrite of planning legislation. In spite of this, here we are mere months later to amend it. That tells us that the Government did not get it right the first time. This is not a once-in-a-generation reform; it is a once-in-every-few-months patch-up job. We owe it to communities, local authorities, developers and all people affected by the housing crisis to get this right. Sinn Féin tabled a number of amendments in the Dáil aimed at strengthening the Bill. These were not accepted but we will bring some of them forward again on Committee Stage here in the Seanad.

One of the main issues with the Bill is that while we need to ensure the legislation works for those genuine developers who need an extension to planning permissions for genuine reasons, we also need to make sure safeguards are in place to prevent speculators abusing this legislation. Last night, the Minister said that he does not see any risk of speculators doing this but the reality is that, as it stands, local authorities do not have the staff or capacity to enforce commencement notices and prevent misuse of these extensions. There has to be a basic standard of accountability so that extensions are not granted for speculative purposes.

The proposals to reduce apartment sizes are absolutely extraordinary. Despite our concerns, we will not oppose the passage of the Bill but I will again highlight that rushing legislation at the last minute, especially planning legislation, without full committee scrutiny is simply not good governance. It raises the risk of error, opens the door to legal ambiguity and ultimately delays the very developments the legislation is trying to accelerate. I have very grave concerns over the Government's broader housing proposals, particularly its plan to reduce apartment sizes. This is effectively a multi-billion euro gift from this Government to developers. It could triple the number of units per hectare. It introduces the failed co-living concept by the back door and will make land values skyrocket. There is no universe in which this is good public policy. It will increase delays while developers seek new planning permissions. Senator Boyhan highlighted the fact that planning permissions have been granted for 50,000 homes. Can the Minister of State assure us that all of these developers will not seek new planning permissions? The site on Kevin Street is a good example of where a developer might seek a new permission. It has been stalled for nearly 18 months now and has been put up for sale again. I imagine the new developer will look for planning permission for this new smaller size of apartments.

Councillor Claire Byrne of the Green Party did amazing work in securing arts, cultural and community spaces in local developments. If you want proper sustainable developments, you need to ensure there are arts, drama and community facilities in large developments. I realise the glass bottle site is an SDZ. Will this developer apply for a new planning permission for smaller apartments and get rid of the arts, cultural and community spaces?

The smaller sizes allowed under this new law will suit developers, the buy-to-rent market and vulture funds but they will not suit ordinary families who are looking to settle and put down roots in a community. It will be attractive to vulture funds, which will buy these units to rent. It will effectively mean that vast tracts of housing stock will be sterile. These smaller units will

suit people looking for medium-term hotel accommodation. We see the amount of development in the inner city. We see new builds going up, contrasting with the flats at Pearse House, Markievicz House and Mercer House, which have been neglected and forgotten about and which now suffer from dampness and mould. These flats contrast with the new buildings going up. The communities there are being forgotten about because the people moving into the new accommodation will mostly not want to be part of the community. They will just be transient. These small apartments may be fine for them for a year or two but they are not suitable for long-term tenants who want to integrate and to send their kids to school locally. They will not use the services. Renters and local communities are once again being given the short end of the stick.

Senator Patricia Stephenson: I am really concerned about the latest amendments to the Planning and Development Act, which further entrench a developer and investor-first approach to our already incredibly shambolic and failed planning system. The 2024 Act has still not been fundamentally implemented and yet here we are pushing through amendments to that Act without any pre-legislative scrutiny. I find that really troubling. The same thing happened with the 2024 Act. That Act's errors are obvious here and I am quite sure there will be many more to come.

The amendments fail to address the root causes of delays in housing and infrastructure delivery. These amendments include new rules on pre-commencement extensions, judicial reviews, time suspensions and the safeguarding of expiring permissions, reflecting a narrow and misleading analysis of Ireland's planning challenges. For the first time, developers will now be able to seek extensions to their planning permissions before any development has even commenced. This fundamentally changes the nature of time-limited planning, which exists to ensure planning permissions reflect current policy, community needs and environmental conditions. Rather than incentivising delivery or discouraging land hoarding, these measures risk enabling speculative behaviour and stagnation. There is no requirement to demonstrate progress, public engagement or a reassessment of circumstances. This planning in reverse serves private timelines over the public interest.

The new provision to pause the clock on planning permissions during judicial reviews is being sold as some sort of practical situation to the delays we are seeing but it rests on the dangerous and very much false premise that legal challenges are the problem. Judicial reviews exist because the planning process has failed, often due to procedural errors, poor consultation or breaches of environmental law. Pausing permissions during this period does nothing to prevent bad decisions from being made in the first place. Worse still, it further scapegoats communities and campaigners who are simply exercising their legal rights under the Constitution and the Aarhus Convention. Instead of fixing a flawed planning system the Government is trying to insulate itself from the consequences of that flawed system. These changes are being framed as essential to increasing housing supply, yet there is no evidence that dormant permissions are expiring due to overregulation or litigation. Most planning permissions never go to judicial review. The real bottlenecks lie in inadequate water and wastewater infrastructure, staff shortages in the planning authorities, the governance crisis that we have seen in An Coimisiún Pleanála, and speculative land practices that delay activation, even when permission is granted.

Extending permissions and pausing judicial review clocks may tidy up the legal optics but they do not actually lay a single brick in developing new housing. They risk entrenching a system where developers are protected from delay but communities, the environment and the environmental activists are not protected from poor planning decisions. The Social Democrats believe in a planning system that is fair, transparent and focused on the common good. Reforms

should be aimed at increasing housing delivery but not undermining accountability, due process, or democratic rights and constitutional rights. True reform means investing in planning capacity, fixing Uisce Éireann and restoring trust in An Coimisiún Pleanála.

These amendments do not fix the planning system. They simply shield it from the consequences of its own failings. We need legislation that prioritises integrity over expedience. We need a planning system that delivers housing and infrastructure without eroding public rights or environmental protections. I am deeply disappointed that a whole range of amendments are being brought through. It is a massive number of amendments at this stage. I hope Senators will be sufficiently briefed on those amendments before next week. It is deeply cynical and not remotely in good faith that it is being done in this way. It is bad process and we are not even going to have a Report Stage on this Bill. I want to put it on the record that I hope this is not a sign of things to come with the legislative process during this term.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I have a number of key concerns on the Bill and the context in which they sit. I feel there is also an element of us having been here before in the shocking announcement that was just made of the intention to add last-minute major and substantial amendments, changes in our planning laws put in at the very last minute just before a recess, and to ram it through without proper democratic oversight. This is a pattern that was exhibited by the previous Government, particularly in the area of planning.

I will go through and highlight some of the specific issues in this Bill. Section 16 amends section 42 of the 2000 Act. This is entirely in violation of our obligations under the Aarhus Convention. This section allows for the extension of permission for uncommenced developments of one or more houses. The key point here is what it leans on, what it is extending, which is section 42 of the 2000 Act, was found to be non-compliant with the Aarhus Convention. Again, this is not about the question of extensions but of how it is being done and the fact that it is being done without giving any rights to public participation or input or any reflection on how situations may have changed. Even environmental factors may have changed over what can, in some cases, be a very long period of time.

Section 42 the 2000 Act was reviewed by the compliance committee of the Aarhus Convention. To be clear, the Aarhus Convention is not an aspirational document or something that we have signed up to in a general sense as a goal for the State. The Aarhus Convention is legislation. It is law and it is legally binding. Ireland is committed to it and has signed up to it. The compliance committee of the Aarhus Convention has previously clearly found that section 42 of the 2000 Act was not compliant with the Aarhus Convention in failing to consider the obligation of public participation requirements when updating or revisiting a consent. This is required under Article 6.10 of that convention.

The amendments to section 16 will compound those issues because they are going to extend again the context in which this flawed section will be relied on. Again, this was highlighted when the 2024 planning Bill was coming through. I heard it multiple times in the Chamber. It is a pity to now again read the text that came from that. Clearly the Aarhus Convention has said that section 42 of the 2000 Act was found to be non-compliant. The Government claimed that the changes it would make in Chapter 5, Part 4 of the 2024 Bill would address those concerns in relation to compliance. Then the compliance committee of the Aarhus Convention, the people whose job it is to determine this, literally published a report in which they said, “In the light of the above considerations, the Committee does not consider that, if enacted in their current form, proposed sections 133 and 135(2)(b) and (d) of the Planning and Development Bill 2023 would

fulfil the requirements of paragraph 4 (a)(i) of decision VII/8i.” Basically it was found to be non-compliant and found to be in breach of the Aarhus Convention. Then a couple of measures were produced in the planning Bill last year which the Government claimed would address it. During that time and prior to that Bill going through these Houses, the compliance committee had already looked at these draft proposals and said this would not fix it and that we would still be non-compliant if we brought forward the legislation in this form. I raised this at the time and made it very clear. I read those concerns during the course of that 2024 debate. I was told that the Attorney General was working hard on it and would come up something to address the concerns of the compliance committee. Instead of addressing the concerns of the compliance committee the Government is now looking to lean even more on that original flawed element of the original Bill, which, as we have been told, was not fixed by the 2024 Bill, and have even more things happen under it. We have even more decisions that are happening in a way that is not going to be compliant with the Aarhus Convention.

This is wrong. It is wrong in the context of the law and our legal obligations but it is also really wrong given the simple things that were asked for, which were appropriate mechanisms for public participation and some engagement with the public, in recognition that if five or ten years have passed, sometimes an environmental context has changed - sadly environmental contexts are changing quite rapidly at the moment - and that the public may have concerns and should have the right to be concerned about something that is going ahead. Maybe a new local development plan has happened during that period of time. Maybe it needs to be considered as well by the councillors and what they have put in and signed off on needs to be included. A lot can have happened and the idea of public participation was meant to ensure that it would be reflected. This is the issue with section 16 of the Bill.

At the moment the threshold being granted is provided as “the development will be completed within a reasonable time”. This is the language for the proposed provision. It is incredibly vague and is likely to cause issues. There is no requirement to justify the delay. Even the original section 42 of the 2000 Act had what were called the NAMA clauses with the requirement to say why development was not done and what happened. Now we have “completed within a reasonable time” and there is no requirement to justify why it is reasonable or what has to happen and so forth. Developers are being rewarded for sitting on development permissions, for no good reason in many cases, allowing them to squeeze supply and drive up prices.

Section 13 also has concerns that are similar in relation to this. It suspends consents that are subject to judicial review. This allows for a de facto extension of duration of permission. Again the problem is that such a time period can be very long. The issues there are not related to individuals taking judicial reviews but to the huge delays we have in the courts system. We also still have a narrative, which it is important to puncture, that it is terrible what all these judicial reviews and objectors have stopped. We heard from Senator Boyhan that they account for a tiny portion of the 50,000 planning permissions that exist. There are very few cases where delays are caused by planning. In most cases it is developers sitting on planning permission and not using it. Crucially, on those judicial reviews, 40% of them are taken by developers, so 40% of those terrible judicial reviews are being taken by developers who literally are saying “we have put in something, the Planning Authority has found it violates the planning laws and not given us permission, but we are going to push on.” I think of all the ire that was directed at every local residents association in terms of judicial review, yet it is often the developers who are delaying things because they are greedy and want more in some instances.

There is a lacuna. The lacuna has been addressed around which section will commence at

which point in terms of costs. I highlighted that gap when the 2024 legislation was coming through. It should have been fixed then rather than now. What is really unacceptable, and it tags onto that, are these proposals for a €35,000 limit, a ceiling in terms of what environmental objectors and others will be able to do. This is not in the Bill but it is what is proposed and it is cap so that developers, with their bottomless pockets, can take any judicial review they want and those who are bringing concerns as a citizen will effectively be capped in what they can get.

The idea of bringing in lower standards for apartments at the last minute is an insult to the public, not just in terms of democracy but in terms of basic decency with respect to how we expect people to live. These are situations where there is already planning permission. It is not addressing any actual problem. It is addressing a situation where investors say they would like more. It is rewarding those who have sought to profiteer more and have delayed using the planning permissions they have. It tells them if they hang around long enough, the Government will get desperate enough to give them whatever they want, as they have done on strategic housing development, as they did when they lowered standards previously, when they tied the hands of those who would object to developers' proposals, as they have done again and again.

An Cathaoirleach: Thank you, Senator.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: Speculation is rewarded by this Government and that is not what delivers houses. This is the same mistakes again and again from the same false principle. It is a disservice to the public.

An Cathaoirleach: Thank you, Senator.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I have gone on but I will say we are being denied time to properly address this, with this poor democratic practice of bringing in this bad proposal at the last minute. By the way, it will require fire safety and health certificates and will delay planning permission that is ready to go. All of those processes around fire and health certificates will have to be done. We are actually delaying and rewarding those who seek to delay for profit.

Senator Niall Blaney: The Minister of State is very welcome. I commend the ongoing efforts at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, with the senior Minister and the Ministers of State. I find it laughable to hear some of the comments from the Opposition, particularly the previous speaker, in relation to developers. Who are we going to depend on to build these houses that we all so badly need? They are constantly put down. No other part of society would accept it. I never heard one solution from any of them. This idea that developers took 40% of those cases against the Department and the State and that it was all down to greed, there is absolutely no basis for it and the remark should be withdrawn. It was a disgraceful remark.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: A Chathaoirligh, I was misquoted. I said that was the case in some instances. For clarity.

Senator Niall Blaney: There was reference to a figure of 40% and an all-encompassing remark was made that was on the basis of greed. That is wrong and I would like it withdrawn.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: A Chathaoirligh, if something is being asked to be withdrawn, I will have to ask-----

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Higgins, you are aware of the Standing Order that if you want

to interrupt somebody in possession, you can only do so with their permission.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I have been directly challenged and asked to withdraw a comment.

Senator Niall Blaney: If she wishes to withdraw, she is welcome to do so.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: To be very clear, what I said was that it was 40% and it was in some instances, whereas the Senator has twice now - if he examines the transcript, he will see what is correct-----

Senator Niall Blaney: We will need to check the record. It is on the record of the House.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: Yes, and at that point, I would like Senator Blaney to withdraw his remarks.

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Blaney to continue.

Senator Niall Blaney: It is on the record of the House. Maybe you want to review that and you can come back at a later stage.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I look forward to Senator Blaney withdrawing his comments at that point.

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Higgins, please-----

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I am sorry, I am not going to be misrepresented.

Senator Niall Blaney: Either way, the contribution was reckless. Moreover, this idea that the downsizing of apartments is also in relation to conditions, whether it be in relation to ensuring that developments meet standards or in relation to fire safety in any aspect of a building, is first and foremost a load of nonsense. Second, there is some belief that because the standards are dropped, every apartment in the country has to go to that size. It does not. What we are actually doing here is ensuring that people who cannot afford apartments of today actually get into the market. This is about ensuring those who cannot afford to get into the market, and continuing with that mantra is actually keeping those lesser people in society out of the housing market. This is another incentive, along with many others the Government is developing and evolving to ensure that people get into the market. It is a very smart initiative. It is in line with what other countries are doing. I commend the Bill to the House and thank the Minister of State for his work.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy John Cummins): I thank all Senators for their engagement on this Bill. I acknowledge the contributions of Senators Flaherty, Boyhan, Murphy, Andrews, Stephenson, Higgins, Blaney and Rabbitte.

We all recognise that it is important that developers use their permissions, whether for housing or energy projects, and important to encourage developers to act quickly on their consents. The Acts of 2000 and 2024 provide that the duration can only be extended if the project has commenced and reached substantial completion. However, in relation to residential development, there is evidence to suggest that a significant number of planning permissions for housing that are due to expire shortly have not yet been commenced.

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We are all aware that the substantial increase in judicial reviews has had an impact on larger developments in particular. For example, the number of legal cases involving An Coimisiún Pleanála has grown from 41 in 2018 to 143 in 2024. Residential data for the Dublin region for the end of 2024 also highlighted these issues when there were 40,112 uncommenced residential units on 265 wholly inactive development sites in Dublin. Of these, the average period that remained to the estimated permission expiry date was 2.9 years. It is estimated that around 15,000 of these units are due to expire within the next two years.

An Coimisiún Pleanála's figures also show that just under 19,000 units on 52 sites were either subject to a judicial review and subsequently permitted, or remain within the judicial review process, over the last five years. Of these, almost 16,000 units across the country have been permitted notwithstanding the judicial review process, and just over 3,000 are still subject to ongoing proceedings. In all of these cases, the duration of the permission has been eroded due to the judicial review proceedings. The new measures contained in this Bill will allow for the holders of permission under the 2000 Act to apply to a planning authority for the suspension of the permission for the period of a judicial review, if the judicial review is upheld. It provides that where a permission was or is subject to a judicial review, the holder of the permission may seek a suspension for the period of the judicial review that was or is ongoing, providing they declare the development did not substantially commence while the judicial review was ongoing. This mirrors the provisions in the 2024 Act and brings them forward.

Planning permission is an essential step in any project, and there are other factors, of course, that can impact on the commencement of a project, including viability. Holders of planning permission will be allowed to apply for an extension. This is to address the issue of development that does not have enough time remaining in the planning permission to be commenced and substantially completed before applying for an extension, as is the requirement at present. This measure will be timebound and will expire in October 2027. The application for the extension must be made within six months of commencement of the legislation, and the development must commence within 18 months of the commencement of the legislation. It is also important to note the extension of duration may only be granted where an environmental impact assessment or appropriate assessment would not be required for the proposed extension of time.

As the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, mentioned in his opening address, implementation of the Planning and Development Act 2024 is a key priority for the Government. However, it is important that the planning system remains agile and responsive to issues. It is for this reason the Bill clarifies the transitional arrangements whereby development plan variations commenced under the 2000 Act can continue when the relevant provisions of the 2024 Act are commenced, with a similar provision for local area plans commenced under the 2000 Act. This will ensure that, following approval of the revised national planning framework, which will facilitate the delivery of in excess of 50,000 additional homes per annum, the updated housing requirements can be incorporated into the planning system as quickly as possible. Local authorities will be required to update their current development plans over the coming months, and we will be writing to local authorities very shortly on their housing growth requirements.

I will follow up on a few of the matters that have been raised by Senators. A number of Senators referenced the fact that the Bill is being rushed and that no pre-legislative scrutiny occurred. With regard to Members on the Oireachtas joint committee, it is important to state pre-legislative scrutiny was waived by the committee. Department officials met the committee in advance of the pre-legislative scrutiny waiver, and they will meet the joint committee on Monday to brief it on the apartment guidelines that will be amended. It is unfair to present it as if

there has not been a briefing from officials on this matter. There has been full engagement with the Oireachtas joint committee. I suggest that Senators speak to the members of their groupings or parties who sit on the Oireachtas joint committee to feed in any questions or get clarification ahead of the Committee Stage debate, which will take place in the House next week.

On the points raised regarding communication with planning authorities, it is important to state that implementation and oversight working groups are in existence. Bespoke circulars have been issued to local authorities with descriptions of new legislation and information on corresponding regulations and such matters. A comprehensive implementation plan is in place with regard to communicating all of these changes. We appreciate the challenge of translating what is significant legislation, and the workload involved, in the local authority system.

Reference was made to the Aarhus Convention. It is important to state that what the compliance committee had looked at when the comments were issued was not the final version of the Bill. Section 42 of the Act of 2000 has been the subject of complaints, as has been referenced. These are mainly to do with public participation. A letter was issued in October 2024 to set out the provisions of the 2024 Act on the extension of duration, including public participation. It explained the Act includes a number of transitional measures to allow for the reforms to be introduced on a phased basis, including the retention of section 42 on a transitional basis until three years after the passing of the Act, which is October 2027, and that section 42 will be limited to a finite number of legacy permissions granted under the 2000 Act. On this basis, we are satisfied it is appropriate to amend section 42, as proposed in the Bill, to allow for an extension to be granted for uncommenced permissions. As I have said, this is as long as an environmental impact assessment or an appropriate assessment is not required. The Attorney General was part of the drafting process for the 2024 Act and has ensured it is compliant with our EU and international obligations, including the Aarhus Convention.

I must say some of the general commentary on the Bill, and on developers in general, is unfortunate and negative. I do not single out anyone in particular when I say that. We need developers, councils, the Land Development Agency, approved housing bodies and everyone firing on all cylinders if we are to deliver the quantum of housing required in this country. Vilifying a certain section will not achieve the outcome we all want.

I must also say that some of the descriptions of apartment sizes, which we will discuss more on Committee Stage next week, are also unfortunate. There are descriptions of shoeboxes. The reality is that, while many people in this Chamber and the other Chamber rightly point to Vienna and all of the positive measures it has in terms of housing, the average size of a studio apartment in Vienna is 25 m². We will have a size of 32 m² in the revised apartment guidelines. Context is very important when we have any debate on housing.

We will table Committee Stage amendments on the apartment guidelines and I am sure they will get a good airing next week. The Government is committed to ensuring we deliver housing as quickly as possible. Extending the duration of planning permission, while also giving back any time lost in a judicial review process, is a common-sense practical measure. It has been brought forward by the Government because we cannot build houses unless we have active planning permissions in place. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

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

10 July 2025

Senator P. J. Murphy: Next Tuesday.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Committee Stage ordered for Tuesday, 15 July 2025.

Teachtaireacht ón Dáil - Message from Dáil

An Cathaoirleach: Dáil Éireann has agreed, on 9 July 2025, to the amendments made by Seanad Éireann to the Supports for Survivors of Residential Institutional Abuse Bill 2024.

When is it proposed to sit again?

Senator P. J. Murphy: Next Tuesday at 2.30 p.m.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar athló ar 2.48 p.m. go dtí 2.30 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 15 Iúil 2025.

The Seanad adjourned at 2.48 p.m. until 2.30 p.m. on Tuesday, 15 July 2025.