



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad.....	450
Nithe i dtosach suíonna - Commencement Matters	451
School Facilities	451
Special Educational Needs	453
Care of the Elderly	457
Housing Schemes	459
Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad.....	462
An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business	463
Death of Former Member: Motion	475
Address to Seanad Éireann by Members of the European Parliament.....	475
Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026: Order for Committee Stage.....	508
Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026: Committee Stage.....	508
Education (Leave for Injuries) Bill 2025: Second Stage	537

SEANAD ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 18 Feabhra 2026

Wednesday, 18 February 2026

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach i gceannas ar 10.30 a.m.

Machnamh agus Paidir.

Prayer and Reflection.

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad

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

Senator Anne Rabbitte - The need for the Minister for Education and Youth to make a statement on the need for an additional classroom provision in Tiernascragh National School, County Galway.

Senator Nicole Ryan - The need for the Minister for Education and Youth to make a statement on the criteria used in recent special needs assistant, SNA, reviews and whether reductions in mainstream SNA allocations are undermining inclusive education in primary schools.

Senator Eileen Lynch - The need for the Minister for Health to provide an update on the timeline for the provision of a day care centre for older people in Macroom, County Cork.

Senator Mike Kennelly - The need for the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to make a statement on funding for the administration of the tenant in situ scheme within local authorities.

Senator Teresa Costello - The need for the Minister for Education and Youth to provide an update on the opening of more reading schools around the country.

Senator Chris Andrews - The need for the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to make a statement on the regulation of urban horses.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly - The need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on conducting an independent review into the provision of telemedicine abortion.

Senator Robbie Gallagher - The need for the Minister for Education and Youth to provide an update on the review of the eligibility of drivers over 70 years of age to drive smaller school buses.

The matters raised by the Senators are suitable for discussion. I have selected those raised by Senators Rabbitte, Ryan, Lynch and Kennelly 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

School Facilities

An Cathaoirleach: The Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, is most welcome to Seanad Éireann.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I thank the Cathaoirleach for selecting this Commencement matter and I thank the Minister of State for being here to take it. While it is not a Commencement matter specifically on special educational needs, I am delighted I have a Minister from the Department of Education and Youth here.

Tiernascragh National School in County Galway has 56 pupils attending. It has grown its numbers over the last number of years. The growth is down to good leadership in the school from the principal, staff and board of management. Most importantly, it is down to the loyal parents who have elected to keep their community school alive.

I am disappointed to say that on 16 April last year, the school received a response from the Department of education regarding an accommodation needs assessment. The Department said that it was moving away from renting modular units. Although the school has two classes and a small room where it provides SEN supports, the Department said that it was no longer renting modular units. The school was told it would either have to wait 18 months for the Department to make a determination on whether it qualifies for a purpose-built modular fix on site or more than six years to put concrete in the ground. The school was also asked to see if there was a community hall available, which the Department of education would rent for it.

A little bit like Kiskeam where the Minister of State comes from, Tiernascragh is one of those little parishes. It is so small that there is no connecting footpath from the church to the community centre, which is on the opposite side of the road. We talk about inclusive education and integration, and this school is doing it all. It is not right that we would provide funding to allow the kids to walk to a community centre when there is no footpath. If there was an accident and something happened to a teacher or pupils, we would be leaving that teacher open to a health and safety risk. The risk has not been assessed here and common sense is not prevailing.

Can we not use the money available to rent the community centre to rent a modular unit? I have a principal who is saying, "Just give me a classroom". Keep the students on site. Let them play inclusive games and engage in inclusive education, but, most of all, let us keep everyone safe.

Where, in the name of God, during the accommodation needs assessment was that risk assessment carried out? Was it another desktop exercise where someone looked at Tiernascragh National School with its 56 pupils and decided that if the school does not go with the community centre, it will be asked to do team teaching with two teachers in a classroom. There are four teachers in the junior section and four in the senior section, but there will be two

teachers teaching in the class. That is like having two housewives in the one kitchen. It does not happen and would not work. A mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law would not happen, so why would we expect teachers to do team teaching?

I have no doubt the Minister of State has a response for me because I am on this case, but I am looking for sense to prevail.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth (Deputy Michael Moynihan): I welcome the opportunity to speak about Tiernascragh National School and am delighted that the Senator mentioned Kiskeam, the centre of the universe.

Joking aside, I welcome the opportunity to take this issue on behalf of the Minister for Education and Youth, Deputy Naughton, who is responsible for the capital programmes.

As the Senator is aware, Tiernascragh National School in County Galway is a mixed Catholic school, located within the Portumna school planning area. It has 53 pupils enrolled for the 2025-26 school year, according to the information I have. The school has an additional school accommodation application with the Department for one mainstream classroom.

The Senator will also be aware that the Department recently published the €7.55 billion national development plan, NDP, sectoral investment plan for the period 2026 to 2030. This places a strong emphasis on maximising existing capacity and the prioritisation of school building projects to meet the most urgent needs. In this regard, there will also be a strong emphasis on special education.

In relation to the issue raised by the Senator, it is important that the Department works with the school's authorities. In her next contribution, will the Senator tease through the issues with the community hall and its facilities? In some instances where there are capacity issues, the Department is looking at community facilities to meet the immediate needs of the school community, but it will always been on a short-term basis while we try to find a permanent solution.

In the past, we would be looking at a permanent or modular building. The Department is always looking to ensure that the best possible value for money is obtained. Given the ongoing need across the entirety of the school estate and despite the fact that billions have been put into the system in the recent years, value for money remains important.

We need to get a sense of this. This small school has grown its enrolment over time, which is a testament to the work done by the school leadership and the whole school community. It is a great sign. I would like to tease out where this school is at. I will go back to the Department and ask it to engage with the school authorities. The Senator might outline the position, and I will respond in my subsequent contribution.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I thank the Minister of State for both his contribution and his leadership regarding how to move to the next phase. With regard to the short-term position, I hear him very clearly. The community centre is about 250 m down the road but, as outlined, there is no footpath. I would welcome it if there were a ray of hope that this was a very short-term solution while we wait for a modular unit to be leased or for planning permission to come through. No doubt there will be a planning permission query, even if we are putting down a

rented building, because we are changing the footprint. We accept that and the teachers accept it, so there is no issue arising. What we need is a plan and a pathway to ensure that this happens within a short period. That would bridge the gap.

The fear about the community centre arises from the perspective of the community itself. There is no shop there any more. Other than the church and the school, all we have left is the community centre. We live on the banks of the River Shannon. It is the only place that people will congregate after a funeral or a month's mind. However, we are going to say to the teacher that they should: put in all the books and take out all the books; put away all the tables and take out all the tables; walk the children up and down the road; supervise all the playing; and carry the risk. At the same time, we are taking one of the hubs of the community out of circulation.

The board of management members are from the parish. They want to keep it all working. They will work with the Minister of State if he can give us options.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I take the point in relation to community centres being a short-term solution. This discommodes communities in a major way. Community centres are hubs for social events and family gatherings. I have been with school communities in my area that have used them in the short term, but they are never satisfactory because permanent solutions are needed. We do not need a short-term solution. We need to look at the issue.

The Senator might come back to me after this discussion with regard to the enrolment for September next. The school should have a reasonable idea at this stage as to what the enrolment will be. I will take this back and ask the Department to engage with the school community. In the first instance, we might get the projected enrolment for 2026-27 from the school community, and take it from there.

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call the next speaker, I welcome to Seanad Éireann the guests of the Minister of State, Deputy Robert Troy, to the Visitors Gallery. They are from Scoil Eoin Naofa, Ballymore, County Westmeath. I am sure the Minister told them that when people visit Seanad Éireann, the extra benefit outside of hearing the wisdom of the Senators is that they also have no homework for the rest of the week. They should make sure the teachers implement that little policy.

Special Educational Needs

Senator Nicole Ryan: I welcome the Minister of State. I am glad he is here to take this matter.

I am convinced that every week the Government meets and decides what fresh hell it can inflict on people and how it can undermine the most vulnerable in our society. The Minister of State is no stranger to the issue of SNAs. A pause was put on, but that pause does not mean a stop. A couple of weeks ago, many autism spectrum disorder, ASD, classes were open. It was fantastic that they were open, and nobody is disputing that. This is the way the Government treats them. An article in the *Connacht Tribune* last week stated that an ASD class for Creagh National School in east Galway was formally approved and given sanction on 12 January last. However, families have been told that their children cannot be considered for placements because the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, application portal closed on 1

October 2025, more than three months before the class actually existed. That shows how the Government treats young children in our society at the moment.

A pause does not mean that the anxiety of the parents, the schools or the teachers has gone away. It is still very much there. What does that pause actually mean for people? Will the SNAs who got letters that they were to be redeployed be reinstated? There is no redeployment strategy. Kids are missing school. I have heard from many schools. The Minister of State is from my constituency. He knows the scale of the story, and the scale of what is happening in our constituency and even beyond that. It is ridiculous. These are the policies of the members of the Government. They are in government. These are the decisions they are making.

Since we are talking about policy, I would like to refresh the House's memory that the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs, EPSN, Act of 2004 established the principle of inclusive education and requires that children with special educational needs receive education appropriate to their needs and abilities. Children's needs do not change when they change class. Children's needs are constantly there. We are trying to give them the best start in life. What we are doing is undermining the system and undermining parents. We are not listening to the parents, teachers or SNAs who are working with them every single day. Furthermore, under the Equal Status Act, schools must provide reasonable accommodation to prevent substantial disadvantage to pupils with disabilities. Where children require supervision or behavioural regulation, an SNA is not optional; an SNA is part of a reasonable accommodation.

I do not know how this decision came about, but the pause does not mean anything because there is no plan for that pause. Parents, teachers, SNAs and schools want to know a few things, and it is not unreasonable to ask those questions. What does the pause actually mean? Will the SNAs be put back into the mainstream? What is the deployment plan? We mentioned that an additional 1,700 SNAs are to be delivered. When is that going to happen? If I sit down now and get a load of waffle that is not going to answer these questions, it is not good enough. Parents, teachers and schools need proper, clear answers. They are the ones who know how the children act. They know the children inside and out. Yet, when the special educational needs organisers, SENOs, come in, they do not listen to that. Clearly, this is a decision from the top down. What is the reason for the pause? I hope I get an answer to that question.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I welcome the group from Scoil Eoin Naofa in County Westmeath. I hope they enjoy their trip to Leinster House. It is always great for schools to visit.

The Senator raised a number of matters. The 1 October deadline was to make sure that we had better sight of the number of children who need special educational supports within the school system, and that we would have better planning for that. One week after my appointment last year, I brought back the date from 1 February to 1 October. We are also engaging with every and any family who contacted the NCSE since 1 October, and working with those families to ensure their needs are met. The 1 October date was to give a sight of this. A number of families contacted us after 1 October, and we are continuing to engage clearly with those families.

Right across the education system, work that is going on in schools. As well as anybody else in these Houses, I understand what is going on with the school communities, the leadership

in the school communities, the SNAs, the teachers and all who make up the school communities. We are working day in and day out to do the very best for the children in the schools. There are some remarkable stories and remarkable examples of best practice that I have seen in the last while across the country.

The NCSE is charged with providing for special educational needs. It is important to make one point. We are setting out to do the right thing. I firmly believe this applies to my own position and right across the Government. We have had many detailed discussions, not just this weekend, but every week as to how we are going to ensure that the need out there, which is constantly growing, is met.

The 1,700 SNAs will be employed from 1 September 2026. There are no questions and no ifs or buts. It is in the budget for it. All mainstream, special schools and special classes will see an increase in the number of the SNAs who are employed in each sector. We have to accept that and understand it. On scapegoating, politicians and Ministers will take that but those who are within the National Council for Special Education, SENOs and those teams are working to the best of their ability to give the information back. We have now paused the decisions that were made because we are doing a complete review of it. Before any further decisions are taken, we have to have clear understandings in terms of a number of schools that have lost a number of SNAs and get the reasons for that. We will update the Houses immediately when we have that. We started discussions on that yesterday and there are a number of meetings this morning and into the afternoon today.

We are very serious about making sure about this. I understand the families. I have met the families and the students, not just across the country in my role over the past 12 months but right throughout my political journey. I have been engaged in special education and have been working on behalf of families. I continue to do that. I genuinely believe that all who are concerned about it have a very clear understanding of what we want to do, including the National Council for Special Education, the Department for education, me, the Minister, Deputy Naughton on her appointment in November and, prior to that, the Minister, Deputy McEntee. We want to do the right thing by every child. If we are investing properly in primary and post-primary education, it will lead to the best outcomes for those children into the future.

The Senator knows my bona fides on this matter, but I assure her that we are taking the issues on it desperately seriously. She mentioned the school and classroom. There are over 300 special classes, which are months earlier than last year. A number of additional special classes will be announced across the country over the next weeks and months. Every single one of them will be operational and populated by children who need extra educational support for their time in primary and post-primary school.

Senator Nicole Ryan: I thank the Minister of State. I hear what he is saying, but when the Taoiseach himself says that schools are used to appealing, it should not have to get to that point. Schools should not have to appeal these decisions. What happens to those appeals now while it is paused? Are they going to go through? Are those SNAs still going to be in the schools in the mainstream classes? That is the issue. The schools need SNAs. They need SNAs in the ASD classes, but also in the mainstream classes. It should not get to this point where the parents and the whole community are so outraged that they put so much pressure on the

Government. Thank God they did because this would not have stopped at all. There would have been no pause had this not been so opposed by parents and across the whole of Ireland.

The issue is that we are saying that we want kids to have the education and all the supports, yet we are silently undermining all of that by removing the mainstream SNAs into a different post. That is not valuing our SNAs, or they work that they do. They do critical work. Every single one of us knows the work that they do. They go above and beyond for each child. They nurture the child. It does not just impact the children who have the additional needs in the classroom. It impacts the whole classroom. All the children will suffer. What happens now to the schools that appealed? Are their appeals going to go through, are they paused or are they going to be reinstated back into the class?

Deputy Michael Moynihan: In relation to the value of the SNAs, absolutely. When I started out on my political journey, it was people who were on community employment, CE, schemes who were providing the SNA support within schools. A decision was taken by the now Taoiseach, then the Minister for education, back in 1997 or 1998 about SNAs. We have grown that to almost 25,000 SNAs across this country. In any comparison with any of the other developed countries in Europe or elsewhere, we are way ahead in terms of the support we are giving into classrooms and to make sure the most vulnerable are getting it. The redeployment scheme will be in operation from 1 September. Any SNA who is being redeployed from one school will have an opportunity to redeploy. That scheme is in place. That scheme has been worked through over the past 18 months or so with the unions and all concerned. That redeployment scheme will be in place.

On the work we have to do, we have paused because we listened very carefully to the concerns. I spoke to principals, parents and SNAs right across the country - not just in my own area in Cork North-West - over the weekend and prior to that. In engagements this week on Monday, we met a number of school principals. They outlined the challenges that they have within the schools. The appeals system is there to make sure that anybody who is dissatisfied with a decision or if they have further information, that they can submit to the National Council for Special Education. It is a robust appeals system. All those decisions are being looked at. Right now, everything is being paused. We want to be very clear when we have that done what the process will be. The integrity of the process is important as well.

Over many years, the National Council for Special Education has delivered special education and reviewed cases. When care needs move on from primary school to post-primary school, we must make sure that the SNA or the support is given to the most vulnerable in their school settings. Everything we are doing is for the child within the school setting to make sure they are getting the best access to the education. We have to look at the outcomes for children and the supports they will get in primary school and post-primary school. It is not the case that it is the school community; it is always the students who we have at the very heart of it. I am desperately passionate about making sure that the very core of our systems and the integrity of the systems, which have been there for quite some time, are targeted towards the children. We will see the provision of that right across.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Anne Rabbitte): I thank the Minister of State.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: The other point on it is that we have almost 25,000 SNAs. In any of the debate over the past week, we were talking about less than 1% of the SNAs across the country. We take into consideration everything that has been said to us and every discussion. We are working on that. Last night and again today, we had a number of meetings, and these will be ongoing over the next number of days. Every decision we will be making will be child-centred to make sure we are giving the best opportunity for children, not just to go through education but to have the best possible chance of a positive outcome within life.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Anne Rabbitte): I have allowed latitude on that because it is an issue of such gravity at the moment. I thank the Minister of State for his comprehensive response. I thank the Senator for raising this matter.

Care of the Elderly

Senator Eileen Lynch: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit as a bheith anseo linn inniu. I seek an update of the status of the timeline of the delivery of a day care centre for the elderly in Macroom in the constituency of Cork North-West. I am sure the Minister of State will agree with and acknowledge the importance of day care centres. We see them all over the country. Macroom has a growing town centre with a big population and a massive hinterland from all over the constituency, from Aghabullogue to Coolea. We are incredibly lacking a day care centre right now, somewhere for our elderly residents to go to socialise, relieve rural isolation and keep in touch with friends and neighbours. This is something that has been mentioned for quite some time.

When I was on Cork County Council, I was a member of the HSE South forum. In both February 2022 and June 2023, I was told that a design team had been appointed for this, an agreement on the design proposal had been agreed and completed, the procurement had been finalised and it was waiting sign-off to tender.

11 o'clock

To the best of my knowledge, it still awaits full funding but I await the Minister of State's update on that. Those are updates I got through the HSE south forum in February 2022 and June 2023. It does seem as though we have made no progress in those three years.

The Minister of State will be aware of the benefits day care centres can provide. This is a problem not only in Ireland but across Europe and the world when it comes to ageing population and the way we keep elderly people at home. I believe community healthcare and community care is the way to do that. It puts less pressure on nursing homes and, ultimately, on the service user. It is vital we make these services available. Not only does it provide an opportunity for older people to keep up their social skills and avoid rural isolation, but it also provides a break for family carers who are looking after elderly people. For elderly people living on their own, it keeps them living independently for longer. It can also be linked in with therapeutic healthcare and access to healthcare through day care centres. The centres also work in tandem with services, such as meals on wheels which provides a fantastic service all over the country, particularly in rural areas. In both Macroom and Millstreet, two of the bigger towns in my area, meals on wheels provides fantastic services, and that is to be commended. Macroom is also very lucky to have a very active senior citizens group, two nursing homes and

a community hospital. I commend the refurbishment work that has been done in Macroom Community Hospital, which is truly a fantastic facility. We were promised a day care centre as part of that facility. That has yet to be delivered. Progress seems to be very much static or stagnant. Looking at the population of Macroom and its hinterland, and the issues with an ageing population, these are the kinds of solutions we need to put in place and prioritise.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): I thank Senator Lynch for raising this important issue. It is a key priority for the Government to increase access to services that help older people to remain independent and live in their own homes with dignity and independence for as long as possible. Alongside home support, meals on wheels and similar services, day centres are an essential support for older people, particularly in rural communities. They provide invaluable assistance, minor treatments, advice and social interaction for older people who may, for any number of reasons, be experiencing isolation and loneliness.

Day centres may be HSE-run services, HSE-funded voluntary services or privately operated and funded services. The HSE reports that, as of quarter 2 of 2025, there were 313 HSE and HSE-funded day centres operating across the country, providing community-based support to approximately 15,600 older people. An additional €500,000 has been provided in budget 2026 to address cost pressures and enhance day care services.

The HSE has advised that it intends to use part of the revamped health centre building at Macroom hospital to establish a day centre for older people from Macroom and the surrounding areas. Senator Lynch has alluded to this. At present, the project is awaiting the allocation of capital funding. Once the capital funding allocation is in place, the HSE will progress the planning for this project to the tender phase. On completion of the tender process, the HSE will be able to provide estimated timelines for the completion of this day centre for Macroom.

The development of the day centre in Macroom will add to and complement the network of social support services that is already available for older people in the Macroom area. This includes Macroom Senior Citizens, Sullane Haven, Aghinagh Active Retirement Group, Coachford Active Retirement Association, Ballincollig Men's Shed and Ballincollig Senior Citizens Club. I am not sure of the correct pronunciation of "Sullane" and "Aghinagh". It is important to get the pronunciation right.

I expect the new day centre in Macroom to be a very welcome addition to the range of health services in the area and I look forward to its completion. I have followed up with the HSE on the particular matter. We will continue to engage with the HSE to get the day care centre in Macroom, which will be part of the revamped health centre at Macroom hospital, progressed as quickly as possible for people in Macroom and surrounding areas.

Senator Eileen Lynch: I thank the Minister of State for the reply. I cannot but say I am disappointed. I have been raising this matter through the council since 2022. I got the same reply in 2023 as I got in 2022 and the reply today, in February 2026, seems to be the same as well. I do not know if the Minister of State can offer any guarantee on capital funding. Are we looking at the 2027 budget or the 2028 budget? This is an issue that comes up every now and again. I do not want to leave this Chamber and issue a press release saying this is coming. I would prefer to be able to tell people in my area not only that this is coming, but that I have

a rough time for delivery, this is a Government priority and we will deliver it when we have the funding. That is what I would prefer to be able to say, having raised this issue today.

The Minister of State outlined all the wraparound services available in the town of Macroom. It is a massive area. There is a population of 6,000 in the town and its surrounds. There has also been a massive increase in the population under the county development plan in the last five years. It is big area extending from east of Cork city all the way to Millstreet and Killarney. There is a massive hinterland there. We need this service. While there are fantastic wraparound services – and I commend all those the Minister of State mentioned which provide an excellent service – we need to expedite this. Community healthcare has to be a priority. I know it is but we need to push it further.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I again thank Senator Lynch for raising this issue. The Government's objective to support older people to live well with dignity and independence in their own homes and communities for as long as possible. Providing the supports of home care, day care and meals on wheels, including dementia-specific supports, is a key factor in supporting people to age well in their own homes.

Day centres like this proposal for Macroom are a crucial part of social provision in our communities. They are an invaluable resource to help older people in our communities to maintain their health and independence.

I will personally follow up with the HSE on the day care centre for Macroom and revert to the Senator on the specific matters she raised. I think she will agree that we wish to see the additional day care centre service for people in Macroom operational to complement the other supports available in the local area. I will come back to the Senator on the specific proposal.

Housing Schemes

Senator Mike Kennelly: I welcome the Minister of State. I wish to raise an issue of growing concern in County Kerry regarding the operation of the tenant in situ scheme. The purpose of the scheme is very straightforward and commendable, but straightforward it is not. It allows local authorities or approved housing bodies to purchase properties where tenants are at risk of homelessness. It ensures continuity of tenancy for households in receipt of the housing assistance payment, HAP, or rental assistance scheme, RAS, and it prevents the loss of existing rental homes from the private market.

In principle the scheme is working okay in some parts of the country. However, in Kerry we are seeing a very low uptake. I believe the last house was purchased in 2024. The reason is both simple and avoidable. Under the current framework, there is no provision for renovation or upgrade costs when a local authority purchases a property that does not meet the standards for rented housing regulations 2019. Indeed, 90% of first inspections fail. Many of the homes coming forward for potential purchase in Kerry are older properties that require works, sometimes modest and sometimes substantial, to bring them up to regularity with the standards.

In Kerry, the average cost for Kerry County Council to renovate a property to comply with the regulations post-purchase is between €30,000 and €40,000. Local authorities are understandably reluctant to proceed with purchases when no funding stream exists to cover the

necessary remedial works. As a result, properties that could otherwise be secured for vulnerable tenants are being passed over. Tenants who should be protected under the scheme are instead facing eviction and, in many cases, homelessness. The intention of the tenant in situ scheme was to provide a safety net, but in counties such as Kerry, which I represent, the absence of renovation funding has created a structural barrier that undermines the scheme's purpose.

I call for clarity on whether the Department intends to introduce a dedicated renovation or upgrade provision in the tenant in situ scheme. Will the Minister of State confirm whether local authorities may access any existing capital or remedial works funding streams to support these purchases and ensure that counties with older housing stock, such as Kerry, are not disadvantaged by a one-size-fits-all approach? If this gap is not addressed, the scheme will continue to underperform in Kerry and families who should be protected will continue to fall through the cracks and face homelessness.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Anne Rabbitte): Before I call the Minister of State, I welcome pupils from Scoil Eoin Naofa from Ballymore, County Westmeath, who are in the Gallery. They are guests of the Minister of State, Deputy Troy. Other members of their class were here earlier. It is a big school and a lot of them are here today. They are welcome. We have a Senator and Minister of State here this morning. I have been told to tell them they have no homework for the rest of the week.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan): I also welcome the school pupils. Is the school in west Cork? It is in Westmeath. I am from west Cork so it is the centre of everything, but Westmeath is a lovely county as well. I welcome the pupils to the Seanad.

I thank Senator Kennelly for raising this issue. Before I read the statement, I hear that one of the reasons the Senator thinks the tenant in situ scheme is not being used regularly in Kerry is that the cost of renovation is not included and the local authority, when it is pricing or valuing a house, has to work the cost of renovation into the valuation. Therefore, even if the sellers of the properties agree to sell them with the tenants in situ, they feel they are not getting the prices they should because the council is factoring in those costs. I think that is what is happening, but perhaps the Senator will clarify. If so, I agree that we should perhaps look at it.

The Minister for housing will shortly approve the parameters and funding details of this year's programme and local authorities will be notified of their respective 2026 allocations shortly thereafter. Last year, some €375 million was allocated to local authorities for acquisitions. Of this, only €290 million was drawn down, including €52 million for refurbishment costs. This funding was given to local authorities for an estimated 775 acquisitions, including almost 490 tenant in situ acquisitions.

The 2026 programme will fund eligible acquisitions under three priority streams, namely, exits from homeless services; priority acquisitions for older persons, care leavers and people with disabilities; and tenant in situ acquisitions. It will continue to be a policy tool for local authorities and approved housing bodies, AHBs, to prevent social housing supported households in the private rental sector falling into homelessness, and support the exit of households from long-term homeless accommodation. Significant funding will again be

available to help to alleviate short-term pressures, affording local authorities the flexibility needed to respond while they scale up their construction programmes.

I note there is no tenant in situ scheme as such, rather, tenant in situ acquisitions are a last resort policy tool available to local authorities through the second-hand acquisitions programme. This has always been the case. Undoubtedly, tenant in situ acquisition is an important tool, but it is absolutely not the only, or even the primary, tool available. It should only be used when all other options to prevent a household becoming homeless have been exhausted. It should never be used as a default first-response option. It remains the case that, as a first step, the relevant local authority tenancy sustainment officer should engage with the relevant landlord on whether the threatened tenancy can be maintained within the current or an alternative social housing scheme. If this is not possible, the local authority must help the tenant to secure alternative private rental accommodation. Where an existing or alternative tenancy cannot be secured, the local authority must examine if a tenancy in a local authority or an AHB social home can be facilitated. Where these options have proved unfeasible, the local authority may proceed to support a tenant in situ acquisition.

While the parameters of the new second-hand acquisitions programme are yet to be agreed, with almost 17,000 people currently residing in homeless accommodation, the programme will focus this year on exiting households from long-term homeless accommodation. Some €150 million will be ring-fenced for this purpose. More than adequate funding will be available in 2026 to support any acquisitions that can be progressed by local authorities or AHBs. The multi-annual approach introduced in 2025 will also continue, with local authorities authorised to enter into commitments for 2027 up to a value of 30% of their baseline 2026 acquisitions budget. This will allow local authorities to plan and progress acquisitions between annual programmes with certainty *vis-à-vis* future funding availability. Notably, at the end of January this year, less than half the €95 million available to be committed in 2025 for acquisitions in 2026 was actually committed by local authorities.

I will continue in my second response.

Senator Mike Kennelly: The scheme was introduced for people facing homelessness so tenants could be put in a place where properties could be purchased without leaving the properties and facing homelessness. Properties cannot be got when a notice to quit has been served on a family. They cannot be sourced. There is nothing to rent or lease. There is nothing to be got. People are falling through the cracks because they cannot get any other local property. When the crack that nothing is available is identified, why can the council not buy the properties, even if a cost analysis of it has been done? The scheme is not doing what it is supposed to and that is why I am raising it.

The Minister of State said that last year, some €375 million was allocated to local authorities for acquisitions and, of that, only €290 million was drawn down. That sounds alarm bells. Kerry County Council drew down money last year for the tenant in situ scheme, but it was to deliver houses it bought in 2024. I have the breakdown. I want a review of it and for someone to come back me about what to tell the people of Kerry where notices to quit are regularly coming for families. They have to leave the properties within a three-, five- or six-month period and there is nothing to rent. Will the Department look at this again because it is not working

in my county? The purchase of 23 properties under the tenant in situ scheme in recent years is a poor return for people facing homelessness, and we have figures to prove it.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: One of the challenges we need to address is that if a house is valued at €350,000, for example, and needs refurbishment and repair, what seems to be happening - and this is what we could look at - is the council may only come up with a figure of €300,000 because it is keeping €50,000 in reserve for the refurbishment. That has proven to be a challenge. If we could somehow get around that, more property owners might come on board the tenant in situ acquisitions. It is certainly an issue I have come across.

The Senator pointed out there is a lack of rental accommodation. We need to sort that out. With the new tenancies Bill, there will be security of tenure so the notices to quit should not be as common after 1 March. There is also the short-term letting legislation, which is controversial. I am from west Cork and the Senator is from Kerry. We know how important tourism accommodation is, but if it could free up a few hundred houses for rent, it might take a bit of pressure off.

I appreciate the Senator raising this matter. I will go back to the senior Minister to get clarification on it.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 11.19 a.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 11.31 a.m.

Sitting suspended at 11.19 a.m. and resumed at 11.31 a.m.

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad

An Cathaoirleach: Before I ask the Deputy Leader to outline the Order of Business, I know Senators were saddened to hear of the death last week of a former Member of this House, Larry Butler. A native of County Carlow and the son of a local lock-keeper on the canal, Larry grew up along the River Barrow and received his education through Graiguenamanagh national school. Although his life and career took him to Dublin, his heart was always in Carlow.

Larry entered public life when he was elected to Dublin County Council in 1991, representing Glencullen. Known for his work ethic and commitment to local issues, he earned a great reputation among the local community. He was re-elected to the newly established Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council and served the Ballybrack electoral area. His years on the council were marked by his approachability, persistence and straightforward dedication to serving the people he represented.

In 2007, he was elected to his House on the industrial and commercial panel. It was the first time that someone from Tinnahinch represented that area since the foundation of the Oireachtas. Larry is remembered as a dedicated public servant, a friend to many and a committed community man. His legacy lives on in the people he served, the family he loved and the quiet, steady impact he made throughout his life.

Beyond his public service career, Larry had a great devotion to his family and his wife Kathleen. They shared 63 years of marriage together, a partnership marked by loyalty, affection and mutual support. On behalf of this House, I express our condolences to his wife, his children

Laurence, Helen, Tom and Mary-Kate, his brother Walter and his sister Anne, his grandchildren and great-grandchildren and his many family and friends. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam dílis.

I ask the House to observe a minute's silence in memory of the late Larry Butler.

Members rose.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I thank the Cathaoirleach for his lovely words about former Senator and councillor, Larry Butler. He was a very gregarious character and his sartorial elegance was always absolutely spot on. He always had the nicest and the best of suits and immaculately polished shoes. He was an absolute gentleman any time I met him and I know everybody who met him had the same experience. Our deepest sympathy to his family.

The Order of Business is No. 1, address to Seanad Éireann by Members of the European Parliament representing the Ireland South constituency, to be taken at 2.30 p.m., in accordance with the arrangements set out in the motion agreed by the House on 12 February 2026; No. 2, Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026 - Order for Committee Stage, Committee and Remaining Stages, to be taken at 4.30 p.m. and to adjourn at 7 p.m. if not previously concluded; and No. 3, Private Members' business, Education (Leave for Injuries) Bill 2025 - Second Stage, to be taken at 7 p.m., with the time allocated to this debate not to exceed two hours.

Senator Alison Comyn: As is evident from my forehead, it is indeed Ash Wednesday today which, traditionally, in the Catholic faith, was a day of abstinence - probably after the previous day's overindulgence with pancakes - ahead of Lenten time. No matter what faith, it is probably a time to not only give up something but perhaps to reflect and maybe even take up something, like a little bit of kindness. That will be my quick thought for the morning.

I will be raising two issues which will probably resonate with many places right across the country, even though this is local to Louth and Meath. I refer to the housing estates almost caught in a never-ending loop of nobody taking responsibility for things that are happening therein. Bryanstown Wood residents have contacted me about a raw sewage leak which has been happening since last December. It is storm drains, and while it has been investigated by Meath County Council and Uisce Éireann, neither of them can do anything because the estate has not been taken into charge as the developer has gone into liquidation. Unfortunately, they are caught in this never-ending loop where nobody will take responsibility. Meanwhile, it is a huge environmental hazard and a risk not only for the residents but for anybody coming near the housing estate. They have contacted the housing Minister, Deputy James Browne, and I would suggest we have a conversation in this House about who takes responsibility in instances like this.

While I am talking about a housing issue, there is a new social housing estate in Drogheda, County Louth, called Tullybrook Court. That is managed by the housing agency Clúid. Right now, some of the residents have been paying electricity and heating bills ranging from €500 to €2,000 per month because of the heating system that has been put into these properties. They were promised heat pumps but the houses are using electric storage heaters that are costing

between €500 and €2,000 per month. They are in a dire situation. This is social housing. Clearly, nobody would be in a position to pay those kinds of monthly bills. I would appeal that, maybe, we could try and intervene and have a conversation with the housing Minister or the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, on energy use, because this is not sustainable. For both of those issues, these people are relying on their new housing and on somebody to step in and assist them but right now, in both of these instances, they are going around in a loop with nobody taking responsibility. Unfortunately, it may take us to step in and see who will step up and take responsibility.

Senator Victor Boyhan: First, I wish to pay tribute to Larry Butler. He was a man I knew well. I served with him on Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council. He had served, prior to that, on Dublin County Council when it arched out into Dún Laoghaire before the merger. I knew him to be a great character; that he certainly was. He was a great colleague and mentor. He was a man who believed in keeping his feet on the ground and keeping in close contact with his constituents. He went on to be elected to the Seanad and he was a man I worked closely with and collaborated with on the General Council of County Councillors, which was the organisation that preceded the Association of Irish Local Government, AILG.

The Cathaoirleach put it right when he said Larry's heart was in Carlow. He was unique in that he is buried in Tinnahinch, which is in County Carlow.

Anyone who knows the beautiful town of Graiguenamanagh will know there is a bridge there called the Tinnahinch-Graiguenamanagh bridge. If someone is on one side of the bridge, he or she is in Tinnahinch in County Carlow while the other half of the bridge is in Graiguenamanagh in County Kilkenny, but there he was. He was the son of a lock keeper and always went back there. He went to London and was involved in the construction and building sector. He was a self-made man and an entrepreneur. He was everything in terms of being close to sport and his community and led from the front.

I pay tribute to him and offer my sympathies to Kathleen, his beloved wife of many years, and his children. They were exceptionally close and exceptionally proud of one another. Certainly, he achieved a lot in his life. His greatest achievement was when he came into the Seanad. He truly loved this place and the sense of awe he got from it. We remember him at this time. He was a great character and a close friend and confidant of mine.

When I looked at this morning's edition of the *Irish Independent*, I saw a caption to the effect that the coalition would override planners in the row over the Rotunda Hospital. I support the Rotunda and its development plans. In the article on the front page of the *Irish Independent*, it quotes the Taoiseach in the Dáil as saying that the denial of permission was "the wrong decision". I think the Taoiseach is wrong, not because of the issue but because we had a Planning and Development Bill that was guillotined in both the Dáil and the Seanad and under which I raised the issue of An Coimisiún Pleanála and its power to override its own inspectors. We know from this article, but we also know from the facts, having read the file today online, that Dublin City Council recommended planning permission. It then went to An Coimisiún Pleanála, which considered it *de novo*. Ultimately, an inspector was appointed and made a decision that permission be granted, but An Coimisiún Pleanála overrode its own inspector because we in these Houses empowered it to do so. Where does the problem start? The problem starts with the fact that some of us in these Houses did not listen and respond to

the debate at the time and allowed this to happen. The Government cannot retrospectively change planning. There is a suggestion today that An Coimisiún Pleanála will go through a critical infrastructure process, which it may well do, but it will have to start all over again. That is the planning process the Houses legislated for. I usually take issue with An Coimisiún Pleanála, but in this case, it did nothing wrong. It operated within the law and within the constraints of the Planning and Development Act as legislated for and provided for in these Houses. Yes, we highlighted it but the Government did not listen to the Opposition in the Dáil and the Seanad and now we have a crisis, but it is a crisis of the Government's own making, nobody else's.

I wish the Rotunda Hospital every success in a plan but if we have plans and statutes on planning and development, we need to think hard before we agree them because this is a result of legislation agreed by this Government in these Houses.

Senator Maria McCormack: I pay my respects to former Senator and councillor Larry Butler, a respected local figure. Many who knew him, including all political colleagues and local residents, tell us he was a complete gentleman who was kind and always ready to help. Our thoughts are with his family and colleagues in Fianna Fáil.

I also pay my respects to a young man named Evan Power from Portarlinton in County Laois who sadly passed away unexpectedly. Evan was a fantastic advocate for disability rights, a member of our local branch of the Irish Wheelchair Association and a regular visitor to Leinster House. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam.

Today, I again raise the issue of nursing homes. Last year, "RTÉ Investigates" revealed issues in an Emeis nursing home in Laois highlighting the undignified and unsafe practices that were putting residents' lives at risk. Another facility in Laois has been highlighted since last year, namely, Droimnin Nursing Home in Stradbally. Its HIQA inspections showed it was non-compliant with eight regulations and only compliant with two. Last September, an application was made to have its licence cancelled. Finally, a couple of weeks ago, the judge cancelled Droimnin Nursing Home's licence on the grounds that the lives and welfare of residents were at risk and the HSE took over operations and management from 2 p.m. that day. I welcome the HSE's involvement here. It brought peace of mind to residents and their families by ensuring continuity of care. However, I would like to point out that if the HSE ran more nursing homes in the first place and if the State stopped relying so heavily on the private care sector, we would not be in this mess. I would like to see the HSE arrangement at Droimnin made permanent. The State must play a bigger role in providing nursing home care because privatisation has not worked out. I would also like us to invite the Minister for Health to the Seanad for an update on what action has been taken since the serious concerns were raised last year because much of them concern my constituency and many people were very alarmed by what they saw. We need to know what measures are in place to prevent further harm and distress to nursing home residents and their families.

Senator Evanne Ní Chuilinn: I put on record my dissatisfaction, disappointment and shock regarding the news concerning the planned neonatal unit at the Rotunda. I know it has been spoken about quite a bit in this Chamber but the more voices are raised, the better. This is not a political issue; it is a human issue. I wrote of a letter of support for the application and met the master of the hospital, Professor Sean Daly, in September or October of last year, as did

lots of people. Letters of support were written. This application was meticulously planned and was reviewed. Most people were of the opinion, and quite rightly so, that it made an awful lot of sense. There are only four level 3 neonatal intensive care units in this country and only one is fit for purpose. We have the sickest children in Dublin and other parts of Ireland trying to stay alive and infection free. Most of the time, there is a distance of just one metre between them. During Covid-19, the healthy among us were told to stay 2 m apart. That old building has not made sense for an awfully long time and it makes sense to grant planning permission for the new facility.

At the moment, the Rotunda cares for 37 babies in its overcrowded neonatal unit. The new development would provide 46 individual rooms to offer the best of care to more infants in modern, well-equipped facilities. It is a brilliant plan. The new extension would also include 19 postnatal rooms, which would relieve pressure on the hospital's postnatal accommodation. It is utterly unacceptable that women in Ireland in 2026 should have to recover from labour and delivery ten or 12 to a room, but that is what is happening, much to the regret of the dedicated staff and management at the Rotunda.

Then, of course, we have the sick babies. The plan would allay a lot of fears, concerns and risks and probably prevent a lot of deaths of small babies.

This has been meticulously planned, refined and updated in compliance with the planning application system. I was really relieved to hear the comments of the Minister for Health and the support she has in trying to get this over the line, and I hope that those who have not yet seen common sense will see it. Common decency should also prevail in this instance.

Senator Sharon Keogan: I raise a matter of growing concern relating to consumer protection and Ireland's obligation under EU law. In recent weeks, the European Commission has issued Ireland with a formal notice for failing to transpose the updated consumer credit directive, which is the legislation designed to protect individuals from unfair lending practices, hidden charges and the risks posed by new digital moneylending and credit products. Most Members know that I am far from being uncritical of EU directives and how the Government often unquestioningly signs to up and applies them, yet here we have a directive that actually looks to do some good for consumers and the Government has done nothing. The directive expands protections for ordinary consumers taking out loans, using online credit or engaging with so-called "buy now, pay later" schemes. At a time when household finances are stretched and debt vulnerability is rising, these safeguards are essential, yet despite the clear deadline of November 2025, Ireland has not yet advanced the necessary legislation. We have held a public consultation but public consultation alone does not protect consumers. The Commission's intervention sends a very clear signal: Ireland is falling behind and consumers are left exposed in the meantime.

This also carries financial risks if delays continue and infringement proceedings escalate further. I ask that the responsible Minister come before this House to explain the reasons for the delay, set out the Government's plan for full and timely implementation and clarify when Irish consumers can expect these protections to be enshrined in law. We cannot afford to drift along on something as fundamental as fair dealing in the credit market game.

Senator Manus Boyle: In the context of water charges, I wish to raise an issue that has arisen regarding houses in the Killybegs area over the past few days. Most families woke up on Monday morning to find they had no water. They have not had water for two days now. Thankfully, this morning the water came back on. I understand that the outage was due to scheduled cleaning works being carried out at the reservoir. Those works are essential and needed to be done. I thank the crews who worked on the ground for the past two evenings to get the service back up and running. The problem here is communication. Uisce Éireann fell down on this occasion. It did not contact local representatives, households, farmers or the elderly. Nobody knew what was happening. Nobody was informed of that this essential work being carried out. A simple written notice or something on the radio or on Facebook to say this work needed to be done would have allayed many people's fears.

I ask that the Minister engage with Uisce Éireann to review the notification process used in advance of works being carried out. I know essential works need to be done in places if there is a burst pipe or something like that, but these were planned works. If Donegal County Council or the ESB are doing something that is planned and that is coming down the line, they send notifications to households in written form or make an announcement on Ocean FM or Highland Radio. When the Minister is discussing a review with representatives from Uisce Éireann, will he have a chat with them about this matter?

Senator Robbie Gallagher: We often hear about many acts of wanton vandalism that occur throughout the country. Unfortunately, at Drum Lough near Drum in County Monaghan last Sunday night we had one such incident that would leave you scratching your head. There is a jetty there that was constructed using recycled plastic over 20 years ago. It was constructed primarily to assist wheelchair users or anybody who has mobility issues to go onto the lake to do a spot of fishing or just relax. Someone decided it would a good idea to set the jetty ablaze last Sunday night, an act that resulted in thousands of euro of damage. I thank the local fire brigade for arriving on the scene quite quickly. Thankfully nobody was hurt. It is beyond belief that anybody would want to set a jetty that is there to assist wheelchair users or people with mobility issues to go and do a spot of fishing ablaze. Unfortunately, that is what happened. I appeal to anybody who was in the general vicinity on Sunday evening or Sunday night and who may have seen anything suspicious to please come forward and tell the authorities. We cannot allow acts like this to go unchallenged. It is hugely depressing that somebody would think it was a bit of fun to carry out such an act. If anybody has any information about cars in the area acting suspiciously or anything at all, will they please come forward and make that known to the authorities?

Senator Chris Andrews: I also wish to extend my condolences to the family of Larry Butler. I knew Larry. In particular, I knew his son Lar. Larry was a great fun. He was a nice, genuine and kind man. I wish to extend my sympathies to his family and to his Fianna Fáil family.

Irish Sport for Palestine has submitted a complaint to the International Criminal Court accusing the presidents of FIFA and UEFA of aiding and abetting war crimes against humanity in Palestine. Well done to Irish Sport for Palestine for doing this. Ireland must not play genocidal Israel. Infantino, the president of FIFA, and eferin, the president of UEFA, are accused of supporting Israeli football clubs based in illegal settlements. They are effectively subsidising occupation. Under Infantino and eferin, the policies of FIFA and UEFA legitimise

settlements which facilitate apartheid. Infantino and eferin are breaching FIFA and UEFA statutes and violating international law. They are ignoring human rights and reports and continue to act with impunity.

The Irish Government has done nothing to challenge this. It is seeking to wash its hands of responsibility. Infantino and eferin co-operate with those at the highest levels of the Israeli and US Governments to facilitate the continued participation of Israel and settlement clubs. Members of the Al-Helal football club came to Ireland in 2017 and 2018. Those children who came here and played football in clubs across the country have been targeted by genocidal Israeli forces. Eight of Al-Helal's football players, young children, have been killed by Israeli forces. Israel does not mind mixing sport and politics so let us not keep pretending that sport and politics do not mix. When Israel's snipers were shooting children in the legs in order that they could never play football again, Israel did not mind mixing sport and politics. When genocidal Israel was turning sports facilities into graveyards, it did not mind mixing sports and politics then. Let us cut out the bullshit that-----

An Cathaoirleach: Sorry, Senator, you cannot use that-----

Senator Chris Andrews: -----sport and politics cannot be separated. Cut out the nonsense that sport and politics do not mix because they cannot be separated. I acknowledge the filing parties, which are: Irish Sport for Palestine; Scottish Sport for Palestine; Just Peace Advocates; Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor; and Sports Scholars for Justice in Palestine.

Senator Aubrey McCarthy: Yesterday, the petitions committee, of which I am a member, was addressed by Sinead O'Reilly. She spoke about her sister-in-law Sarah O'Reilly, the 34-year-old mum of twins, P.J. and Lilly. Sarah developed a fever. At first they thought it was pneumonia, and then gallstones. She was brought to hospital. After a number of weeks in ICU, she passed away. The issue was sepsis. To hear that harrowing story was horrendous. An external review found that if the sepsis protocol had been activated and followed, a different response could have come about and Sarah could be alive today.

The committee also heard from Professor Steve Kerrigan, who outlined the number of people who have died from sepsis in Europe. The figures are phenomenal. We are talking about millions. The uncomfortable truth is that sepsis is a very real danger. It certainly affects older populations, but Sarah was only 34. We now have fewer effective drugs to treat the condition. Professor Kerrigan stated that we need to take three steps. First, Ireland needs to commit to developing a national timebound sepsis strategy that aligns with international best practice and then scale that to cover the health system here. Second, as we have the EU Presidency in the second half of this year, sepsis should be formally considered as one of our priorities, particularly in the context of antimicrobial resistance, hospital safety and ageing populations. Third, both Houses of the Oireachtas should support further engagement by referring this issue to the relevant Ministers, Department and Oireachtas committees. It is essential that sepsis awareness is at the forefront of what we do here.

Senator Gareth Scahill: Today, the families of more than 300 children in north Kerry have received details of the findings of a review into the care their children received. This comes

on the back of the south Kerry CAMHS review earlier this year which found that 227 children were exposed to risks of serious harm and 46 suffered significant harm.

12 o'clock

Behind those families are children and families who trusted the system for help.

The review showed that long-term vacant consultant posts and weak governance played a major role in how those failures were allowed to happen. We constantly hear that lessons would be learned. We have to be honest and ask if anything has been learned from this experience. Yesterday, we heard that key posts are still left unfilled in our mental health services, particularly in my home town of Castlerea, County Roscommon. When senior clinical posts are left vacant we create the same risks that exist in Kerry. I commend Deputy Claire Kerrane for raising this with the HSE and finding out this gap is there. When our older person service in Castlerea was closed, the e-mental health hub was opened to great fanfare and CAMHS services were promised. However, Deputy Kerrane has continued to probe that and has found that positions have been left unfilled. We owe it to constituents and people trying to access these services to raise this issue.

Staff on the ground are doing their best but they cannot provide safe services without the right supports, the right staffing and the right leadership. Children and adults who need help cannot wait for recruitment processes that drag on for years. Families deserve to know that when they seek help the service is safe and properly staffed. For this reason, I call for a debate in the House on the CAMHS services that are delivered nationally but also, again, on the mental health services delivered throughout the country for all people, as well as on staffing, governance, accountability and how to ensure safe, consistent mental health care for children and young people throughout this State.

Senator Mark Duffy: I raise an issue relating to housing. We see across the country the housing crisis that faces the State for so many different reasons. There are many potential ways to help to unlock housing supply. Many people, in particular young couples, are priced out of the market and fall between the cracks, in that they are not able to afford to build or buy their own home and are also not eligible, because of income limits, for social housing supports. In my case, in County Mayo, the towns of Westport, Castlebar and Ballina are eligible for affordable housing schemes through the Department of housing. This entailed, first, having KPMG do market analysis on the town and then a recommendation being made to the Department to say affordable housing is required for Ballina, or whatever the town may be. This is total overkill. The housing crisis affects every town, village, nook and cranny of this island. Having to do market analysis when the dogs on the street know there is a housing crisis is totally unnecessary. People who have the financial ability can build large one-off homes in rural areas. If we build houses, they will be bought and will put a roof over people's heads. Where is there an example of oversupply in the country at the moment? There is none. We need to get rid of this obstacle before developing affordable housing schemes, so that in a small village a developer may be able to build a small scheme suitable for that village. The same would apply for a medium-sized town, where a local contractor could do the same. Having to apply to the Department of housing to be validated for something like this is a step too far. We have a crisis on our hands. I would welcome if the Leader gave consideration to liaising with the Minister for housing on this.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: After I was elected as a councillor in Cavan County Council, one of the main issues I campaigned on was the poor quality of the roads and road surfaces in counties Cavan and Monaghan. Many Senators in this Chamber today have heard about the substandard roads that we and our citizens have to travel on. The people in my area pay motor tax and carbon tax and some of them pay two or three tolls going to work every day, just to end up driving on roads that are substandard. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, was recently asked about the increase in tolls. His response was that these tolls go towards the upkeep of our roads. However, there is no evidence of that in counties Cavan or Monaghan. There is no upkeep of the road structure. The road funding announced yesterday was much anticipated. Councillors came from Cavan to meet with Ministers. They expected and advocated for more money but what we got was more of the same. For our regional and local roads in 2025, we received €10.084 million. This year we received €10.727 million.

In my municipal district there are no national routes or national secondary routes. We rely on regional and local funding for our roads. We have huge industry, which needs to get product out to market. That is not happening. Why is this issue being raised time and again? Is it falling on deaf ears? We need a substantial increase to roads funding if the improvement we need is to be achieved. It is simply not good enough that roads get worse and worse while taxpayers are fleeced by tolls. I look forward to another announcement. I kept looking at the figures last night to see what was I missing because an increase in funding was expected. There has been an increase but it does not keep up with the inflation rate, as it is supposed to.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I am glad I made it in time. There is much discussion at the moment about children and access to social media. Clearly, Ireland is a bit of a laggard with respect to how we are dealing with this issue. However, something we should implement from fourth class onwards in national schools is a cyber awareness campaign. This would include Internet hygiene and the use of the Internet. We should not be afraid of using any resources that are available for research purposes. I have huge reservations about social media. I regard most of it now as a cesspit. I am delighted to say I am no longer a member of the X fraternity. I have no time whatsoever for the nonsense that goes on there and the attacks on decent people who work in this establishment and on other public figures. Going back to my time in the teachers union, two 11-year-olds took their own lives as a result of cyber-bullying. It would be helpful if we were to have the Minister for Education and Youth here for a debate on the impact of the cyber world on young children as they pass through the education system. Perhaps the Deputy Leader would try to organise that?

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I welcome pupils from Newtown National School, County Meath, and also guests of the Minister, Deputy McEntee, and the Minister of State, Deputy Thomas Byrne, who are in the Visitors Gallery. I acknowledge Deputy Cormac Devlin, who is accompanied by Saoirse Evoy and Alex O'Hagan, two transition year students. They are very welcome and I hope they enjoy their visit to Leinster House. For those who are here on their school tour, there is no homework for the rest of the day, as is customary here in the Seanad.

Senator Martin Conway: I think the Leas-Chathaoirleach meant to say there will be no homework for the rest of the week.

I seek a debate on maternity services. The decision made by An Coimisiún Pleanála in the past week has baffled the country and defies logic.

It has actually seen a situation where all parties are coming together in criticism. Dublin City Council granted planning permission and the inspector recommended that the planning permission be upheld but two of three members of the commission decided against it. There is something fundamentally wrong here when you are talking about critical health infrastructure. The Leas-Chathaoirleach comes the same region as I do and we know that if another maternity hospital is to be built, it needs to happen in Limerick.

The Rotunda has excellent plans in terms of a critical care unit for very sick children and babies. It was very difficult listening to a spokesperson for the other side on "Morning Ireland" criticising the size of the building, maintaining that it would be another maternity hospital. That is not true. Providing care like that requires space. It requires accommodation for families. It requires accommodation for clinicians. It requires room. Given that it is located so close to the Mater Hospital, the decision to refuse beggars belief. The new legislation that is going through, which will identify critical infrastructure for the State in order that we can bypass all of this, needs to include this particular unit. To say I was absolutely stunned by the decision, like everyone else, is an understatement. Healthcare and saving lives has to trump everything.

Senator Garret Kelleher: Cuirim fáilte roimh an gcinneadh a thóg an tAire Oideachais agus Óige, an Teachta Hildegard Naughton, inné mar gheall ar chúntóirí riachtanas speisialta sna scoileanna ar fud na tíre. With specific reference to an outstanding community, which has been at the heart of the community which I represent for over 40 years, Scoil Barra National School in Ballincollig, I received a high volume of emails and phone calls from school management, teachers, parents and other members of the wider school community in relation to their well-founded concerns about the proposal to reduce the school's allocation of special needs assistants from 8.33 whole-time equivalents to 6.33 whole-time equivalents. Scoil Barra is a school that prides itself on the culture of inclusion and respect for diversity, which it strives to foster. It has a long history of promoting a neuro-affirmative environment in the school and in providing supports to its pupils with additional learning needs and challenges. For the incoming school year, Scoil Barra has 75 junior infants' pupils enrolled, a high cohort of whom have additional needs, including some pre-verbal children.

In line with the NCSE's recommendations for schools to focus on early intervention with primary schools in its allocation and deployment of special needs assistants, it is the school's intention to deploy three special needs assistants for the incoming junior infants classes. If the proposal that was made in the letter that they received was to be followed through on, that would leave only three whole-time equivalents for the entire remainder of the school population. I cannot stress enough that it is imperative, in the case of Scoil Barra, the history that it has, its proportion of diversity and in the work it does to support its pupils in the school community with additional needs, that the cuts that were proposed in the initial letter are not followed through upon. Again, I welcome the pause in the review announced by the Minister yesterday. I hope that when it comes to it being looked at again, the needs of Scoil Barra will be given the attention they deserve.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I thank the 15 Senators who contributed on the Order of Business this morning.

We started with Senator Comyn, who spoke about Ash Wednesday and its importance in our calendar, heralding a time not just to abstain but to reflect and take up some type of positive habit. Kindness was the one she suggested. I think we can never have enough kindness in the world, including in this Chamber at times.

Senator Comyn also spoke about two housing estates in Drogheda that have particular issues. In Bryanstown Wood, sadly there is a situation where there is a raw sewage leak, which has been investigated by Louth County Council and Uisce Éireann but, because the housing estate is not taken in charge, nobody is doing anything about it. I suggest to the Senator that there is a process under section 180 of the Planning and Development Act 2000 whereby residents, in a situation where the developer has gone, can initiate the process themselves. Some years back - I cannot recall what year - legislation was put in place to ensure that there would be a fund there to support works that need to be done in a place that is unfinished. Essentially the estate is unfinished. That would pay for that to bring it up to the stage where Louth County Council would take it in charge. The Senator may wish to look at that as it is worth doing. In relation to Tullybrook Court, it is shocking to think that tenants are paying such huge electricity and heating bills. They are not using heat pumps, I understand, but electrical storage heaters. The best thing to do is to try to have a conversation with Clúid. That does not seem to be going anywhere. Some intervention should be made. I suggest a Commencement matter with the Minister for housing because that situation is simply not good enough.

Senators Boyhan, McCormack and Andrews spoke about the legend that was Larry Butler and expressed their deepest sympathies to his wife, Kathleen, and family. They remembered him in very kind words. I thank them for that.

Senator Boyhan, along with Senators Ní Chuilinn and Conway, spoke about the Rotunda Hospital and the shock we all felt when we heard the announcement on the news yesterday morning that planning permission had been turned down. I know the Minister for Health has expressed her deep disappointment. The Taoiseach did so yesterday as well. I think Senator Boyhan is wrong to say that the Taoiseach was wrong to express that. At the end of the day, Dublin City Council and the planning inspector had recommended this. The Rotunda is one of the busiest maternity hospitals in Europe. I remember seeing somewhere that this year they expect to deliver their one millionth baby in the hospital. That shows how important it is to the mothers of Dublin and outside of Dublin.

The planned new critical care wing is absolutely necessary for upgrading the essential competencies of the Rotunda. It includes a neonatal intensive care unit, 46 single-bed rooms, 19 postnatal rooms, which are really important, and a new operating theatre. It is shocking. There will have to be a meeting. I know that the master of the Rotunda offered to meet the Dublin Civic Trust some time ago and had invited the objectors to meet with him and engage. Unfortunately, that invitation was not taken up. That is disappointing, too. Senator Boyhan said that the power should be taken from An Coimisiún Pleanála. We have to have an independent planning process because there are a lot of vested interests on both sides in relation to planning. It is important that there is a planning process.

It is important that this is removed from politics. However, having said that, there should be no issue with politicians saying that they are disappointed with the actual verdict that was given, as indeed we all are. Senator McCormack also spoke about Evan Power from Portarlinton, who was a great advocate for disability rights and sadly has passed away. Our deepest sympathy go to Evan's family and community. The Senator also spoke about Droimnin Nursing Home, which HIQA found was non-compliant in eight areas. The licence was cancelled and the HSE took the nursing home over. The Senator would like to see that being put on a permanent basis. To see that carried out we should have a debate with the Minister of State with responsibility for older people, Deputy O'Donnell, about nursing homes, to see if we can advocate for the HSE taking more of them in charge.

Senator Keogan spoke about the EU consumer protection law, the consumer credit directive, which would expand protections to customers. The deadline for Ireland signing up was November 2025. The fact that there was a public consultation is important but it does not actually mean anything is going to happen. I will check with the EU scrutiny committee because I would be surprised if some level of scrutiny was not done. I genuinely do not know the answer but it is important that we find it out.

Senator Boyle spoke about water outages over the last two days. Luckily, supplies have been restored after scheduled works in the reservoir. The Senator is right that there is a problem with communication. It causes all sorts of problems. If these shortages and stoppages to water or electricity supplies are communicated in a timely manner, then people can make plans. For all of these vital parts of our infrastructure, we need to have proper communication to all those who are going to be impacted.

Senator Gallagher spoke about a jetty that was constructed from recycled plastic about 20 years ago to assist people with mobility issues to fish. Unfortunately, this was set on fire last Sunday night. He expressed his thanks to the fire service and has requested that anybody who saw anything suspicious to please inform the authorities, and obviously we support that.

Senator Andrews spoke about Irish Sport for Palestine, which has submitted a complaint to UEFA saying that UEFA is legitimising the occupied territories. The FAI is in a very difficult situation here. Some time ago, it made its preference known to UEFA that Israel should not be included in the competition. I think the FAI was absolutely right and I would completely support its stance. UEFA has taken its own decision. It has put Ireland and the Irish players who are involved in a very difficult situation. The Senator said that Israel is playing politics with football. It is, but that does not mean we should follow suit. The Senator is saying that because Israel is doing that, Ireland should do the same. There is nothing about Israel that I would like to copy, particularly in relation to the kinds of things it is doing.

Senator McCarthy spoke about the public petitions committee two days ago and a witness named Sinead O'Reilly whose sister in law, Sarah O'Reilly, had died from sepsis. Had protocol been followed, she would be alive today. There is a very real fear about sepsis at the moment and everybody is right to be concerned about it. We need to have a time-bound strategy and a development of an awareness campaign. We certainly will ask the Minister to come to discuss that. Perhaps Members here in the Seanad who are on the health committee would raise it in that forum. We are hearing about sepsis more and more and it is affecting people of all ages. Everybody is right to be concerned but we need to do more than show concern.

Senator Scahill spoke about the situation in Kerry and the families of 300 children who were in CAMHS. The review showed that there was very weak governance and failures there. There is a concern that something similar might happen in Castlerea because of key posts that are left unfilled. While I have no doubt but that staff on the ground are doing their best, it has to be a concern and we will look for a debate on the CAMHS service and mental health services.

Senator Duffy spoke about housing and the fact that in Westport, Castlebar and Ballina, while councillors and other public representatives want to see more affordable housing, apparently it is a requirement of the Department that KPMG carry out a survey and an analysis. It does not make sense on any level. As he rightly says, every village, town and city needs to have more housing. We need to see more affordable housing and affordable sites everywhere. In rural areas where people find it hard to get one-off planning, having affordable sites zoned for those who could build their own houses is important. We will take that up with the Minister for housing. The survey requirement does not seem to make sense.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly spoke about the poor quality roads in Cavan and the reliance on national funding. I would suggest that the Senator put in a Commencement matter in relation to that.

Senator Craughwell spoke about children and access to social media and about the need for a cyber awareness campaign. I understand that today at Cabinet there is going to be debate on that and actions that will be taken. In the education committee a few years ago we had a number of sessions with the anti-bullying centre, ABC, from DCU. The centre is internationally recognised and it does incredible work on cyber-bullying and online harassment. An observatory was set up there following the enactment of Coco's Law. We will ask for the Minister for education to come and speak about that and to speak about the work being done in DCU.

Senator Kelleher spoke about the SNA situation, which I know we are all concerned about. About 200 schools received letters over the last week, and the Senator spoke about Scoil Barra National School in particular, and the concerns there, particularly about next September's intake. The school would need three SNAs for just the new intake alone, which would leave just three for the rest of the school if these cuts were made. Yes, certainly it is good that a pause has been announced but we need more action than that. We need to have a debate with the Minister on the matter. None of us should have an issue with reviews because they are important at every level. A review of SNAs had not been done for about eight years, I think. However, the way this was handled was completely wrong. The communication to the affected schools was completely wrong and anyone who has a child with special needs faces uphill battles all of the time and they take things like this very personally. Schools pride themselves on inclusion and so many of our schools that are really doing excellent work in the inclusion area take it very personally as well. I had a Commencement matter last week about a similar situation in Newbridge. While we welcome the pause, we need to have a debate in the House about how we go forward. Given that there will be 1,700 new SNAs, there has to be a better way of redeployment. We get what the Minister has said about needing to ensure that redeployments are in the areas of need.

That is what we all want but we see and we recognise that need in the schools in our communities.

Senator Gareth Scahill: It is also about how the NCSE engages.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: The NCSE is obviously part of the whole story. Part of the problem is that the NCSE seems to have taken the decision to send out these communications unilaterally. That was very regrettable. I am sure there will be conversations about that. That is the end of my response to the Order of Business.

Order of Business agreed to.

Death of Former Member: Motion

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I move:

That Seanad Éireann –

- expresses its deep sadness on the death of Larry Butler;
- conveys its sincere condolences to his family; and
- expresses its gratitude for his notable contribution, as a member of Seanad Éireann, to Irish public life and for his dedicated service to the people of Ireland.

Question put and agreed to.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: The Cathaoirleach will send notice of the motion to the family of the former Senator, Larry Butler. Before the House suspends, I welcome Senator Garret Kelleher's nephew, Seán. He is here on work experience for the week. He is very welcome.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 12.31 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.35 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 12.31 p.m. and resumed at 2.35 p.m.

Address to Seanad Éireann by Members of the European Parliament

An Cathaoirleach: Sorry for the delayed start. It is a great honour to welcome our colleagues from the European Parliament, Members of the European Parliament. I will announce them in alphabetical order. That is the way the seats have been allocated to make sure it is impartial. We are delighted they are here. We are joined by Ms Kathleen Funchion, MEP; Mr. Billy Kelleher, MEP; Mr. Seán Kelly, MEP; Mr. Michael McNamara, MEP and Ms Cynthia Ní Mhurchú, MEP, who are representing us in Europe, working together as a team. As the embodiment of that institution and our representatives there, it is very welcome, in this year of Ireland's forthcoming Presidency of the European Union, that they participate in this engagement with the Seanad.

Standing Order 63(1) provides for Members of the European Parliament to be attendant and to be heard here with the approval of the Committee on Parliamentary Privileges and Oversight. I am delighted that so many Senators are here. We asked the Senators who are from the Ireland South constituency, similarly with Dublin and Midlands North West, to attend on the occasion of their MEPs being here. It is important. It is about strengthening the understanding within

the Seanad and within Ireland generally about the work that our MEPs do in Brussels and Strasbourg. It is very complicated but very important in terms of agriculture, artificial intelligence, the issues around economic resilience, peace and security and also democratic values.

We had a meeting yesterday of the Seanad Select Committee on EU Scrutiny and Transparency. Unfortunately, we did not get any one of the statutory instruments that we had sought. We hope to make sure that people understand the importance of the legislation that comes from Europe. When that legislation was coming from Europe in 1974 it accounted for 20 pieces of legislation. It is now over 200, so nearly four out of five of the laws that are enacted in Ireland in that process in our parliamentary system every year are European-led. The people of Ireland are entitled to see the drafts before they are signed into law and our legislators are entitled to see them in advance.

This co-operation between the Seanad and our MEPs is greatly valued. I will outline how we will run this session. Some of the MEPs have been here before. Each MEP will address the Chamber for six minutes. There will be contributions - and I mean questions; it is about questions - by the spokespersons in each group, and then a response not exceeding three minutes from the MEPs. We will then have questions from Senators. There will then be final contributions. It is all very short, at two hours, but it is valued that the MEPs are here. I will, in alphabetical order, call on Ms Kathleen Funchion, MEP. You are most welcome.

Ms Kathleen Funchion: I thank the Cathaoirleach. This is a really good idea. Ever since being elected to the European Parliament and in the run-up to that campaign, one of the things that I noticed was that sometimes people feel left out and a bit excluded. They may not fully understand what happens in Europe and feel disconnected from it. However, as the Cathaoirleach said, a huge amount of our legislation originates there. It is really important that there is a connection between the work we are doing, the work done in the Dáil and in the Seanad, and I would say the work the local authorities do as well. It is good to have this opportunity. We obviously have a very exciting time coming up too in relation to the Irish Presidency.

I will speak a little about the committees I am on and a little bit about things that I would like to see potentially happening during the Irish Presidency. I will be happy to do my best to answer questions; that is probably the best way of putting it.

I am on a number of committees such as the committee on regional development, REGI; the committee on employment rights, EMPL; and then the FEMM committee around gender equality and women's rights. It is important. We see a changing world and a changing environment and solidarity and cohesion between communities and countries is more important than ever before. We have the Presidency, as has been said and we have a good opportunity to make our mark. It is a six-month window. I would like to see an emphasis on Irish unity. It is a good opportunity for us. We often talk about the Good Friday Agreement and the potential opportunity for border polls and referendums but we need to plan for all of that. None of that is going to happen overnight or without a plan and we need to bring everybody with us on that process. I regularly talk about the fact that I would like to see a citizens' assembly but we should be looking to use the EU Presidency to highlight that situation, to highlight the benefits of a united Ireland and of bringing everybody on that journey.

We also need to look at what I see, unfortunately, as the increased militarisation of the EU. It seems to be creeping into everything we are working on and every report we speak about. I mentioned some of the committees I am on. For example, we are working on a report regarding carers, that is, people who work in the paid carer industry but also people who are unpaid carers in the home and we are working on a report in relation to the gender pension gap. We see at times some groupings trying to put reference to defence and militarisation into these reports, which is something that would not have been seen in the past. As a neutral country, it is important that we are really strong on this. We have a unique position in the world and it is really important that the funds and the really good programmes we have coming from Europe are held and are not potentially sold out to any kind of militarisation situation.

The EMPL committee is one I mentioned. One of the examples I gave throughout the campaign when I was running for Europe as someone who worked in the trade union movement previously was that we got a huge amount of our really good, strong workers' rights legislation from Europe, particularly around gender equality. I always use those examples. For now, the EMPL committee is holding strong on a lot of that but there is the danger when we see other influences with a different agenda that the workers' rights agenda might be eroded. It is important that we are really strong on this and we continue to campaign on all of those matters. I acknowledge that there need to be supports for small and medium businesses and the huge pressure on these as well.

Cynthia Ní Mhurchú will be glad to hear I also want to mention the Irish language. I am not a Gaeilgeoir by nature but I have been making a bit of an effort in trying to use our language. I have given myself the task of having at least one speech per month as Gaeilge in Strasbourg. Unlike the institutions here, they are very strict on the one to one-and-a-half minute speeches.

An Cathaoirleach: We are strict here.

Ms Kathleen Funchion: You would never get an opportunity of six minutes. It is nearly unheard of nearly. For someone who might want to use the language but who does not always have the confidence to use it, this is a really good opportunity to encourage and use our language. Regarding the technicalities of that, we would like to see during the Presidency the end to the technical derogation on Irish interpretation that is currently in place, as it limits the rights of Irish speakers in the EU. Obviously, at Parliament level the translation is available but it is sometimes not available at committee level.

The Presidency will also play a key role in delivering the next EU budget. We need to be looking at our young people in relation to this. Youth unemployment is a major issue in Ireland. It is something that is actually being discussed at the moment in the EMPL committee. We have to look at opportunities because an unusual situation is developing where a lot of young people are being limited to part-time work whereas a lot of graduates are coming out very qualified and may not be getting the opportunity. They are stuck between a rock and a hard place where they do not have the experience but how can they get the experience if nobody gives them the opportunity?

Am I coming up on the six minutes?

An Cathaoirleach: Yes. Sin a bhfuil. I will give a light bell at one minute to go.

Ms Kathleen Funchion: There I was bragging about the one-minute-----

An Cathaoirleach: There will be a chance to come back in.

Ms Kathleen Funchion: I am happy to finish for now and come back in on some of it if that is okay.

An Cathaoirleach: Anois - I was going to say "An Seanadóir" but it is a long time since he was a Seanadóir.

Mr. Billy Kelleher: Fadó, fadó, nuair a bhíos óg.

Gabhaim buíochas leis na Seanadóirí agus na feisirí Eorpacha. Is mór an ónóir dom a bheith thar n-ais arís sa Seomra álainn sa Teach an-tábhachtach seo. Before I begin, I put on record my deep sorrow at the passing of Brian Crowley. I can distinctly remember him sitting over there in the Chamber. We were both appointed to the Seanad in January 1993 by former Taoiseach Albert Reynolds. Brian was a great European, a loyal friend and a proud Cork man. I know he and the Cathaoirleach were great friends and his loss will be felt by many near and far, and obviously by his family in Bandon. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam dilís.

Europe is at a crossroads. It is a phrase that is often used by politicians across Europe. Sometimes it is hyperbole but sometimes it is also a fact. In 2026, it is a fact that we in Ireland, a country that has gained more than most from the European Union, cannot ignore any more. We are at a crossroads. The last time I addressed Seanad Éireann was on 23 February 2022 and it was one day before Russia launched its war of aggression against Ukraine. Four years have now passed and Ukraine is still fighting for its independence, a testament to the incredible resolve of the Ukrainian people and the near unanimous support from EU political leadership. Despite everything, they keep fighting for their freedom and for the common values they share with the EU. Make no mistake that Ukraine is at the front line of Putin's campaign against everything the EU stands for, namely, democracy, rule of law, independent media, independent Judiciary, equality and the respect for international law. To those in Ireland who remain ambivalent about the outcome of this war, I say history will judge how we have responded on this issue. Ireland is militarily neutral but being militarily neutral does not mean we can be ambivalent or morally neutral. It does not mean we cannot distinguish between aggressor and victim.

Ukraine's resistance has exposed a number of fundamental challenges facing the EU. What must Ireland do to address these issues? First, I mention resources, funding and finance and how we make decisions in the European Union. These are two significant challenges for the years ahead. Putin has very little to show for four years of aggression except unprecedented EU unity, NATO's expansion to Finland and Sweden, and the fast-tracking of Ukrainian membership to the European Union. However, maintaining that unity requires something we have been reluctant to discuss honestly and that is the whole issue of money and finance. The EU budget is only about 60% larger than Ireland's for a population that is 90 times that of the Republic. Therefore, we have a significant shortfall. Everyone wants the EU to do more but we can only split a pie of €190 billion so many ways before we are dishing out crumbs. Ireland is now a net contributor, which means our economy is strong and that EU membership works.

Ireland has gone from being the poor man of Europe to one of its wealthy members in less than two generations. The challenge is that the future CAP proposal is effectively a cut when inflation is accounted for, yet, eastern flank member states increasingly prioritise defence and security funding over agriculture and many of the other EU programmes. The only way to square the circle is to increase the overall budget. Do we increase member states' contribution to the European Union or do we allow the EU to raise its own money through what we call "own resources"? Historically, Ireland has opposed both. We fear that the current own resources proposals, the digital tax, the financial transaction tax or a new EU corporation tax will disproportionately affect us. Yet, we have also been slow to support increased national contributions and this is neither sustainable, fair or probably even honest. If we do not like the current options, we must propose alternatives. Ireland must lead, not merely participate. We have benefited hugely from EU membership and continually support enlargement. It is time now for us to put our money where our mouth is in the context of EU funding.

As we enlarge, decision-making will come under significant pressure. Hungarian, Slovak and Polish prime ministers have previously held the gun to our collective heads on foreign affairs debates and decisions, abusing the threat of a veto on one issue to secure leverage on another. The threatened use of the veto is dangerous for us all and it undermines that concept of collegiality and solidarity among member states. Moving to qualified majority on more issues is the right move and Ireland should not be afraid to go that direction.

It will require us to be more open about our priorities and build alliances with like-minded member states. We can strengthen qualified majority voting and thresholds to protect smaller states. On key issues, however, we cannot allow one or two countries to block efficient and correct decision-making processes. Our citizens want the EU to deliver. They will not accept a *laissez-faire* approach to making decisions on the basis of outdated constitutional provisions.

The final challenge is one in respect of which Ireland has a unique role, namely navigating the turbulence in the EU-US relationship. We have all witnessed the recent volatility emanating from Washington, the trade disputes, the threats to member states' sovereignty and the pronouncements that undermine decades of transatlantic partnership. Last year, the White House national security strategy included a particularly concerning objective, namely "Cultivating resistance to Europe's current trajectory within European nations". That is a direct quote from the national security strategy published by President Trump. This is a direct threat to interfere with member states and to support actors intent on undermining our Union. We have already seen allies of President Trump openly supporting the AfD in Germany, courting Viktor Orbán and amplifying nationalist parties across the Continent. I have more to say, but I will elucidate that in the context of the question-and-answer session.

An Cathaoirleach: I would not doubt Mr. Kelleher. Anois Seán Kelly, who presented me with the Cahill Cup in Fitzgerald Stadium in 1996. It was not exactly the Munster Final, but for me it was as close as I will ever get.

Mr. Seán Kelly: Agus é tuillte go maith agat. Gabhaim míle buíochas leis na Seanadóirí, leis an gCathaoirleach agus le mo chomhfheisirí as ucht an cuireadh labhairt leo. Nuair a bheidh ár n-óráidí thart, beidh díospóireacht againn le chéile. Is maith an rud é go bhfuilimid le chéile inniu.

Ireland's place at the heart of united and ambitious Europe has never been more important. Our support for the EU and our place in it is consistently high, but we cannot take this for granted. History has shown how quickly things can change. I call on everyone here to do what they can to continue to promoting the benefits of EU membership and reminding people how important these are for Ireland's economy.

In general, our approach to Europe is positive. Ireland should have the confidence in 2026, as one of the few net contributors to the EU budget and as a member state since 1973, to assert itself and shape EU politics. We often claim to be a country that punches well above its weight at EU level. I am not convinced that this is backed up by hard evidence. I see other small countries operating at European level in an extremely organised way and co-ordinating very effectively with their industry representatives to push national priorities effectively and coherently across various fora. We also see other small countries being far better represented across senior roles in EU institutions than we are. They are far more effective at getting their people into the much-coveted roles in Commissioner's cabinets than we have been recently. Where is the next Catherine Day or the next David O'Sullivan?

Our position in Europe and the perception of Ireland remain positive, but recent experience suggests that we need to work hard at both. Part of this involves ensuring that the public receives factual and accurate updates on discussions at EU level and calling out misinformation and populism when we see them, regardless of who is responsible. Let us take the recent discussions on Mercosur. We have heard all sorts of claims by commentators, farm groups and elected representatives about the Mercosur deal and the impact it will have on our beef sector. Farmers are perfectly entitled to voice concern about the potential market impact of gradually lowering the tariff on 99,000 tonnes of beef, which is 1.5% of total production or a small burger per person in Europe. However, I am deeply unhappy about how this debate has continued to centre around the extremely misleading claim that we will be supposedly flooded with untested and unsafe beef that is pumped with hormones. Let us be very clear. All products entering the EU Single Market must meet the same food standards that the EU applies in respect of domestic production. This is already the case for the 200,000 tonnes of beef that the EU imports from Mercosur countries today. There are checks at entry points and certification and inspection of exporters. The trade deal does not lower these standards in any way. In fact, it provides far more checks on goods than exist currently.

The issue with Mercosur and beef is purely price and market share. The relevant stakeholders should be honest about this. Will Mercosur cause a surge in imports that will severely impact beef prices for Irish farmers? Most unlikely. Independent analysis says that it will not. If you look at CETA, the result was the exact opposite. Regardless, just last week in Strasbourg, we finalised the safeguard regulation which means that a 5% drop in the price of beef would lead to a suspension of the application of the relevant provisions in the agreement. We sometimes look at what went on a decade ago in Britain and assume that Ireland is immune from the sort of populism and misinformation we saw during the Brexit referendum campaign. This is a very dangerous assumption. To be perfectly honest, some of what I have heard from certain stakeholders on the Mercosur deal would not be out of place written on the side of a red double-decker bus driven by Nigel Farage. The consequences of Ireland becoming a Hungary or even a France at Council level when it comes to trade discussions would be dark, ironically so for a country that is as dependent on an open global trading environment as we are.

We need to pay attention to the possible reputational damage that our position on Mercosur could bring at EU level. Senators will have read the comments of EU Commissioner Cristophe Hansen, a good man, in the *Business Post* a couple of weeks ago. He considers our stance on the agreement to be incoherent, not least in light of the enthusiasm with which we welcomed the conclusion of the EU-India agreement just a few days later and the nitrates derogation before Christmas. This also reflects the feedback I have received from colleagues within the European People's Party, EPP, group within the European Parliament. That Ireland, which, historically, is perhaps the most pro-trade member of the European Union, would oppose the opportunity to enhance our trading opportunities with a market of almost 300 million people at a time when our biggest trading partner, the United States, attempts to tear down the global trading environment as we know it and put a regime of protectionist tariffs in place, is frankly baffling to them, as are China's state-subsidised exports to the European Union, which are undermining all our industries. European politics is all about alliances and being a reliable partner with like-minded member states and MEPs. I fear we have really put this to the test in recent months. We need to correct it. The Presidency gives us an opportunity to do that, hopefully we can. Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirligh - a chaptaein ó Neidín.

An Cathaoirleach: A chaptaein - that was the Kenmare B football team, the Cahill Cup and Seán was the chairman of the county board at the time. It was a lifetime ago now.

Mr. Michael McNamara: I wish to discuss with Senators a couple of files that will be particularly important to Ireland and during the Irish Presidency. The first one is the AI omnibus. The original AI Act was a genuine achievement passed in 2024, a landmark attempt to govern artificial intelligence in a way that protects fundamental rights, ensures legal certainty and supports responsible innovation. The omnibus is the Commission's proposal to amend it before it is even fully in force. This requires careful scrutiny. I should say that it is anticipated that this omnibus will be complete in the first half of this year. If there is any delay at all, however, it will fall to the Irish Presidency to conclude that omnibus, which, because it delays part of the implementation of part of the Act, which comes into force on 2 August, has to be concluded at the latest at the beginning of July.

The European Parliament has a responsibility to ensure that any amendments to the AI Act reflect the public interest as opposed to just the preferences of those with the deepest pockets and the most persistent lobbyists at their disposal. Where the Commission's proposal aligns with what industry has been seeking, that alignment requires explanation and justification. Simplification that genuinely reduces burdens on SMEs and improves legal certainty and clarity is welcome. Simplification that removes safeguards that citizens fought hard to secure is something quite different, and the Parliament must scrutinise that.

There is one addition which I, as a rapporteur on the file, am determined to secure. Senators will be aware of the controversy that erupted at the start of this year around the AI tool Grok being used to digitally undress images of women and children and share them online. This caused revulsion, and rightly so.

3 o'clock

The AI Act, as it stands, does not explicitly prohibit the non-consensual generation or manipulation of intimate images, which are known as AI nudification tools. It should be

stressed that these are not unique to Grok in any way. It is just that Grok perhaps used these as a unique selling point.

These recent controversies involving major AI platforms have demonstrated exactly how serious the harm is. It is a violation of dignity and privacy. In many cases it is a weapon used against women, particularly those who run for election. As rapporteur, I will be seeking to have the practice explicitly classified as prohibited under Article 5 of the AI Act. As Article 5 is already in place, any such ban would take immediate effect across all member states from enactment. I am encouraged that in the Parliament there is a broad spectrum of support across the political spectrum, but I urge Senators who are members of political parties affiliated with one of the larger groups that is not in support of the proposition to lobby those parties. I am talking about the EPP which, for reasons we have yet to determine, is currently not supportive of the proposition. However, it is early days in the legislative process. Crucially, the Irish Government has signalled its support and that it is supporting an initiative being led primarily by France. With Ireland holding the Presidency, that matters.

Alongside having a role in respect of the AI Act, I am shadow rapporteur on the digital omnibus, the Commission's parallel package, which has very significant implications for the GDPR and the wider architecture of European data law. The digital omnibus includes proposals that would change how pseudonymised data can be shared, how AI companies process sensitive data and the legal basis under the GDPR for using that data for training AI.

One element is the codification of the judgment of the Court of Justice of the European Union, CJEU, but there are many people, myself included, who believe that what is proposed actually goes further. These are not technical footnotes; these are fundamental questions affecting fundamental rights. The CJEU has repeatedly said that the right to privacy regarding one's data is a key right in the EU and one that becomes increasingly important as we rely more and more on smartphones and as our data can more readily be abused by nefarious actors.

Senators will be aware that Ireland's Data Protection Commission is the lead supervisory authority in Europe for many of the world's largest tech companies, precisely because so many of them have their European headquarters here. This means that this is not just of legal and moral interest to us, it is also of great economic interest. Ireland is uniquely exposed. When the GDPR is weakened or enforcement is diluted, Ireland is in the spotlight. When we hold the Presidency, we will simultaneously be chairing the negotiations that will determine the outcome. Ireland needs to be clear-eyed about the pressures that will come during the Presidency. The major tech companies headquartered in Dublin, many of which are global leaders in AI, have significant financial and political interests in the outcomes of the AI omnibus and the digital omnibus. They will engage and lobby, as is their right, but holding the Presidency demands that Ireland act as an honest broker for all 27 member states and all European citizens. It does not mean being the tech companies' preferred chair at the table. The Data Protection Commission has painstakingly and, as many would acknowledge, almost painfully built over many years a reputation as a serious, rigorous and independent regulator. Ireland's Presidency must be consistent with that reputation, not in tension with it.

Ireland has always taken its European responsibilities seriously. It is a small country but one that has embraced the opportunities that membership of the EU afforded it. When we held the Presidency before, we demonstrated size is not a barrier to effective and principled leadership. The challenges facing the Union in the second half of 2026 will be considerable.

The ongoing war on the Continent has been mentioned. There is also a fraying transatlantic relationship, to which we are particularly exposed, and the matters of negotiations on the next long-term budget, including the CAP, and a digital and AI agenda that will shape the kind of society Europe becomes. Ireland must approach all of this in the spirit that has always defined its European engagement, namely as a constructive partner, an honest broker and a country that believes in the EU.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank Mr. McNamara and call Ms Cynthia Ní Mhurchú.

Ms Cynthia Ní Mhurchú: Gabhaim buíochas ó chroí leis an gCathaoirleach, leis na Seanadóirí uilig atá i láthair um thráthnóna, agus le foireann iomlán an tSeanaid as an gcuireadh flaithiúil a thabhairt dúinn teacht os comhair an Tí. Is é seo an chéad uair domsa a bheith sa Teach seo ag labhairt os comhair na Seanadóirí. Is mór an pléisiúr agus an phribhléid dom a bheith anseo. I am delighted to be in the Senators' presence this afternoon. I thank them very much for this opportunity to speak to them.

The Seanad has a crucial role. It is critical to the legislative system. The Senators are the important súil eile, the other eye, the critical eye, that protects our citizens and enriches our democracy. Bunreacht na hÉireann in 1937 gave Senators their clear role in the legislative process, and their work ensures that citizens' concerns are articulated in our laws. This is a critical part of our democratic process. It is more critical than ever as the far right sweeps across Europe, sowing doubt and mistrust in our democratic institutions.

I have two stories for the Senators. Suíge siar. The first one is about P.J. Hickson, who is an SME retailer in Carlow. He is the kind of businessman that really breathes life into the urban and rural aspects of County Carlow. His business creates jobs, supports local teams and provides opportunities for hauliers and a raft of other businesses in small towns and villages that the Senators represent around Ireland. People like P.J. and his employees are the anchors of our communities, but today P.J. is thinking about red tape. To run his business he needs separate licences for wine, spirits, beer, tobacco, vapes, fuel, wild salmon, you name it. He needs 20, in fact. Each licence involves paperwork, inspections, costs and stress. He does not have the resources to deal with these, and that is even before he begins to deal with the HSE, Irish Water, the Workplace Relations Commission, the Health and Safety Authority and the Revenue Commissioners. Of course, these also have their forms and requirements. On top of it all, P.J. has to do the hardest thing of all, which is to make money so he can pay his staff, pay his way and serve customers.

My second story is about a Wexford farmer, John Roche. He has a medium-sized farm, of 55 ha, in south Wexford. He is well off, the neighbours say. They say he has nothing to worry about. Do you know what? He really does. He worries all the time. He grew up with eight siblings and none of them wanted to run the farm. They left him and went to college in Dublin and got good jobs. It was left up to him to transform the mixed enterprise on the farm into something viable. If he were still working the mixed enterprise farm, he would need licences for everything his parents did. Fast forward to today, what is John doing? He is milking 70 cows to make the farm viable. He has some calves – beef follow-ons. He sows grain to have a food source for the winter. He does it all on his own, leis féin. His income is way too low to pay for any help beyond his children, who are getting older. What youngster wants to be facing the challenges of farming? John is 68 and has no formal education. He inherited the farm only

at the age of 56, when his dad passed away. He is too old to do anything else and he has not had time to follow a different career path. He works all day and at night goes inside to the kitchen table and faces all the red tape, an téip dhearg. Oh my God, tá ualach ann. There are mountains of it on the table. Tá sé tuirseach agus buartha. He is really anxious over form filling and looming deadlines. He has to employ a special adviser, who gets a cut of his basic income support for sustainability, agri-climate rural environment scheme and targeted agriculture modernisation scheme payments. His income has steadily reduced bliain i ndiaidh bliana. He wants to get out of farming but nobody wants to take over the farm.

These two stories are indicative of the culture that has been allowed to build up in the EU over many decades – a culture focused on regulation and that is smothering innovation. It is a culture that has determined that the delivery of housing and large-scale infrastructure is slow and problematic. Like me, the Senators know all about that only too well. The culture is one in which SMEs, farmers, tech and manufacturing companies and other sectors of European society have been burdened by decades of excessive regulation.

One of the first documents to cross my desk when I was elected was Mario Draghi's report on European competitiveness, which the Senators will all have heard about. It delivered a stark warning: Europe is struggling to compete because of heavy regulation. Across Europe, SMEs make up 99% of all businesses. They are engines of employment, innovation and local prosperity but they are being absolutely smothered. Meanwhile, businesses in rival economies are moving, innovating and scaling faster. Europe really needs to work for its people, not the other way around. Unfortunately, our people tend to see the EU as a far-off bureaucracy that exists to create unreasonable, unmanageable and unrealistic environmental laws predominantly, but also other laws. They do not hear about the successes of the EU, including a Single Market of 450 million people in which young people can work and do business in any one of the 27 member states, although not seamlessly, it has to be said.

The EU project has transformed Ireland from a wholly agri-based economy to a high-tech, globalised, powerhouse super-economy, ranking second in the EU for GDP *per capita*, with a figure of €81,200.

It is a project that has brought peace. I would hope that a key part of Ireland's Presidency of the Council later this year involves sharing the message of the success of Europe. I would hope that Ireland's Presidency of the EU can drive the competitiveness agenda so that farmers, small businesses and large-scale companies, all of whom we represent, can be built up and we can find our mojo of competitiveness again. The stakes could not be higher. Everybody has mentioned it here before me. We must have the confidence and courage to strip away the unnecessary red tape that has accumulated for decades.

Ireland's Presidency of the Council gives us a real chance to steer because the direction of Europe is at a critical moment. Ireland is good at presidencies and as has been said, we are trusted. Our reputation and influence go far beyond our size. What I would say to Members today is beirimis bua le chéile i rith na hUachtaránachta. Let us work together. *Vive l'Europe, es lebe Europa*, ar ghaidh leis an Eoraip agus Éire go brách.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank all our MEPs for a broad range and great sample of all the challenges and opportunities that face Ireland, the EU and its citizens this year and in the years ahead.

Senator Dee Ryan: Fáilte go léir to the representatives of Ireland South. On behalf of Fianna Fáil, I thank them for their addresses. I look forward to continued engagement as the afternoon progresses. I wish to raise three issues that touch upon contributions some of the MEPs made. The first is the pressing matter of social media accounts and instant messaging platforms, particularly with regard to our young people and our children. The single biggest pressure facing parents today and their greatest worry is the moment they feel compelled to give their child a smartphone. It usually comes after confirmation in sixth class just before they move into first year of secondary school. Parents tell me they do not want to do it yet they feel intense pressure. They fear their child will be the only one without a device, the odd one out in a new school environment and subject to ridicule. At the same time, evidence of harm from social media and instant messaging platforms continues to mount. It includes relentless pure comparison, addictive design and the very real dangers of grooming and sexual abuse, particularly on platforms such as Snapchat, where disappearing messages and private channels make oversight extremely difficult. I welcome the leadership shown through the Digital Services Act and the AI Act. They demonstrate that Europe can regulate powerful technologies in the public interest. I also welcome the European Commission's investigation into Grok and Temu regarding the reported sale of childlike sex dolls but now we must go further. If big tech is today's big tobacco then banning one platform at a time for those under 16 is like tackling vaping one flavour at a time. By the time we regulate one app, three new ones will have appeared. We simply will not be able to keep pace with every new trendy platform, every update and every workaround so I want to put the question to MEPs: Are we focusing on the wrong end of the problem? Instead of chasing platforms, should we not focus on the gateway, which is the hardware itself? Just as we introduced age restrictions on alcohol and cigarettes, should we now seriously consider EU-wide age restrictions on the sale and use of smart and instant messaging-enabled devices for those under 16 in a co-ordinated European approach? In parallel, we should, of course, to continue focus on all the other necessary forms such as turning off recommender systems by default, disabling autoplay and introducing meaningful ID verification to tackle bots as we are doing ourselves here in Ireland or trying to do.

My second point concerns regional connectivity and economic competitiveness. As a Senator living in Limerick, I am highly aware of the importance of regional access to the EU marketplace through Shannon Airport and the disadvantage that lack of daily business connectivity from Shannon into the EU market hub places on businesses in the mid-west region. Cynthia Ní Mhurchú mentioned Mario Draghi's report in support of competitiveness and our SMEs across the country. Should we not legislate for or support regional connectivity at an EU level?

Senator Eileen Lynch: It is very important that the MEPs are here with us today. We often see or feel that there is a disconnect between our representatives in Europe and our representatives and people here. How do the MEPs feel we can bridge the gap not so much with our politicians but with our people because our connection and our place in Europe have never been more important than now? We are seeing a massive fragmentation of the Union and of parties within the Union but also of politics at a global level. When we have a fragmented and a weakened democracy, it weakens us economically and makes us more vulnerable to other markets. How do we address that deficit? How do we protect our democracy and the rule of law because this is something that the Union stands for and it is

something we definitely are not doing enough for at the moment? As democracy and values are very important and will probably play a large role in our Presidency, how do we deal with that?

Second, I would like to speak about the multi-annual financial framework, MFF. During our last EU Council Presidency, we worked to deliver the final MFF and I would be optimistic that that would happen during our Council Presidency this year. In particular, I would like to speak about CAP reform, which has already been touched on by several of the MEPs. Obviously, it is incredibly disappointing that we have seen a decrease in our CAP budget and a change in the way in which CAP functions. We have seen the removal of the two-pillar system. Do the MEPs believe there is any scope for this to change? When we look at the national and regional partnership plan, NRPP, and CAP coming from within that, all of our local development companies and groups that receive LEADER funding are very concerned. Will groups be fighting for this funding for Ireland? Our NRPP budget at the moment is somewhere in the region of €12 billion with €8 billion allocated to agriculture and €4 billion allocated to the remaining supports. Is there scope there? I think Billy Kelleher mentioned that. The only way that I see, and it has been commented on by Commissioner Serafin, to increase our budget is if we have a larger input from member states and if they desire to do that because it is disappointing to see such a decrease in our CAP budget, in particular for our young farmers. We are not talking enough about generational renewal. We talk about security and defence and we have a massively increased security and defence budget but what about our food security and encouraging our young farmers? I appreciate it is within CAP and that our own Government has published a report on it but what are we going to do on a practical level to ensure food security and to ensure generational renewal within our agricultural sector?

There is a lot of talk at the moment about the savings and investment union. How do we deepen the Single Market and how do we improve regulatory simplification and take burdens off businesses to allow them to flourish?

Senator Sharon Keogan: I thank the MEPs for coming in here this afternoon. Time is short so I will jump right in. Regarding the EU-India trade and mobility negotiations, Ireland's Indian population rose from 59,600 to 70,000 in a single year and is on track to become the largest foreign national group in the State. As this is happening while governments claim migration is being tightened, I ask our MEPs, particularly Mr. Kelly and Mr. Kelleher because they sit on the industry, research and energy and the economic and monetary affairs committees, whether any of them raised concerns about the demographic impact on our infrastructure and social services of these mobility concessions in the EU-India deal? Do they support labour mobility being written into trade packages, "Yes" or "No", because they cannot tell the Irish people migration is being restricted while supporting expanded inflows in Brussels?

My second point concerns the recent resolution to respectively enshrine abortion as an EU fundamental right and to emphasise the full recognition of trans women as women. Regarding the former, Irish voters were repeatedly assured in the referenda on the Lisbon and Nice treaties and previous referenda that abortion would remain a national competence yet the proposed initial initiative would embed abortion access within EU-level rights architecture, so I ask the MEPs whether they accept that this contradicts what Irish voters were told? Regarding the recognition of trans women as women, can the MEPs explain what legal assessments have been carried out on the implications relating to member states whose equality, healthcare, sports,

education and other frameworks rely on sex-based categories? Do they accept that enforcing recognition at EU level may breach the principle of subsidiarity by overriding national competence on how sex and gender are defined in law?

You cannot promise one thing during referendums and deliver the opposite when in Brussels.

On the Digital Services Act, Ireland hosts the European head quarters of all major platforms now under the Commission's oversight. Across Europe, we have seen political content branded as systemic risk or disinformation. We have seen elections cancelled. I spoke about this issue last week. This is something that has been called electoral interference by the US House Judiciary Committee. What safeguards exist to make sure lawful Irish political dissent, including criticism of migration policy and other uncomfortable issues, is not algorithmically suppressed under DSA compliance pressure? Did our MEPs assess the sovereignty implications of shifting tech supervision from Dublin to Brussels?

Senator Tom Clonan: I want to ask a question. I did not want to interrupt Senator Keogan. Is it within the Standing Orders of this House to identify one nationality or ethnic group for hostile scrutiny?

An Cathaoirleach: Senator, please.

Senator Tom Clonan: Because that community has been subjected to harassment and assault-----

Senators: Hear, hear.

Senator Tom Clonan: I have Indian personal assistants-----

An Cathaoirleach: Senator.

Senator Tom Clonan: -----beautiful young men working with my son who are afraid to go north of the Liffey - and I am from north of the Liffey – for fear of assault or intimidation. I think as public representatives-----

An Cathaoirleach: Senator.

Senator Tom Clonan: -----we have to be very responsible in the language that we use.

Senators: Hear, hear.

An Cathaoirleach: Senators know the Standing Orders in relation to contributions in this House. They are well aware of them and use them themselves. I ask the Senator - people have a privilege in this House and must use that privilege carefully. The Senator is aware of the Standing Order.

Anois, an Seanadóir Murphy.

Senator Conor Murphy: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Cathaoirleach. I offer some sympathy by the points made by my colleague behind me, Senator Clonan.

Cuirim fáilte roimh na finnéithe go dtí an Seanad inniu. So many issues have been raised by all five of them it would be impossible in the less than three minutes I have left to address them.

I want to focus on one issue in particular, namely, the opportunity that arises to us in the latter end of this year in terms of the EU Presidency. Europe is going through a phase of some of the most significant challenges since the original six members got together to create European institutions. The context in which we will inherit the Presidency is one of increasing conflict and uncertainty. There is conflict in Europe in Ukraine, in the Middle East in Gaza and the actions of the Israeli state there and threatened conflict across the globe including actions in Latin America and other areas. It is also in the context of the international rules order being set aside and international organisations that we look to support peace and democracy are being pushed to one side. With that is the rise of a far-right ideology. The question is what is Ireland's story for the six-month Presidency? What will be our contribution to try to bring some sanity to all that insanity not only to the EU but to the world as well? That is clearly through the peace we have established and developed in Ireland under the Good Friday Agreement on principles of dialogue, democracy, equality, protection of human rights, cultural rights and other rights, particularly for minority populations. There is an opportunity, which I suggested to the Minister of State with responsibility for the EU at our meeting yesterday, to host an international parliamentary conference over the course of the Presidency in relation to the peace process in Ireland, how it was developed, the principles which underpinned it and what its lessons are for the world in the current context.

The EU was heavily involved in that right through from its contribution to peace. It did so financially, through its support for the institutions of the peace process and through our Brexit process, which threatened the hard-won peace in Ireland. It moved very clearly with the Government in this State to ensure that the British Government's reckless approach to Brexit was curbed to protect the peace process in Ireland and by the provision it put that in the event of reunification, which is a growing conversation here, Ireland as a full state would automatically secure EU rights. There is an opportunity here. I would like to hear from our guests their support for the idea of an international parliamentary conference in Ireland over the course of the EU Presidency to address those issues with international focus not just from Europe but across the world on Ireland. What is the message of Ireland to the world at this time of great uncertainty and conflict? We have a homegrown story to tell people in support of that.

Senator Laura Harmon: Cuirim fáilte roimh na feisirí Eorpacha go dtí an Seanad inniu. Gan dabht tá tionchar mór ag polaitíocht na hEorpa ar Éirinn. Gabhaim buíochas leo as an obair atá á dhéanamh acu.

It was really interesting listening to the contributions. There were a lot of themes. They included neutrality not equalling ambivalence and the importance of sovereignty for member states in the EU. There have been many attempts to undermine that sovereignty, the EU project and the principles on which the EU project was founded of democracy, equality, rule of law, promoting peace and stability. The reasons there are actors out there trying to undermine the

EU is because we know the EU project works and has huge potential to be even stronger. That is really important.

It is also important that we have specific MEPs for the regions too because there are so many regions within Ireland. Ireland South is unique in itself. Being from Cork myself, it is great to see our Cork MEP here today.

The Labour Party is very proud of our MEP, Aodhán Ó Ríordáin, who is in the Socialist and Democrats group in the EU. He has been championing a number of issues in relation to housing, child poverty, technology and AI, as well as climate and the challenges we face in relation to that.

I wish that the European Parliament had taken a stronger stance overall in relation to Palestine and had called the genocide out earlier. That will be something that stands out in history. We still have an opportunity to act in relation to that. I know many of the MEPs here have been vocal on it.

Education is an example of where the European Parliament has really excelled in terms of the Erasmus programmes and collaboration between universities.

I have a question on the area of disability. There are 87 million disabled people in the EU. Only half are in employment which is less than the average. Ireland is a laggard in that we are 20% behind the EU average in employment for disabled people. Do the MEPs have a view on that?

There have been very mixed views from the European Union on the topic of migration. Ireland has benefited hugely from migration. There are people here bringing their skills and culture, enriching our society and propping up our health service in many instances. That is something to be celebrated and the EU needs to be stronger in promoting that message.

A Senator: Hear, hear.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I welcome all the MEPs. I will begin by supporting Senator Murphy's point on the theme of peace. The theme of peace and active neutrality should be something that is central to Ireland's Presidency. We have had huge benefit in knowledge and learning on what actual peace building looks like. It is not simply about military security but things like Resolution 1325 on the role of women, recognising social cohesion funding, which is sadly being cut in the European Union in order to redirect it for military purposes. Things like social cohesion and Resolution 1325 are part of what peace building is. Neutrality is not ambivalent; I do not think anyone suggests it would be. Active neutrality means you are applying the same principles to all; that your actions are not based on interest but on values and that international law applies to all. I would urge that another theme, where Ireland could really contribute, could be on international law and a recommitment to that being part of the Irish Presidency. Sadly, whether areas like protecting the International Criminal Court or ensuring that international law is properly reflected in relation to Palestine when it is not in terms of the ICJ, the EU loses really important credibility. Ireland could strengthen that and drive a recommitment to international law, as well as international engagement in areas such as international aid because that is part of Ireland's proud legacy.

I was one of four parliamentarians who were part of the Future of Europe project. I am very sad when I look at it now. There has been a losing of the way from what was there in that Future of Europe process. What I heard from citizens, not just from Ireland but 800 citizens right across Europe, was what they valued about Europe were things like its standards. It raised the bar on equality, on the environment, on digital regulation, crucially, and on employment standards. It raised the bar constantly. That is what they valued. They also valued the diversity of Europe, fundamental human rights and Europe's record in protecting those across all genders and races. Yet, those aspects are what are being undercut right now.

I would like some of the MEPs who are on the finance committees to talk about how moneys are being redirected, sadly, away from the things that are valued, such as social cohesion and the LIFE programme, and being pushed into €800 billion in military weapons. Hungary has been mentioned a lot. There have been loans of €16 billion for Hungary to buy armaments, which may or may not include cluster munitions. We have not had assurances on that. I am very concerned about that direction of focus within the EU budgetary process, the simplification narrative and the removal of standards through omnibus legislation, which is moving fast and undercutting a lot of what all of us are proud of in Europe. I am worried that we may not be minding the past or properly minding the future.

An Cathaoirleach: I ask the Members of the European Parliament to respond - they have three minutes apiece - to the questions asked. If Members feel they did not get an answer to their question, we will bring them back in later. I want the engagement. After the MEPs respond, we will have one-minute questions from the remaining Senators. We will have that over-and-back exchange, which will benefit everybody in teasing out the answers.

Ms Kathleen Funchion: I thank the Chair. I thank everyone for the questions. I will try to go really fast because three minutes to answer all those is quite challenging.

I agree with the comments about Shannon Airport. Part of the reason I was so anxious to run for Europe was that my region of the south east gets left behind a lot. That is the same for lots of areas of Ireland South. We need to see balanced regional development, which we try to bring to the REGI committee I referenced. It makes so much sense from so many different points of view. I would love to get into more of a discussion but I am trying to cover a number of points.

On social media in relation to young people, I have two teenagers and the area of children's rights has always been of big interest to me. I feel very torn on it. I do not want to see a situation where social media companies are let off the hook. I am not sure an all-out ban is the answer, if you are just exposed to everything at the age of 16. There need to be really good discussions with the Children's Rights Alliance, CyberSafeKids and different organisations like that because algorithms and the recommender systems need to be challenged. It is something that should have a good consultation before any decisions are made in relation to it.

I wanted to mention CAP and the fishing industry in my first contribution but I ran out of time. I am really concerned at the moment. Probably most of us share the view that we should be challenging to ensure that CAP is maintained and increased if possible. On the different pillars, LEADER funding comes from Pillar 2, for example. If that is eroded, what would that potentially mean for LEADER? A lot of people do not understand that and do not know that.

The LEADER programme is doing unbelievable work right throughout rural Ireland. We need to keep highlighting and talking about those things.

I totally agree with the comments from Senator Conor Murphy about the conference. I am 100% supportive of that. I often say that we need to look more to the expertise we have in relation to the Good Friday Agreement from all sides and push on that.

I agree with the comments that Europe has not been strong enough on Palestine. We need to do an awful lot more. I am really worried about the direction we are going in terms of militarisation, for example, with cohesion funds. The WorkAbility programme helps people with an additional need or disability to potentially access employment. Programmes like that could potentially suffer. That is why it is important, if people are arguing for money and more funds towards the military, that they say where they think that should come from. Is it coming from CAP? Is it coming from the cohesion policy, for example?

I agree with Senator Clonan's comments. Immigration has had a huge positive impact in this country. Any of our hospitals or our hospitality sector would collapse without people. As a nation, we have gone all over the world and know what it is like to be treated as second-class citizens. At this worrying and difficult time, it is important that we stand up and are really strong against anything that is in any way negative in relation to that. Maybe I can come back in on some of the other points.

An Cathaoirleach: Absolutely.

Mr. Billy Kelleher: I thank the Senators for their questions and observations.

On social media platforms and the very large online platforms, we have the Digital Services Act, the Digital Markets Act and the AI Act. There is no doubt there is now a mood across Europe and probably across the western world, as we traditionally called it, on the impact that social media is having on children and young adults. Australia and France have made a decision and a number of other countries are making decisions on this. The mood here in Ireland is very much towards that as well. We have heard this debate in the European Parliament from what I will call people on the right of the right, because they do not like being called far right, but the situation here is that we are not suppressing free speech. The idea is to make sure that platforms are open and transparent in their algorithmic settings, for example, and if we are passing legislation, an age verification process is in place so that a child who is on it is not a child of 12, 13 or 14, but at an age decided by legislators, either at a national level or as an EU competency. It is that we would have age verification.

As a parent and politician, and looking back over my time as a parent and phones in my children's lives, the idea that we would farm out what my children can watch, what they read and how they even think to Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg, or any other Zuckerbergs or Elon Musks, is fundamentally wrong. We have to have some benchmark for what misinformation, disinformation, fact, fiction, injurious and causing harm are and ultimately, sometimes, what causes death. This House passed legislation, Coco's Law, which was a direct consequence of the bullying of a young girl on social media. We have to be conscious that it is causing harm. It is to get the balance right.

I will come to the issue of the multi-annual financial framework raised by Senator Lynch. The difficulty here is we are trying to pretend that the budget will add up. It is not going to add up. We are pretending that we will be able to address cohesion funding, the Common Agricultural Policy, the fisheries policy, Horizon 2020, Erasmus and all the other programmes that we funded previously. At the same time, no country is saying whether it will contribute more or allow the European Union to raise its own resources either through a digital services tax, a financial transaction tax or some other form of revenue-raising measure. At the moment, we propose a corporation tax for very large multinationals. We are saying it will bring in €65 billion. Any assessment will suggest it will bring in an awful lot less than half of that. We are trying to build budgets on fictitious means.

I only got through my first page, but with regard to Senator Keogan and the issue of abortion being enshrined in EU law, all I can say is that I sat as a Member of these Houses on an eighth amendment committee. I sat on many committees over my life in the Oireachtas. We had a referendum on 25 May 2018. The Irish people were emphatic in what they said. It is now lawful and legal to provide abortion services in Ireland. Equally, other countries have the opportunity to decide for themselves. It is still a member competency but, at the same time, the EU has an entitlement to express a view around the fact that it should be in the Charter of Fundamental Rights.

Mr. Seán Kelly: I thank the Senators for their questions and comments. Some of them have been answered by Ms Funchion and Mr. Kelleher already.

Cyberbullying is another big issue in relation to the whole social media area. I have been involved in addressing that for 15 years now or more. Thankfully, my group wants to make cyber-bullying a crime. That has to happen. The other issue which would help to curtail what is going on with social media is dealing with the whole question of anonymous accounts. That really has to be dealt with. Senators themselves, and all of us, are being abused every single day on social media by people who we probably do not know.

It could be the same person. That has to stop. The power of the platforms has to be curtailed. There is movement in that direction in order to make them more responsible and accountable. That is a good thing. Senator Lynch mentioned communication of Europe. A lot more could be done but it is not as bad as people say. It would help if we had more Erasmus students and visitor groups going to Europe, learning what is going on there as opposed to what they hear. At the same time, where Ireland is concerned, we have the highest percentage of people who are pro-Europe in the European Union. Things are perhaps not as bad as they say. Local radio and local newspapers often do far more than the national ones. Mr. Kelleher mentioned the vote last week. That is not a legislative file; it is an own initiative report. It came from FEMM. It is to advise the Council ahead of the 70th session of the Commission on the Status of Women. That was no real controversy. I think every Irish MEP voted in favour of it. It was carried by 340 to 131. It is not legislative, however. One has to make a distinction between legislative and something only trying to make a point on behalf of a committee or whatever. I agree completely with the interparliamentary conference. It would be a very good idea. I was first vice-chair of the EU-UK Parliamentary Partnership Assembly between the European Parliament, the House of Commons and the House of Lords. We have made a lot of progress. Things are back on track in many respects in terms of the European Union and United Kingdom. As for anything else we can do to bring that about and particularly to promote peace

- peace is always fragile - there is a lot to be done in that regard and I would back that conference 100%.

In relation to CAP funding, Mr. Kelleher gave the honest answer - there are too many people looking for money without knowing where the money is going to come from. The war in Ukraine, energy costs, Trump's tariffs, undercutting by China and the need to develop a grid to carry energy - all these things have to be done. To suggest there is more money there, I will tell you what will be said. They will be asked why did they not vote for Mercosur. It would be worth €50 billion a year to the European Union and that might help us get some funding. People have to be honest. If governments are not prepared to put more in, they cannot expect to get more out.

Mr. Michael McNamara: On the issue of air transport, as a former TD for Clare and somebody who makes their way from Clare to Brussels, I lament the concentration of all air navigation in Dublin at the moment. The removal of the cap will be a further step in that process. All Senators and TDs, including those from the mid-west, will get to vote on that in the very near future, it seems. Even if it goes through, it will offer opportunities for other airports because the infrastructure simply is not there for Dublin to expand in the way some airline companies would like to see it expand for their own profit. It is not about the good of Ireland; it is about their profit and their profit-making ventures; they are entitled to pursue profit at the exclusion of everything else.

I share the Senator's concerns about digital bullying. I think it is something most people have a concern for. A ban at EU level for under-16s would be very much against the direction of travel of this Commission. One could argue Donald Trump has had more success in implementing his agenda with regard to big tech in the Berlaymont than he has on Capitol Hill. He has tried to get a moratorium on state legislation through and has failed. Nobody really knows what was agreed with von der Leyen but the direction of travel is certainly not towards banning them.

On generational renewal, I have had the opportunity to meet the current agriculture Commissioner several times. I even got to go to a mart with him once. While I think he has a profound commitment to generational renewal, some of the measures he is proposing would not find favour in Ireland around making sure European payments are to a new generation.

On the India trade agreement, it is not possible to address migration from India to Ireland without resolutely condemning the orchestrated attacks on the Indian community here last summer. It is not possible to visit an Irish hospital without being struck by how reliant we are on Indian nurses. Much as we lament that we train medics in Ireland who then go abroad, imagine how they feel in Kerala, a much poorer area, that essentially is training the medics who prop up our health system because we seem to fail to do so.

On the DSA, I accept there is a risk but the real issue is not what some idiot chooses to say on social media; it is that it is amplified. The central part of the DSA which is important is algorithmic transparency.

As somebody who listened very carefully to the debate on repealing the eighth amendment, I voted to repeal it and I would do so again tomorrow morning. That said, one can hold that view and still lament the rise in the abortion level in Ireland. We need to address the societal

reasons people feel they cannot have children and why we have this huge demographic decline in Europe. It cannot be addressed through constitutions or criminal laws. It is something society must face up to. Those who argued to repeal the eighth amendment said the Constitution was no place for provisions on abortion, *Roe vs. Wade* and all of that. I share their view with regard to putting it into what is a quasi-constitutional Charter of Fundamental Rights. It is not something I would support. Likewise on trans rights, there was a judgment of the Supreme Court in the UK with which I largely agree; in particular the part that these are vulnerable people who deserve to be treated with integrity, respect and dignity. It is lamentable the extent to which they can become the subject of a political football. I fundamentally support the nub of that judgment and the resolution last week Mr. Kelly referred to. That particular provision is not something I could vote for. I support the proposals of Senators Murphy and Higgins around a peace conference and for Ireland to set out its position and the case for neutrality in the world because every war is brought to an end ultimately by negotiation and discussion. There have to be players left who are not militarily aligned who can bring about that discussion. That is with the exception of the Second World War where there was an unconditional surrender, which is very unusual in history.

Mr. Billy Kelleher: It was a fairly big war.

Mr. Michael McNamara: I just hope there will not have to be an unconditional surrender in the case of Ukraine.

Ms Cynthia Ní Mhurchú: I will start off with peace and neutrality. It would be a huge opportunity and I would love to work with the Senators on that. It is something I have been reaching out to parties and groups in Europe about. It has to include everybody from the Skainos Centre on Newtownards Road, where I was recently, or Cultúrlann McAdam Ó Fiaich ar Bhóthar na bhFál. Northern Ireland cannot be left out. Ms Funchion and I meet frequently to help out the Northern Ireland Executive, which has an office in Brussels. It is really important to include them in the Presidency. I thank the Senators for raising and apologies that none of us mentioned it. We had limited time.

I thank Senator Dee Ryan. The reason I went on the transport committee was because of regional airports, predominantly a little regional airport that did not have any flights going in and out of it, namely, Waterford, but there is also Shannon, Cork and Kerry. I have a campaign at the moment, Keep Europe Flying, because we know about rising costs. Regional connectivity is vital. It is such an economic driver but also a driver for tourism. In relation to social media, based on my reading and the research of the anti-bullying centre in DCU - a spokesperson was on the "News at One" this afternoon. The Senator may have heard him. Professor TJ McIntyre spoke on "Morning Ireland" this morning - the Senator might have heard him as well. Bans are not working. While the bans the Government is considering are worth considering, they are not backed by any of the data or resources. We need the evidence to show we would not be enacting something that is futile. We do not want to be busy fools enacting laws that cannot be policed or regulated. We need to see laws that actually work. At the minute, all those bans are not working. It also does a disservice to young people who have asked not for bans, according to the research in the anti-bullying Centre in DCU.

I thank Senator Lynch very much. She had lots of questions there. I will pick out the issue of the fragmentation and weakening our democracy. One of the best ways for us to strengthen our democracy is to invest in our trusted media. I am working on the European democracy shield. It is a temporary committee set up under Commissioner McGrath, which is looking at independent and local media and all of that. It is like the housing committee, in that it is temporary, but we are hoping it will see out the lifetime of this mandate. It is important to protect our democracy.

I cannot touch on the savings and investment union. I apologise but we do not have time.

I thank Senator Keogan very much for her points. I reiterate what Seán Kelly said. This was not exactly a vote in relation to anything to do with gender recognition or anything like that. It was about women's rights and the UN Council that is happening. It was to send a delegation to that. It is hijacked constantly by the far right, which is something that troubles me. I agree with Michael McNamara in relation to trans people being used as political footballs in these kinds of debates. That is to be regretted because they are vulnerable people. As Seán Kelly said, we were endorsing what we voted for in relation to abortion. We also were endorsing the legislation that we have, the Gender Recognition Act 2015, under which people over the age of 18 can make an application to identify.

I apologise that I am running out of time. I thank Senator Harmon very much for her comments. Employment for the disabled and those who are less able is very important. I thank her for her comments on immigration. We need to serve our citizens better, a chairde. We need to talk about the real story about immigration and not let it be dominated by the far right. I know that is very difficult. I am delving into that myself. Obviously, people are targeted once they do start speaking out.

I hope I mentioned everyone who spoke because I do not want to leave anybody out.

An Cathaoirleach: In this section, I ask Members to indicate whether a particular question is directed at a particular MEP or for all the MEPs. I ask the MEPs to take notes and make sure they try to respond to the Senators' questions. I appreciate Senators coming to the House and the MEPs taking the time to answer the questions. Members will have one minute each for the questions. We will get a group of questions together and then let the MEPs respond. If Senators feel they want further engagement, please ask because that is what this is about.

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: A number of weeks ago, a resolution was before the European Parliament condemning the slaughter of 30,000 people by the Iranian authorities, the use of execution as a tool of oppression of the people of Iran and the treatment of women, and supporting the Women, Life, Freedom campaign. In recent weeks, 30,000 people have been slaughtered by the Iranian regime in an attempt to suppress an uprising. People are being executed in hospital beds. They are being shot in the head, yet two Sinn Féin MEPs abstained on this resolution.

Women in prison are asking families to send them in contraceptive pills because they are being raped so frequently in prison. This is how evil this Iranian regime is. Sinn Féin cannot bring itself to condemn this evil regime. If a young woman is being executed, and many young women and men are being executed, the night before the execution she has to be raped by

prison wardens because if she dies a virgin she will go to heaven, and they cannot allow this. This is the reality of what is happening in Iran. This is the evil regime that Sinn Féin cannot condemn. I am watching what it is doing. The people of Ireland are watching what it is doing. Sinn Féin thinks it can get away with its actions in the European Parliament and nobody will notice. Why did Kathleen Funchion, MEP, abstain on this vote? I want an explanation as to why this-----

An Cathaoirleach: I ask Senators to stick to one minute. The next speaker is Senator Cathal Byrne.

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: I did not get to the end of my contribution. I wanted to pose a question on a very important topic. A lot of other Members ran over their time.

An Cathaoirleach: The Order, as agreed by the House, is that there will be one minute per question. That is what was put forward at the Committee on Parliamentary Privileges and Oversight.

Senator Cathal Byrne: In 2017, then Taoiseach Enda Kenny, together with others, secured a commitment from the EU that if Ireland were to be reunified, the North of Ireland would be automatically subsumed into the EU. The estimated cost at the moment is in the region of approximately €20 billion per annum. As a republican and someone who wants to see a referendum on the unification of Ireland, but also a referendum that passes, there is an important role for the EU in this. My question is for all the MEPs. In the next round of budgets, will they keep on the agenda the issue of monetary support for the costs of the ultimate reunification of this country?

Senator Joe Conway: In Europe, about 125 million of our citizens are aged 60 or over. I am sometimes distressed to see that we have Directive 98/58/EC, which governs the welfare of cattle in the EU. Would the Cathaoirleach care to guess how many directives we have governing the welfare of our older citizens? Zero. If we look at the letter of appointment from President von der Leyen to Commissioner Micallef who has responsibility for these matters, it shows his tabulated responsibilities are intergenerational awareness, culture, sport and youth. However, there is no mention of older citizens. I have a question for our Ireland South MEPs. I address it in particular to mo chara Seán Ó Ceallaigh mar tá sé ar chomhaois liomsa agus an duine is sine ar an mbinse sin. Tá fáilte roimhe freagra a thabhairt dom.

Senator Joanne Collins: I will direct my questions to Séan Kelly, MEP. Why did he vote against referring the EU Mercosur trade agreement to the European Court of Justice? I know he spoke about that in his opening remarks and a couple of times thereafter. Was there a whip in place for that vote? I ask this in light of the recent block-in of the Hague fisheries safeguards by a group of the larger member states, an outcome which is expected to probably cost Ireland up to €200 million. There are real concerns that the safeguards can be weakened in practice. How can Irish farmers have confidence that the safeguards that are put in place as regards the Mercosur trade agreement will be legally robust and cannot simply be undermined or vetoed?

Senator Malcolm Noonan: Cuirim fáilte roimh Bhaill Pharlaimint na hEorpa. I welcome the MEPs. I have a question to all the MEPs on the multi-annual financial framework and the dedicated funding. I welcome the engagement we had on the nature restoration regulation and, in particular, the bravery shown by Irish MEPs in getting that regulation across the line. We now need to go the distance and move to fully fund nature restoration in Ireland. We will be developing a plan that will be brought forward in September in Ireland. We need support for that. We need financial support. I met with the Irish Natura and Hill Farmers Association last week in Sligo. It wants funding. There is deep concern around the funding of that, but also around LIFE projects, European Innovation Partnerships, EIPs, the funding of which is to be subsumed into the competitiveness fund. It is very important from the MEPs' point of views that they argue and fight for a dedicated stream of funding for nature restoration and to ensure that the LIFE and EIP projects are maintained as stand-alone funding measures.

Senator Pat Casey: I will be as brief as I can. Billy Kelleher always tells it as it is. We all want more, but we are not willing to identify how we are going to pay for it. I look forward to him making a presentation at the next parliamentary party meeting looking for more money off us to balance the budget. I cannot agree more with Séan Kelly. We are losing sight of the bigger picture. We are focusing on specific individual issues and losing sight of the common good and a lot of stuff that is happening at the moment, not just in relation to Mercosur but with other things.

My point to Cynthia Ní Mhurchú rolls into the committee the Cathaoirleach set up on EU scrutiny and the transposition of EU legislation into Irish law.

4 o'clock

It is frightening to say that we will probably introduce 50 pieces of Irish legislation this year but we will transpose 200 pieces of European legislation into Irish law with no oversight. Legislation that starts in Europe probably doubles the amount of red tape for us. Certain European legislation is delaying critical infrastructure in Ireland. How do we interact more closely with MEPs to head this off before it becomes a single piece of European legislation and is transposed into Irish law?

Senator Garret Kelleher: Chomh maith le gach éinne eile, cuirim fáilte roimh feisirí Pharlaimint na hEorpa. Tá sé an-tábhachtach iad a fheiscint istigh sa Teach seo. Ba mhaith liom ceist a chur mar gheall ar mhéadú an Aontais. I ask for an update on the current status of the applications to join the European Union by ten accession countries, in particular, the applications of Montenegro and Ukraine. Is it envisaged that progress will be made during the term of Ireland's Presidency in the latter half of this year?

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: First and foremost, I congratulate all the MEPs who were returned to the European Parliament. I know I am a bit late in doing so. I am very proud of them.

I have a defence question for Billy Kelleher, MEP. Ireland has hidden behind neutrality, although we are not neutral. We are militarily non-aligned but we do not qualify as neutral under international law. We have hidden behind neutrality to stop investment in defence. We are about to take over the Presidency of the European Union and we are not equipped to provide

the required security to look after Heads of State, ministers from other governments, etc. The Taoiseach has referred to people like me as creating negative noise around defence. Do the MEPs think it is negative noise when we are about to be embarrassed internationally by virtue of the fact that we cannot provide our own defence for such a prestigious role as the Presidency of the EU? After all, the MEPs must live with their European Parliament colleagues in Europe, who I have no doubt are talking about this.

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome to the Distinguished Visitors Gallery a Member of the House of Commons, Sorchá Eastwood from the Alliance Party, who represents Lagan Valley, and her mother, who is no doubt proud. They are most welcome to Seanad Éireann. Ms Eastwood is here to meet a Minister.

Senator Chris Andrews: Seven Irish MEPs, including three of the MEPs present, supported Ursula von der Leyen and rejected a motion of no confidence in her in July. Why did they support Ursula von der Leyen despite her support for and facilitation of genocide in Gaza? In many ways, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael MEPs think and hope that no one will notice that they supported a genocide enabler, Ursula von der Leyen, but we see them and we hear them talking about it.

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: What about Iran?

Senator Chris Andrews: I did not interrupt Senator Clifford-Lee. I ask her to show respect, please.

We hear these MEPs talk about the horrors in Gaza - the genocide - but we do not see them doing anything about it. We see them supporting Ursula von der Leyen who has supported Israel to the hilt. That is not acceptable. MEPs should not do that. The Government talks about the occupied territories Bill but it will not pass it. It is blocking the Bill. The least the MEPs can do is be clear. If they support Israel, they should say they support Israel. They should not talk out of both sides of their mouths.

Senator Patricia Stephenson: Reference has been made to the Draghi report, which has been used in the EU and by Ursula von der Leyen to set a deregulation agenda. I was deeply concerned about the vote on the omnibus I package last year on the corporate sustainability due diligence directive, which saw members of the European People's Party, EPP, for the first time in the history of the European Parliament, vote with the far right. The forthcoming digital omnibus will again strip away fundamental digital protection rights. The omnibus I package stripped away fundamental human rights and environmental standards, no longer making it mandatory for companies to implement their environmental plans. All of that is hugely concerning. We often hear the term "simplification", which is being used increasingly as a synonym for deregulation. Where do the MEPs stand on this issue? What does this mean for the future of the EU around deregulation? We hear the word "competitiveness", but we can compete while also setting high standards for the rest of the world when it comes to human rights, digital protections and the environment.

Senator Mike Kennelly: I offer a warm welcome to all our MEP colleagues. As a proud Kerryman, I hope the House will allow me to direct my question on LNG and Ireland's energy security to Seán Kelly, MEP. As a full member of the European Parliament Committee on Industry, Research and Energy, ITRE, he has been closely involved in Europe's evolving energy strategy. How does he view the role of LNG as a secondary or back-up energy source for Ireland, particularly in terms of energy security, more so now than ever, and its diversification and resilience during the transition to renewables?

Senator Tom Clonan: The MEPs are very welcome. I know the sacrifice they make in terms of lost time with their families when it comes to operating in Strasbourg and Brussels. I thank them for their public service. We are well represented in Europe, notwithstanding the differences we might have.

On disability rights, in advance of our Presidency, Ireland is in an outlier in the European Union. We do not have legal rights to services, supports or therapies for disabled citizens. We are the only country in the EU without that. We are in breach of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. We are in breach of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU. Ireland is in breach of principle 17 of the European Pillar of Social Rights, specifically as it applies to dignity, services and participation. We are in breach of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

The HSE, in a letter it sent to an elderly woman trying to look after her adult child with Down's syndrome, told her that she is legally responsible to "indefinitely" accommodate and care for her child until she dies. That applies in the case of children aged up to 18 years, students aged up to 23 years and disabled citizens until the parent dies. This flies in the face of the people. Can the MEPs get me in front of the disability platform in advance of Ireland talking over the Presidency? Can they get me in front of the European Disability Forum, EDF? Can they facilitate me to address the mechanism for reporting on the EU's disability strategy for the period 2021-2030?

Do the MEPs think it is okay to talk about pay inequality in a country? I think it is okay to talk about workforce planning and legal or illegal immigration because they are legitimate concerns. When one nationality or ethnic group is identified in a pejorative fashion, that group is subjected to hostile scrutiny. That is hate speech. Do the MEPs agree?

Senator Sharon Keogan: It is called the EU-India trade deal.

Senator Tom Clonan: It is called hate speech.

Senator Sharon Keogan: It is called the EU-India trade deal.

Senator Tom Clonan: The Senator did not listen to what I said.

An Cathaoirleach: Ciúnas, más é do thoil é.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: I thank the MEPs for attending. On the Mercosur agreement, why is there such a push to bring in Brazilian beef that has no traceability and contains growth

hormones which are banned within the EU? Have the MEPs not a duty of care to European consumers? Is not that why we have these very protections in Europe? I advise Seán Kelly to read the report by the *Irish Farmers' Journal* after he has read the *Sunday Independent*.

Last week, Sinn Féin, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil all voted to recognise trans women as women. That was a complete betrayal of every biological woman and the rights we have long fought for. We deserve to have our rights to single-sex spaces and sports protected. Do the MEPs think that a female victim of domestic abuse should have to share a refuge with a biological man?

Our fishermen need the MEPs to work on their behalf. Their culture and industry have been taken from them and Europe has simply sat back and allowed third countries to devastate the Irish fishing industry. Why?

An Cathaoirleach: I ask the MEPs to respond in the same order again, after which we will hear from the Leas-Chathaoirleach and Acting Leader.

Ms Kathleen Funchion: On the issue of Iran, we abstained from the vote because of other details in the resolution. To explain, resolutions that come before the Parliament contain a huge amount of information.

Obviously, we totally condemn this situation and everything that the Senator has laid out in relation to rapes and people trying to access contraception. However, sometimes there is other detail in a resolution and it is really important that the EU plays a really strong role in the peace-building, in trying to bring stability and not make the situation worse.

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: On a point of order, will Ms Funchion outline what other details was-----

Ms Kathleen Funchion: I am in the middle of speaking.

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: I am not aware of any other details so perhaps Ms Funchion would outline the rest of the detail of the resolution.

Ms Kathleen Funchion: Maybe if I am allowed to finish my contribution.

An Cathaoirleach: Ms Funchion, please, without interruption.

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: There is a lot of detail-----

Ms Kathleen Funchion: There is a lot of things to get through in six minutes.

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: Ms Funchion did not answer the question. I want to know what detail was objected to.

Ms Kathleen Funchion: I am moving on to the referendum on Irish-----

(Interruptions)

Ms Kathleen Funchion: Sorry, I am not going to have this situation.

An Cathaoirleach: Out of respect for our guests, I ask that Ms Funchion be allowed to continue without interruption.

Ms Kathleen Funchion: I am not here to have a back and forth with Senator Clifford-Lee.

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: I expect my question to be answered.

Ms Kathleen Funchion: I answered the Senator's question. I was in the middle of answering it and she was cutting me off.

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: I want to know what detail Ms Funchion-----

Ms Kathleen Funchion: I have three minutes to answer everyone's questions.

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: I want to know what detail she objects to.

An Cathaoirleach: Without interruption. Ms Funchion, please.

Ms Kathleen Funchion: We basically abstained in relation to that motion. When a resolution comes before Parliament there can be an awful lot of detail in it. In some situations we would agree with a lot of the detail. Obviously, we condemn the situation and we support people's right to protest and the protestors there. However, sometimes there are details in resolutions that we do not agree with in relation to the situation. We think the EU has a role to try to make the situation better and not to try to make it worse. Some of the sanctions that were indicated in that would make the situation worse and it is not apportioning blame where it should be apportioned.

Regarding the referendum on Irish unity and the costings, it is great to see people bringing that up and talking about it. It is something I would fully support. I would love to see us use the opportunity of the Presidency to be talking more about Irish unity and to have a really positive conference or an engagement to see how we could encourage that and move it on. Ultimately, I would like to see a citizens' assembly on Irish unity that would bring all sides into the discussion.

This is my third time to say I wanted to mention fishing and I have not had the opportunity to do it. We definitely need to see a proper review of the Common Fisheries Policy and we also need to consider the situation with quotas. We had some discussion last week on bluefin tuna. There is the potential for a quota for that but we are not getting it at the moment. There definitely needs to be much more discussion on that.

Disability came up in the first round and then again in the second round. I am a member of the Disability Intergroup. I would be happy to speak to those mentioned by Senator Clonan

about some of the issues he raised. I am not sure if I will be in a position to get him before some of those groups about which he spoke but I am certainly happy to explore it and talk to him afterwards about it.

There was a question on an update on countries coming into the EU. We will have to come back to the Senator on that because I am not 100% sure where that stands. My experience so far of everything in the EU is that it works slowly. If you think it will take six months, it will actually take at least 12 months.

There were questions about simplification and funding from our two Kilkenny Senators, Senators Stephenson and Noonan. I am very worried that a lot of potential funds are going to be eroded for military purposes. Whenever there is talk about increased funds for military or defence, there seem to be no questions asked. There is talk of potentially changing or relaxing fiscal rules to allow that but that is not the case when it comes to other funding streams. Another really important one is our own housing situation. I know there needs to be an honest conversation about funds. Sorry, I was interrupted-----

An Cathaoirleach: I know Ms Funchion was interrupted and I gave her extra time.

Ms Kathleen Funchion: -----and I have really tried to stick to my time all along. There does need to be an honest conversation about funds but for me it is about political priorities. If you are under pressure, you need to see where your priorities are. Certainly, from my point of view and that of Sinn Féin, it is not towards military and defence.

Mr. Billy Kelleher: The issue of funding and neutrality was raised by Senator Craughwell. He described how he has been called "negative noise" from time to time. I have been called that once or twice as well, so he should not worry about it too much. A report was done by the European Parliament some years ago, in advance of the war in Ukraine. It identified inherent weaknesses in Ireland's capability to protect key infrastructure such as subsea cables. That was flagged for some time. There has been an awareness in Europe for a long time that there is a weakness in Ireland's capabilities, not only in defence but in monitoring our sea territorial areas and also our skies. If we look at drug importation, for example, they do sometimes look at Irish waters as the softer option from time to time but we have had some success in recent years in combating that due to co-operation with other navies and customs forces. There is no doubt that we will depend on the goodwill of others for the six months of the Presidency to ensure we have security capability when we have Heads of State in Dublin and across Ireland, so it is a significant issue.

Senator Andrews raised an issue I will dwell on a bit. First and foremost, I am a democrat. I respect the democratic process and everybody's right to engage in it. However, what I hate is when real issues are being used in a particular context. I am not saying the Senator is doing this today. On the issue of Palestine, in the context of the vote, a motion of censure on Ursula von der Leyen was an appallingly distasteful thing to link. The motion of censure on Ursula von der Leyen, whom I did not support for her initial nomination, was based on the issue of vaccines and Covid. In the motion of censure there was no relevance to or mention of Palestine, the appalling attacks on the Palestinian people in Gaza and the undermining of the Palestinian

state in the West Bank itself. The reason I say that is I have consistently raised those issues. We have consistently pushed for motions of censure-----

Senator Chris Andrews: You backed her up.

An Cathaoirleach: No interruptions.

Mr. Billy Kelleher: I have backed it up every day of the week inside in the Parliament in the context of how I vote. The idea that every issue about which people disagree or about which people are very passionate would be used as a motion of censure means that we would never, ever have a Commission. We would never be able to govern, we would never be able to make decisions and we would make an absolute mockery of the European parliamentary process, but more importantly, we would be using genuine issues that I fundamentally support. I visit the occupied territories. I sponsored the occupied territories Bill inside in the Dáil. The idea that the Senator would suggest that my support for Ursula von der Leyen in the context of Covid vaccines and corruption is somehow diminishing my genuinely held beliefs on Palestine and the suffering of the Palestinian people, not just since the war but over many years, is distasteful to say the least.

Senator Chris Andrews: It is accurate.

Mr Seán Kelly: Tá a lán ceisteanna curtha. Just briefly, I would agree on support for Northern Ireland in the MFF. We may not be able to get an actual figure but it is a good idea because it is something we would be anxious to see happening - hopefully the sooner the better.

On referring the Mercosur deal to court, I voted against that of course. First, I was elected to make decisions and not to be asking the court to make the decision for me. Second, it was only a ruse really to try to postpone it indefinitely and get the court to probably find some fault with it. I was the rapporteur for the EU-Singapore agreement and in 2018 that was referred to the courts. The courts found that it was perfect in terms of complying with the treaties, and it has operated since. We had it last year with the EU-Chile agreement and I would say the same will apply here. There was no reason in the world to refer that to the court as far as I am concerned and I have no hesitation in saying that if it came up again I would not vote for it to go to court. I have been elected to make decisions and I will make them myself.

I agree about the nature restoration. I stuck my neck out against the EPP on that. I was blamed for being it being passed but there was a commitment that there would be special funding outside of the CAP for the nature restoration measures and that is something we will have to fight strongly for to ensure that is done and also, of course, to keep the EIPs, the LIFE programme, etc. I would agree with that completely.

On enlargement, we have had no enlargement since 2014 when Croatia came in. It has been postponed and postponed. It is now back on the agenda, big time. Will it happen? It may. It may pick up momentum in the second half of this mandate. Ironically, Ukraine could be a stumbling block. I know it is very important for Ukraine to have the security of knowing it is going to join the European Union.

Would Ukraine be ready for it post-war? Quite frankly, I do not think so.

We have to be very careful with these countries, particularly when we see what happened in the case of Hungary in particular. If we got another Orbán or two, they could disrupt the European Union completely. It will be necessary to look at some of the constraints. What I will be proposing is a kind of provisional membership for a year or two or something of that nature, but allowing them in if they cannot be put out subsequently could be detrimental. Of course, the budget has to be looked at. That is going to be a big issue in this regard.

I agree with Mr. Kelleher. I voted for Ursula von der Leyen. I will vote for her any time there is a vote of censure in the Parliament. First, she was elected by us to do a job. She has a five-year mandate. If you vote against her on the motion of censure, you are actually voting against Michael McGrath and all the other Commissioners, which is like a vote of no-confidence in the Government. The whole thing would collapse. We would have to start all over again. There would be absolute chaos. We do not agree with Ms von der Leyen on everything but - and I give credit to the Government and to the Opposition here - she got the message on Gaza, at least to a certain degree. In her most recent state of the Union address, she was far more critical of Israel and supportive of Gaza than she might have been in the past.

LNG is a disgrace. I have been working on it for 15 years. Something like €40 million or €50 million has been spent and a decision has not yet been made. It is a disgrace in the context of the whole Irish approach to things. We need energy security. We need to have gas until we develop our renewables, which we need to develop much quicker, but we do need to transition. I completely agree with Mr. McNamara on that.

Migration has been mentioned. I agree with what was said. We try to control it as best we can, but we cannot attack or find fault with any particular country.

Fishing is the one sector that has a complaint about European policy. It has suffered both historically and as a result of Brexit. We have now lost the Hague preferences, which Garret FitzGerald got for the sector many years ago. If anyone deserves support in terms of fighting their case, it is the fishers of this country.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: What about women's rights? What about the right to our spaces? Nobody has answered the question in that regard. The right to our spaces-----

An Cathaoirleach: I will let them come back in on that in a minute. I call Mr. McNamara.

Mr. Michael McNamara: Maybe the Senator arrived late, but I addressed the issue in my previous contribution. I will not repeat what I said.

On Ireland's ability to defend itself, there has been a lot of talk about what we are going to do. However, our level of investment in the Defence Forces is both incredibly low and inexcusable. That said, there is a lot of discussion about it in the Irish media. I am always quite surprised about that because I have never really met anybody – it might be different for Mr. Kelleher, Mr. Kelly, Ms Funchion or Ms Ní Mhurchú – who asked when the Irish Defence Forces were going to come over the hill. I do not think anybody in Europe really cares much about it, but it is an issue for us ourselves. There is a great deal of talk in the media about it being an embarrassment to us abroad. It is an embarrassment to us here. It is an embarrassment

in the context of how we treat the members of our Defence Forces who stand by the flag and who put their lives on the line for it. At European level, I am not sure that there is much of an interest, but that does not mean we should not address it. We clearly need to do so.

Senator Casey mentioned EU scrutiny. I completely agree with him. It is something that needs to be stepped up. Senator McDowell, who, unfortunately, is not here today, had something to say about it recently. I very much agree. I do not always agree with him, but I frequently do. I agree with him on the need for far greater EU scrutiny. Perhaps he and Senator Casey could get together and come up with a solution as to how it could be better scrutinised.

On the von der Leyen motions, I have abstained from them because they are votes of censure on the entire Commission. It is not just von der Leyen, it is the entire Commission, including Michael McGrath and Commissioner Jørgensen, a socialist from Denmark who is doing quite a good job on energy issues. I fundamentally disagree with the direction in which von der Leyen is bringing the European Union, but tabling motion after motion is not going to achieve anything. In a way, it is just a bit of political pantomime. If we look at the results of those motions, they are not getting anywhere. I would like to see her removed though, but that is something which will require a bit more political manoeuvring than is currently happening.

On enlargement, I very much commend Mr. Kelly on his honesty. It is rare to hear it from Irish representatives. I recommend that people read the conclusions document from the Council meeting on 18 December at which Ukraine was discussed. It was very clear that there will not be a departure from the standards. Ukraine has to meet the *acquis* of the European Union like every other aspirant applicant, and it is not in a position to meet that. It is, unfortunately, unlikely to be in a position to do so in the near future.

There is also a part of that which includes the use of frozen Russian assets. I recommend that people read this as well, particularly as, in my view, the reporting of it in some normally reliable mainstream media outlets was completely erroneous. The use of Russian frozen assets is as dead as the Monty Python parrot. They are based in Belgium, and the Belgians were not having it, notwithstanding the enormous pressure that Merz and von der Leyen put them under. They resisted. It is dead unless the Belgians get a guarantee that Ireland and all other member states are not prepared to provide them with.

I agree with the point about energy security. At present, our energy policy is based on importing nuclear energy from the United Kingdom and, now, from France. Both the United Kingdom and France have very ambitious plans for their own energy. We in Ireland need to grow up. Unless we cover the whole country with windmills, the idea that we can do it through wind farms alone is nonsensical unless we can develop the offshore wind sector, which is not economically viable at the moment. If it is not, then we need to look at the use of small nuclear reactors, etc.

Ms Cynthia Ní Mhurchú: Nobody asked me a specific question. That is fine. I will just deal with the few general open questions that were asked. I will start with fishing, and the questions from Senator O'Reilly of Aontú. I will be having a public meeting with fishers in Castletownbere tomorrow. The Senator is more than welcome to attend. She should please say it to her councillors. Everybody else is more than welcome. It does not matter what party or group they are from. There will be some speakers from Europe and obviously some speakers

from the Irish fishing industry. It is the most devastated industry in the country. There is no doubt about that.

If Senator Clonan wants to get in front of anybody in the EU, I am his ticket, particularly in relation to disability, because I share his concerns. I will reach out to him separately in relation to that. We should make inroads and progress on that during the Presidency. It is an ideal moment. I thank him for that.

I thank Senator Stephenson very much. Senator Casey also mentioned over-legislating and simplification. He is a bit worried about simplification leading to degradation and so forth. The old phrase which we all know is that America innovates, we legislate and then China imitates. We have got to stop legislating. We have a lot of legislation. It is like the Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act that I work with on the Committee on Internal Market and Consumer Protection. We now need to roll out those Acts. We need to use them and put them into effect. I take the points made by Senators Casey and Stephenson. We cannot dilute either, but we cannot overdo it. We need to pull up a little.

On the estimated cost of reunification. I would err on the side of caution and say that it might be a little presumptive and a bit too early. We recently saw an exchange that happened between a Northern Ireland politician agus Uachtarán na hÉireann. There are lots of sensitivities. That is why I would like to roll it out in a sustained – not a slow way, but in a more progressive way which does not hone in on costs initially. We have an awful lot of progress made through the North-South bodies and so forth. We need to build on that. Going back to my previous point, we do need to talk about reunification in a very collaborative way. I would really welcome that during the Presidency.

I do apologise if I left anybody out. Tá sé sin go hiontach. There are a couple of seconds left. I do want to mention the Irish language. It is an official language in the European Union. This is the first Presidency that Irish has been an official language. Guess what? There is a derogation on me speaking Irish in the Parliament. The Ministers can say it at the Council and the Commission – if anyone wants to speak it there, like Commissioner McGrath - but in the Parliament, myself and éinne eile taobh thiar ná in aice liom a labhraíonn Gaeilge agus a theastaíonn uathu Gaeilge a labhairt ag gach leibhéal de chruinniú – every level of meeting, I cannot speak it in the Parliament. Guess why? There is a derogation until 2029. I did not vote in favour of it.

We have to undo it by the end of 2029. We have to get the interpretation service rolled out in the Parliament. We need to take our place. Our national language needs to be i lár an aonaigh. It is one of the most valuable commodities we have, as people and as politicians. Go raibh míle maith agaibh.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank all the MEPs for their contributions and Senators for their questions. Before I call the Leas-Chathaoirleach to give thanks on behalf of the House, I call Senator Ahearn.

Senator Garret Ahearn: I thank all the MEPs for being here today. We have seen from the debate back and forth that although people have very different views and positions, it is extremely helpful to have all five MEPs here to be able to outline their position and views and

the work they are doing to represent Ireland South. Mr. Kelleher said this is a changing world. It is absolutely changing, and the EU's position and role are so critical in that.

One particular issue is the rise of the far right and how Europe, as a Continent, manages that. If we are honest with ourselves, it is not accidental. It has been planned, it is strategic and there are people behind it, whether it is Tommy Robinson in the UK or the AfD party in Germany, particularly in eastern Germany. These are organisations that are being funded by Putin and Musk. It has been well planned and managed. The European Union has a role to play in this regard. We have very important elections across Europe this year, in Armenia, Bosnia and, obviously, Hungary. Comments made yesterday by Marco Rubio endorsing Viktor Orbán were outrageous. No state should be interfering in any election but America has given its view.

Senator Clifford Lee tried to get information on why people hold their positions. When people come here, whether we agree with them or not, it is a good opportunity for them to outline their position and, in this case, for some MEPs to outline why they abstained in a vote on Iran and voted against supporting Ukraine in a financial package. People can have different views, but this is a very good platform to outline that.

Senator Chris Andrews: In fairness, Ms Funchion did that.

An Cathaoirleach: Allow Senator Ahearn to continue without interruption.

Senator Garret Ahearn: There are different perspectives on how people answer.

Senator Chris Andrews: The Senator could argue about MEPs voting for Ursula von der Leyen too, but we are not making a point of that.

Senator Garret Ahearn: The Senator spoke about interrupting someone and now he is interrupting me.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank everyone for the robust debate. I ask that Senator Ahearn be allowed to continue without interruption.

Senator Garret Ahearn: We have spoken on a range of issues but there is nothing more important at EU level at the moment than security and defence.

Mr. Michael McNamara: The people are more important.

Senator Garret Ahearn: When we talk about decision-making, one of the faults of the European Union is the speed of decision-making. I just came back this morning from the World Forum in Berlin where I spoke on defence and security and what allied countries can do to support Ukraine and position ourselves to support of other countries that are vulnerable. Taiwan will be an obvious country in 2027. Taiwan controls 90% of semiconductors. If it is invaded by China, it will have a massive impact throughout the world. However, a deterrent to that would be the EU and America having a position before a war starts, not afterwards. Mr.

Kelleher has done an awful lot of work on Ukraine sanctions coming through, but the European Union should have had a position well before the war in Ukraine started to try to deter what happened. We are playing on the back foot after the war commenced. The European Union needs to learn the lesson that we have to hold a position in support of small countries that are very vulnerable.

An Cathaoirleach: I have one proposal on an issue that falls on the desk of many Senators. Would the European Union bring in a requirement that all online bookings of flights include the expiry date of passports? It might lessen the load of Members of the Oireachtas. If that is something the MEPs could investigate, many of us would get fewer phone calls every week from panicked constituents.

Mr. Billy Kelleher: It is a great vote-getter.

An Cathaoirleach: Anois, I call the Leas-Chathaoirleach to conclude.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I thank the five MEPs for their hard work and dedication since they were elected. Many have been in the European Parliament for a number of years. I thank them for coming here this evening to share their experiences and thoughts with us. They all gave a very balanced view as to what their own thoughts are and the work in which they are interested. The Presidency of the EU is going to be an exciting time for Ireland. I thank the MEPs and wish them the best of luck in the work they are doing on behalf of all of us.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank the Members of the European Parliament who are here. They were very gracious to give their time today. We look forward to engaging with this group of MEPs again next year, and also with MEPs from the Dublin and Midlands–North-West constituencies during this year, in the latter half of which Ireland will hold the Presidency of the European Union.

Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026: Order for Committee Stage

Senator Joe Flaherty: I move: "That Committee Stage be taken now."

Question put and agreed to.

Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026: Committee Stage

SECTION 1

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, and the officials from his Department. They are very welcome.

Amendments Nos. 1 to 3, inclusive, are related and may be discussed together by agreement.

Senator Pauline Tully: I move amendment No. 1:

In page 5, to delete lines 30 and 31, and in page 6, to delete lines 1 and 2 and substitute the following:

“(2) Within three months of the passing of this Act the Minister shall lay before the Houses of the Oireachtas a report setting out the impact of the “market rent reset” provision contained in *section 8* on rental inflation in the private rental sector.”.

I have genuine concerns about this Bill, where it is going and what it will do for renters in this country. I am already concerned about affordability. Rents are very high all over the country.

That is particularly the case in urban areas but elsewhere as well. It seems that no impact study was done on this Bill before it was produced as to what it was going to do to rents. The way I see it is that rents are only going to go one way. Many landlords in my constituency are small landlords. They might have a number of properties and most of them are generally fair. They might get a nice family in to rent and want to keep that family there, so they may not have increased the rent in some years. Suddenly this legislation comes in and it is going to change how things are done and the rent can only be raised for new tenancies every six years. If the tenants move out for whatever reason, and new tenants are moving in after 1 March, naturally they will raise the rent because they will not be able to raise it for another six years and may not have raised it for quite some time before that. I know many landlords in those circumstances. One landlord told me he has a number of properties. He was only charging €800 euro to a family for his property, whereas one neighbour was charging €1,500 and another was charging €1,600 for the same size house. He had not raised his rent. He was not that type of person. He said he was not greedy and he was not trying to profiteer off ordinary people because he did not think it was fair. However, he will obviously take the opportunity to raise it, maybe not as high as his neighbours, but to some extent. Many landlords will raise the rent to what we call market value when they get the opportunity.

Looking at the figures from the Residential Tenancies Board for the average rent in each county, we know some places have lower rents and many places are much higher. The figures also show an average market rent. Going on those figures, it is possible that people may end up paying up to €3,500 extra a year in the first year and for subsequent years in a new tenancy in my county of Cavan. I do not know where they will get the money. I am hearing from families whose landlords are selling up because this legislation is so confusing and have issued eviction notices to people. Up to this, they had been charging them a reasonably fair rent. People come into my office and ask me where they are going to find a rental they can afford. They are looking but they cannot find anything because there is very little availability and what is available is very expensive. Many of these people are above the HAP rates and above the social housing threshold. They have to go on the private rental market without any sort of financial support and they cannot find anywhere to rent. Do they go into homeless accommodation or do they try to bunk in with family, squashed into one bedroom? It is an absolute nightmare for them. As I said, this legislation is not well thought out whatsoever. It will have an extreme impact on rent in the private rental sector.

On students, I am about to see my son go off to college, I hope, in September. He will be looking for rented accommodation and we know there is very little student-specific accommodation or on-campus accommodation. If he is lucky enough to get that - and it is not cheap either - that would be great but if not he will be depending on the private rental market.

It is a new tenancy every year because most students seek a nine-month tenancy. They move into the house at whatever the rent is and then they move out. Then they have to get another new tenancy for the following year. The rent will be raised again and again. I do not know how I will afford that if that is what happens next year and I know many other families will be in exactly the same position. This Bill will only drive homelessness higher because already we are talking about in excess of 16,000 people, of whom 5,000 are children. That is not even counting the people I have already spoken about who are bunking in the family box room or lying on the sofa of their friend's house or in domestic violence shelters or lying on the street. There are a lot more homeless than we actually see in those figures that are accessing emergency accommodation. Again, that figure will only rise because more and more people are going to be out on the street because they cannot afford the rent as it is and this Bill will drive rents up. We should have had proper analysis of any sort of legislation like this on what it will do to the rental market. We need regular monitoring and reporting of this Bill as we go forward.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I would like to welcome members of the Drumshanbo men's shed, who are guests of the Minister of State, Deputy Frank Feighan, and also members from south Down men's shed, who are guests of Senator Conor Murphy. You are very welcome here this evening. I hope you enjoy your visit to Leinster House.

Senator Patricia Stephenson: I thank the Minister of State for being here. It was the Minister, Deputy Browne, who was here last week when we were on Second Stage of the legislation, so I will repeat some of the concerns about this Bill. It will be no surprise to the Minister of State that many in the Opposition do not support this Bill and do not see any evidence of how it is going to work. There is no evidence that it will bring down rents and that is why we are referring to it as the rent hike Bill, because in fact everything points to the fact that it going to increase rents which are already incredibly high. A series of amendments from me and other Social Democrats, Labour Party, Green Party and Sinn Féin Senators are all an attempt to make this Bill a little bit better. The Minister of State will probably not accept any of those amendments. That is what we saw play out in the Dáil last week, but the fact of the matter is this Bill cannot be made very much better, even with the small mitigations we are attempting. I stand to support this particular amendment, which is really just trying to bring a bit of evidence and actual analysis to what has been an incredibly rushed process. There was a minority report at the housing committee which laid out very clearly deep concerns about this Bill and what it will mean in terms of making rent incredibly unaffordable. I wish that the Minister of State will at least consider this idea of bringing some evidence and analysis so that we could come back to this. I suspect the answer is going to be "No". If we want to talk about evidence-based policy, we should be looking at reports and analysis so that we can assess the impact of the policy we are making on the lives of people who are going to be affected.

Senator Maria McCormack: I will keep it to the amendments we are discussing at the moment. We do not agree with this legislation. We do not agree with something that will bring up the price of rent for people who are already to the pin of their collar. When we discussed this legislation at the housing committee, even when we had the experts in, a large number of typos had to be corrected. It was described as the most confusing legislation to have come before us. There are so many different categories of rent for so many different people. If the

experts cannot understand it, how are we supposed to understand it and how is the regular renter out there supposed to understand it? I hear an awful lot about the security of tenure and that people will have security of tenure for six years, but I just cannot get my head around how that will work when people just cannot afford the rent. The facts are there that normal tenancies are only lasting three and a half years, so it will be reset every time someone moves out and really this six years provision does not matter a damn. I am bearing in mind that the Government has the majority and the Bill will get pushed through but our amendments are just asking for reports. I really cannot understand how it would not be acceptable. Amendment No. 1 states:

Within three months of passing of this Act, the Minister shall lay before the Houses of the Oireachtas a report setting out the impact of the "market rent reset provision" contained in *section 8* on rental inflation in the private rental sector.

I cannot understand what would be wrong with agreeing to show us a review of this. Amendment No. 2 states:

Within three months of the passing of this Act the Minister shall lay before the Houses of the Oireachtas a report setting out the impact of this Act on rental inflation for student renters in both the private and rental sector and the Student Specific Accommodation sector.

We are just asking for reports. We feel that this is being pushed through and we are listening to people on the ground telling us the impact it is going to have. We just want to make sure that there are options for this to be reviewed, for reports to be generated and for us to be able to discuss the impact this is having on people. For people in Laois, rents are possibly going to go up by €3,100 a year. We know that people absolutely cannot afford it. Anyone going to third-level education has to leave the county. For 90% of the time students are not getting a six-year secure tenancy. We know how much these young people are going to suffer. We know how many of them need to emigrate because they cannot afford to rent or buy a house here. We are simply asking that there would be some review mechanism for the damage this is doing because big landlords benefiting from this will not sit well with the general public.

We have seen all of the rent organisations come out against this Bill and tell us how concerned they are. We have seen the Simon Communities in Ireland come out and tell us of the detrimental impact this will have. We know the homeless figures are going up and up. They say the higher the rents are, the more impact they will have, with more homelessness and more women and children in homeless hubs. We do not have enough facilities for them. We do not have enough social and affordable homes. We know there are better options. Deputy Eoin Ó Broin has brought forward lots of detailed plans, including 114 pages of a housing plan that details and sets out ways to improve the housing crisis.

It was said in this Chamber last week that Sinn Féin does not have ideas. There are lots and lots of ideas being put forward by the Opposition and every time they are put forward they are just put back. Even when we have simple amendments just asking for collaboration to please generate a simple report to share with the public on the impact this will have on the rental market, even that cannot even be accepted. I do not know; I am running out of words. I understand this is not the Minister of State's brief but I hope he can give me some kind of a clear answer as to why the hell a report could not be generated and why those amendments could not be accepted. We could have come in with many more amendments.

People in County Laois will suffer much more from rent reset to market values. We do not pay anything near the market value in a lot of cases because we do not have a lot of apartment blocks. We have a lot of rentals in the second hand sector. A tenant may be paying an historical rent of €900 but from 1 March, that rent will just shoot through the roof. Those people are really worried. I cannot keep up with the demand and the number of calls coming into my office and I do not know what to say to them. The rent will go up and there is the food poverty. I attended a meeting of the social protection committee this morning and listened to statements from MABS and the Citizens Information Board. There is poverty and increasing numbers of people are coming in to them with cost-of-living and energy poverty queries. There are millions. They do not know what to do. This is having an impact and 20% of their overall calls are from people who are distressed. I asked what was the main reason people are distressed and they replied it was due to the cost of living. People are terrified.

I hope we can get some answers because they are watching. They are looking to see leadership here and for some kind of answers that will speak to the real people, the people who cannot afford to heat their houses or pay their rent or electricity bills. An electrician rang me when I was on my way here this morning and told me that the roll of wire with which he is going to wire houses - it might take him 40 rolls of this wire to wire a house - used to cost €120 but now costs €240. We are dealing with levels of inflation. This does not relate directly to housing but everybody is absolutely stretched. I would love for there to be a way this Bill could be paused and that we could go back to the drawing board and think about the impact it is having. I acknowledge that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael want to make a difference and help renters and I do not stand in this Chamber and give out for no reason but I have been listening day after day to people telling me about the fear they have about this and I am really worried. I have no answers for them except to say I am sorry but they are being thrown under the bus with this legislation because I cannot say that their rent is not going to go up. Someone who is struggling really cannot afford that extra €1,000, €2,000, €3,000 or €4,000.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan): I thank the Senators for their contributions. I get that the crux of the amendment is to seek a report within three months but, as the amendment is presented here today, that is simply impossible because what the amendment does is delete the lines within the legislation that enable me to move the provisions of the Bill, yet at the same time the Senators are asking us to produce a report within three months. It does not make any sense. It cannot happen. The amendment proposes to delete the lines that would allow me to move the provisions of a Bill but within the same amendment it is suggested that a report be produced within three months. It is contradictory and I am surprised that it was not ruled out of order for that reason because there is a complete contradiction within the amendment.

Speaking of reports, Dáil Éireann Standing Order 204 provides that within:

Twelve months following the enactment of a Bill, save in the case of the Finance Bill and the Appropriation Bill, the member of the Government or Minister of State who is officially responsible for implementation of the Act shall provide a report which shall review the functioning of the Act and which shall be laid in the Parliamentary Library.

Irrespective of this requirement, the proposed amendments to require various reviews after just three months of operation simply do not afford enough time as a basis for any meaningful

review of the significant changes being introduced in the Bill. The changes apply to first-time tenancies created on or after 1 March 2026. In the student-specific accommodation, as was referenced by some of the Senators, it will be 1 March 2029 before existing stock can be reset to rents beyond the rent increase restriction. A much longer review period would be required to measure the impacts of these changes in the rental sector generally and in student-specific accommodation.

Considerable time has been spent on report writing and recommendation making to inform these policy measures. I believe there has been sufficient analysis of the rental market over the past two years, in particular, and this Bill is the outcome of that process. I, my Department and the RTB will continue to keep the operation of the residential rental sector and the Residential Tenancies Act, as amended, under constant review with a view to making any necessary legal changes in a timely manner. The legislation is always under review. The legislation can be amended. As our approach to housing policy is flexible and often open to amendments and changes, this legislation will be kept under constant review with a report required within 12 months anyway.

I think the Senators will agree that this Government and the previous Governments have not delayed in making necessary, justifiable changes. Equally, the Government wants to provide certainty, clarity and stability for the rental sector and that is key. Any potential review after three months would take away any of that certainty or stability. These measures have been informed by the finding of the Housing Agency's review of RPZs, its potential policy option for rent controls and the agency's preferred recommendation to modify the existing operation of the current rent controls. Their view involved having extensive stakeholder engagement and a comprehensive examination of the current RPZ system that showed that the existing rules are restricting supply and need to change. The work and recommendations of the Housing Commission have also been taken into account. The approved policy measures aim to boost investment in the supply of homes available for rent and strengthen tenancy protections. Delivering on these policy measures is now a priority for the Government.

I will speak to some of the comments that have been made. Almost all Senators referenced availability and the lack of it, of rental accommodation in particular, and that is the exact tenet of this Bill, namely, to try to increase supply and the supply of apartments in particular. There is a chronic shortage of apartments to lease or rent and that is exactly what this Bill is trying to do. Whether we like it or not, we will require some element of the private sector for the delivery of homes. Some people do not like to hear that and will not accept that but that is a fact if we are to increase supply and delivery of apartments. So far, the reaction of industry to these measures has been good.

Also, many Senators referenced the anxiety or fear tenants have about being served with notices of termination. Again, what this legislation aims to do is extend the security of tenure; to extend the security of the tenancy to six years. That is unprecedented and it is essentially rolling. The Bill tries to strike that balance. For the past number of years when I was in here, the Housing Agency was referenced and the question of why we were not listening to the Housing Agency and the Housing Commission was asked a number of times but we have done so.

5 o'clock

What they have asked us to do is strike a balance between ensuring that landlords remain in the market for rental accommodation and increasing the supply of apartments and securing the protection of tenants. That is what we have done, especially by expanding the RPZs nationally. That never happened before. I often use the example of my hometown of Clonakilty, which was not in an RPZ. It was not offered the protection that RPZs offer to tenants, and now it is. We also have to think of those people who are renting outside RPZs. There was reference to homelessness numbers. That is exactly what the Bill is trying to deal with. It is trying to increase supply in order that, once and for all, we can see the homelessness figures go in the opposite direction to the one in which they are going at present.

There was reference to the fact there is no evidence it would work. As already stated, the response of the industry so far has been quite positive. We expect to see an increase in the supply of apartments in particular. This legislation has been described as confusing, but I would describe the amendment as very confusing. As stated, it would delete the lines that allow me to move the provisions in the Bill but asks for a report at the same time. I do not see how that could work.

This legislation is aimed at supply. I have said it before that all of us have people coming to our clinics and offices who are desperately seeking rental accommodation. They all refer to the fact that they have been on *daft.ie* and other platforms that offer places to rent but that those places are not there. We are trying to fix this by increasing supply. The legislation will do that. We cannot accept the amendment for the reasons I have outlined.

Senator Chris Andrews: I will make a criticism of the Bill. It is political criticism, and I ask the Minister State not to take it personally. I know the officials have put in a huge amount of hard work. Because the legislation is being rushed through the Dáil and Seanad, renters and the public are not being allowed to examine it and have a good long look at the ins and outs of it in any detail. This is being rushed through. It is the most profound change to the regulations of the private rental sector in a decade.

The centrepiece of the Bill is the market reset proposal. This allows landlords to reset the rent to the market rate between tenancies. At present, a landlord can only increase rent by 2% to account for inflation. This change has been made at the behest of the big institutional investors to increase their profits. The reality is that Irish Institutional Property, IIP, which, it is fair to say, represents the big companies, the vulture funds and the big developers, has brought this about. It has open access here, and I see its chairman, Pat Farrell, coming in and out. He has access to Leinster House. He and IIP have been pushing this proposal. It cannot be right that the head of one of these big institutional organisations has such open access to Government. Whether Ministers meet him, I do not know. However, it should be declared and should be made clear whether they do. What engagement has Mr. Farrell had with Ministers, backbench TDs and Senators? It is not healthy for society. Clearly, the Bill is something they want. They wanted this. As was said by Lorcan Sirr recently-----

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I ask Senator Andrews to be careful mentioning names because the people involved are not here.

Senator Pauline Tully: It is on the record.

Senator Chris Andrews: It is on the public record. The Government has been taken hostage by companies and organisations such as this, and they are ensuring that this legislation is put through. Lorcan Sirr said the Government is trying to convince people that it will bring down rents by allowing landlords to put up rents. That is the reality.

I look at the glass bottle site in Ringsend where 3,500 or, possibly, 3,800 new homes are to be developed. The only people who will be able to buy or rent them are the really wealthy and really high earners. I went to the glass bottle site and had a look. Those involved with the site kindly showed me around. The rent will be €2,500 a month for a one-bedroom flat. There are people who have lived in Ringsend all their lives. When it was not popular to live there, they made Ringsend the great community it is. What has happened? The Government is facilitating developers to come in and is allowing these units to be built, and the cost of them is absolutely insane. Very few people in Ringsend will be able to afford to rent of these one-, two- and three-bedroom apartments. A household would need to have two Senators' salaries in order to be able to afford to rent a one-bedroom apartment at the glass bottle site. This is having a huge impact. Where will people go? They have to leave their communities. They have to move or they are living in overcrowded conditions on Pearse Street and Kevin Street or in Ringsend because they cannot rent properties. They cannot afford to buy or rent.

Not too far from here, 500 m away, there is a five- or six-storey building where a one-bedroom apartment costs €2,700 a month. How can anybody pay that? Beside that building is St. Andrew's Court, which the Government has been promising to regenerate, rejuvenate and redevelop for nearly ten years. It is still lying vacant in the middle of a housing crisis. Across the road from is the building to which I refer in which a one-bedroom apartment costs €2,500 or €2,700. It costs even more to rent a two-bedroom apartment there. That is what is happening in Ireland. There are the wealthy and there are the forgotten. Families in the inner city are being forgotten and pushed out because of policies such as those outlined in this rental Bill.

How will families from Ringsend or Pearse Street ever be able to find homes? They have experienced decades of underinvestment in their communities. The community to which I refer has been there a long time. Before it was popular, they were there with the football clubs and the bingo. The latter is still being organised. During Covid, many of the families who live in the community were working on the front line. There were working in hospitals, they were in these Houses cleaning, they were working in Tesco and they were delivering essential supplies. None of these families will be able to afford to buy in their own communities. They cannot pay €2,700 rent. That is what is happening. The Government has just forgotten ordinary working-class communities in the inner city.

It is not only in Dublin. It is in Limerick, Galway and Cork. Inner-city working-class communities have been forgotten and this Bill shows that and highlights how forgotten they are.

As I say, rents will go up and up. The Government will talk about protection for renters. That is all very well but protection is only good if you can afford the rent and they will not be able to afford the rent. Sandymount is an affluent area. People would assume that it is a very wealthy area but young people cannot afford the rent. The average price of houses in Dublin was in the news today, with the headline, "Cost of buying a home in Dublin reaches €500,000". That is not according to Sinn Féin, but the CSO. An article states:

The ... cost of buying a home in Dublin has now reached €500,000, according to the Central Statistics Office. Residential property prices rose by 7% nationally last year. It marks a slight deceleration compared to 2024, when the cost of buying a home rose by 8.7%.

I suppose the Government will probably put out a press release stating that prices are not going up as fast as they were and looking for a clap on the back. The article continued:

Residential property is now 178.8% above its low point in early 2013 after the financial crash. Prices are now 25% above their highest level at the peak of the property boom in April 2007.

[...]

Nationally, the median price of buying a home was €387,000 last year. Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown in Dublin was the most expensive area at €680,000.

On those sort of eye-watering figures for homes, most people will know where Sandymount is. It is not too far away. Walk for a kilometre from here and you will be in Sandymount. People and their children in Sandymount are expected to pay €680,000 for a home in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown, such as in Blackrock. It is insane. The option is to stay at home because they cannot go out and afford to live in one of the overpriced rental units on the glass bottle site.

According to the article, "Outside the capital, the most expensive region was Wicklow with a price of €454,000. The second most expensive was Kildare at €440,000", and "The least expensive was Donegal, where the price was €195,000." The way things are going, people from the inner city will only be able to afford to live in Donegal because they cannot afford to live in Ringsend, Sandymount, Pearse Street and Kevin Street. Even now, there is a site on Kevin Street. It was bought for some eye-watering multimillion euro sum. They were to develop it and build offices and apartments. They could not afford the financial model that they had paid out that money for and it is now derelict. It has been derelict for nearly two years. At the same time, across the road, on Bishop Street, in the Iveagh Trust buildings, they are expected to live in absolutely shocking conditions. There is dampness and mould in the tiny flats. You would not be allowed construct them these days, although, having looked at the Irish Glass Bottle, IGB, site, the one-bedroom apartments there are not far off them, but that is another story.

When you look at the conditions in the Iveagh Trust, there are so many boarded-up flats. In the middle of a housing crisis, they are empty. It seems insane that people are expected to pay these massive bills. They are expected to pay eye-watering amounts in rent, such as €2,500 for a one-bedroom flat or apartment on the glass bottle site. I am not sure what the difference between an apartment and a flat is. They are both very expensive but a flat, in general, in the Dublin City Council area tends to be neglected and under invested in.

On the Government investment, Pearse House residents put in a request because there was a regeneration plan. They got phase 2 of the regeneration plan in Pearse House. Residents were really looking forward to it. They have lived in shocking conditions for many years. They asked the Minister to meet them because the Minister had pulled the regeneration and said they were going to deep retrofit Pearse House. They have put in multiple requests to meet the Minister for housing and he has ignored them.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: The Minister, Deputy Browne, is not here. We are discussing amendments Nos. 1 to 3, inclusive.

Senator Chris Andrews: The Minister of State, Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan, might pass that message on. I would appreciate that. It is unfair on the residents that the Minister refuses to meet them.

We undertook analysis of the average cost of this market reset which the Government talks about. It will be almost a €3,000 increase reset in the first year. For instance, existing tenancies in Carlow town currently pay €1,050 a month rent. When this Bill comes into being, a new tenancy, which is a proxy for market rents, will be €1,355. Over a year, this total increase will be €3,660. In Cavan, in Senator Tully's constituency, the existing market rent is €963 and over 12 months there will be a total increase to €3,108. That is significant. In Cork, it is currently €1,238 and it will go up to €3,696. In Cork city, it will go up to €3,336. In Dublin, currently it is €1,937 for an existing tenancy and that will go up to €3,516. Galway will be the most affected area. Monthly rent in Galway city is currently €1,409 a month and it will go up to €5,292. That is absolutely insane. In Limerick, Senator Collins's constituency, it is currently €849 and it will increase to €3,156 after that. I cannot see Laois there.

Senator Maria McCormack: Laois is there.

Senator Chris Andrews: Laois is there. It is currently €1,047 and this will be €3,132-----

Senator Maria McCormack: Increased over the year, yes.

Senator Chris Andrews: -----increased over the year. You are picking people's pockets. People cannot afford the cost of living as it is and now they will be expected to pay significant sums, depending on where they live in the country. For me and the people whom I represent and meet every day, that is how Ireland works now.

It is one law for the wealthy and one law for inner city communities. Irish Institutional Property has free access to Leinster House, but somebody living in Pearse House, Ringsend or Kevin Street does not have that access, connection and past with the Minister for housing, other Ministers, Deputies and Senators. That is a real concern.

Rents are already too high. As I said, we are in the middle of a housing and cost-of-living crisis. People are struggling to meet their weekly and daily costs. The budget last November left people with disabilities in difficulty. Where will they get money to pay rent? They will be down €400 and have been left short again.

Government policy should be focused on cutting and freezing rents, not allowing them to rise even further. As I said, Lorcan Sirr, who is not a Sinn Féin representative but, rather, an independent analyst who has studied housing and housing economics for many years, said the Government is now trying to tell people that it will reduce rents by allowing landlords to increase rents. I mentioned that earlier. That stuck with me. It is difficult to understand.

Market rent means whatever rent the market is charging at a point in time. The average length of a private tenancy is three and a half years, according to the RTB. The RTB has its challenges. This is not directly related to the Bill, but public housing, including flat complexes, should be allowed to come under the auspices of the RTB because the neglect in the flats is absolutely shocking. People have nowhere to go but to the council, which will ignore them. Dublin City Council tenants and local authority tenants across the country should be allowed to go to the RTB to get some redress because local authorities do not respond to council tenants. They brush them off.

Some 25% of all tenancies registered in 2025 were first-time tenancies. If these trends continue, within four to six years, the vast majority of private renters will be caught by the market reset rule. The Minister might address that. Young people do not want to live at home for the rest of their lives. They want to get out and rent until they can save and buy a house. The current housing system is so broken that that is not achievable unless they win the lotto or get an amazing job that pays huge sums of money. Young people do not want to live at home. Children in Sandymount are mainly living in homes owned by the well-off, but they do not want to live at home forever. Just because their parents have a nice large house does not mean their child can afford one. They have to go out and rent, but cannot do so because of the failure of the Government to address the housing crisis.

I hope I am not boring Senator Flaherty.

Senator Joe Flaherty: Not unduly.

Senator Chris Andrews: Where do young people go? They are living at home in their 20s and want to get out, live independently and move on with their lives. What are they going to do? They have to stay at home. They cannot go out and rent. They are expected to rent. This will lead to homelessness because there are relationship breakdowns. Senator McCarthy is on the front line of dealing with homelessness and addiction issues. He has done amazing work to support people who find themselves in homelessness. Senator McCarthy and organisations like the one with which he is involved are picking up the tab for the failure of the Government to address the housing crisis. I will leave it at that. I have made a few points on which I ask the Minister of State to come back to me.

Senator Patricia Stephenson: Obviously, supply is important and I do not think any of us are saying it is not. The level of housing being built does not match the increase in population over the past several decades. The problem is that we have over-relied on the private sector. The private sector is important. The Social Democrats are not saying there is no role for the private sector to play in this space. When it comes to supply, it has to be more nuanced than just supply, supply, supply. We have to look at affordability.

We have no evidence. Can the Minister of State tell us if he expects rents to come down in the next six, 12 or 18 months? If he is claiming rents will come down, which we do not believe, can he point to a period of time when he thinks they will?

The Minister of State spoke about the six-year protections for renters. The reality is that the average rental time span is three and a half years. We would like something like a no-fault

eviction ban, which is what would actually give renters protection, rather than the idea of six-year tenancies which does not reflect the reality.

For example, students move around regularly and some face extortionate rents. This includes the challenge of what rent is because many people face additional charges, in particular for private student accommodation. One student told me it is becoming impossible to continuously afford rent and they have had to cut essential groceries each week which, it goes without saying, affects one's dignity. They went on to say that their parents have helped them with accommodation, but have been struggling big time as the rent is now more than the mortgage cost. That family may have multiple children around the same age at university at the same time. They are paying more in rent while still paying off their mortgage. It is excruciating for people.

Last week, the Minister, Deputy Browne, said the Opposition is peddling misery. I wonder whether the Minister of State thinks we are lying or not reflecting the reality of the people who come to us with these concerns and are horrified by the real rent increases that the Bill will bring about. Does the Minister of State think we are peddling misery or reflecting legitimate views from people who are screaming out with concern that this is going to make their lives unaffordable?

I would like to mention something I spoke about last week, when the Minister of State was not here for the debate. Women fleeing domestic violence are told to go and seek new accommodation. They are told to go to a refuge and, it is to be hoped, after that they can find a new place to live and rent. They will not come under the six-year tenant safety protection the Minister of State says the Bill will provide. They will be forced into market rent every single time they flee. That will lead to women staying in violent situations.

I spoke about this in detail last week. That is what the outcome of this legislation will be. Women will choose between fleeing with their children or staying at home because they do not know where to live. They do not know whether they will have emergency accommodation for eight or ten months. There is very little evidence in the Bill on the protection of vulnerable groups, such as those who constantly cycle in and out of rental accommodation.

Senator Andrews spoke about the high levels of rent across the country, but people are screaming out with fear and are terrified that the Bill will make their lives more unaffordable than they already are. It would be great to hear directly from the Minister of State about when he anticipates rents falling. Rents in the many expensive apartment buildings that have been built are totally out of reach for people. The Minister of State knows that we would love to have a State construction company and the Government building housing.

We often hear that Fianna Fáil is the party of home building but we cannot keep dining out on a decades-old story because the reality is we do not have enough homes. Yes, building more accommodation and apartments is a positive thing but not if they are unaffordable and not if they are linked to market rents where the average person simply cannot not afford to live in them.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Nicole Ryan): Before we move on to our next speaker, I welcome to the Public Gallery, Miriam Fletcher, David Murphy, Maureen Murphy, Angela Murphy, Jennifer Murphy, Karen Wilds and Kaye O'Loughlin who are guests of Brigid

McGlynn from the Office of the Secretary General. They are most welcome to the House and I hope they enjoy their evening.

Senator Laura Harmon: I thank the Minister of State for engaging in this debate. Where do we even start with this Bill? We put down sensible amendments in the Dáil from the Labour Party. We are bringing them to the Seanad now as well. I am sure they will not be supported by the Government. We have called for this legislation to be scrapped. We simply do not believe that it supports renters. We do not believe it will work. It sides with big developers, big landlords and vulture funds over the average small landlord and, certainly, it is not on the side of renters. We know average tenancies end after three and a half years, not six years, so we will know there will be more frequent market resets. The Government has admitted that itself. It brought in a rent credit because it knows renters are struggling. It has already acknowledged that by bringing in a rent credit, which I would argue needs to be increased. Rents are going to go up because of this legislation. The Government seems to be coming up with all different ideas on how to solve the housing crisis but nothing seems to be working. This is another one of those ideas. We had the idea of the housing tsar before; I do not know what that was about.

This is causing a huge amount of confusion for renters and for small landlords. I am a renter myself. I live with my landlord currently and we are both confused by this legislation. We are both very confused as to what is going to happen. The general public is very confused. There needs to be a whole review of renting in Ireland. There is this idea that renting is this transient thing that people do but people have been renting in this country now for decades. People who do not want to be renting are trapped in renting. A lot of people aspire to owning their own properties. It is not everybody but a lot of people aspire to being able to own their own home one day.

We cannot have a whole generation of pensioners renting in the future. I have said it a million times. This is an absolute poverty ticking time-bomb. I do not know what we are going to do when we have a generation of pensioners who are renting in this country with an ageing population. The average house nowadays costs over eight times the average annual salary. The word "mortgage" itself comes from a term from the Middle Ages that means death pledge. Essentially, we will be paying mortgages until we are almost dead and past the age of retirement at this stage. Many banks will accept that. They are lending beyond the average age of retirement because they know people are going to have to be working longer in order to pay off these mortgages, these death pledges we are signing up to.

Ultimately, the cost of housing is going to have to come down. We need to accept that. We need to make housing more affordable for people. People are paying money into rent when they could be paying more money into our economy. They are paying it to private landlords and developers when they could be spending it in their communities. They could have it in saving accounts that could be accruing interest but instead they are paying off other people's mortgages. As I said before, there is a huge transfer of wealth happening in this country between renters and those who are renting out their properties. We need to have a sea-change in how we approach housing in this country and how we approach the issue of renting. The word "landlord" is even outdated. They are not lords. It is an imperialistic term. It implies a huge imbalance in power which exists. We absolutely need to review that. It is archaic.

We saw a report yesterday from Sherry FitzGerald that there is a deficit of nearly 39,000 when it comes to student accommodation beds in Ireland. I was president of the national students' union 11 years ago. There was a huge issue in terms of the availability of student accommodation then. It has got so many times worse now to the point where many students cannot even afford to rent. They do not have access to accommodation. There has been a huge skew towards the private sector to solve this but the private sector is not going to dig us out of the hole we are in. We have to have a more active role from the State in terms of building, working with local authorities and getting homes built because ultimately it will be a supply issue. We are talking about renters now but the whole thing is connected.

I was at a press conference in Buswells Hotel this morning, which I attended with members of the disabled community and students who are calling for an emergency payment for disabled people. We know the last budget has made disabled people in Ireland less well off. Disabled organisations estimate that they are less well off by €1,400. I was extremely sad to hear from a young man at that conference that as he could not afford to heat his home, he had to go out and buy an extra blanket to sleep in. He has to choose between eating and heating. That is the sad state of affairs we are at in this country. There should be social floor under which nobody can fall but the floor is gone. There is no floor. There are people in employment now who are falling into homelessness. I was talking to a plumber in Cork South-Central who was housed one week and was homeless the next. The reality here is that people renting are falling into homelessness. I do not need to tell the Minister of State about Cork and the availability of properties at a council level that are suitable for people who are disabled in order to live independently. That is a whole other issue about their economic independence and to be able to live independently. I am meeting people week in, week out, where there are three generations in the one house.

This is a wealthy country. We are a wealthy country but that wealth is not going into the pockets of ordinary people. I do not know what the Government will do in the next budget. Will it introduce another small rent credit? That is not going to help with the cost of living and the cost of renting. We believe this legislation is going to make these costs worse. I wish I could say I believed it was going to work. If we thought it would work we would not be opposing it but this is genuinely going to make things more difficult for people who are renting. That is why we called for it to be scrapped. We have brought amendments to try to make it better in whatever way we can but unfortunately, the Government is not supporting that. Not only has the Government been reliant on the private rental market and private investment but it is fair to say that the Government has been reliant on emigration to an extent. It is almost like we need people to leave the country; it is just not working. As the eldest of five girls, three of my younger sisters have left Ireland because they do not want to be paying extortionate rents. They do not see home ownership in their near future and things like public transport do not even work, so they left the country. I hope they will be able to come back one day and that they may be able to afford to buy their own home. For the minute, there are a lot of people in this case. We have the highest outward levels of migration since 2015 in this country. Meanwhile, the Government is also blaming immigration for the housing crisis. We have heard from Fine Gael in particular that immigration is contributing to the housing crisis whereas a lot of people who are coming into the country are key workers and are propping up our healthcare system because we are losing our own key workers at the same time. We are losing teachers, healthcare workers and members of the Garda from this country because they cannot aspire to

own their own homes. They are going to places like Dubai where they may have a better standard of living, instead of being trapped in renting with no prospect of owning their own homes in Ireland.

We will be opposing this Bill as we did in the Dáil but we urge the Minister of State to consider the amendments that are being put down. These are sensible amendments that need to happen.

Senator Chris Andrews: The haste with which this Bill has been undertaken is disappointing. We talk about democracy and commitment to the institutions we are elected to, yet a Bill this important will go through the Seanad and Dáil and be in place for 1 March. I presume that is the objective. We have Committee and Report Stages, and they are all being rushed through. I suspect the Government is going to guillotine the Bill if it is not going through fast enough and if Members are talking, analysing and examining various aspects of it. This is the most substantial change to the regulation of the private rental sector in over a decade and the Government is pushing it through over a few weeks in the Houses. I could be wrong there, but my understanding is that it will be guillotined and there will be no respect. The Bill is going to have a massive impact.

I meant to say earlier that when we look at students, we know the overwhelming majority of them do not live in the student-specific accommodation sector but in the private rental sector. Typically, they are seeking a lease for nine months and not 12 months. Come September, they are going to get hit substantially again. The vast majority of families in Donegal, west Cork and Mayo do not have access to specific student-built accommodation. There is some. I know UCD is building more. Each year, it builds a few more units, but it just does not meet the demand from students. Young people leaving west Cork, Donegal or Mayo are looking forward to going to college, getting a little bit of independence, meeting new friends, going out and enjoying the nightlife, studying, being educated and becoming independent. What will happen to them is that they will not be able to afford it because rents will be going up and up. Security of tenure is not going to be a huge factor for these students, but the cost will have a major impact on them. The cost of rents will be an issue for young students coming up to Dublin or going to Galway, for example, if they are in the midlands or Dublin and travelling. They are eating into the private rental market. They are going to be very much impacted by this change. The Bill's impact on third level education is one aspect of this issue.

Up to a little while ago, I was on the board of a school in Rathmines. It has struggled to get teachers to come up and teach in the Harold's Cross-Rathmines area because they could not afford the rents. The same goes for nurses, doctors and pharmacists. People in the medical and educational sectors cannot afford it. Schools cannot get teachers and principals now because of the rents. Those individuals cannot afford the rents they are expected to pay. A teacher is not going to be able to afford a one-bedroom apartment down in the glass bottle site, where the rent is €2,500 a month, or just down off Fenian Street, where the rent sought is €2,700. More supply might come on stream in Dublin, but ordinary people will not be able to afford it. Teachers, guards and doctors will not be able to afford it.

What use is bringing on stream all these units? More and more, it is creating a two-tier society, where if people have money, they will have accommodation, but if they do not have money, they will not have accommodation. They will be subjected to living in local authority

housing that is being neglected and forgotten about. Dublin City Council recently said that it was going to cost €400 million or €500 million to move the civic offices from the quays up to the site on Kevin Street and to develop that site. That is great. Happy days. However, how can the council manage to find the millions of euro required to develop the Kevin Street site when across the road 79 apartments are lying empty in the middle of a housing crisis? It can find the money to redevelop the Kevin Street site, but residents in flat complexes right across Dublin, including in Pearse House and Markievicz House, are left in completely unacceptable conditions. The Government can allocate the funding to reconstruct the civic offices, but it cannot ensure that people, families and communities in the inner city have decent homes to live in. It is just not right.

Ordinary workers are being driven out. A two-tier society is being created. We have the affluent down in Ringsend, over in Fenian Street or up in the new apartments in and around the south inner city while ordinary people cannot afford those properties. It is very frustrating to see the Government rushing this legislation through, ignoring the institutions its Members have been elected to and ramming through a Bill that will have a devastating impact on young people and old people. Senator Harmon mentioned this aspect. Older people are going to be hugely affected by it as well. I was contacted recently by a couple who had got a notice to quit. They are each in or around 61 or 62 years of age. They are not going to be able to rent one of these new apartments the big companies are building. Where are they going to end up then? They are going to end up using homeless services and it will be a result of the Government's neglect of ordinary people and middle-income workers.

We hear about the middle class. Middle-class people are being squeezed out, too. Their kids are not going to be able to afford to pay €500,000 for a new house and they are not going to be able to afford to rent. We will get to a point where we have young people with decent jobs and relatively decent incomes of, say, €40,000 a year, who are working hard, doing everything right and paying their bills. They are not able to save enough to buy a house. They are struggling. They cannot have children because they cannot afford to do so. They have only one room. Where are they going to keep the second or third child? They do not have the room. The cost of childcare has gone through the roof as well. Where are people expected to find all of this money to pay for the costs and set up a family home? It is nearly impossible.

If people are on middle-income wages, they will not have enough to pay rent in the high-rent rental areas. I know those and have documented them. They are also earning too much to go on the council housing lists. Where do they go then? They have to couch surf. They end up in family hubs.

A person in recovery contacted me.

This single individual cannot go home and had to move into a supported accommodation, but is being asked to leave that supported accommodation after eight months. Where does that person go now? There were 1,800 people ahead of him or her on the housing list. The person works and does all the right things but cannot afford to rent or buy a home or get a mortgage.

It is depressing for young people. I would not like to be a young person trying to make my way in the world right now, because of the challenges. Like I said, setting up a family or even just trying to survive independent of your parents is becoming increasingly difficult. The new renters in new tenancies will be facing potential rent increases in the order of 20%, 25% or

30%. That is what their increase in rent will be over a year. In the case of Galway, it will be €5,000 and in the Minister of State's own constituency, I do not know if he has mentioned it to his constituents, but renters are going to pay roughly €3,500 extra per year in rent because of this Bill. Has the Minister of State told his constituents that?

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: I have not because it is not true.

Senator Chris Andrews: Well, we have done the studies and the figures are there. The Minister of State should be honest with his constituents in Cork because it is going to have a massive impact on people. Those same people are going to end up in homeless services, back at home or couch surfing. People in addiction are not going to be able to recover out of their addiction because they will be trying to navigate the many obstacles put in their way, such as when it comes to childcare and recovery services. It is going to have a huge impact on everybody in society.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: There is no doubt we all want to solve this crisis. Labour has a strong track record on housing. We had the housing Department while in government. We put forward proposals that were not always supported, but we also put forward proposals that were supported. We definitely do not want to disagree with this. We see there is, of course, room for a rental market, but we have put in 69 amendments and I cannot understand why none of them were taken up. We have a track record and a history. We have been calling for a State construction company since 2024, and I know other people have come along with it now too. We are not trying to be awkward. We in the Labour Party believe the market is not going to solve the housing crisis.

This Bill is trying to appease institutional landlords. We can see this right across the board. A three-year rent freeze is nothing to be looking for. For general, smaller landlords, a three-year rent freeze is not the end of the world. Ruling out no-fault eviction is not going to be the end of the world and neither is stopping evicting children into homelessness. These are all very easy things on which the Government could work with a small landlord. It is the big institutional landlords who are the ones influencing this Bill. That is wrong and the Government should listen to the Opposition. We all live in the same constituencies. In Sligo where I live, the average rent has gone up 90% since Covid, with the average rent of a house being €1,400. That is crazy. In Leitrim, it is €1,300, having gone up 98% since Covid.

If we wanted to have a full governmental approach to this, which I thought we would and that is one way we could look at solving the housing crisis, this would have been able to support bringing in the minimum wage for apprentices, which we have previously brought before the Seanad. We have a shortage of apprentices and there are many of them leaving in the first year, with low pay cited as one of the main reasons. I cannot understand why this was not taken into account. Instead of trying to appease smaller landlords, we are actually talking about vulture funds here. The Bill reflects the neoliberal influence that, unfortunately, this Government is paying homage to.

My own party colleagues have brought forward legislation on the right to flexible work and the right to remote working. If you can do your job from home, you should be entitled to do it there. Again, this would relieve the housing crisis. I get the train up and down to Sligo. We

can see the homeless crisis is very hard, and it took me a long time to get my head around it, seeing so many people, including children, homeless. As Labour Party spokesperson on workers' rights, I have made the point that there many low-paid workers are stuck in the middle. They cannot afford rent and, in my opinion, the HAP rates are too low. I know I should not be saying that because I do not want to be giving money to private landlords, but the HAP rates need to be increased until the supply of housing is there. The HAP rates are too low, so people are getting notices to quit and they have nowhere to go. The thresholds for social housing are also too low. To be eligible for a social house in Sligo, you have to earn €30,000. That is it. They should be higher. They have not been reviewed for years and should be higher until more housing comes on stream. If we look at building houses, why are there not more affordable to rent and affordable to buy houses being built? I argue this Bill aims to appease institutional landlords.

Low pay is an area we have spoken about, and I know people here have spoken about pensions. Every day we are contacted on these issues. The main thing all of us as politicians hear about is housing, but there are also pensioners, as Senator Andrews said. I have pensioners coming to me who are 60 or 65 years of age and have received notices to quit but have nowhere to go. Where are they going to go? The issue of student accommodation has come up many times and there is a lack of available purpose-built student accommodation but, until it is built, and there are strides being made to build it, why can accommodation not be put into that in the meantime, so that students will not be affected by this?

I am disappointed the Minister of State is not listening to the amendments. There are many qualified people with experience and knowledge on the Opposition benches. They are worthy of having their amendments listened to. Instead, the Bill will be rammed and pushed through the House. We spent hours deliberating over the Mental Health Bill and the defamation Bill, and rightly so; that is our job. We are here to talk through legislation and work it out; not to have it rammed through. I hope the Minister of State will reconsider the idea of bulldozing this through just because he does not want to listen to very sensible amendments from all the Opposition benches.

Senator Patricia Stephenson: I echo what Senator Cosgrove just said. There is an opportunity to not guillotine the debate tomorrow and it would be fantastic if that opportunity was taken.

Senator Harmon talked about the terminology of landlords being outdated. While I wish that were true and I wish it were archaic, the reality is it is not. There were 5,000 eviction notices issued in the past three months. It is almost like we are approaching Famine-level evictions in Ireland and, like the Famine, these evictions are based on economic reasons because people cannot afford rent. We will see that soar in this context. We had evictions in Kilkenny this week and in Waterford. It is so evocative and painful for people that there are community members getting out on the streets, trying to defend their neighbour who, through no fault of their own, cannot pay rent.

When we talk about homelessness, and we have these endless figures increasing month after month, it is heartbreaking and can be difficult. The more the figures increase, the less human it becomes, and it is more about numbers. We put less of a face on it. Since it was pancake Tuesday yesterday, it reminded me of that. I recently spoke to a mother who is living in

homeless accommodation. She told me that the most heartbreaking thing for her is when she is talking to her child about their whole situation.

6 o'clock

They have been there for months and there is no pathway out for them. There is nowhere to go, so they are living in emergency accommodation. Her child asked, "Can we have pancakes today?" All that is required to make pancakes is milk, flour and eggs. It is the simplest thing; cheap as chips. However, she cannot do that for her daughter because she does not have a hob, a fridge or access to cooking facilities. Many families would not have had pancakes. We all had our pancakes down in the canteen. They did not have pancakes yesterday, Pancake Tuesday. It was not available because she could not do the simplest thing. What a small gesture for a child any day of the week. It does not need to be Pancake Tuesday to be able to provide that.

We do not see this Bill bringing those people out of homelessness. It will increase supply, but we do not see it driving down rents or providing more affordable accommodation where people can live. That is the challenge for us. We do not see it stopping evictions, which are increasing. We do not see it stopping the rise in the number of homeless people. It would be great for the Minister of State to be able to tell us what will happen. I appreciate that we have been putting up our hands to speak and that he has not yet had the opportunity to come back in. These are the things in respect of which we want answers, because it is hard for us when we strongly believe that the legislation will not fix those things. It will not put mothers back in their homes with their children in order that they can make pancakes. It will not stop people from having to go out on the street to stop their neighbours being evicted. We all appreciate that this is so real for many people.

We all receive representations all the time. It is the most heartbreaking thing. People come to us, as representatives, and ask if we can help them with finding somewhere to live or getting out of emergency accommodation, but we cannot do anything. The local authorities are struggling to meet the demand. Senator Cosgrove laid it out beautifully. We believe that the incentive behind this legislation is coming from private investors and is not being driven by affordable housing demand. That is the issue. We are seeing the kind of colonial tenant class and landlord class that are so etched into our history being played out in modern Ireland, and that is dark and bleak. If it goes on like this, we will be in an even worse situation, if people can imagine that, than we are today.

Some of the amendments are mitigating efforts to try to make the Bill a little more realistic and a bit more manageable. Perhaps we will have time to speak about them today and tomorrow.

Senator Chris Andrews: I mentioned that the increase in rents in Cork would be around €3,600 per year and the Minister of State said that is not true. What will the cost of an average market reset new tenancy in County Cork be from March? What assessment did the Department undertake and will it publish that research?

Can the Minister of State give a commitment that the Government will not guillotine the debate on the Bill?

Acting Chairperson (Senator Nicole Ryan): As we have no indication from other speakers-

Senator Joe Flaherty: Sorry, before the Chair calls the Minister of State, I wish to point out that Opposition Members have spoken for an hour and a half without addressing one amendment. They have wasted an hour and a half. I still ask for a Bill not to-----

Acting Chairperson (Senator Nicole Ryan): This is Committee Stage.

Senator Joe Flaherty: They have had three-----

Acting Chairperson (Senator Nicole Ryan): -----and there is no time limit on Senators' contributions. I remind Senator Flaherty of the Standing Orders of the House. As no other Senators are indicating, I call the Minister of State.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: I thank Senators for their contributions. It was stated that we are listening to the investors and that this is what is driving the legislation. That is absolutely not the case. The motivation behind this legislation is to support the types of people and situations Senators have been describing, namely the women in emergency accommodation and the pensioners in private rented accommodation. That is exactly what we are trying to do here. We are introducing security of tenure and a nationwide rent pressure zone, which was not there before. I keep coming back to the example of Clonakilty in my area which did not have any rent control restrictions. The latter was non-existent, and now Clonakilty has them. That is exactly the motivation behind the Bill.

Senator Andrews mentioned that rents in Cork are going up by €3,500 per year. Those are figures that he has extrapolated from some report or that he has seen. What he outlined is absolutely not the case.

Senator Chris Andrews: What will the figures be?

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: Existing tenancies cannot reset to market rent. How could I go back to my constituents in Cork South-West and say that their rents are going to increase? Existing tenancies cannot reset to market rent. This only applies to first-time tenancies from 1 March.

Senator Chris Andrews: New tenants-----

Acting Chairperson (Senator Nicole Ryan): Senator-----

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: There is absolutely no indication that this will happen. I do not know where the Senator is getting that from. I will certainly not be going back to my constituents in Cork South-West with that type of scaremongering.

Senators spoke about the legislation being rushed through, hammered through and so on. We knew this was coming last summer, and even prior to that. We knew of the date of 1 March

at that time. This has not been just thought up and rushed through the Dáil. There was pre-legislative scrutiny in respect of this legislation. That is not rushing legislation through the Dáil. I just wanted to address that.

Senator Andrews talked about lobbying and the influence of big developers who have access to the Oireachtas. It is quite well known that the Sinn Féin housing spokesperson in the Oireachtas has a very long list according to the lobbying register. By the way, I do not criticise him for that. In order to get the solutions, we need to talk to as many people as possible. For example, we have gone out and spoken to the NGOs, including Threshold and the Simon Community. We need engagement at all levels. I do not know why this is being used as a political tool.

The Senator mentioned the idea of bringing down rents to drive up rents. The simple fact is that we have a population that is growing significantly. We do not have the supply of units to meet the demand that exists. That is why rents are increasing. We are bringing in a rent pressure zone nationally to ensure that we have those protections. We are bringing in this legislation to ensure there is supply. As I have said previously, the industry has reacted well to the potential for the delivery of units. That is something we welcome. While there has been a lot of commentary in this House today, there is also been a lot of positive commentary about this legislation that has not been mentioned. Senator Andrews mentioned rents in Dublin estates on quite a few occasions. If we talk about it honestly, Dublin will benefit more from this legislation than anywhere else-----

Senator Chris Andrews: Not in Ringsend.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: -----by driving up the supply of apartments and other units. It is all about supply. Of course there are other factors. We have to introduce affordable housing schemes and we are. We have to introduce social housing. We are building record amounts of social housing. That is all part of it. There is no one silver bullet to fix the housing crisis; there are many elements to this.

Senators also mentioned affordability. There is quite a lot of work being done on that issue. The Government's new plan, Delivering Homes, Building Communities, contains an action plan with regard to housing supply and targeting homelessness between 2025 and 2030. It will provide 90,000 affordable supports to help people secure a home of their own. That is the ambition in the plan over the next while. We are seeing some positive outcomes with the trends in the delivery of housing. Since 2022, 4,500 homes have been delivered by AHBs, local authorities the Land Development Agency. There is a strong pipeline of future developments with over 5,150 additional affordable purchase homes approved for support from affordable housing funds across 22 local authorities. Indications are good.

From a funding point of view, money is not the issue. This legislation should not be seen in isolation. The plan is being enabled by the largest ever capital investment in the history of the State of €275 billion over ten years to significantly upgrade the country's infrastructure and make the environment for building homes much better.

We are trying to put in place an environment for a significant upscaling and delivery of housing. Direct funding for housing will be at unprecedented levels. In 2026 alone, more than

€9 billion in capital funding will be provided through the Exchequer to the LDA and the Housing Finance Agency. This cannot be seen in a silo. It is all part of an approach across different Departments and Government agencies to ensure we increase supply at record levels. This legislation ensures the involvement of the private sector, which is key. However, the State is doing more than ever. The State currently delivers the biggest proportion of housing in the country. That is probably not how it should be. We scale up and do as much as we can to increase delivery. However, the private sector will have to play its part.

Senator Stephenson referred to women fleeing domestic violence, which is a really important consideration. I appreciate her doing that. Everything possible should be done to accommodate such women. However, again what is being lost in the conversation is that we now have a nationwide rent pressure zone, which means there are controls, and we also have security of tenure. In addition, new tenancies will not be reset to market value.

A question that was repeatedly asked was when we will see a cooling down of the significant and unprecedented increase in rents currently seen throughout the country. Again, supply is the key here. We have to get supply to critical mass so that we get to the point where supply is sufficient.

Senator Harmon referred to pensioners. To reiterate that point, the motivation of this legislation is to have the dual effect of, first, increasing supply and creating an environment where it is again viable to build units, apartments in particular, and, second, there is security of tenancy, which is also key. It is about protecting the tenant but also increasing supply. That is really important.

I agree with Senator Harmon that the word "landlord" should be done away with. That is just my own opinion. I do not know what the potential is for that happening. I agree with the Senator that is an outdated term.

To come back to the amendments, this amendment deletes the lines that will allow me to move the provisions in the Bill, yet it is asking for a report within three months. It does not make sense and it cannot work. That is one of the main reasons the Government opposes the amendments.

Senator Chris Andrews: The Minister of State mentioned increasing supply in Dublin. The reality is that increase will be in high-end property. I was on the glass bottle site where 3,800 new homes are planned. The Minister of State is right that 350 of those will be social homes. In my view, and in the community's view, it is not enough but it is welcome. The number of people on the housing list in that area is through the roof. As I said, people cannot afford to rent or buy, so the only option is to live in overcrowded homes in Ringsend, Pearse Street or wherever it is and then look to rent. The reality is they cannot afford to do so. It costs €3,000 and €3,500, respectively, for a two-bedroom and three-bedroom apartment in the glass bottle site. In another building not far from there, the Shore Club, it cost €675,000 to buy a one-bedroom unit. No social housing was allocated on that site. The developer made a financial contribution off site and homes are being built. While that is all very well, not all of them are being built in the community. The council had to buy homes down in Heuston Quarter, so only some of these homes are in and around the area.

As regards the high-end, expensive apartments, it costs almost €1 million for a two-bedroom apartment in the Shore Club. My understanding is that not all of those have been sold. Who is able to afford them? If people do not live in them, they will rent them out at astronomical rents. While there may be more units coming on stream, they not for ordinary working families who are already squeezed and struggling with the cost of living. Is that what the Government is doing?

The Minister of State is telling me that part of the solution to the housing crisis is to produce top-end apartments. In one of the blocks, there is a little home cinema which residents can book. There is a gym, which is absolutely fantastic, but that is not going to make these apartments affordable for ordinary people living in the inner city. The glass bottle site has a fantastic tradition. It is intertwined with the local community in Ringsend. Families worked there and were let go out of it. At one stage, the National Asset Management Agency, NAMA, offered the Government a discount on the sale price of the site, and the Government refused. It could have built 3,500 units of public, social and affordable housing with various types of cost-rental homes, but it did not take up that offer. That is a shame on the Government.

In regard to high rents in Cork, the Minister of State misunderstood my question. We are talking about new tenancies. The Minister of State is saying rents in existing tenancies will not go up. What he is doing there is deflecting from what we are talking about. The Bill states that new tenancies from 1 March will go to market reset. Is that the case? If so, what assessments were done by the Department? If assessments were done, why will the Department not publish them? If they were not done, how can the Department have figures for how much rents will go up? The Minister of State might come back to me on that.

Senator Pauline Tully: The Minister of State said this Bill will bring security of tenure to tenants. However, security of tenure is no use to any tenant if they cannot afford the rent. The Bill is confusing because it will create different categories of tenants. There will be those in new tenancies that start after 1 March, there will be existing tenancies and then there will be students. There are different groups of tenants and some are going to be afforded protections while others are not. That is highly unfair. All tenants deserve security of tenure but they deserve security of tenure with an affordable rent. There should not be a differential across the tenancies.

In relation to the Residential Tenancies Board figures Senator Andrews referred to, the RTB figures are based on its predictions around existing rent and market rent. Sinn Féin looked at those. For example, in my county, Cavan, the average rent is €947 per month. The market rent in Cavan is €1,226. For a new tenancy after 1 March, a landlord could potentially increase the average rent by €279 a month. If landlords do that, and I predict many of them will, certainly if they have not raised the rent in some time and cannot do so again for another six years, it could result in a rent increase of €3,300 over a year for tenants. That is what we are basing our figures on. They are average figures, of course, and we do not know what every individual landlord is going to do.

However, I predict that the vast majority of landlords will take the opportunity to raise the rent when a new tenancy comes along because they will not get an opportunity to do it again for another six years.

The Minister of State talked about the need for an increase in supply, particularly with regard to apartments. I can probably see an increase in apartments in Dublin, maybe Cork and other large urban centres, but they will be quite high end and out of reach to most ordinary people. For counties like Cavan, Monaghan and the smaller, more rural ones where there will be small, non-major groups of apartments, I cannot see investors being interested in building apartments in those small-to-medium-sized towns. It will not benefit any tenant or prospective tenant in the likes of Cavan and the more rural counties.

We need an increase in the supply of public and affordable housing on public land to address this. Many people are facing eviction because their landlords are selling. Quite a number of landlords are selling as a result of this Bill because they find it confusing and feel it penalises them, especially smaller landlords who are now deemed large landlords if they have four or more properties. That is not many. Those tenants being evicted from a property are in an awful position because they have nowhere to go and cannot afford the rent. Even if they qualify for HAP, there are no available properties anyway. Landlords are picking and choosing, and most of them are not choosing HAP.

The Minister of State mentioned our referencing of Irish institutional investors, vulture funds and other big investment companies. The Minister of State said there had been engagement with people from all of the sectors concerning housing. While they might have been engaged with, were they listened to? Has the Government engaged with communities and groups like Focus Ireland, the Simon Communities in Ireland and so forth? I do not think they are in favour of this Bill. Rather, they are fearful of what will happen as a result of it. They are going to see an increase in the number of people trying to access the homeless services they provide. Maybe the Minister of State and the Department have engaged, but have they listened? I fear not.

Senator Joanne Collins: I am always hearing stuff from the Government benches such as “time is more valuable than money” and, in this case, “it is all about supply”. There is no point in supply, however, if people are not able to afford that supply. With this Bill, supply only seems to play in favour of some parts of Dublin. Supply is not going to increase in Limerick, Cork, Kerry, Tipperary or any of the rural areas. Rather, it will hit those rural areas the hardest because they predominately have houses rather than apartments. In County Limerick, a new tenancy will be an extra €400 per month when market rates come in. In the Minister of State’s county of Cork, it will be an extra €300, while in Kerry it will be an extra €250. I am focusing on Munster at the moment. Most people in County Limerick cannot afford rent as it is, never mind an extra €400 per month for a new tenancy. It is absolutely crazy.

Every week, I receive calls to my office from tenants facing eviction notices who ask what they should do and whether they will have to go to homeless services. Homeless services will get to a point - it is horrible to say it - where they will not be able to take these people. They are going to run out of space because people cannot afford to stay in rented accommodation.

Most of these people do not even want to be in rented accommodation; they want to own their own homes. Going back ten, 20 or 30 years, the thing in this country was to get a good job and buy a house, but that is not even a possibility any more. To take a couple, one a teacher and the other a garda, as an example, people would have thought that, since they had such amazing jobs, they were on the pig’s back and would have no problem getting a house, having

kids, putting them through college, buying the new car and going on holidays every year. That is not the case any more. These things cannot be done on those wages. People need to be earning over €100,000 to be able to even think about going to a mortgage company. Very few people can go to a mortgage company and get a mortgage. Maybe they could 20 years ago because house prices were on average between €200,000 and €250,000, and people could get one for a little bit cheaper if they were willing to downgrade. I am looking at houses being built in rural County Limerick in the west and a three-bedroom bungalow, off the plans, is €500,000. It is absolute madness to think about what the cost is going to be. No young person can afford that.

I listened to other Senators talk about emigration. Young people are finishing school and college and getting out of here. This Bill is going to hit college students worse than it will hit rural Ireland. It is going to be bad for rural Ireland but it will be 100 times worse for college students because they take out a new lease every nine months. That is a new tenancy every nine months. It is going to be great for the people who own the houses because they will be able to keep increasing their rent every nine months. Where is the fairness for these students? They are breaking themselves every day to get to college. A lot of them have to commute. There are three colleges in Limerick city and the students in the county who cannot afford to drive but might be lucky enough to get accommodation in the city are now going to hit with this where they will pay huge, extortionate rents. I am sorry - it is not going to be them paying, but their parents. If they are in college Monday to Friday, they are only getting weekend jobs. They are not earning enough to pay for this rent. It is the parents who pay it, and they are being crippled left, right and centre.

This is crazy. It is all for large corporate landlords and developers. This is not for the one-off landlord. Those large companies pay little to no tax. It is crazy to think that they can get away with upping the rent every single year for a new tenancy and not have to pay any penalty for it. I cannot understand it. It is as if the Government is punishing renters for the failure in housing. That is how it comes across. People who are renting are in that situation because they cannot afford to buy a house.

Let us go back a few years. I built my first house when I was 20. I could not do that now if I were a 20-year-old. There would be no chance in hell I could do that now. I have two adult children at home. I have four children altogether but two of them are adults. I am never going to see the back of them. Do not get me wrong; I love them but I am going to get sick of living with them at some stage. The day one of them comes home and says they are going to have a child, that is it. I am sorry but there is not a chance. I am going to have to look at building chalets around my house or something because they are never moving out, and they know that. The only way they are ever going to move out is if they emigrate. I do not want that. While I wish for them to be able to live independently, I do not want to lose them. I know that when they emigrate, especially girls, they might meet someone over there and not come home because they end up having their families there. I have a lot of friends living in Australia and Canada who are never coming home. They have children and are married there. They are now residents of those countries and integrated into their societies. They might come home at Christmas to see their parents or if their parents become really sick, God forbid, they might have no choice but to come home. That is it, however.

We have lost many good people, including many tradespeople. They trained as carpenters, builders, plumbers and electricians but we cannot even get one here if we have a problem in our house because none of them lives in the country anymore. This is what is going to happen if we keep pushing up the cost of rent. We are going to end up losing many more people. If Members think emigration is bad now, just give it a couple of months or years when this market reset keeps going. It will be 100 times worse. It will be all old people living here and no young people. When we are all retiring, there will be no one to take over and we are going to have the pension problem again. It goes around in a circle constantly.

The Minister of State said he did not want to accept any of the amendments. Deputy Ó Broin has brought forward many brilliant ideas and I do not know whether it is stubbornness or pettiness that the Government parties do not want to look at them. He has consulted experts – not Sinn Féin experts, but independent experts - who back up some of the policies he has suggested, but the Government just does not want to look at them. It is just going to keep making the same mistakes over and over.

The Minister of State asked about how we fix the housing crisis. There is one simple answer - we need to get rid of the parties that caused it. I do not mean for that to sound as bitchy as it does, but we need to get rid of the ones that caused the housing crisis. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have been in government for the past ten and 15 years, respectively.

Jesus Christ, if we go back 15 years, people were able to live. People cannot live any more. It is absolutely heartbreaking to see that the next generation is going to come up and will not know what it was like to be able to go out for a drink, to not struggle to pay for their car tax or to be able to put diesel in the car and not worry. They are putting in €10 worth of diesel one day and waiting until the following day to put in another €10. They are seeing how they go by the end of the week. Fifteen years ago, we were able to live a little bit. This is not living. People are not living right now. They are struggling to survive every single day. The Bill, in allowing the upping of rent, is absolutely farcical. How can the Government say rents will go up so supply will come up so we can bring down the rent again? It is completely ridiculous.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: I appreciate the comments from Senators but I feel that this Bill is being completely mis-characterised. As I said at the outset, the types of people the Senators are describing, including those facing homelessness, those in emergency accommodation and those who are afraid of extortionate rent hikes, are exactly the people we are trying to protect and cater for. If you listen to what the Bill actually does, I am surprised that it is being characterised like that and I am surprised that the Opposition is not supporting it. Six-year tenancies, and rolling, are guaranteed. That is unprecedented. That is security of tenure. Landlords will only be able to reset the rent if the previous tenant has left of their own volition. That is unprecedented security and protection for tenants.

No-fault evictions are no longer legal for landlords who have four tenancies or more, that is, the larger landlords. That is unprecedented. It has been called for in both Houses for a long time. That is what this legislation does. Yet, the Opposition is opposing it. That does not make sense to me. Even for smaller landlords, there is a very limited set of reasons where notices of termination can be served. Rent pressure zones are nationwide. I say it again. I am surprised at how this is being characterised. I am surprised at the level of opposition. As I have

summarised, what the Bill is doing is giving greater protection to tenants and increasing supply, which is exactly what is being sought.

I was called petty for not accepting this amendment. The main reason we cannot accept this amendment is because it precludes me from commencing the provisions of the Bill. At the same time, the Opposition is looking for a report in three months' time. It does not make sense. That is one of the main reasons we cannot support this amendment.

Senator Chris Andrews: I mentioned a point previously to which the Minister of State did not respond, which was an assessment of which rents will be going up. What assessments did the Government do? If it did assessments, why will it not publish them and explain how it came to these figures? When I said the rent in County Cork will go up by €3,500 per year, the Minister of State said it will not. Where is the assessment to show that is not true? How can the Minister of State tell me that is not true? Did the Government conduct research or assessments? It would be important for people to see how it came to the conclusion that rents will not rise. Is it fair to say that the Minister of State is saying that rents will not rise? Perhaps he would respond to that.

Senator Maria McCormack: I thank the Minister of State. I want to come back in on the amendment because I am confused. I know the Minister of State said he thought it should be ruled out of order. I think it was accepted that it was a valid amendment. Perhaps the Minister of State could explain it to me more clearly. What we are seeking is the deletion of a section and the insertion of a section that we are requesting to have a report after three months so we can get analysis. Will the Minister of State clarify that point? We seem not to be on the same page there. I do not think any of the Seanad staff have made a mistake in accepting the amendment.

I want to go back over some points. The figures that are there do not refer to existing tenancies. We are talking about new tenancies after 1 March, which will go through the market reset. It might be fine for people in cities. In fact, it is not going to be fine for people in Dublin or anything like it. However, those people are not going to be impacted as much as people where I live. I am from Laois. I talk about it enough in this House. No big private investors are going to come to Laois and build anything for us. We cannot get anyone to do anything there. We are the forgotten county. We are really going to suffer. The Minister of State mentioned that everywhere is going to be a rent pressure zone now, but what security of tenure is there going to be for people if they are facing such a dramatic increase in their rent now? It is the dramatic increase in rent that we have a problem with.

Let us consider Josie down the road, who might be paying €900 rent now. She might only be there for two years. She moves out and has to move elsewhere. The average market rent in Laois is much higher than €900. I know a lot of people around Laois who are paying €900 or €1,000 in rent but that is not the market value at the moment. The market value is substantially higher. I worry that big landlords are going to completely take advantage here. These are the issues we are pointing out.

These are the reasons we want reports that will allow us all to sit down together and look at the situation. I have sat down with representatives of the Simon Communities and Focus Ireland. We have looked through the reports. I have looked at the analysis and the homeless

figures that they are expecting as a result of the impact of the driving up of rents. It is concerning. I know the Minister of State is saying that the Government is collaborating or engaging with those organisations, but it is not the same collaboration as we have been having, day in and day out, with the Simon Communities and all the homeless agencies.

I cannot see how this Bill will have any positive impact for people in Laois. I cannot see how it will have any impact for people all over Ireland except the big developers. We need to appeal to those big developers to come in here and build more properties but this is not going to do it. The economic experts have come out to say this will not result in the building of many houses. I am hearing so much deflection but am not hearing points or answers. Is the Minister of State disagreeing with the facts? I am not talking about existing tenancies. I am talking about new tenancies. That is exactly what this Bill does. From 1 March, new tenancies are going to market reset. That means the highest point in the market in a certain area and it is a massive problem. There is no point in fluffing around. We are here. Rents are going to go up for people and we have nothing to say about it. I would like to hear answers on those aspects.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: I say to Senator Andrews that there has been sufficient analysis of the rental market over the past two years to inform this legislation. There is absolutely no doubt about that whatsoever. Not only that, there has been engagement with the housing and homelessness NGOs, including Threshold, Focus Ireland, the Simon Communities, etc. There is no doubt about that whatsoever.

As I said, the Housing Agency and the Housing Commission are often quoted in this House, and we should listen to them. I ask everyone to go and visit the Housing Agency website and view the report which specifically says that we need a reset. That is exactly what we are doing.

In order to answer the specific question and try to avoid confusion, this amendment seeks a report within three months of publication of the legislation. That is fine. There will be one in 12 months anyway, which is one of the reasons we are opposing this amendment. That is what it specifically asks for. I do not think it gives enough time for a proper assessment and review, but that is okay. That part of the amendment is fine. However, it also deletes the lines that allow me or the Minister to commence the provisions of the Bill, which means there can be no report. I hope that makes sense. That is why we are opposing the amendment.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I welcome Deputy Ardagh, a former Member of this House. She is accompanied by Ms Regina Burke, Mr. Ronan O'Sullivan, Mr. Jimmy Lawless, Ms Jennifer Davitt and Mr. Killian O'Sullivan. I hope they enjoy their visit to Leinster House this evening. They are in very capable hands. I call Senator Andrews.

Senator Chris Andrews: In reference to the research carried out over two years, I ask that it be published so that people can see it and make their own minds up, rather than having to take the Government's word for it.

I hear the Government talking about how it is committed to protecting tenants' security in their tenancy. I have to question that because, when we look at the tenant in situ scheme, it was a scheme that gave people some bit of security. People renting in the private sector are waiting for the notice to quit. As I mentioned earlier, the average lease time is three or three and a half years, so people are waiting for the notice to quit. The tenant in situ scheme was

giving people a little bit of security. It obviously was not going to work for everybody, but it was going to work for a lot of people.

I know one person renting in the private rental sector who received three different notices to quit during their time in private tenancy. That person has had to up sticks and leave their tenancy, their HAP property, on three separate occasions. The first and second occasions were very close together. That person dreads receiving a notice to quit. They are waiting to get on the social housing list, but that can take ten or 11 years. In area M in this area, there are more than 1,000 people on the waiting list for a one-bedroom property. That is the housing list for one very small area. The tenant in situ scheme was giving people some security but the Government has deconstructed it to almost nothing. Dublin City Council has very few tenant in situ applications. It is dealing with that.

The tenant in situ scheme was going to allow persons to live in the home they had been renting up to then, and the council was obviously going to take it on, but that was effectively scrapped by the Government while people were midway through their applications. When the Government says it is concerned about the welfare of renters, it rings a bit hollow when we know that the same Government effectively got rid of the tenant in situ scheme.

We hear talk about protecting tenants. Again, I go back to the fact that many tenants cannot afford to pay the rents. It is all very well having security of tenure and no-fault evictions, but if a person cannot afford the rent, it does not really matter what we have. It is like the difference between theory and practice. I ask that the Minister of State consider publishing the research and findings the Department has which allow him make a call that rent is not going to go up to €3,500 per year and €5,000 per year in Galway. I would appreciate it if the Minister of State could respond on that.

Senator Patricia Stephenson: The Minister of State talked about consulting different organisations, and we appreciate that he has done that. It is worth pointing out that, for example, Threshold has said that despite the proposed improvements to security of tenure, it is extremely concerned about the decision to allow landlords to set rents to market levels between tenancies, particularly after a renter leaves voluntarily or is evicted for breach of contract. It urges the Government to remedy this gap in the legislation. It is important to note that. It is one thing to say they have been consulted, but we all know there are different levels of consultation and engagement. I appreciate that the Minister of State engages with many stakeholders and, as anyone who has worked on any type of policy with a wide range of stakeholders will know, it is impossible to get consensus. For us, groups like Threshold, which represent the most vulnerable people renting in society, are the voices to be prioritised. I wanted to make that point clear.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: The tenant in situ scheme is still an option for local authorities for a variety of reasons, especially when it comes to people who are exiting homelessness. It is very important to say that the scheme has not been scrapped.

Again, the Housing Agency report is available on the Housing Agency website. I urge the Senator to view it because the recommendations within have informed this legislation. It certainly was not back-of-the-envelope calculations, which I think is what Members have done to come up with figures like €3,500 for Cork South-West. If the people of Cork South-West

are listening, I can tell them there is no evidence that is going to happen. I want to ensure that is out there. I cannot support this amendment.

Amendment put:

The Committee divided: Tá, 15; Níl, 29.	
Tá	Níl
Andrews, Chris.	Ahearn, Garret.
Black, Frances.	Boyle, Manus.
Clonan, Tom.	Brady, Paraic.
Collins, Joanne.	Byrne, Cathal.
Cosgrove, Nessa.	Byrne, Maria.
Harmon, Laura.	Casey, Pat.
Higgins, Alice-Mary.	Clifford-Lee, Lorraine.
McCarthy, Aubrey.	Comyn, Alison.
McCormack, Maria.	Conway, Martin.
Murphy, Conor.	Costello, Teresa.
Noonan, Malcolm.	Crowe, Ollie.
O'Reilly, Sarah.	Daly, Paul.
Ryan, Nicole.	Duffy, Mark.
Stephenson, Patricia.	Fitzpatrick, Mary.
Tully, Pauline.	Flaherty, Joe.
	Gallagher, Robbie.
	Kelleher, Garret.
	Kennelly, Mike.
	Kyne, Seán.
	Lynch, Eileen.
	Murphy, P. J.
	Nelson Murray, Linda.
	Ní Chuilinn, Evanne.
	O'Donovan, Noel.
	O'Reilly, Joe.
	Rabbitte, Anne.
	Ryan, Dee.
	Seahill, Gareth.
	Wilson, Diarmuid.

Tellers: Tá, Senators Maria McCormack and Chris Andrews; Níl, Senators Garret Ahearn and Paul Daly.

Amendment declared lost.

7 o'clock

Progress reported; Committee to sit again.

Education (Leave for Injuries) Bill 2025: Second Stage

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister to the House. Before I call Senator Harmon, I welcome former Senator and leader of the Labour Party, Ivana Bacik, to the House along with Deputies Lawlor, Nash and Sheehan. They are most welcome to the Distinguished Visitors Gallery, where they should be, of course. I also welcome guests of Senator Harmon, who are in the Gallery for this debate.

Senator Laura Harmon: I move: “That the Bill be now read a Second Time.”

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: I second.

An Cathaoirleach: Is Senator Harmon sharing time?

Senator Laura Harmon: Yes.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Laura Harmon: I thank the Cathaoirleach and welcome the Minister, Deputy Naughton, to the Seanad this evening. I am delighted to bring the Education (Leave for Injuries) Bill to Second Stage tonight in the Seanad. It has been a long process to even get it to this point. I believe the Government will not be opposing the Bill on this Stage. I am thrilled about that and I know the campaigners in the Gallery are really delighted about this too because we have been waiting for progress on this for a long time. It really is welcome. We need to work together across this House in order to get a resolution here. This is one step along the way.

As the leader of the cross-party group in the Seanad of the Labour Party, Social Democrats and the Green Party, and with colleagues Senators Nessa Cosgrove, Malcolm Noonan and Patricia Stephenson, I are delighted to bring forward another Bill to the House. We have been very practical in all the proposals we have brought forward. This was in the Labour Party manifesto in 2024. We were the only party to have this in our manifesto at the time so I am really thrilled to be able to follow through on action in relation to this.

I have many people to thank but first I want to talk about Sophie Cole, who is in the Gallery, and her husband, Shane O'Brien.

I first met Sophie and Shane in November 2024 in their kitchen of their home in Carrigaline in County Cork. I could not believe it when Sophie outlined her story to me regarding what had happened to her in terms of an injury sustained in the classroom. Sophie is a special education teacher. Unfortunately, she was left without adequate supports. Once her assault leave pay ran out, she was left without support from the State for a long period. This was a huge financial burden on Sophie, and it was also a huge shock to her. There was a significant lack of information around the process and the supports that were available. Sophie has spoken about how hard it was to get information and answers on this. It is great to see that we are at the stage where there is real progress happening in respect of this issue. I really want to thank Samantha O'Flanagan from Fórsa, who is here with Andy Pike. This legislation was created with Sophie, with Fórsa and with the Irish National Teachers Organisation, INTO. David O'Sullivan from the INTO is also here this evening.

Colleagues in Cork were really supportive of this, including the Ministers of State, Deputies Jerry Buttimer and Michael Moynihan, and Deputy Séamus McGrath. Councillors Jack White, Ciara O'Connor and Peter Horgan were essential. I have also had loads of conversations with Senators Anne Rabbitte and Margaret Murphy O'Mahony. I want to put that on the record because I believe we can work together on this. There are a lot of public representatives in the Oireachtas, but we are not the only public representatives in Ireland. There are also public representatives who are outside of electoral politics. People like Sophie Cole are public representatives. She has taken on an issue and championed it because of her experience. She is being obliged to tell her story again and again. She was on Ireland AM just this week. The programme attracted nearly 1 million views. Sophie has been her story consistently, even though she is in extreme discomfort a lot of the time with complex regional pain syndrome, which she suffers as a result of her injury. She is doing this at huge personal cost, and that needs to be acknowledged. Whatever happens down the line in terms of the final legislation, I suggest that the ownership belongs to the teachers and the SNAs who are directly affected. I propose that it should be named after Sophie in terms of her campaign. Perhaps calling it Sophie's law might be appropriate. I want to put that suggestion on the record. Ultimately, Sophie set up a campaign page and she has received messages from thousands of teachers and SNAs across the country recounting their personal experiences about injuries that happened to them in the classroom.

What will the Education (Leave for Injuries) Bill 2025 do? It will ensure that the current assault leave circular would be amended and that paid leave would be granted for the duration of the period for which someone is medically certified, and that immediate costs would be covered should a teacher or SNA experience an injury in work. We are moving away from the language of assault. Sophie and all the teachers and SNAs I have spoken to will say that we are not apportioning any blame to students or children here. These are not premeditated acts. The Bill will provide for early retirement provision in cases of long term or permanent incapacity to return to work. The scheme must be agreed by trade unions, which is essential as part of this, and the teachers and SNAs would be treated the same under any scheme so that there would not be any differentiation in relation to that.

I want to read out some anonymous comments and messages that I have received. These are personal stories from teachers and SNAs who are affected. There are many. We know from research by the INTO last year that over 1,700 people have availed of the assault leave scheme. At the end of 2025, I think 97 had been out of work for longer than the period for which they were medically certified. This issue affects a large number of people. These are just the ones who have come forward and talked about what happened. There is a lot of stigma in relation to it as well. People are afraid to tell their stories. I will just read out the messages. I will not attribute any names. The first states:

While working in an autism class I was headbutted in the mouth and as a result have a fat lip. Additionally, in last school year I ended up needing a tetanus injection due to a bite that broke the skin. These, along with many other daily injuries, occur and we keep going to work to help and support these children. We are not asking for anything other than support for the teachers and SNAs who most need it: those injured who cannot return to their job that they love due to their injury ...

The second states:

I am working as an SNA since 2002. In 2021 I was injured at work resulting in a fractured shoulder. Since then I have had two shoulder operations and a third one which entailed a full reverse shoulder replacement. In this time I could only avail of 12 weeks assault leave for initial fracture recovery. Three operations later I have had to use all of my sick leave ...

The third states:

I myself am currently on injury leave, presently unpaid and losing vital pension contributions as a result. I have been unable to work since 2023 and have been receiving extensive medical treatments, including extremely painful spinal surgery in October last, from which I am currently recovering with ongoing physio for the foreseeable future. Injuries leave pay and sick leave entitlements have all since been exhausted but I am still on medically certified leave and I am being treated by the Department as if I am on unpaid leave. This is grossly unfair given that I was injured while doing my job ...

The fourth states:

I have 13 years post-qualification experience. I have dedicated the past ten years to special education working in special education classrooms for students with autism. I really enjoy and love my job. Earlier this year I was injured in the classroom. I had instant pain in my arm. I took assault leave and went to the emergency department. The X-ray was clear yet the swelling and pain was very significant. I continue to experience horrific pain that led my GP to order an MRI. More than seven weeks after the incident a private MRI revealed a slight dislocation of my wrist, two partial ligament tears, cartilage damage and possibly instability in the joint. My GP and Medmark have stated I am unfit to work. I am the mother of two children under the age of four so this injury is having an enormous impact on me and my home life ...

These are just some examples. I am sure the Minister has heard them as well. We have had multiple emails from members of the public who have told us their very personal stories. This is happening. We have to deal with the reality of what is happening in our classrooms. Schools need to be safe for all the people in them, namely those who work in them and students.

What really struck me when I met Sophie Cole and her husband Shane O'Brien for the first time was that he is a firefighter. He said that he would expect some level of danger in the job he does but that he never would have thought that his wife would be at risk going to school every day as a special education teacher. He said he was worried about her going to school and that something was going to happen, and something did happen unfortunately.

This is where we are with the campaign. It is a huge achievement for it to reach Second Stage. We genuinely appreciate the Minister's support. I know that she is keen to work with me and others across this House. The Minister met Sophie and Shane earlier. I know she Minister is committed to this. We need to ensure that this happens and that we can improve the lives of so many across the country. We are losing SNAs and teachers from their professions. Some are moving abroad. We need to ensure that the professions are as attractive as possible to enter and that we properly support those who work them. Those to whom I refer are predominantly female, but this obviously affects both women and men. We need to ensure that the Bill moves to Committee Stage, at which point there can be a full debate on it and on any amendments tabled. The most important thing is that we make sure the Bill progresses and is passed.

I just want to acknowledge those in the Public Gallery, many of whom are SNAs and teachers. I thank them for the work they do. That work is vital. All of the work that Sophie, Samantha, the INTO and Fórsa have put into this legislation cannot be understated. This Bill does not belong to any particular party or individual: it is about the teachers and the SNAs. Ultimately, Sophie has been an absolute champion in relation to it. I also acknowledge my colleagues in the Labour Party, namely Deputies Conor Sheehan, Ged Nash and George Lawlor, and our leader, Deputy Ivana Bacik.

This is really important to us in the Labour Party. It is a workers' rights issue and an education issue. We are the party of workers' rights and we want to make sure this happens.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire. It is great to have her here and I thank her for her proactive approach to the Bill. It is great that she will allow it to pass Second Stage. I know how hard Senator Harmon has worked on this legislation and it is an absolute privilege for me to have met Sophie and Shane to hear their story. Sophie is a true inspiration. I am fully in support of calling it Sophie's Law when it is enacted. I welcome and thank all of the SNAs from Fórsa and the teachers from the INTO. Without their support, this Bill would not have got this far. I know the Minister has engaged proactively with the union representatives as well. I welcome my Labour Party colleagues to the House because, as Senator Harmon said, this is a workers' rights issue.

Since this the debate on First Stage, I have been contacted by teachers and SNAs from all over my constituency. I spent a long time working in schools. The common thread is that SNAs and teachers love their job. That is very clear. It is a great idea that the name will be changed because teachers and SNAs do not want to blame anyone. I will relay the experience of a home economics teacher from my constituency. She has a very similar story to Sophie and she has given me permission to speak about it today as well. She stated:

Last February, I was assaulted by an adult autistic student in the classroom. I suffered a blunt force trauma to my right wrist. I was in horrific pain. The next day, I attended accident and emergency in Letterkenny, was x-rayed and put in a splint.

The teacher went on to explain that, thanks to the excellent care of her GP, she had an MRI which showed ligament and cartilage tears and a partial bone dislocation. Following steroid injections into the joint and surgery to repair a large tear, it was hoped that the dislocated bone would relocate when the inflammation subsided. Despite six months of physiotherapy, the pain and lack of wrist function continued. One year on, the ulna bone is still out of position, fluid and inflammation are still present, a tendon is inflamed and possibly out of position and wrist ligaments are showing chronic tearing. Another operation is scheduled for this March to cut nerves to the wrist. If that does not reduce the pain, a third operation to fuse the bones together will be required. This operation is a last resort and is normally reserved for elderly patients, as it will cause a significant reduction in wrist mobility. Following her six months' assault leave and 50 days of sick leave, she returned to work on limited duty, unable to do the home economics classes she loved, as she remained unable to lift, cut and sew as a result of the assault. Remaining on sick leave was not an option. Being on half pay meant she could not meet her young family's needs. To finish in her own words:

I have been eating pain killers and in constant pain since I went back to work. I will have to use my own sick leave again, and possibly go to half pay, for my operation next month.

I have medical bills of €2,200, as well as 4,000 km of mileage from seven round trips to Galway.

As well as the medical expenses and loss of earnings mentioned, this teacher has experienced other financial losses as she is unable to complete State examinations work, which she always did. On a number of occasions, she had to stay overnight in Galway. The teacher reached out after she heard about this legislation, which shows how important it is. She is one of many. We all know it is impossible to completely remove the risk of an injury occurring in a school environment but we can put in place systems that support educational professionals following an incident which leaves them in need. Senator Harmon's Bill does this.

I thank the trade unions again for how much work they put into the Bill, which will recognise the duty of care the State has towards education providers. For too long, educational professionals have been left to deal with the consequences of an incident on their own. The Bill addresses this. I thank Senator Harmon, Sophie and all of the SNAs and teachers who educate our children as best they can and for which our country is so well renowned.

Senator Ollie Crowe: I welcome the Minister, Deputy Naughton, to the Chamber. I especially welcome Sophie, Shane and everybody in the Gallery. Senator Shane Curley cannot be here this evening, so I will speak on this topic. The Senator was a teacher prior to his election last year and I spoke to him while preparing these words in order to benefit from his extensive experience in the sector. I have also spoken to teachers and SNAs, particularly those in special education settings. The picture they describe is clear: the demands of the job have intensified and the number of incidents involving injury to staff has increased significantly in recent years.

We are talking about professionals who go to work every day to support children, many of whom have complex additional needs, and do so with enormous dedication and compassion. We must also acknowledge the difficult truth that injuries occur, including bruising, biting, hair pulling, physical strikes and, in some cases, far more serious harm requiring hospital treatment. For a small but important number of staff, the consequences are not short term. Some are living with long-term or even permanent injuries. Others experience psychological trauma, including anxiety and post-traumatic stress, whether from being assaulted or witnessing serious incidents involving colleagues.

This debate is not about blame. The vast majority of educators are deeply committed to the pupils they support. They are the first to say that children, particularly those with additional needs, must never be stigmatised. However, recognising the complexity of the classroom cannot mean minimising the impact on staff when injuries occur.

The existing leave of absence following assault scheme provides three months, or 92 days, of paid leave in a rolling four-year period. It is extendable, in exceptional circumstances, to a maximum of six months, or 183 days, at full pay. Any additional absence reverts to the sick leave scheme. When introduced, this was a meaningful recognition that assault-related injury is not ordinary illness. However, concerns have been raised that the fixed time limits do not always align with medical certification. If a staff member is medically unfit to return to work beyond the current threshold, there is an argument that paid leave should reflect the full certified recovery period, rather than automatically reverting to standard sick leave provisions. There is also the issue of immediate costs. At present, the scheme does not cover medical

expenses arising from an assault. Many believe that where an injury is sustained in the course of employment, the injured staff member should not be left covering upfront medical costs. In addition, there is a strong case for ensuring structured access to psychological and specialist supports as a core part of the response, not simply as an add-on.

Another consistent concern is parity between teachers and SNAs, as SNAs, particularly at primary level, are frequently at the front line in supporting pupils with high care needs. Any scheme must treat teachers and SNAs equally and transparently. The principle of equal treatment is fundamental. There is also the difficult question of long-term incapacity. In rare but serious cases where a staff member cannot return to work due to permanent injury, early retirement provisions may need to be examined to ensure fairness and dignity. These are not radical proposals. They are grounded in workplace equity.

Recent publicly reported data indicates a significant increase in assault-related leave in recent years, including a marked rise since 2022 and hundreds of cases in a single year. That trend demands a measured response. It is important to remember that boards of management are the legal employers of teachers and SNAs and have statutory obligations under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005. Risk assessments, safety statements and preventative measures must remain central. The Health and Safety Authority has oversight responsibilities in this area. Alongside this, the occupational health strategy, including the 24-hour employee assistance service and access to counselling, provides important supports. However, the existence of support structures does not negate the need to review whether the assault leave scheme itself remains fit for purpose.

Fianna Fáil will not oppose this Bill because it provides an opportunity to review and, where appropriate, strengthen the framework. The Department has already commenced a review of the scheme in consultation with education partners, including unions and management bodies. Any changes must be agreed through that process and approved within the public expenditure framework. That is responsible governance. Responsible governance also means listening, examining the evidence and ensuring that policy reflects the lived realities in schools today. If paid leave needs to align more closely with medical certification, that should be examined. If medical costs require clearer coverage, that should also be examined. If psychological supports need stronger statutory footing, that needs to be done. If language within the scheme can be improved to better reflect compassion and dignity, that too should be examined.

Our teachers and SNAs work in increasingly complex environments. They do so with professionalism, patience and care. When they are injured in the line of duty, fairness must be the guiding principle. This Bill allows us to have that discussion in a structured way. It allows us to consider whether the balance between protection, sustainability and prevention is correctly struck.

Fianna Fáil will engage constructively. We will not oppose the Bill and we will work to ensure that any changes strengthen both staff protection and the integrity of the education system as a whole. Supporting educators when they are harmed while doing their job is not controversial; it just must be done.

Senator Gareth Scahill: I welcome the Minister once again to this Chamber. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Education (Leave for Injuries) Bill 2025. I acknowledge Senator Harmon and her colleagues for their work and the care and commitment that has clearly gone

into bringing this legislation forward. It is evident that this Bill is rooted in real experiences and genuine engagement with those working on the front line of our education system.

I also want to recognise Sophie Cole and her husband Shane O'Brien for their advocacy and for sharing their story with such courage and dignity her tonight and over the last couple of months. It is never easy for families to relive traumatic experiences in the public sphere but their willingness to do so has helped to shine a light on the realities faced by some education staff and has helped drive this conversation forward. I must acknowledge it was 25 February last year when Senator Harmon raised this first in the Chamber. It is good to know she has been able to deliver this Bill within that 12 months. I also acknowledge David O'Sullivan from the INTO and Samantha O'Flanagan from Fórsa for their input into this process.

Teachers and SNAs play a vital and irreplaceable role in our society and I acknowledge all the SNAs and teachers who are present here tonight. They educate, they support, they protect and they advocate for young people, often going far beyond what was written in any job description. SNAs provide essential care and support to children with additional needs and complex needs, ensuring they can participate fully in education. Teachers shape not just academic outcomes, but confidence, well-being and the opportunities for our next generation. Who would not want to do more for teachers and SNAs when we hear some of the real life experiences they have shared in recent years. The stories of physical injuries, psychological trauma and long recovery periods are deeply concerning and no worker should feel unsupported or uncertain about their entitlements if they are injured while simply doing their job.

I acknowledge the examples that were read out earlier on. We have all received numerous correspondence from a lot of teachers, SNAs and members of the public. I wish to recognise some of those contributions as well. One email I received stated:

In the course of my work, I have experienced bites, kicks, and punches from students. While I remain fully committed to supporting the children in my care, I go to work each day with a genuine worry that today could be the day that I sustain a serious injury, the possibility that I could be unable to work and unable to support my own family once my leave is exhausted due to work related injury. It is a constant source of stress.

Another piece of correspondence said:

I work in a school where health and safety is paramount, but dealing with challenging behaviour is becoming increasingly problematic. I have seen it first-hand the harm and hurt that can be caused, not on purpose by the child, but leading to staff absences and in some cases ongoing trauma.

It is right that we look seriously at how we support education staff who are injured in the course of their duties and it is right that we examine whether existing schemes are fit for purpose. It is right that we ensure there is clarity, fairness and consistency in what supports are delivered. For that reason, we are not opposing this Bill tonight. However, it is also responsible that any legislation of this scale is carefully examined in full and I am sure the Minister is committed to working constructively with all parties, with the unions and with the advocates to ensure that the final legislation is as strong and workable as possible. It is important that we fully explore any unintentional consequences that may arise and carefully consider the potential associated costs, both financial and operational, to ensure that whatever framework is put in place is sustainable into the future.

Ultimately, we all share the same goal: safe schools, supporting staff and the best possible outcome for students. If we keep that shared objective at the centre of our work, I believe we can strengthen this legislation and deliver a meaningful, lasting protection for those who dedicate their working lives to educating and caring for our young people.

Minister for Education and Youth (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): I thank Senators for the opportunity to speak today and respond to the Education (Leave for Injuries) Bill 2025, which has been proposed by Senators Laura Harmon, Nessa Cosgrove, Patricia Stephenson and Malcolm Noonan, and indeed the many Senators across the House who have raised this important issue with me in recent weeks and months.

Before I begin, I want to express my own personal thanks and gratitude to Sophie, who is in the Visitors' Gallery today. Sophie has been steadfast in her campaign for better conditions for teachers and SNAs who may have suffered an injury in the classroom. I had the honour of meeting Sophie and her husband, Shane, earlier today. Hearing their experiences at first hand has only reinforced my commitment to working with Sophie, alongside teachers and SNAs across the country, with a view to making life easier for those who are out of work as a result of an injury, and to ensure that we are responding with fairness and understanding while we do that. For example, Sophie, and indeed others, have rightly highlighted that it is not fair that an injured person should bear the medical burden of treatment in the aftermath of a school-based injury, only for those costs to be later recouped through the school's insurance. To that end, I have tasked my Department to examine options to ensure that access to treatment and support is provided without delay or financial hardship.

At the outset, I wish to acknowledge the vitally important and challenging role that SNAs, teachers and school staff play in helping to educate our young people and equip them with the learning and skills they need to thrive in adult life. Every day these dedicated staff work with children and young people from all walks of life and from every background in schools across our country. Some young people face challenges that others do not. Some require little or no support, and others more. However, the nearly 1 million pupils in our primary, post-primary and special schools are lucky to be assisted by these dedicated, hard-working professionals. Their work means that the vast bulk of young people have a positive school experience. However, unfortunately, there are incidents whereby during the course of their work, teachers and SNAs may incur an injury requiring an absence of leave in order to recover.

I appreciate that this Bill has been drafted with the very best intentions for teachers or SNAs in an approved position of employment in a recognised school to establish standards for any scheme providing for leave of absence from work following injury. I wish to take this opportunity to acknowledge the work of the Senators in relation to the proposed Bill.

The Government and my Department recognises that any injury received by a teacher or SNA in the course of their duties has the potential to have a significant impact on them, both physically and mentally. I also fully appreciate that in the vast majority of cases, any injury unfortunately suffered by a teacher or SNA in the course of their work is not intentional and that using the word "assault" in this context is problematic. I agree with Senators that the more appropriate term in this context is "injuries", rather than "assault".

I wish to take this opportunity to outline the measures in place to help avoid injury to any teacher or SNA and highlight the resources in place to assist those who may require assistance. A

key focus for my Department is equipping teachers and SNAs with the training and tools to help them de-escalate situations which put them and the young people in their care at risk. There are a number of documents available around managing behaviours of concern in schools. In December 2024, the Department of education published the guidelines entitled Understanding Behaviours of Concern and Responding to Crisis Situations in Schools. The National Council for Special Education has published Relate, which is a regulation framework for schools. Separately, Tusla's education support service, TESS, will shortly publish updated guidance for schools on codes of behaviour. The three documents have a strong focus on prevention, early intervention and de-escalation strategies for the management of behaviour generally.

To support the introduction of the guidelines on behaviours of concern, all schools were enabled to attend in-person information sessions in education centres around the country. More of these are planned. The NCSE also procured specialist, bespoke training for special schools and approximately 70 of these schools have availed of this support to date. This training will soon be available to mainstream schools. In addition, the National Council for Special Education is currently providing sustained support on behaviour to 85 special schools. The NCSE also provides seminars and training to support schools and the training available on the Relate framework is proving to be very well received.

NEPS, the inspectorate and the NCSE's behaviour service have developed a training programme for primary teachers which was delivered over summer 2025 and will be available again in the summer of 2026. The focus of the course was, first, on the guidelines on behaviours of concern, second, the NCSE's Relate framework and, third, TESS's code of behaviour guidelines. Some 100 teachers attended the programme and rated it as being an excellent support.

That said, there are situations where, despite the best efforts of all concerned, a teacher or SNA can suffer an injury during the course of his or her work. To assist these school staff, there is an existing robust non-statutory leave of absence following assault scheme for both SNAs and teachers and an occupational injury scheme for teachers. Both schemes were negotiated through established industrial relations mechanisms in conjunction with the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation. These schemes provide leave entitlements for three months, or 92 days, at full pay in a rolling four-year period. In exceptional cases, such as where a significant period of hospitalisation is required or in situations of a second or subsequent incident of assault, or injury in the occupational injury scheme, the leave may be extended for a further period not exceeding three months at full pay, subject to an overall limit of six months at full pay in a rolling four-year period. Currently, once the leave entitlement has been exhausted, the teacher or SNA may be able to access the sick leave scheme. In the event of a long-term sick leave absence, the teacher or SNA can avail of temporary rehabilitation remuneration for extended absences and, in the event of long-term injury, can apply for the existing ill-health retirement schemes. It is important to note that in the case of the leave of absence following assault scheme, the scheme does not require that there be an intent to cause a physical injury, merely that there was physical contact from a third party which caused a physical injury to the teacher or SNA. Regarding the occupational injury scheme for teachers, this scheme covers teachers who are physically injured due to an accident in the actual discharge of their duties, including approved school

activities, which are not due to negligence on the part of the teacher and by some injury solely attributable to the nature of their duty.

In addition to these schemes, an occupational health strategy is also in place as a supportive resource for staff and leaders in schools. The aim of the occupational health strategy is to promote the health and well-being-----

An Cathaoirleach: I am sorry to interrupt the Minister. I know she can hear the bells for the vote. I am not sure whether she is paired.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I am told am I am okay to stay here.

An Cathaoirleach: Okay, then we will continue. If the Minister says we are okay, then we are okay.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I thank the Cathaoirleach. He is very diligent. This is important.

The aim of the occupational health strategy is to promote the health and well-being of employees in the workplace, with a strong focus on prevention. The occupational health strategy comprises the employee assistance service, EAS, and the occupational health service. The employee assistance service is provided by Spectrum Life and is a self-referral service where school staff have access to a dedicated freefone confidential helpline. The service is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. The employee assistance service provides advice to all school staff on a range of issues, including well-being, bereavement, conflict and mediation. Where appropriate, short-term counselling sessions are available to staff and their family members. In circumstances where short-term counselling is determined to not be clinically appropriate, the EAS provides for interim counselling sessions while the staff member or his or her family member are awaiting engagement with specialised or open-ended services to ensure the individual feels supported and guided during the waiting period.

Regarding this Bill, I absolutely believe the intention of the legislation is good. However, having read the Bill, it would be remiss of me not to highlight a number of issues and unintended consequences that would arise if the Bill is enacted as it currently stands. In the first instance, the Bill introduced would override the current leave of absence following assault scheme, which is in place for both teachers and SNAs, and the current occupational injury scheme in place for teachers. As previously mentioned, both of these schemes have been negotiated with education partners through the established industrial relations process in conjunction with the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation.

As the Senator has described, the Bill seeks to apply, among other provisions, to any scheme that is, or is to be, maintained by the Minister for Education and Youth providing for leave of absence from work following injury suffered by a teacher or SNA who is employed in an approved position of employment in a recognised school, to include: provision for immediate financial assistance to cover the medical and ancillary expenses of the teacher or SNA; subject to any relevant provisions, provisions for paid leave of absence from work for the duration of any period in respect of which a medical certificate signed by a registered medical practitioner

is provided stating that the teacher or SNA is unable to return to work as a result of the injury concerned; and to provide for early retirement in cases of long-term or permanent incapacity to return to work. The Government does not oppose the reading of the Bill at this Stage but has concerns with a number of the proposed provisions.

In particular, it is important to note the following: section 24(3) of the Education Act 1998, as amended, states:

The terms and conditions of employment of the teachers and other staff of a recognised school, appointed by the board and who are, or who are to be, remunerated out of monies provided by the Oireachtas, shall be determined from time to time by the Minister, with the concurrence of the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform.

Amendments to the terms and conditions of employment of teachers and SNAs should be sought and negotiated via existing industrial relations mechanisms that have been set up in the education sector as detailed in section 7(4)(b) of the Education Act.

A number of industrial relations mechanisms have been established in the education sector. For teachers, this is done through a scheme of conciliation and arbitration for teachers, that is, the Teachers Conciliation Council. This scheme is not set out in statute. The purpose of the scheme is to provide a forum for Government, the managerial authorities of national and second level schools and the teacher unions for dealing with claims and proposals relating to the salaries and conditions of teachers and other specified education grades. This scheme is chaired by the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC. If unresolved, matters can be referred to the arbitrator or adjudication board appointed under the terms of the scheme.

For SNAs, the SNA IR forum was established to provide a mechanism for the parties to engage bilaterally and to avoid, to the best extent possible, issues escalating to the industrial relations machinery of the State, namely, the WRC or the Labour Court. The SNA IR forum is underpinned by agreed terms of reference and is managed within the Department. Members of this forum include trade union officials, officials from school management bodies and officials from my Department. If matters cannot be resolved bilaterally, they can be referred to the Workplace Relations Commission and, potentially, the Labour Court.

The introduction of this Bill would be contrary to the provisions outlined and seeks to amend the terms and conditions of employment of teachers and SNAs by means of the introduction of this Bill, rather than via the existing industrial relations mechanisms in place. In addition, changes to non-statutory terms and conditions, such as the leave of absence following assault scheme and occupational injury scheme, can only be introduced through centrally agreed industrial relations agreements agreed between the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. The existing agreement also contains a clause that unions will not submit cost-increasing claims during the lifetime of the current agreement. The provisions the Bill is seeking to introduce are significantly cost-increasing. For example, it proposes: expanding the provisions of the existing leave schemes as regards the period of paid leave of absence; extending the definition of an injury to include mental illness or injury - it should be noted that this provision is not provided for in any similar public sector scheme; extending provisions for injuries suffered other than those injuries currently covered by the leave of absence following assault scheme to SNAs; and the provision for immediate financial assistance to cover the

medical and ancillary expenses of the teacher or SNA. The Bill also does not distinguish between who is the employer of teachers and SNAs. This is a key issue with the proposed Bill as it does not acknowledge the existing role of the employer in the proposed scheme as noted in primary legislation.

Finally, the introduction of this Bill in its current form would likely see other unions throughout the Civil Service and public service seek to make amendments to the terms and conditions of the employees they represent through the introduction of other Bills, further undermining the existing industrial relations processes and the provisions of any nationally agreed public pay agreements. This is a Government that engages with education partners through the established IR mechanisms and within the terms and conditions of the agreed public sector pay agreement. As I said from the outset of my contribution tonight, and as I said to Sophie and Shane earlier, both I and Government are committed to doing what we can to support teachers and SNAs who may have been injured in the classroom. This is about ensuring that our response is one of compassion and fairness in the immediate aftermath of an injury and while they recover. I acknowledge the challenging role that teachers and SNAs undertake. I also want to acknowledge again that this Bill has been drafted with the very best intention by the Senators. I will work with Senators to find a resolution to the issues and concerns I have highlighted. My Department will continue to engage with education partners within the parameters of the established IR mechanism and the agreed public sector pay agreement.

An Cathaoirleach: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire for coming to the House tonight. I also thank Sophie and Shane for coming here. It is important to remember that laws are passed to change outcomes and to improve the lives of citizens. Giving the name to a Bill of those who embody the reason for a Bill is appropriate and important.

Senator Joe Conway: Cuirim fíorfháilte chaoin roimh an Aire. Guím gach rath uirthi san obair thábhachtach atá os a comhair amach. I am delighted to be here on behalf of the Seanad Independent Group to register our full-throated support for the Bill that has been brought forward by the Labour Party Senators, in conjunction with their group. I supported the minimum wage for apprentices legislation before Christmas, another Bill brought forward by the Labour Party which did not get the same benign look from the Minister and the Department at the time. Nevertheless, it was earmarked for progress. It had all the hallmarks of very sensible proposed legislation and that is something it has in common with the Bill being brought by Senators Harmon and Cosgrove tonight. I feel that I am pushing at an open door here because there seems to be a rounded sense of support for this. It is, as the Minister said, based on fairness and equity. It has been receiving a lot of input from the two main trade unions, Fórsa and the Irish National Teachers' Organisation, INTO, of which I am a proud former member. I fully endorse the work they are doing in conjunction with the Members of the Seanad and the Minister and her Department.

I could be here boiling cabbage twice. A lot of things people have said were addressed in the Minister's speech and I accept her bona fides. I think that she and the Department will work with the Seanad and the Labour Party Members and their grouping here to progress this very fair, reasoned, and timely proposed legislation. Back in the day, when I was teaching principal in County Waterford, these things did not happen at the school. In fact, in my whole teaching life, I never saw a teacher being assaulted by a child. However, it did happen on a few occasions

when teachers in schools close to us were assaulted by a parent. The result is really just the same. It is an extremely traumatising situation. Not alone does it occasion physical harm, but there is huge evidence of post-traumatic stress syndrome. A person does not have to be in Angola or Vietnam to suffer that. People were injured in situations which they previously thought were perfectly safe, like a classroom, a playground, a corridor or a staffroom. To find that they are suddenly attacked, through absolutely no fault of their own, means that their status as a professional is undermined and weakened. The impact it has on the psyche of a teacher as they try to return to normal teaching and normal supports in the classroom can be very demanding. That really is the essence and the basis of this proposed legislation. It is there to make our system better, to be compassionate, to look after the children who have difficulties, and to look after the welfare and the strength of the main prime actors who bolster our education system, namely, the teaching and support staff in schools.

Senator Pauline Tully: On behalf of the Sinn Féin group, I support this Bill wholeheartedly. I commend Senator Harmon on all the work she has done on this extremely important issue. As a former teacher, I witnessed at first hand the dedication that special education teachers and SNAs have to their students with additional needs or those with disabilities. In fact, without the support of SNAs in particular within our mainstream schools we would not be able to include these children in education. It is not that long ago that any student with an additional need or a disability was sent off to an institution and was excluded from society. Thankfully, we have moved a long way from that but we still have a way to go to make sure our education system is fully inclusive. This can only happen if the required supports are put in place within our mainstream schools to ensure that all children get an appropriate education, preferably in their local school alongside their siblings.

As Senator Harmon has said, it is not intentional when students injure someone. No SNA or special education teacher I have spoken to has said any different. I dislike the word, as they do. The lashing out which may cause an injury often comes from a place of frustration and it is often due to an inability on the part of the student to communicate what they are feeling. I have to go back to early intervention and community supports, which are severely lacking in our society at the moment. If the children who require the supports get them at an early stage, they will progress. A lot of these issues could be avoided if students got the proper supports, like speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, etc. A number of teachers and SNAs have reached out to me urging me to support this Bill, which of course is not a problem for me.

One woman struck a chord with me. It has been two and a half years since she received quite a severe injury in school. She has undergone surgery during this time. She has had a lot of pain and discomfort and ended up with mobility issues as a result. Her assault leave and sick pay leave have been exhausted at this stage so she is currently unpaid. Her family has been reduced to depending on only one income, when before it was a two-income family. They have children who are students in third level education and that is a costly endeavour. She is worried constantly about money and meeting all the expenses they have, especially as we are going through a cost of living crisis. There is also the fact that she has lost her independence. She is not earning anymore, so she is financially dependent on her spouse. That puts any person in a precarious position. There is also the loss of social contact and of getting up and going out to work. She has a lot of different issues. She requires a lot of support, and she has anxiety as

a result of what happened to her, and she worries about the day-to-day issues of the loss of income as well.

Something has to be done to address the situation. It not fair that any person who is injured while doing their job should end up not having their medical costs covered and having their leave pay cut off at a certain point when they are not fit to go back to work. It has to be extended to cover the period for when they are medically unfit. We also have to recognise that other supports may be required, such as psychological supports or specialist supports like physiotherapy, etc., and they should also be covered. The person who suffered the injury should not be out of the cost of those. As the Bill says, early retirement options should be available in the case of long-term or permanent incapacity to return to work. I know Minister and Senator Crowe referenced that work is being done to look at all these issues and to change the legislation. It is very important that this be done in consultation with the unions and to ensure that the people who are most affected by this are listened to and the change is made.

The Minister outlined a number of supports available to people who have suffered an injury. We need to make sure that every school staff member should be aware of the supports and how to access them. It can sometimes be an issue where people do not know. I fully support the Bill and I commend Senator Harmon on her work on it.

Senator Mike Kennelly: As the bell for the Dáil was ringing, the Minister was saying that this is a very important Bill.

8 o'clock

I am pleased to speak in support of Senator Harmon's Education (Leave for Injuries) Bill 2025, which is before the House this evening. First, I acknowledge the work that has gone into developing this legislation, not only by Senator Harmon but also by Fórsa and the INTO, and by the campaigner, Sophie Cole, and her husband, Shane. I welcome them to the House this evening. Sophie's advocacy has been charmed. She is leading this out. She has been instrumental in bringing this issue to where it is right now on a national level.

A lot of us have a personal interest in this issue, as many of us have family members who are either SNAs or teachers. Tonight, we have their back on this. The Bill is rooted in the lived experience of teachers and special needs assistants who support children in classrooms across this country every day. It is about real people who have been injured, traumatised or left without adequate support under the current system.

The Bill seeks to modernise and amend the existing assault leave circular, which many staff feel is outdated and inconsistent. Senator Harmon's proposal replaces it with a more compassionate, accurate and protective approach, one that the Bill sets out in a number of clear and reasonable principles. First, it ensures that paid leave is granted for the full period for which an injury is medically certified. That is a basic standard of fairness. No teacher or SNA should be left worrying about income while recovering from an injury sustained at work.

The Bill provides for immediate financial assistance to cover the costs that arise when someone is injured or assaulted in the course of their duties. These costs can be significant and unexpected, and it is only right that the State steps in promptly. The Bill guarantees access to appropriate information and supports, including specialist and psychological services, where

needed. We know that not all injuries are visible. Trauma, intimidation and delayed symptoms must be treated with the same seriousness as physical harm.

The Bill provides for early retirement options in cases of long-term or permanent incapacity. This is a humane and necessary provision for those who cannot safely return to their roles. As Senator Cosgrove said, it is a worker's right and a human right. The Bill requires that any future scheme be agreed in consultation with trade unions. That is essential. The people who work in our schools must have a voice in shaping the protections that affect them.

The Bill ensures that teachers and SNAs are treated equally under the scheme. Too often, SNAs, who are overwhelmingly women, have found themselves treated differently in policy and practice. This Bill corrects that imbalance. This is a balanced and constructive proposal. It does not place unreasonable burdens on schools or the Department. It simply ensures that when staff are injured in the course of their work, they are treated with dignity, consistency and compassion.

This issue was a major topic of discussion at both the INTO and Fórsa conferences in 2025. As we approach their next conferences, progress on this Bill would send a strong signal that this House is listening and responding.

For all of these reasons, I strongly support the progression of this Bill to Committee Stage. I hope colleagues across the House will join in allowing it to move forward so that we can continue the detailed work needed to deliver a fairer, modern system of injury leave for the teachers and SNAs who give so much to our children and schools.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Dee Ryan): We will pause for a moment while the Minister departs and the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan, takes over. He is very welcome.

Senator Linda Nelson Murray: I am sharing time with Senator Ní Chuilinn.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Dee Ryan): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Linda Nelson Murray: I thank Senator Harmon for bringing this Bill forward. Nothing ever becomes real until it is experienced. I know Senator Harmon has spoken to people who have experienced this, which is why she is so passionate about bringing the Bill forward. I spoke to her last week about it. Fair play to her. We all feel that.

This is a very important Bill, which contains Parts dealing with injury leave for people who work in jobs that are nearly like a vocation. When it comes to SNAs, parents cherish the fact that their child has one and likewise with teachers.

I will start by talking about a friend of mine who sent me a message last week. She said she was just out of a cast after four weeks. A child in school broke bones in her hand but she did not get assault leave because she came to school the next day and the injury was not discovered until five days later. She has only been back at school since last Monday, and that leave has been taken out of her sick leave.

I also mentioned that I am on the board of a special school and I see at first hand what teachers and SNAs do in the school. The advantages that I see in this Bill include expanded

paid leave for teachers and SNAs injured while at work, and not just for a limited period. This provides wage security, and people know their job is there when they recover. It acknowledges that assaults and injuries are a workplace health and safety issue for people in the classroom, especially those in a special classroom where, unfortunately, physical aggression can occur through no fault of the child.

Perhaps, through having this Bill enacted, better records might be kept, so we can further support policy development and resourcing for preventative measures. When a person knows they are valued and looked after that can really help their well-being and recovery. It is not always physical. We must, however, consider other aspects of the Bill, for example, the cost to the State and employers. School budgets are tight as it is. Is there potential for misuse? Are we better to put resources into having more teachers and SNAs? Should we be supplying more training for behaviour management and putting more resources into therapies in schools? I fully welcome the recent announcement of therapy services, which cannot come quickly enough. I also welcome the increase in SNAs on a year-on-year basis.

Having made those points, I still consider that this Bill is very important. I would also try to improve in-classroom support, behaviour provisions and preventative staffing, working in parallel with this entitlement. I do not think there is one person in this room who does not value the work of SNAs and teachers. If there was, that person would be wrong. If you get injured in the course of work, in a job you have been trained to do and that you enjoy doing, you should get paid if something happens in the course of that employment. This Bill will make teachers and SNAs feel a sense of comfort so that should anything happen, they will be looked after. However, it does not automatically prevent classroom injuries and will need clear implementation rules, adequate funding and wider preventative measures to be truly effective. I will not oppose the Bill. I congratulate Senator Harmon on bringing the Bill forward. Well done to her.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Dee Ryan): I advise the Minister of State that a vote has been called in the Dáil. There are just three minutes left in the debate.

Senator Evanne Ní Chuilinn: I promise it will not take me longer than that. Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit. Gabhaim buíochas leis as ucht a bheith anseo. Molaim an obair atá déanta ag an Seanadóir Harmon ar an mBille seo. Is saothar suntasach é agus leagann sé béim ar an dualgas atá orainn mar reachtóirí iad siúd atá ag obair sa chóras oideachais a chosaint ó dhíobháil, bíodh sé d'aon ghnó nó ná bíodh.

I commend Senator Harmon on her work on the Bill. She is supported by Senators Stephenson, Noonan and Cosgrove. I also welcome Sophie Cole and our guests in the Gallery, who are the people doing the work we are speaking about tonight.

We have a duty of care to the people who are working in our education settings. I say "education settings" quite deliberately because I believe that teachers and SNAs should have equality of access to any expanded supports that we agree to. I note that in the speech from the Department delivered by the Minister earlier, two separate schemes were referred to, one for teachers and SNAs and another one that was just for teachers. It is important that the outcome of any scheme we debate or develop in this House is made available equally to SNAs and teachers.

My mam was a full-time music teacher in secondary school for most of her career. She took some time out to work when my siblings and I came along. When she went back, it was not long before she retrained as an SNA. At that point, she spent a wonderful time working with a young boy right through his primary school and into secondary school. He is now a young man. She absolutely loved that work. His mother and my mam are still friends and he is still friends with her as well. She brought him through his school life. That time was so special for both of them. My mam is a qualified secondary school teacher. She was also a qualified special needs assistant. She did not become a lesser educator when she started working as an SNA. It is really important that whatever we do, we have SNAs and teachers on an equal footing. My mam's vocation never wavered, changed or became something less when she retrained as an SNA.

One of the most important parts of the Bill is the call for equal treatment under the scheme for teachers and SNAs. I voice my support for the premise of the Bill and I put on record my gratitude to teachers, SNAs and all ancillary service providers in all of our schools and education settings throughout the country. We have had a week of miscommunication, confusion and undue stress, all while teachers and SNAs are trying to enjoy a mid-term break. I am really conscious of this and I take the opportunity to say this. Our educators are the best of us and our children's lives are richer because of those people and the work they do. We owe it to them to seriously consider, debate and explore the detail of this legislation so that we can properly provide this duty of care and meaningful leave for injuries. I support the statement the Minister made, that she has tasked the Department with examining options to ensure that access to treatment and support is provided without delay or financial hardship.

Senator Tom Clonan: I am very grateful to Senators Harmon, Cosgrove, Stephenson and Noonan from the Cross-Party Group for tabling the Bill. I thank everybody here and our guests. I have been lobbied very intensively and very effectively by people, including Samantha O'Flanagan. In terms of my own interest in the Bill, a long time ago, more than 40 years ago, I went to Coláiste Mhuire in Marino, coláiste de chuid Choláiste na Tríonóide. Rinne mé céim san oideachas trí mheán na Gaeilge chun a bheith i mo mhúinteoir bunscoile. I went to Trinity College through the school of education in Coláiste Mhuire. I was a primary school teacher. I did my leaving certificate when I was 16 and the teacher training was a three-year course, so I was just barely older than the children I taught in a national school in Lucan called Scoil Mhuire in the Woodfield Heights and Airley Heights area. It was what we called a scoil leath-thumtha. We taught the core curriculum trí Ghaeilge and other subjects through English.

I am familiar with Sophie's experience and journey. As a person who was a young teacher, I really appreciate the work that teachers do and that SNAs do. I had 37 children in the class at the time. We did not have SNAs back in the 1980s. I really appreciate the work they do. As a parent of a child with additional needs, I cannot speak highly enough of the SNAs who allowed my son to realise his full potential and allowed him to have his fundamental right to an education and participation in society. I commend the Bill and I commend the SNAs.

I thank the Minister for not opposing the Bill. Without prejudice to the Cross-Party Group and the engagement they will have with the Minister, I take issue with some of the remarks she made. I am assuming the remarks were drafted for her. I would appreciate it if the Minister of State could communicate some of my concerns around this. The Minister stated regarding the Bill:

I absolutely believe the intention of the legislation is good. However, having read the Bill, it would be remiss of me not to highlight a number of issues and unintended consequences that would arise if the Bill is enacted as it currently stands.

So far, that is fine. It is an observation. We all know we are going to work together. The Minister, who I assume did not draft this herself and that it was drafted by her officials who, unfortunately are not here, raised concerns about negotiations taking place, IR processes and so on. This is the apparatus of State. It is the Executive and its outworkings. This is a Legislature. I am sure we are all familiar with the separation of powers. Senators Harmon, Cosgrove, Noonan and Stephenson are not trade union officials at a congress putting forward motions while the Minister sits and listens. This is Parliament. We are here to legislate. A lot of the concerns set out put the cart before the horse. It is this idea that people cannot legislate because there is a standard operating procedure in a Department. That is neither here nor there.

This is vocational house and we try to make a positive contribution for the common good based on our life experience and our professional experience. We have had Ministers come in here with time delays that have no logic when the concerns raised could be dealt with in Committee Stage debates. These are technical measures that are taken to undermine the basic principle of the House. It undermines us but it also undermines the Government as legislators and people who have been elected and have a mandate to represent the people and the common good.

As I say, this is not Liberty Hall. This is not the INTO headquarters. I was proud to be a member of the INTO at the age of 19. It is where I got all my stubborn pugilistic skills. This is not the TUI, INTO or ASTI congress, where the Minister comes and makes a speech and hears certain motions from the floor. In a situation such as that, some of the concerns might be appropriate to raise but not in the Parliament. There is a separation of powers between these Houses and the Executive. We are *a priori* and paramount. This is what my grandparents fought for in the War of Independence. It is why the Oireachtas, Dáil and Seanad were established.

I ask the Minister of State to communicate this to the officials because I am assuming it was an official who drafted this. It is like something out of "Yes Minister". It is Civil Service-ese. We cannot be constrained in our aspirations by the workings of the apparatus of State. That is something that follows from the deliberations and the iterative process that is the passing of legislation which happens in these Houses. It is not a criticism of the Minister or the Minister of State but, as Government parliamentarians, some of these explanatory notes on time delays and such concerns really are *non sequiturs*. They have no basis in logic.

I commend my colleagues and thank them. I thank the Government Senators for their very eloquent statements. I note they share our common positive interest and I thank them for not opposing the Bill.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Dee Ryan): I call Senator Stephenson. Is Senator Stephenson sharing time?

Senator Patricia Stephenson: Before he left the Cathaoirleach said he would allow an extra speaking slot.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Dee Ryan): Did he?

Senator Patricia Stephenson: He did. I thought it had been communicated.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Dee Ryan): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Patricia Stephenson: I am pleased to have co-sponsored Senator Harmon's Bill. I acknowledge the work of Sophie, who is in the Chamber, and the work of my friend Samantha O'Flanagan and what she has done in Fórsa. I am very conscious of the sensitivity and complexity of the issue before us. As we have heard in all of the contributions this evening, SNAs and teachers do vital work supporting children with additional needs to reach their full potential, as Senator Clonan so eloquently put it, and to learn and thrive in an inclusive environment. In some instances their work is not without risk. Schools must be safe places for children and for the adults who care for, teach and support them.

However, across our education system teachers, SNAs and other school staff are being injured in the course of their work and in many cases these incidents involve children with additional needs who themselves require care, understanding and appropriate supports and those supports are not always available in the schools. I have heard of one SNA, Donna, who had her shoulder injured when attempting to support a 12-year-old boy in a sensory tunnel. The boy panicked, kicked out and accidentally injured her. Devastatingly, because of the aches and pains from her shoulder, which she assumed were a consequence of being kicked, Donna missed an early diagnosis of cancer in her shoulder and she is still suffering from that. My Social Democrats colleague, Councillor Jesslyn Henry, is here this evening. She has faced significant injuries in the course of her work as an SNA. At her first meeting of Dublin City Council she was unable to speak because her jaw was locked following her being punched in the face and dragged to the floor in the classroom earlier that day. Jesslyn has told me of a huge list of injuries she has faced in the workplace, including being pushed into iron railings and being badly bruised. She has had to have her neck in a brace because she has been dragged to the ground several times. As we have heard from many contributors to this debate, Jesslyn and all the SNAs I have spoken to are at pains to reinforce this is not the child's fault and wish to reaffirm the children are not to blame. These incidents happen because of dysregulation, because children are not having their needs met and quite frankly it is a direct consequence of the State's failure to provide adequate services, supports and appropriate school places.

I am also appalled by the SNA reduction letter received last week by schools across the country. I appreciate there has been a pause, which I welcome, but a measure reducing SNAs in schools would make classrooms less safe for SNAs, teachers, children with additional needs and children in mainstream classes because there will be fewer SNAs around to do the Trojan work they are doing to support children in having sensory function and not being dysregulated. SNAs are doing a whole range of work. That could be movement breaks, sensory breaks, quiet time and a long list of other crucial tasks. In many cases we see SNAs doing medical interventions because there is no appropriate supports as schools do not have nurses, even though we are told the school nurse should be doing toilet breaks for non-toileted children. This reduction in SNAs was a slap in the face to hardworking staff in schools supporting children with those needs, so as I said I welcome the pause. I welcome the Trojan work of Fórsa and SNAs for their successful campaign to have that decision paused.

Just because an injury caused by a child was not the result of an intention to hurt their SNA or teacher does not mean school staff should have to accept it and receive no support from the State. Fórsa had a survey which showed 69% of SNAs reported being injured due to an assault – a word I use cautiously – and some 47% of respondents required medical treatment after that and 37% required hospital care. SNAs, just like any worker, have the right to be protected in their workplace and their employer has a legal obligation to make the workplace as safe as is reasonably practicable. Staff who are hurt in work are placed in an impossible position. Unless they leave immediately after the injury they may be denied any paid leave. This is an outrageous system because in many instances an injury might not be immediately recognisable. Back or neck injuries might not until a few days afterward, especially if we take into consideration adrenaline response and especially the human response to keep going, not let colleagues down and not let the children they are working with down. If someone delays taking leave while trying to manage their pain or injury, the system effectively penalises them for that choice. That is not compassion and it is not fairness and that is why we need to change it.

The Bill recognises workplace injuries require a human and realistic response. It acknowledges that trauma and injury do not always present themselves immediately and that workers should not be forced to make snap decisions while in shock or pain for fear of losing their income. It says that if you are injured in work you should be able to take leave and get the medical care you need without being out of pocket or fearing you may face a financial cliff edge when the paid leave comes to an end. I really welcome that this Bill seeks to remove the word “assault” from the circular. It is wrong this word is used in most instances where an injury has been caused by a child who is dysregulated and might be feeling unsafe or scared. This child does not intend to injure those who provide care for them and as I mentioned in the context of the planned cuts to the SNA allocation, in the past few days we have heard so many parents talk about the incredible relationship between their children and the SNAs who work with them and that the SNAs are crucial to providing a feeling of safety for the children. This Bill says care must flow in all directions; not just from SNAs to children but from the State to SNAs. We cannot ask staff to support children with complex needs without also supporting the staff themselves. We cannot champion inclusion while ignoring the physical and psychological cost borne by those providing care and we cannot continue to rely on goodwill, silence and self-sacrifice as substitutes for proper workplace protections.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit. I thank colleagues across the House for their very warm comments on this important Bill. I thank in particular my comrade, Senator Harmon, for bringing this Bill forward as part of our Cross-Party Group slot. I welcome the senior Minister's decision not to oppose the Bill and thank colleagues across the House for their support. I commend Sophie Cole, her husband Shane O'Brien and her family on what is a positive day after so many difficult and challenging days. To be able to turn a challenging situation around into a positive campaign to help others is a very selfless act and I commend her on her work and bravery on this. It is not everybody who would do this. Unfortunately, as has been articulated so well by others, these incidents happen in the workplace. The Minister of State and I have had engagement about Scoil Náisiúnta Chiaráin Naofa, Stoneyford, County Kilkenny, and the special needs unit there. These are diverse workplaces with children with additional needs and our teaching staff and SNAs work together to support the needs of the children to ensure they have a fulfilled education and can live fulfilled lives and to support them and their families. These are more challenging times and it

is important that legislation like this can be there as an enabling force to help SNAs, teaching staff and staff more generally in our schools. I acknowledge the senior Minister's intervention and I note the points raised by Senator Clonan and the supports that are there through the NCSE and the Tusla education support service. Those are important but I hope this is used as an opportunity not just to not oppose the Bill but to be fully supportive of getting it through the Houses and having it enacted. I commend my Cross-Party Group comrades. We have diverse interests and areas of focus but we are united in a common cause of social, economic and ecological justice. We have a good strike rate so far in 2026 of 100%. We brought four pieces last year and there were a lot of timed amendments but fortunately this year we are having a better success rate. I hope that continues from the Government side with all the motions and Bills we bring to the House this year. I thank the Minister of State for his engagement and again sincerely thank Senator Harmon for bringing this forward.

Senator Laura Harmon: I acknowledge all the contributions from Senators, including Senators Cosgrove, Stephenson, Noonan, Clonan, Scahill, Kennelly, Nelson Murray, Ní Chuilinn, Crowe and Tully. I hope I have not forgotten anyone. I also acknowledge the Minister of State and the Minister, Deputy Naughton, and the comments she made, as well as those of Senators Ryan and Conway. It is significant that this Bill is being brought through the Seanad initially because we are a House that has more potential for collaboration. I refuse to be cynical. I genuinely appreciate the support shown by Senators across the House and by the Minister. I have to believe the Government wants this to happen and I have to believe it wants it to happen quickly and effectively and that it wants to support teachers and SNAs. I certainly will not be giving up on this. We want to get it to Committee Stage, which is the forum to bring amendments.

I do not think there is any impediment to the legislation or to it being amended. Of course, we aimed high. You do not aim low with legislation; you want to cover everything that needs to be covered.

There is potential for us to work together. I am putting out the call in that regard this evening. It is an open call. I want to work with the Minister. I want to work collaboratively with her as partners on this legislation, because it is not about any party or individual. We can all claim credit for this when it is done. Ultimately, however, this is about the campaigners in the Gallery. It is about Sophie Cole, Samantha O'Flanagan and her mother Angie. This is Angie's first time being in Leinster House, so I want to welcome her.

This is about the teachers and the SNAs. It is also about the trade unions. Trade unions need to be essential to any agreements. Saying that they need to be included does not negate any other processes that are there. Of course education partners need to be part of this. Ultimately, the word "commitment" stood out this evening. There is a commitment from the Government to work on this, and that is what we need.

Getting the Bill this far took a lot of work. It was drafted in light of significant legal advice and collaboration with campaigners and the unions. It took many conversations and much relationship-building. I quite enjoyed calling and chatting to many of the Government Senators, TDs and Ministers in respect of it. From my conversations with them, I know that they all feel very passionately about this and that they want to get it over the line. I am not

going to be cynical; I am going to be positive because I am hopeful that we can get this done together. The real win is for the teachers, SNAs and the sector as a whole.

It is really welcome to hear the clear commitment that we are no longer going to use the word "assault". We are very much in agreement there that we will move towards the word "injuries". The Minister was very clear on that. That will remove a lot of the stigma that SNAs and teachers feel around reporting and coming forward. They should not feel any stigma but, unfortunately, that hesitation is there because of the word "assault". They do not want to place any blame on the children or pupils in question. That change in language is going to be absolutely essential.

We need to ensure that the remainder of the Bill is fully debated and remains intact. I do not want this to be the case of a race. Will the Government come forward with its own legislation and try to do it faster than I can get this to Committee Stage? I encourage us to work with the blueprint we have here. It is a good blueprint on which we can work together collaboratively. It would be nice, maybe for a change, for the public to see that we can actually have full collaboration across the House in respect of a cause and the passing of legislation. That is my hopeful message on which to end.

I am delighted that we were able to get this through Second Stage. It is not easy to get Bills out of Second Stage sometimes. We will progress it to Committee Stage when we can. I really hope we can have a full debate at that point. Any amendments or suggestions would be welcome when it does reach Committee Stage.

Again, I commend the campaigners. I commend Sophie in particular. This should have happened much sooner. It now needs to happen as quickly and in as robust a manner as possible.

Question put and agreed to.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Dee Ryan): When is it proposed to take Committee Stage?

Senator Laura Harmon: Next Tuesday.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Dee Ryan): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Committee Stage ordered for Tuesday, 24 February 2026.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Dee Ryan): When is it proposed to sit again?

Senator Ollie Crowe: Tomorrow at 9.30 a.m.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar athló ar 8.34 p.m. go dtí 9.30 a.m., Déardaoin, an 19 Feabhra 2025.

The Seanad adjourned at 8.34 p.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Thursday, 19 February 2025.