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DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE  
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

# SEANAD ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe  
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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## **SEANAD ÉIREANN**

*Déardaoin, 26 Feabhra 2026*

*Thursday, 26 February 2026*

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach i gceannas ar 9.30 a.m.

*Machnamh agus Paidir.*

*Prayer and Reflection.*

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### **Teachtaireacht ón Dáil - Message from Dáil**

**An Cathaoirleach:** Dáil Éireann passed the International Protection Bill 2026 on 25 February 2026, to which the agreement of Seanad Éireann is desired.

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

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

Senators Patricia Stephenson and Malcolm Noonan - the need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on staffing, bed capacity and medical equipment at St. Luke's Hospital, Kilkenny, in light of an increase in demand.

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 Eileen Lynch - the need for the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment to provide an update on tourism plans for the Gearagh, Macroom, County Cork.

Senator Mike Kennelly - the need for the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to make a statement on the introduction of a DNA database for dogs to counteract attacks on sheep farming communities.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick - the need for the Minister of State with responsibility for the Office of Public Works to provide an update on the redevelopment of the GPO.

The matters raised by the Senators are suitable for discussion. I have selected Senators Patricia Stephenson and Malcolm Noonan, who will be sharing time, and Senators Sarah O'Reilly, Eileen Lynch and Mike Kennelly and they will be taken now.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick may give notice on another day of the matter that she wishes to raise.

## Nithe i dtosach suíonna - Commencement Matters

### Hospital Services

**An Cathaoirleach:** I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins. Tá fáilte roimhe.

**Senator Patricia Stephenson:** St. Luke's Hospital is the seventh biggest hospital in the country. There are very few hospitals in the centre of the country, which leads to St. Luke's having a huge catchment area, well beyond counties Carlow and Kilkenny, and the surrounding hospitals are not performing well. Yet in St. Luke's, posts remain unfilled across cardiology, dermatology, respiratory medicine, rheumatology and neurology. These are not peripheral specialties. They are at the core of a service for any modern model 3 hospital.

St. Luke's is facing severe understaffing. The absence of permanent consultants in these areas has very real consequences: longer waiting times, increased reliance on highly expensive locums and agency staff, reduced continuity of care, pressure on existing staff, and, ultimately, an impact on patient outcomes. Consultant-led care is directly linked to improved patient flow, faster diagnosis, safer discharge decisions and reduced admissions. When three emergency medical posts are vacant, for example, that pressure cascades through the entire hospital system.

What really concerns me is the broader structural inequality at St. Luke's. As a model 3 hospital, it serves not only Carlow and Kilkenny but a huge catchment area. When we compare this to other model 3 hospitals nationally, there is a clear perception and operational reality that St. Luke's is not receiving matching funding, workforce allocation or capital investment. Letterkenny University Hospital and St. Luke's are both model 3 hospitals, but Letterkenny has 1,000 more staff. Other model 3 hospitals in Sligo and Tralee have bigger budgets than St. Luke's. In comparison to other model 3 hospitals, simply put, St. Luke's receives less funding and has fewer key consultant positions. There is a sense that St. Luke's is being penalised for performing well over the years.

The staff on the ground are working hard and the management are doing all they can. Indicators show the hospital is under huge strain. There appears to be an implicit assumption that the hospital can continue to manage without the investment it desperately needs. However, the hospital is struggling, particularly with the absence of a second CT scanner, which is urgently needed. A business case has been submitted and it is now at the appraisal stage. The existing scanner at St. Luke's is operating 24-7 under significant critical strain as the hospital is experiencing such high demand. The absence of a second scanner has a knock-on effect across the entire hospital. It delays diagnosis, slows clinical decision-making and prolongs stays in hospital for patients and contributes to discharge delays for patients who are medically fit to leave but still waiting on imaging. This in turn obviously leads to pressure on beds. A second scanner is essential to improve patient flow and reduce wait times. Staff in St. Luke's are crying out for additional support. The pressure on the ground is incredibly real. Without additional resources, they simply cannot meet the growing need.

**Senator Malcolm Noonan:** To add to what my colleague has said, the population catchment around St. Luke's is significant and has grown significantly over the last decade. It includes parts of south Kilkenny sometimes known as Waterford. From our meetings with the hospital team, it is clear there is an especially critical need for these posts to be filled. As my colleague said, four medical assessment unit, MAU, consultant general physicians, one consultant respiratory physician, one consultant cardiologist, a consultant dermatologist, a consultant rheumatologist and two consultant neurologists are required. These staff are absolutely vital to the services that St. Luke's provides.

The other issue in need of critical attention here is the development of the new-build Dolmen Wing ward block to replace the old medical one and medical two and surgical two units. These are the old long wards of the original 1941 hospital building, which served St. Luke's very well, but which became very challenging during Covid and had to be shut. The 86-bed Dolmen Wing ward block facility is a vital project that needs to be proceeded with. I look forward to the Minister of State's response.

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Niall Collins):** I thank the Senators for this opportunity to address the House on this important matter. St. Luke's General Hospital in Kilkenny provides a range of important services including general surgery, maternity, emergency, paediatrics, hepatology and acute psychiatry. The hospital serves a significant population, including the people of counties Carlow and Kilkenny, as well as areas of counties Tipperary, Waterford, Wexford, Kildare and Laois.

I acknowledge that the demand for healthcare services is increasing, due both to the development of new treatments and our ageing population. Considerable extra resources have been provided to increase the level of services at St. Luke's General Hospital, Kilkenny. Notwithstanding the very difficult recruitment environment impacting the healthcare sector, staffing at the hospital has grown by 262 since the end of December 2020 - from 1,185 to 1,447 at the end of November 2025. This represents an increase in staffing of 22%.

The HSE has also advised that St. Luke's Hospital plans to progress consultant appointments to develop services, including rheumatology and neurology. These posts can be integrated with community services to provide the most appropriate care in the most convenient setting for the patients. The budget for St. Luke's General Hospital has also increased significantly. In 2020, St. Luke's General Hospital had a budget of €102.7 million. In 2025, the budget increased to €155.6 million, meaning its budget has grown by almost €53 million in five years, an increase of 51%.

St. Luke's General Hospital has 260 inpatient beds and 25 day-case beds.

Between 2020 and March 2025 30 beds have been delivered. The Acute Hospital Inpatient Bed Capacity Expansion Plan 2024-2031 aims to deliver 82 beds between March 2024 and 2031 for St. Luke's General Hospital. There has been and continues to be significant capital investment in St. Luke's hospital. Projects delivered to date include provision of a new MRI completed in 2022, a 72-bed replacement medical ward block completed in 2022, and the electrical infrastructure upgrade works completed in 2025. The HSE's capital plan 2026, including building and equipment, and the HSE digital for care capital plan published on 24 February 2026 outlines the investment in public health infrastructure over the coming five

years. The plan demonstrates the Government's commitment to improved services, increased productivity and strategic reform of our health service. It provides for capital funding of €1,327 million for building and equipment and €263 million for digital for care. Additional projects are being progressed in the HSE's capital plan 2026, published on 24 February 2026. These include refurbishment and extension of the existing mortuary, proposed new ward block development to include a critical care unit and a new 50-bed acute mental health unit. These developments show the Government's commitment to the progressive development of St. Luke's General Hospital, Kilkenny.

**Senator Malcolm Noonan:** I thank the Minister of State for the answer. We certainly recognise that there has been significant investment. However, the posts and capital projects we are talking about are absolutely vital given the population increase in the catchment. What has happened in St. Luke's over the past five years in particular has been something truly phenomenal and the staff are under severe pressure while trying to deal with the increased numbers. I welcome the additional investment but it is still not enough. These posts we are talking about are the absolutely vital component of that. Separately, it is hugely important that the Minister meet the management team and clinical staff of St. Luke's hospital as a matter of urgency to try to address these chronic shortages in the hospital. The hospital is performing extremely well under extreme pressure and that is down to the dedication of the staff and management team in the hospital.

**Senator Patricia Stephenson:** In the final seconds I also reiterate that it would be good for the HSE to meet the hospital staff. While we recognise that there is additional staffing in place, it is over-reliant on agency staff to meet the basic needs. That is so costly for the HSE, as we know. I reiterate the point on the perceived lack of balance in terms of how St. Luke's as a model 3 hospital has been treated in relation to other model 3 hospitals around the country.

**Deputy Niall Collins:** I again thank the Senators for raising the important issue and giving me an opportunity to highlight how committed the Government is to the progressive development of St. Luke's General Hospital in Kilkenny. Significant additional resources have been allocated to the hospital in recent years to meet the needs of patients. Staffing at the hospital is now approximately 1,447 whole-time equivalent posts, an increase of 22% since December 2020. The hospital's budget has increased considerably in the same period. Funding allocated to the hospital has increased by 51%. There is a strong commitment to the health capital investment at St. Luke's hospital and a number of projects are being progressed in the capital plan, which was published on 24 February. The positive progress made in recent years to increase the level of services at St. Luke's hospital in Kilkenny is a testament to the Government's commitment to the hospital and to the people of Kilkenny, Carlow and the south east in general.

### Natural Heritage Areas

**Senator Eileen Lynch:** I am seeking an update in relation to any current or planned tourism strategy for the Gearagh, which is just outside Macroom, County Cork. In particular, were considerations being given to its development as a recognised national tourism asset, including the potential for a sensitive greenway development? The Gearagh is one of Ireland's most

unique and precious landscapes. It is the largest remaining glacial-alluvial woodland in Europe and provides a rare ecosystem of international ecological importance. It was shaped by the River Lee and is a place of outstanding natural beauty, but also an essential part of the cultural and historical fabric of the Macroom and Muskerry region. Before the flooding associated with the Lee hydroelectric scheme in the 1950s, the Gearagh served as a home to many and its loss was a significant chapter in local history. Its survival today as a protected landscape reminds us that balance has to be struck between development, heritage and environmental protection. The Gearagh currently provides a walking area for many in the locality and is an amenity that could be transformed into an outdoor tourism hub. I also believe there is massive scope for a Macroom-Gearagh greenway. Across the country we have seen how well-planned, low-impact greenways can improve biodiversity awareness, support local economies and promote sustainable tourism when done correctly and in consultation with environmental experts and the local community. Macroom and the wider Muskerry area are ideally positioned to benefit from this. As a gateway to west Cork, tourism already plays a vital role in sustaining rural employment in our area, supporting accommodation providers, cafes, shops, activity operators and cultural attractions. I believe that a carefully designed Gearagh greenway, mindful of conservation objectives, could extend visitor stays, attract off-season tourism and strengthen Macroom's role as a hub for inland west Cork. This is about managed access, education and appreciation, allowing people to experience the Gearagh responsibly while safeguarding its integrity for future generations. Local communities have shown strong interest in seeing the Gearagh recognised at national level, not only as a protected site but as a place of learning and recreation. I believe now is the time for action on this.

Therefore, I hope the Minister of State will be able to outline whether the Gearagh is included in any current or forthcoming national or regional tourism plans, whether the Department has engaged with Cork County Council, Fáilte Ireland or the OPW regarding its future development and whether a feasibility assessment of a low-impact greenway or interpretive trail is under consideration. Macroom town is just a mile and a half from the Gearagh. It is currently going through a period of significant infrastructural development and investment. A greenway would complement this growth by enhancing local amenities, supporting the health and well-being of residents and absolutely boosting the town's appeal as a destination for visitors and tourists.

**Deputy Niall Collins:** I thank Senator Lynch for raising this matter. I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment. At the outset, I clarify that the Department of Transport has responsibility for overall policy and Exchequer funding in relation to greenways while national parks are under the remit of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. Regional tourism promotion is an operational matter for Fáilte Ireland in collaboration with local authorities and other tourism stakeholders. Cork is represented by three regional tourism brands, namely, the Wild Atlantic Way, Ireland's Ancient East and Ireland's Hidden Heartlands. Fáilte Ireland's regional tourism development strategies are the roadmap for the tourism industry and for all stakeholders involved in tourism.

To activate these strategies, Fáilte Ireland has established localised five-year destination experience development plans. The west Cork and Kenmare destination experience development plan, which encompasses Múscraí and includes the Gearagh was launched in

quarter 4 of 2023 to efficiently manage the delivery of actions within the destination experience development plan. Three thematic subgroups were established based on the prevalence of actions emerging from the plan. They are artisan food, outdoor activities and marketing. Key priorities in 2026 for west Cork and Kenmare include undertaking a mid-term review of the west Cork and Kenmare destination experience development plan, which will provide an opportunity to reassess objectives and actions against emerging trends, updated national and regional policies and new projects that have come on stream before the plan was first adopted. It will ensure that priorities for the remainder of the plan lifecycle remain relevant, achievable and responsive to the needs of local communities and industry. This review is due to be completed by September 2026. There will also be the roll-out of a cluster development programme from 2026 to 2028 for tourism businesses in the destination, based on a workshop and learning needs analysis.

The marketing subgroup of the destination experience development plan will work with Fáilte Ireland to produce a brochure by the end of April 2026 highlighting the region's food experiences, markets, outdoor activities, accommodation and cultural experiences. The brochure will also feature key tourism towns and villages linking to itineraries and other assets under Discovery Ireland and Pure Cork.

**Senator Eileen Lynch:** I thank the Minister of State for taking this. I appreciate this is not under his Department and I thank him for the reply. I will definitely be raising this with the Departments of housing and Transport. I note the reviews, some of which, under Fáilte Ireland, will be undertaken this year. I will, of course, touch base with that agency.

I want to stress the importance of this. It is a fantastic natural amenity and one of the only such woodlands left in Europe. As I said, it has a fantastic history. Up until the fifties, it was a settlement hub and people were actually living there. There is so much scope and potential for this. I would hate to see it being neglected or not included in regard to future tourism. Undoubtedly, it is of massive historical and heritage benefit and it is important that we would look after it and protect it. I thank the Minister of State; I appreciate it.

**Deputy Niall Collins:** Again, I thank Senator Lynch for raising this. Last December, the Minister, Deputy Burke, launched the new national tourism policy statement, A New Era for Irish Tourism. This strategy sets out a clear vision for growing visitor numbers and associated revenue and employment while ensuring balanced regional development. A key objective under this new policy statement is to spread the benefits of tourism to all regions. This will be a priority consideration for all public investment decisions. In particular, the need to see less mature tourism destinations grow at a faster rate than the traditional tourism regions will be a priority for Government and the tourism agencies. Regional tourism development strategies will continue to be activated through a series of destination experience development plans, and local tourism enterprises will have an enhanced role in the development of these strategies.

Under the new policy statement, tourism agencies will work with the relevant bodies to increase the focus on nature-based tourism opportunities associated with our inland waterways system and landscape, including angling, cruising, watersports and outdoor activities such as walking and hiking.

## **Control of Dogs**

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

**Senator Mike Kennelly:** I welcome the Minister. Today, I need to highlight a serious issue that affects communities right across rural and urban Ireland, one of that is being felt particularly strongly in counties like Kerry. I refer to the growing problem of irresponsible dog ownership, including dog fouling and uncontrolled dogs that are causing savage harm to livestock, wildlife and, in some cases, people. The Minister is well aware of this.

This is not a new problem. For years, local authorities have relied on enforcement systems that require wardens to witness an offence before action can be taken. Despite the dedication and professionalism of dog wardens across the country, that system is no longer fit for purpose. The reality is simple; without the ability to identify an offending dog after an incident occurs, accountability is often impossible.

Dog fouling remains one of the most consistent complaints raised by the public in local authorities. It affects public health, damages tourism and undermines enjoyment of our beaches, parks and shared public spaces. Beyond inconvenience, there are very real human consequences. Recently, a woman from Kerry contacted a representative to share her personal story. When she was just three years old, playing on a beach, she contracted a serious infection linked to dog fouling. That infection ultimately caused her to lose vision in one eye. This is not an abstract debate; it is a reminder that irresponsible behaviour can have lifelong consequences.

In rural Ireland, the stakes are even higher. Farmers continue to face devastating livestock attacks caused by uncontrolled dogs, particularly during the lambing season, which we are in. The financial loss is significant but the emotional toll on farming families finding animals injured or killed cannot be overstated. The scale of the problem nationally is clear. In 2024 alone, 287 livestock-worrying incidents were reported, a 4% increase on the previous year. A total of 2,077 farm animals were attacked by dogs in a single year, including 1,592 sheep along with cattle and poultry. In those attacks, 618 animals were maimed, killed or had to be put down, and dog attacks on livestock are now at a six-year high nationally. We are not talking about isolated incidents. Over 2,000 farm animals were attacked by dogs in Ireland last year alone.

The impact on farmers is widespread. The survey shows that 73% of sheep farmers have experienced dog attacks on their flocks, while historical farming data suggests that between 3,000 and 4,000 sheep may be injured or killed annually due to dog attacks. Behind every statistic are a farming family dealing with loss, distress and financial pressure. The Irish Natura and Hill Farmers Association has been in contact and has made clear that stronger measures are needed. It has been calling for improved traceability and accountability for some time, recognising that existing enforcement tools are completely out of touch and are failing farmers who are doing everything right. What is being proposed is not punitive or anti-dog, and we have to state that. Ireland is nation of dog lovers. I am one myself and the vast majority of dog owners are very responsible. This is about addressing the small minority whose actions create consequences for everyone else.

A dog DNA database is one modern tool that deserves serious national consideration. Under such a system, DNA samples could be collected when dogs are licensed or registered and could be phased in over time. I do not want this to start today. I want it to start with the next pup that comes in to be chipped by the vet, whereby they would be registered and a DNA sample taken. Evidence gathered after livestock attacks or from dog fouling incidents could then be matched, allowing enforcement officers to act fairly and effectively.

Importantly, this is about deterrence as much as it is about enforcement. When accountability becomes possible, behaviours change. Responsible owners are protected, public spaces become cleaner and farmers gain reassurance that incidents will no longer go unanswered. Local authorities, including those in Leitrim and Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown, are beginning to examine this approach because they recognise that the current systems are completely outdated.

10 o'clock

We now need national leadership, clear guidance, legislative support where necessary and a willingness to explore modern solutions to modern problems.

Protecting public health, supporting farmers, safeguarding wildlife and promoting responsible dog ownership are goals we all share. Examining innovative enforcement tools should not be controversial as it was last week down in Kerry County Council when this issue was raised. It should be seen as common sense and welcomed. I urge this House to support further examination of dog DNA databases as part of a broader effort to strengthen responsible dog ownership across Ireland and to give our local authorities the tool they need to protect everyone in the community.

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon):** I thank the Senator for raising this really important matter and assure him and all Members of the Seanad of my commitment to improving the traceability of dogs. Effective traceability is fundamental to safeguarding dog welfare, supporting responsible ownership and strengthening accountability where incidents occur.

The Senator referenced the Irish Natura and Hill Farmers Association, INHFA,. I was in Donegal last Thursday, which is a long way from Kerry, where the association launched a campaign on sheep worrying and dog ownership. The title of the campaign is: "It's not your dog's fault, it's yours". I commend the INHFA on its work in this area and I know the concerns it is raising with the Senator on this point as well. Sheep worrying has a profound impact on farmers and rural communities. I fully recognise the gravity of this issue and agree that robust traceability measures are central to ensuring that dog owners can be held accountable where their animals are involved.

This week, my Department commenced a media awareness campaign urging dog owners to take due care and act responsibly in any instances where there may be a risk to livestock, particularly sheep, as we approach the critical lambing season for the sheep farming community. Responsible dog ownership, including effective control of dogs in a countryside setting, is an important matter. I am invested in making a difference in this area. I look forward, along with my Department, to engaging proactively in terms of wide-ranging awareness

campaigns across relevant platforms throughout 2026 on issues around responsible dog ownership, including sheep worrying.

In response to the Senator's question on the possible role of DNA in dog traceability, I acknowledge that DNA technology has potential in relation to canine traceability. The use of DNA profiling could, in certain circumstances, assist with linking a dog to a specific incident. Before any decision could be made to mandate DNA sampling and profiling for all dogs, a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis would be required. Such an assessment would need to carefully examine the potential advantages of mandatory DNA profiling compared to the financial costs and operational implications. Mandatory DNA sampling would significantly increase the cost of dog registration for owners. This is an important consideration, particularly in ensuring that compliance remains achievable and proportionate. In addition, the State would incur further expenditure.

Therefore, my immediate focus is on maximising the effectiveness of the existing dog microchipping system before introducing any major new regulatory changes. Strengthening adherence to the rules already in place can deliver immediate and tangible benefits. I believe that where dog owners are educated to understand their legal obligations and the practical benefits of micro-chipping, we can achieve a culture of responsibility and increase the number of dogs in Ireland that are micro-chipped and traceable. A well-functioning microchipping system plays an important role in tackling issues such as sheep worrying as clear identification helps deter irresponsible behaviour and enables more effective enforcement where incidents occur. Through sustained awareness and improved compliance, the existing system can deliver substantial benefits for dog welfare, farming communities and public confidence.

My Department is open to the potential role of DNA in the future development of the canine traceability system. However, it is prudent and responsible to first implement and assess the impact of the planned improvements to centralised data management. I am taking a measured and evidence-based approach to strengthen accountability and deterrence through practical reforms to evaluate their effectiveness in addressing sheep worrying and will only then to consider whether additional measures, which would mean significant cost implications for dog owners and the State, are necessary and proportionate.

**Senator Mike Kennelly:** I am glad there is ongoing work to promote public awareness of dogs and lambing season. The Minister said that the Department is open to the potential role of DNA in the future development of the canine traceability system. I am glad about that. It is results-based no matter what we do or what public awareness campaigns are launched. Last week, we discussed road safety in the House and this week, we are discussing safety with regard to control of dogs. I respect the Minister's response. I hope that at the end of 2026, these results will show a reduction in dog attacks. The rollout of a dog DNA database could be a future development. It may be costly and I hope the microchipping works out but the increasing number of sheep being targeted by dogs and the increase in dog fouling on our streets and public beaches shows that the situation is not improving so I ask the Minister to keep this in focus. If we can deal with a dog that has killed ten sheep or an incident where someone's child steps on dog mess on a beach, playground, football field or public park, which could cause health problems, we should. I welcome the Minister's response and hope he keeps it in mind.

**Deputy Martin Heydon:** Sheep worrying is devastating. Its impact on animal welfare and farming families who suffer as a result of their sheep being attacked by dogs is devastating and goes way beyond the financial implications of a such loss to their economic model of farming. It cuts to the heart of what a farmer is as a custodian of the land and a minder of the animals in his or her care. The reason it is particularly frustrating is it is always preventable. We know of instances where pet owners have been approached by farmers who told them their dog just did this and the owners say, "My dog couldn't possibly do that. My dog's lovely, quiet and docile around the house." What nobody realises is that every dog is capable of this when it is running with sheep. It is in their nature. I think of the proverb about the scorpion and the frog. Why did it kill them both? It was because it was in its nature. It is in the nature of dogs and while they might not show that as domestic pets around the house, they will display it in the right setting with those animals and pet owners need to know that.

I am not closing my mind to the Senator's proposal but he can see that there are broader considerations around cost. This requires a multifaceted approach. There is no single solution here because if there were, it would have been resolved long before now. Effective traceability that allows for speedy identification of a dog and its owner is a powerful deterrent and an essential support for enforcement authorities. I have plans to improve our dog traceability system through a centralised database and increased data consolidation across all Departments and organisations that have a role in the control of dogs. I was one of the Fine Gael representatives during the talks on the programme for Government and I was a keen supporter of making sure that control of dogs was transferred from the Department of Rural Affairs, Community Development and the Gaeltacht to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine was included. This was not because the Department of rural affairs was doing anything wrong but because this area covers three Departments because dog wardens come under local authorities and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage while my Department deals with animal welfare. Control of dogs is a good fit with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. I want to get through a serious body of work this year on this.

While I acknowledge the potential benefits of a DNA database, it is prudent to implement and assess the impact of better data before imposing the significant additional costs of a database on dog owners and the State. We will keep an open mind because this is a body of work I want to make real progress on during my term.

*Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 10.09 a.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 10.32 a.m.*

*Sitting suspended at 10.09 a.m. and resumed at 10.32 a.m.*

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

**Senator Fiona O'Loughlin:** The Order of Business is No. 51, motion 1, regarding online safety, to be taken at 11.45 a.m. with the time allocated to this debate not to exceed two hours.

**Senator Mary Fitzpatrick:** I congratulate everybody in the north inner city of Dublin. This week, they welcomed the Taoiseach to St. Agatha's Hall for the launch of the ninth annual north east inner city, NEIC, initiative progress report. The NEIC task force was established in 2016

and since then it has worked under the leadership of the Taoiseach's office. Dublin City Council has a dedicated NEIC task force office working with residents, schools, sports clubs and all of the organisations and businesses in the area to make it a healthier and brighter place for us all to live in. Great progress continues to be made there.

I want to call out, in particular, the expansion of the City Connects programme. This is a really innovative programme that was put in place to support young people in the school environment. It is a pilot programme that has been running now for a number of years and most recently, in 2025, it was expanded beyond primary and into post-primary level. The programme supports every young person in the ten designated primary schools, and now in the secondary schools, and ensures that their needs are met so that they can engage in education. There are three stages to it. There is an assessment, obviously with parental consent, of every individual child's needs, be they educational, social or emotional. Then a plan is put in place and there is an assessment. It is a great programme and I congratulate everyone involved. I also want to mention the P-TECH programme, the pathways to technology programme that is running in the secondary schools. Last year, 80 students graduated with a level 6 qualification, so well done to everybody involved. It is really great news. The residents' associations that are involved are really helping with the greening of the area and with cultural activities. The NEIC is a great news story.

I also want to welcome finally, after decades of campaigning, the Government's announcement of the move to construction of the national monument at 14-17 Moore Street. This will create for the first time a 1916 commemorative centre, which is so important. Those buildings were the last meeting place of the leaders of the 1916 Rising. They are on what was a battlefield site and the monument is going to preserve for future generations the history of the birthplace of our Republic. It is also going to commemorate and ensure that the legacy of the street traders, and of Moore Street as a trading street, is preserved and accessible for everyone. It is moving to the stage of a contractor being appointed and then construction will commence. This is a great news story for all of the relatives, all of the traders and everybody who has campaigned not just to save 14-17 Moore Street but to ensure there is an appropriate commemorative centre there, which is what we will have.

**Senator Victor Boyhan:** I am happy to support the Order of Business as proposed by the Deputy Leader today. I wish to bring up two issues. One relates to ongoing issues around mental health. Yesterday, the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, was in the House to deal with my Commencement matter but we did not make a lot of progress. Therefore, I am formally requesting another debate on mental health. I know the Minister of State will be back in the House on 18 March to complete the passage of the Mental Health Bill, which is really important. That date has been confirmed so we are all aware of it. It is the day after St. Patrick's Day. I want to renew my call for the Minister for justice to come in on this occasion. Members will know, having discussed it here previously, that the "RTÉ Investigates" programme that aired about two weeks ago identified very serious issues around a shortage of beds. My Commencement matter yesterday raised the situation of the 50 beds that are currently provided but are vacant. The Minister of State made the case that it is difficult to recruit staff and I understand and accept that. As a result, beds have to be opened up incrementally over a period. There are currently 50 beds vacant, as confirmed by the "RTÉ Investigates" programme. That is an issue. We have heard concerns expressed by Shine, the Irish Penal Trust and other

advocacy groups and yesterday, at a hearing in Cloverhill Prison, Judge Alan Mitchell expressed serious concern about the number of people presenting to him with mental health difficulties whom he has no option but to put back in prison. He is not prepared to continue to do that and he has put the Government on notice, as was documented in various media yesterday. There are challenges around it. While it is a mental health issue, the blockage lies with justice and the prison system. Prison is not appropriate. People do not get well in prison if they have mental health problems and sometimes the reasons people are in prison are connected with all of that. We need to hear commentary from the Minister for justice on this occasion because we have to have a collaborative approach. We need to get the 50 beds open. We can be reasonable and accept that it will be transitional. It might be ambitious but it would be great if we could say that we will open 25 beds this year and 25 next year, or whatever. Let us hear what the logistics are and have a reasonable, fair and pragmatic debate about it.

I have continuously asked for a debate on rural housing. Many Members of this House represent rural communities and they know better than me the demand for rural housing. We have been told continuously that we cannot proceed. The rural housing guidelines are out of date but there are imaginative ways in which we can enhance our villages and towns. We can have small clusters of houses. Clearly there are very good things going on in the area of renovation and restoration but we need to do more. A lot of people would like to work from home two or three days a week. They want to support their rural communities. GAA clubs, sports clubs, parishes, and national schools are facing imminent closure because of a lack of people. People want choice and it is about having various options. I would expect nothing less of rural public representatives that they would be here beating the drum about affording people the opportunity to live in rural communities.

**Senator Joe O'Reilly:** I recently attended a very interesting seminar organised by the Garda in my region in Cavan to commemorate Coco's Law. Coco's mother, Jackie Fox, gave a harrowing account of what gave rise to Coco's Law. I rise to ask the Deputy Leader if people will be informed that there is recourse to cyberbullying. When children are being bullied or teachers in classrooms are witnessing obscene bullying, etc. - there are teachers and pupils in the Gallery - there are recourses in the law. They should report it to the gardaí and the various social services. On the topics of pornography, violence and gambling, all of that comes online as well. We need robust age verification tools. The Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, has said that he is working towards those quickly. We need them. I would like a report from the Deputy Leader on that and maybe a debate on this whole area very soon. We need robust regulation. We need dialogue with the platforms here. They are based in Ireland, but it is nonsense to think that because they are based here that we should not have robust dialogue with them about this. Of course, we should. There should be strict regulation. The Deputy Leader will know that I did a report for the Council of Europe on this area. It was adopted by all the member states around the whole area of online abuse, including of young people. I ask the Deputy Leader to let us know about that and to organise a debate. I ask her to tell me what she is going to bring to the Government from it and what she knows the Government is doing.

**An Cathaoirleach:** Before I call the next speaker, I welcome guests of the Tánaiste, Deputy Simon Harris, to the Public Gallery. They are from St. Patrick's National School in Stackallen. They are most welcome to Seanad Éireann. I met them in the corridors. I remind them that there is no homework for the rest of the week. We will extend it to the weekend as well.

**Senator Joanne Collins:** Students, farmers, renters, people with disabilities, SNAs, pensioners and working families are among some of the groups that have been completely disrespected and left behind by this Government over the past weeks and months. Students see their student fees increased. Farmers are out on the street for Mercosur and Bord Bia. Renters who can afford their rent are looking at a market reset where their rents are going to increase if they change their accommodation after 1 March. People with disabilities are fighting every day for basic rights, never mind anything extra. SNAs feel like they are not respected. The children in their classes are devastated at the thought of losing a SNA and the families of those children are wondering how they are going to get their child to school if the SNA cuts go ahead. It is not definite that they will not happen. The Government has come out and said it is rolling back on them, but we need to see definite policies put in place to protect SNAs and students. Pensioners are facing rising costs, including ESB bills, every day and every week. There is no help. There are no extra payments. They do not know how they are going to live from week to week. For working families, there are concerns about childcare, groceries and ESB bills. The list goes on and on. It is like living in the Dark Ages at the moment because people are struggling so much.

I was in Cavan last night at an IFA meeting, which was attended by 800 or 900 farmers who are absolutely furious because there is a chairman sitting inside in Bord Bia with double standards. They truly believe, I truly believe and the rest of this side of the House truly believes that there are double standards going on. When somebody who has responsibility for promoting Irish food and produce is importing Brazilian beef for their own company, there is a double standard and a clear conflict of interest. They are not backing down. I wish to give a shout-out to those who are playfully called the Bord Bia five; the people who are still sitting inside the Bord Bia headquarters. I think last night was the 23rd night they spent sleeping on a floor because they are standing up for farmers, their families and what is right. We need to acknowledge that. We need to get them out of there by taking the chair out of his position.

**Senator Margaret Murphy O'Mahony:** I rise to speak about the inadequate postal service that is happening at the moment. Stamps recently went up 20 cent to €1.85, which is very expensive to post a letter. It is not beyond reason to expect a very good service for a €1.85 stamp. A lot of councillors and people from the public have contacted me. I have done a bit of research on it. One delay that I sussed out involved some people who were getting no post. When I rang the local sorting office, I was told that a postman was on holidays, which he is entitled to be on, but there was no replacement. He was off for two weeks. People in that area had no post for two weeks. Our older people deal a lot in paper. Like anyone else who pays €1.85 for a stamp, they should expect a normal and good service. I wish to invite the Minister in and ask if he is aware of what is happening and what he is going to do about it. It is hard to believe in this day and age that someone would not be replaced when they are on annual leave. Annual leave is planned. If it was sick leave, even that would be hard to comprehend, but annual leave is planned far in advance. It is not good enough that postmen are not being replaced while they are on annual leave. I would like the Minister to come in to discuss this.

**Senator Pauline Tully:** I raise the meeting that took place in Cavan last night, which was organised by the IFA. There were hundreds of people in that room from counties Cavan, Monaghan, Louth, Meath, Westmeath, Donegal and all around the whole region. They are very

angry, but they are also very steadfast. They are not backing down on this issue. The Minister needs to reconsider his decision to continue to back Larry Murrin as chair of Bord Bia. The actions of the chair of a board which guarantees quality-assured Irish produce in admitting to importing Brazilian beef, when we know it does not meet the same standards of Irish produce, are hypocritical to say the least. It is undermining the role of Bord Bia and everything it stands for in giving an assurance that what a person is buying is of good quality. Nobody wants to see that. The farmers are angry, but the public are angry as well. They do not want to see him remaining as chair. Recent polls have indicated that. As was said at the meeting last night, there is no wrong time to do the right thing. It is time for the Minister to do the right thing now without delay by backing down on his support for Larry Murrin - for whatever reason, he is so steadfast in supporting him - and by ensuring that the five people who are sitting in Bord Bia headquarters can go home, do their farming and see their families.

**Senator Manus Boyle:** I welcome the national maritime security strategy, which will address key risks that threaten Ireland's maritime domain. I understand that the Naval Service is considering a base in the north west. Donegal would be the perfect place for the base. We have ports like Killybegs, Burtonport, Rathmullan and Greencastle. Geographically, we are in the right place for once. Naval ships often use Killybegs and Rathmullan. Naturally, Killybegs would have the greatest potential as one of the deepest ports in Ireland. We have a great service industry that has grown up with the fishing industry for generations. It has looked after the Naval Service in the past and worked on its fleet. I ask the Deputy Leader to ask the Minister to strongly consider Donegal as a port for the Naval Service. It would be a great natural fit. We have four ports up there that would be capable of doing this. It would strengthen our hand in the North Sea and everything up there. For once, Donegal is in the right place for this. I ask the Deputy Leader to make a recommendation to the Minister that we will fight hard for this one.

**An Cathaoirleach:** Before I call the next speaker, I welcome Cash Cummins, who is a son of Ray Cummins who works in Leinster House. He is most welcome here on work experience for the week.

I hope they do not have him working too hard and that he enjoys his time in Leinster House.

**Senator Chris Andrews:** Dartry gym, which is also known as Iconic Health Club in Rathgar, Dublin 6 is more than just a gym. It is a community hub that employs 35 or 36 individuals. The benefit of the gym to the local community is profound. It makes its facilities available to schools and sports clubs free of charge. Mental health groups such as Blueballs Ireland have had significant support from Dartry gym. Young and old use the facilities. It is a generous sponsor and supporter of various community projects.

The problem is that the gym and its development is being targeted and blocked by a prolific objector. The current objection from the prolific objector is to a canopy that was erected during Covid to allow exercise in a safe, open and healthy environment. This is a wellness space. It provides classes in a healthy space and it is barely visible to pedestrians. This facility will have to be removed due to this one objector, who I believe is not impacted at all by the facility. I have been inundated with emails and calls from locals who use the gym to improve their health and to socialise.

What really irritates me is that when residents in the inner city protest against a facility or service, they have to take to the streets because they do not have the resources, time, money or professional background. They are often derided for doing so by the media and commentators. This objector is a senior counsel and because he has the time, money and professional background, and knows his ways around the courts and legal processes, he can put in objection after objection and no one says anything. He is not derided in the press or among commentators. This mostly happens only if people are from a disadvantaged community. If people have the letters for senior counsel after their names, such as Gabriel Gavigan has, they can object as much as they want and object to anything they want and no one will comment. Anything I say now is on the public record; he has signed all of the objections and they are on the record. This is very unfair on a gym that makes a massive contribution to the local community. As I have said, it is being damaged and impacted negatively by one individual.

**An Cathaoirleach:** Items may be on the public record but Members need to be aware of the Standing Orders in relation to naming people in the House.

**Senator Sarah O'Reilly:** We have discovered through a parliamentary question submitted by Aontú that the Department of education has given just under €500,000 to the LGBTQ+ organisation Belong To. Does the Government feel it is appropriate to fund organisations that have been criticised by young people themselves for putting its agenda over the well-being and safety of children? It has been rightly condemned for spreading misinformation, for advising children not to tell their parents if they use a chest binder and for encouraging young people to speak only with trusted adults. These trusted adults are, of course, only those who are affirmative of their gender transition. Belong To's stand up campaign, which is rolled out in schools nationwide, is rooted in the Bí Cinealta programme, which has been criticised by parents, teachers and students. We can teach our children to be respectful and kind without forcing them to go against what is biologically true. We have a duty to ensure that what we teach children is grounded in best practice and appropriate for their age and stage of development.

The Government's priorities seem totally twisted. We constantly see money being poured into NGOs, awareness campaigns and agenda-driven gender guides and no priority given to what is actually important. Classrooms remain under-resourced, parents struggle to find support for their children, and young people with disabilities feel totally left behind in the education system. Please stop allowing these loud activists to push an agenda. Are we now educating flag wavers for NGOs? Listen to what teachers and parents actually want. They need to know their children will have a place for school in September and that they will have SNAs to support children with additional needs.

**Senator Aubrey McCarthy:** I want to bring the attention of the House to a report published by Alcohol Action Ireland. Its findings are very disappointing. During recent high-profile rugby matches in Ireland and abroad, alcohol branding appeared at a rate of one reference every eight seconds. Imagine that every eight seconds young people watching their team play something we promote as healthy, positive and community driven are exposed to alcohol marketing. As chair of the south-west regional drugs and alcohol task force and Tiglin, I have seen the damage that alcohol can do in communities. Imagine these heavily alcohol-branded

events are being broadcast during watershed hours and are getting around the rules. When young people are watching it is concerning because they cannot distinguish between zero alcohol products and full alcohol products. They see them all as alcohol and research has shown this. In effect, we are allowing backdoor advertising directly into the minds of our children.

Research has shown that youth drinking in Ireland has increased by 12% over the past decade, with 78% of 15- to 24-year-olds consuming alcohol on a regular basis. As somebody who experienced alcoholism in my family, and from working with Tiglin and seeing addiction, I have real lived experience. This is this beginning of a journey that too often ends in crisis for families with the lives of young children going off track. I know we have the Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018 but it is not being fully implemented and there are gaps for zero alcohol products. This is a key issue. Long-standing recommendations dating back to 2012 call for a ban on alcohol sponsorship. We need to stop waiting and implement it. If we are serious about prevention, we need a joined-up Government response and thinking to put young people first. This is something we cannot ignore. Will the Leader bring the Minister for Health before the House to outline what immediate steps will be taken to close these gaps and protect our young people?

**An Cathaoirleach:** I welcome to the Distinguished Visitors Gallery none other than my nephew Ruairí, who is on work experience. He is suffering badly from paper cuts due to a massive amount of envelope stuffing and other activities required in the office of somebody working in the Seanad or the Dáil. I thank Ruairí for all his hard work and for putting up with his uncle for the week. It certainly has not been easy and not only for the week as I have been his uncle all his life, which is really tough.

**Senator Fiona O'Loughlin:** I hope the paper cuts will not last too long. If he wants to come to any of our offices, we will find similar work for him.

I thank all of the Senators for their contributions. Senator Fitzpatrick greeted us with very positive news this morning, and it is always good to get positive news about positive affirmative actions that are making a difference in the lives of people. She spoke about the Taoiseach launching the ninth annual report of the north inner city task force in St. Agatha's Hall yesterday. This task force sits in the Taoiseach's office and co-ordinates and make sure the voices of people who live in the north inner city, be they students in schools, businesses or residents associations work together to try to make the inner city a good place to live. One of the highlights was the expansion of the City Connects programme, which encourages children in school to excel in their own way. Currently, ten primary schools are involved. It really seems like a wonderful programme and something we would love to see every child in the country being able to get. We could not because of the time element. Every child has a plan for themselves in terms of centring what is going and what they want to achieve in their own lives. It is expanding to secondary schools, and through the P-TECH programme 80 students graduated secondary school with technical skills up to level 6. It is really good news.

There is also the commitment to move to construction for the monument on Moore Street.

11 o'clock

It is not just the commemoration of the birth place of our Republic, it is also home to the Moore Street traders, and we need to make sure they are all remembered in the appropriate way. It is a significant announcement, which we welcome.

Senator Boyhan spoke about ongoing issues regarding mental health in prisons. He is correct. It is something about which we are all concerned. We were all shocked by the "Prime Time Investigates" programme. Some 50 beds are not being used and the Senator made the point they should be used incrementally if it is not feasible to open all 50 at one point in time. We will ask the Minister for justice to address the matter. While we need a cross-departmental approach, it is appropriate that we ask the Minister to respond. The Senator also referred to rural housing. We are awaiting a new strategy. There are things we can do. Serviced sites and small clusters are a way forward. There is a huge benefit to rural communities not just in terms of schools, sporting groups, etc., but also intergenerational living where children grow up beside their grandparents and help one another.

Senator Joe O'Reilly spoke about a recent gathering in Cavan addressed by Jackie Fox in respect of Coco's Law. Jackie has been an incredible advocate and her work directly led to Coco's Law, which is the criminalisation of the sharing of intimate images without consent and sending harmful, threatening and offensive communications. We have to appreciate what she has done in turning her incredible tragedy and grief into something that, we hope, will help others. I am sure the Senator realises that Fianna Fáil has tabled a Private Member's motion on online safety, something which concerns all of us, to be debated later today. I want to acknowledge the work of the Senator on the Council of Europe in regard to same.

Senator Collins spoke about students, farmers and SNAs. Regarding student fees, it is important to note that for the first time ever, we have had a permanent cut of €500. While post Covid there was a reduction, it was always on a year to year basis. It is important to state that a reduction was introduced by the Minister, Deputy Lawless.

Senator Tully also spoke about the meeting held with farmers in Cavan last night. I have attended a number of such meetings and met farmers in Kildare who are travelling to support those in Bord Bia. I understand where farmers are coming from because they are subject to many different inspections and are very proud of the reputation of Irish meat. I understand the concerns. I will continue to meet them. We need highly experienced and wise people to head our boards. It is not easy to get them. It is important to say that the chair in this case has done nothing illegal. Everybody agrees with that. At a meeting of the European affairs committee yesterday, I said that we are coming up to the Presidency and a period in which CAP is being negotiated. As we all know, there currently is a proposed 20% cut, which would be a crisis for Irish farmers. We all need to concentrate all of our energies on ensuring that we get to negotiate a better deal.

Senator Murphy O'Mahony spoke about the inadequate postal service. She correctly referred to the need for a good service. We have all met postmasters at different stages and support them in getting more Government funding, etc. Unfortunately, the price of a stamp has gone up. The role postmasters and the postal service play in all of our communities, urban or rural, is important. To leave a community without post for two weeks because somebody is on well-deserved leave is not good enough. We will ask the Minister to come to the House to address the issue and take any questions people have.

Senator Boyle spoke about the new maritime strategy and said for once Donegal is in the right place. I think Donegal has always been in the right place. It is a beautiful county to visit. There is always wonderful hospitality and it has beautiful beaches. It just needs better weather. He made a fair request about considering Killybegs as a base. That is something I will pass on to the Minister. I have no doubt he will use his good services to do the same.

Senator Andrews spoke about Dartry gym, which sounds incredible. It is almost a community centre, providing a hub to not just those who use it but organisations which need a place to meet. It is important that we have places that serve every single age. As he said, it acts as a generous sponsor. He referred to a canopy where people can gather for outdoor activities. People have the right to object, and that is something we have to stand over. It would be relatively unusual that decisions are made on the basis of one individual. Having said that, when I became a Deputy I opened an office with a lovely canopy. There was a canopy on the building before because it was a blind shop, and I assumed I could install a new canopy on which I spent a lot of money. One person made an objection under a false name and permission was refused. The whole thing cost me an incredible amount of money. I adhered to the rules, but it was an incredibly frustrating experience. I hope Dartry gym does not have to take down the canopy, but obviously we cannot interfere with planning decisions.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly spoke about the Department of Education and Youth giving half a million euro to the LGBT group *Belong To*. It is important that the group gets funding. When I was mayor of Kildare in 2014, one of the first things I did was hold a meeting with our youth parliament. By far the strongest message that I received from those young people was that they wanted more support for those within their peer group who belonged to the LGBT community. That was something that resonated with me. During the marriage equality referendum, people felt very strongly that those in the LGBT community have the right to marry on an equal basis to anybody else. I support it, along with its advice to for young people to speak to trusted adults because we need them in our lives, be they teachers, parents or others. I have spoken to parents and young people. As we all know, that time of life can be fraught with difficulty. We will have to agree to differ. My opinion is that it is the right thing to do and I will support it. I accept that the Senator does not agree.

Senator McCarthy spoke about Alcohol Action Ireland. He referred to the fact that at some of the large rugby matches to which many people tune in, there is alcohol branding once every eight seconds. That is concerning. He is correct about backdoor advertising, whereby a loophole is being used to advertise non-alcoholic beer. I noted that research. I understand why people cannot tell the difference. It is like low calorie chocolate or whatever. I accept what the Senator has said. It is concerning that youth drinking has increased by 12% over the past decade. What is more concerning is that it is not happening in social gatherings.

I often think that within the pub setting, there are people who can keep an eye out when young people are gathering together. When it is happening at home or behind closed doors, it is more concerning in terms of the volume that can be drunk and, sadly, behaviours that can take place. We need a joined-up Government response and I will ask the Minister for Health to come to the House to address that.

Order of Business agreed to.

*Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 11.10 a.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 11.49 a.m.*

*Sitting suspended at 11.10 a.m. and resumed at 11.49 a.m.*

### **Online Safety: Motion**

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Pat Casey):** I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Collins, to the Chamber. We are now discussing No. 51 *I.* on the Order Paper, Private Member's motion regarding online safety. The combined speeches of the proposer and seconder shall not exceed 16 minutes and all other Senators have six minutes. I call on Senator O'Loughlin to move the motion.

**Senator Fiona O'Loughlin:** I move:

“That Seanad Éireann:

recognises that:

- we are at a pivotal moment in our digital transformation;
- Artificial Intelligence (AI) is reshaping how we live, how we work, and how we interact as a society;
- Ireland has strong digital foundations with our well-established reputation as a digital hub, our exceptional talent base and our vibrant innovation ecosystem;
- Digital Ireland – Connecting our People, Securing our Future sets out the Government's ambition to 2030 to strengthen our position as a digital leader and a global hub for applied AI innovation;

agrees that:

- Ireland has a robust online safety framework;
- the EU's Digital Services Act and the creation of Coimisiún na Meán has brought to an end the era of self-regulation of big tech platforms;
- online safety, particularly for children and young people, is a priority for us all;
- new challenges will inevitably arise as technologies continue to evolve;
- we must maintain a modern, cohesive and well-resourced regulatory framework that is responsive to the evolving digital age;

notes that:

- Ireland will soon assume the Presidency of the Council of the European Union;
- online safety will be a priority during the Presidency;
- as part of the Presidency, we will host an International AI and Digital Summit to showcase Ireland as a digital and regulatory hub;

calls for:

- Ireland to be a strong voice in Europe for a digital economy which supports competitiveness and innovation, while protecting data privacy and fundamental rights;
- the Government to ensure we reap the benefits of digital technologies and AI for growth and competitiveness and to enhance our public services;
- the Government to ensure that everyone in our society is empowered to succeed in a digital era, by fostering the skills, literacy and the societal trust necessary for a confident digital future;
- the Government to strengthen Ireland's position as an EU centre of excellence and digital regulatory hub;
- Ireland's Council Presidency to reflect our ambition to be at the forefront of digital innovation; and to advocate for a digital age of majority but will take action at domestic level, if necessary;
- our Presidency to prioritise the protection of women and children, in particular, from the misuse of digital tools;
- Ireland to advance the EU's AI Act during our Presidency;
- Ireland to advocate for adding the AI generation of intimate abuse images to the list of prohibited practices in Article 5 of the AI Act;
- the Government to advocate for a decision on the 'digital age of majority' to be taken at EU level; and to work with like-minded countries to introduce age restrictions on the use of social media, concentrating on those under 16;
- the full implementation of Digital Ireland's 20 high-level objectives and 90 specific deliverables;
- the prioritisation of deliverables for children and young people, including:
  - supporting Coimisiún na Meán to improve awareness and reporting of AI-generated non-consensual intimate images;
  - supporting robust age verification across the EU;
  - implementing, with the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer, a wide scale pilot on age verification in conjunction with one or more of the major platforms, to run for several months to test technology and to ensure public buy in; and
  - the support of schools and teachers through updated resources on online safety."

**Senator Shane Curley:** I second the motion.

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Pat Casey):** Are the Senators sharing time?

**Senator Fiona O'Loughlin:** Yes, Senator Curley and I will share time.

The Minister of State, Deputy Collins, is very welcome to the Chamber. We really appreciate him being here. This is an important motion. We may have different views on this

but we are all concerned about it. Another commitment we have to make - and our party, Fianna Fáil, is committed to it - is to make the online world safer for everybody, especially children and young people. Our children now are growing up online. It is not all bad. The Internet offers endless opportunities to learn, engage and play. However, it also presents serious risks which can have devastating consequences. We have seen, witnessed and heard them. This motion highlights online safety as a rapidly evolving area of Government policy. There are several cross-departmental collaborations on various related initiatives, including the recent publication of the national digital and AI strategy 2030, the implications of the EU AI Act and the development of an age verification tool. Because we are coming up to the Irish Presidency of the Council of the European Union, starting 1 July, we also refer to that in the motion because we believe we can have key influence at that point in time.

The latest state of the digital decade report shows that Ireland continues to perform strongly, particularly in digital skills, business digitalisation and public service digitalisation. They are all key enablers of long-term competitiveness, and we have to welcome that. As one of the EU's best performers, Ireland is committed to building on its positioning to accelerate the digital transition right across its economy and society. Despite all that, however, we have to be mindful of the very real harms the online world presents. We can commit here that Ireland will use its Presidency to prioritise the protection of women and children, in particular, from the misuse of digital tools, including AI.

Senator Alison Comyn and I had the opportunity to be in Stormont two or three weeks ago and we heard from a really interesting lady called Kristina Wilfore, who set up an organisation called Reset Tech. She is well worth looking out for and watching. Her mission is to guard against digital threats to our security, our safety and our fundamental rights, to look at resetting the connection between media and democracy, to restore the promise of technology that works for people, keeps people safer and keeps democracy safe and to hold the biggest tech companies accountable to the values of a true democratic society by promoting new ideas around legislation, industry standards and consumer attitudes. We could ask: why has Reset Tech been set up now and why are we looking at this now? There is no doubt that the Internet has given us a lot. It has given us a lot of ideas, exposed us to new ideas, etc., and that is a great achievement, but it is very fragile and very easily exploited, manipulated and weaponised. A lot of people are making money for private gain in a way that is not good for democracy or the public good. We can see it all happening from day to day. We see our children and indeed ourselves addicted to smartphones, and that can lead to a lot of issues and challenges around mental health, anxiety and depression. Some people who have worked with Meta have come forward and said this. We also see foreign influences targeting elections. The public conversation can often be hijacked by algorithms, and those algorithms can push conflict and violence, which is concerning. Then when we look at the number of false accounts on social media pushing scams, spam, fake videos and conspiracy theories to grab all our attention and to profit at our expense, it is very concerning.

What can we do about it? We need action from society, from the tech companies and, of course, from the Government and from legislation. We also need work at EU level. The Government is in the process of implementing domestic legislation to give full effect to the EU AI Act in Ireland. The main supervision and enforcement provisions will come into effect from August 2026. That will provide a formal regulation for relevant surveillance authorities to engage with individual companies specifically in relation to the development, provision and

deployment of AI systems. Alongside that, we will support an amendment of the AI Act at European level to expand the list of prohibited AI practices. That is really important.

As regards digital simplification, an omnibus package by the EU was published last November. It includes proposals to simplify rules in relation to AI, data and cybersecurity incident reporting. Again, that is very important.

I have highlighted the upcoming Presidency of the Council of the EU and that we will make online safety a priority issue there. We thank the Minister of State, Thomas Byrne, for all his excellent work on that. We had a meeting of the Joint Committee on European Affairs yesterday about the European Youth Forum and the youth engagement piece that we will hold. That is to get the perspectives of children and young people because "nothing for them without them". That is really important. Ireland will host an international AI and digital summit on 14 October 2026. That is a flagship event of the Presidency.

I want to speak a little about a youth workshop that our party, Fianna Fáil, held on 23 September 2025. It was part of an ongoing group of stakeholder engagement pieces. The following were some of the key findings. The participants were on average six years old when they first used a smart device, with some as young as four. As someone who has taught children of aged four, I am really concerned that just with a click, young people are finding access. A lot of this is happening in the home. I know there are issues and concerns about children using smartphones in school, but we have to start with the home and the parents as the primary educators. Participants reported spending an average of four hours a day at a minimum on social media. When a young mind is developing and when young people should be out socialising and talking to one another, spending four hours on a phone has to be very concerning. Some have access during lunch break to their phones, again losing that very valuable opportunity to play and to socialise. More concerning, however, was the fact that the young people reported having been exposed to violent content, extremist content and content promoting diet culture and excessive exercising on social media. This is eating disorders awareness week, and we have to be concerned about all that influence on our young people.

We have heard and understood that there are different views on the implementation of a social media ban for under-16s, as done in Australia. Young people themselves feel that it is not something they want. We have listened to other experts as well and they would say that if you ban something, it becomes more attractive and more alluring and people will find a way around the ban. It is therefore not as simple as that. That could be part of the response, but there are a myriad of other things we have to look at.

12 o'clock

We do need to communicate with young people. We also did an online parents' survey and the responses were quite different. Over 35% said their child received a smartphone between the ages of 11 and 13, whereas children said they were exposed at the ages of four and six. Parents did express major concern about their children's online exposure. More than 75% of the parents supported the smartphone ban in all schools. There are a number of takeaways and recommendations in the motion. I am very happy to support the motion and outline it here. I will hand over to my colleague, Senator Curley.

**Senator Shane Curley:** I am glad to be bringing this motion today together with my party colleagues. Fianna Fáil is committed to making the online world safer for everyone, especially children and young people. We are at a pivotal moment in our digital transformation. Artificial intelligence is reshaping how we live, work, learn and interact as a society. Ireland has strong digital foundations and a well-earned reputation as a global digital hub. Growing up online offers extraordinary opportunity. Our young people can learn, create, connect and innovate in ways previous generations never could. Alongside these opportunities come very real risks that can have devastating consequences. Generative AI holds enormous promise in healthcare, accessibility and enterprise but it is also being misused to create non-consensual intimate images, to produce harmful and extremist content and to exploit children and vulnerable individuals. The sharing of non-consensual intimate images is illegal. The generation of child sexual abuse material is illegal. The abuse of digital tools to harass or intimidate is illegal but enforcement and deterrence must keep pace with technological change. Ireland's online safety framework is strong. The Digital Services Act has ended the era of self-regulation. Coimisiún na Meán now has real supervisory and enforcement powers. The online safety code places obligations on platforms to remove harmful content and implement age assurance measures.

In my own constituency, I recently worked closely with Aoife Noone, founder of Think Smart Cyber, who hosted excellent online safety talks in Loughrea and Athenry. Those events brought together parents, teachers, a detective garda from the Garda National Cyber Crime Bureau, and a child and adolescent therapist. There is a reason Aoife is packing ballrooms all over Galway with frightened parents. What strikes me most is the fear that has gripped parents throughout my constituency. Parents want practical tools. They want clarity on threats like online grooming, algorithm-driven content and excessive screen time. They want to understand how social media affects the developing brain. Parents are petrified of the danger of online bullying, which has tragically cost many young lives. We need to get tougher on social media companies. When harmful content is reported, it needs to be removed instantly, not days later when extensive damage is done. Many parents do not feel equipped to navigate the online environments their children inhabit. We must support them. Ireland will soon assume the Presidency of the Council of the European Union. Online safety will be a priority. That gives us a significant opportunity to shape Europe's digital future. We must be strong voice in Europe for a digital economy that supports innovation and competitiveness while protecting fundamental rights. In particular, we must prioritise the protection of women and children from the misuse of digital tools. That includes advocating for the addition of AI-generated intimate abuse images to the list of prohibited practices under Article 5 of the EU AI Act. Age verification is important to provide proportionate safeguards. If platforms profit from user engagement, they must accept responsibility for ensuring children are not exposed to pornography, extreme violence, grooming or algorithm-driven harmful content. These systems must be secure, privacy-preserving and trusted. If Ireland is to position itself as a centre of excellence in digital regulation, we must build systems that citizens have confidence in.

Many young people now receive their first smartphone before their teenage years. They spend hours each day on platforms engineered for engagement. Some have devices in their bedrooms without parental controls. Exposure to violent content, extremist narratives and distorted body image messaging is increasingly common. This is why this motion is timely. It recognises both the opportunity and the risk. It calls for full implementation of Digital Ireland's

objectives, strengthened regulatory frameworks, and the prioritising of children and young people in our digital policy. Ireland's Presidency must reflect our ambition to be at the forefront of digital innovation and at the forefront of digital responsibility. We can be pro-innovation and pro-safety. We can support enterprise and protect fundamental rights. We can lead Europe, not just in digital competitiveness but in digital ethics. The digital transformation is not slowing down. AI is not going away. Social media is not disappearing. Let us ensure that Ireland leads with confidence, clarity and a commitment to protecting the most vulnerable while enabling opportunity for all.

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Pat Casey):** Before I call on Senator Mullen, I want to explain to Members that all amendments today are being discussed together. They have to be discussed within the Member's six-minute allocation. When Senator Mullen moves amendment No. 1, all other amendments must be moved at the end of the debate, not during each Member's six-minute slot. I ask Senator Mullen to move his amendment.

**Senator Rónán Mullen:** I move amendment No. 1:

After the third paragraph under “agrees that:”, to insert the following paragraphs:

“- such benefits as may exist for children in the use of social media are now clearly seen to be outweighed by the negative impact on children’s learning ability, mental health and general welfare of early and excessive exposure to online social media;

- the widespread availability of pornography in particular poses dangers to society, and especially to children and vulnerable persons, and that it must be recognised that any facilitation of access to pornography for children is itself a form of child sexual exploitation and abuse;”

**Senator Sarah O'Reilly:** I second the amendment.

**Senator Rónán Mullen:** Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit. I welcome this motion in general terms. There is lot that is good in it and a lot that I support. I am of the view that it does not go far enough. It clearly nods in the direction that online safety is something that has to be a priority in the context of pursuing the economic potential that big tech and AI in particular offer. Where we might differ is that there is a difference between something being a priority and something being the priority. There are a number of issues in play here. There is the unique role of the Irish regulator, Coimisiún na Meán, because so many big tech companies' platforms have their European headquarters in Ireland. There is the surge of new knowledge around the problems associated with early, by which I mean early in children's lives, and excessive use of smartphones, screens and social media. There is the horrendous damage being done by adult consumption of pornography, not just where it entails in its production and distribution the exploitation of children, but the very exposure of children to pornography is in itself a form of child abuse. I say that in light of what we know about the harms it does, the way it rewires their minds, the generation of negative attitudes between men and women and all the rest of it, which we can discuss at another time. There is the pushback against controls from those who espouse a libertarian philosophy and promote the enablement of certain adult appetites around online services and who seek to make some kind of compromise between

child safety and protection on the one hand, and a radicalised view of free expression and privacy on the other.

There are questions about the adequacy of regulation itself, the cat-and-mouse struggle to get a situation under control, which we are seeing. We have not had a single prosecution of the purveyors of harmful content online as regards dangerous stuff on social media, or pornography. Users occasionally come within the cross-hairs of the Garda but certainly not those who are pushing the appetites and enabling them. The interplay of EU regulation and domestic legislation, particularly around civil and criminal liability, is a factor. When I brought forward legislation in recent times proposing strict criminal penalties for those who would not ensure strict age verification to ensure persons under 18 would not be able to access pornography, I was effectively told by the then Minister in the last Government that we were constrained here by our European obligations. In recent days, I heard a person from Digital Rights Ireland talking about the maximum harmonisation principle of EU law and the rules around country of origin regulation. In fact, what we know is that when people are sufficiently concerned and member states stamp their feet and say "No", we need to be able to take particular domestic measures. We see that it is possible and we have seen emerging legislation in France and Italy. We must stop hiding behind the skirts of the EU. The Government at the moment is tending very much towards hedging its bets around this question of a ban on social media access for under-16s. I heard what Senator O'Loughlin had to say this morning, appearing to pour cold water on the idea of such a ban. I will address that in a moment. I am also hearing noise from the Government to the effect that it would be much better if we moved forward with the EU. I am all for harmonisation with the EU but there comes a point where if the problem is not being solved, we need to take measures ourselves. In this House, I pointed to the apparent success around pornography in some American states, for example, where there was bipartisan support for measures that put the clear onus under criminal and-or civil law on pornography providers which, in certain circumstances, led to them withdrawing their services in particular states. That is effective legislative action.

If we could get somewhere like that in this country, an awful lot of parents in particular would feel reassured.

There is no time to discuss the amendments in detail. This is about children's mental health. I recommend to everybody to listen to what people such as Professor Jonathan Haidt says. He is an eminent social psychologist and there was a fantastic interview with him recently on the BBC with Amol Rajan on the programme "Radical". Listen to it and learn from it. It is clear, and the evidence is in, that excessive early access to phones and social media has been damaging children's mental health, their intellectual study and their results performance, and we know the connections with cyberbullying, self-image and all of these problems.

It would be interesting to hear what Jonathan Haidt would have to say on whether a ban on social media access for under 16s would be a positive development. If the problem is serious, the response has to be serious as well. I know Senator O'Loughlin's intentions are completely honourable but, as I said at the committee yesterday in response to something an official from Coimisiún na Meán said regarding this talk about children finding workarounds and going to darker places and there being so much that is positive in social media usage, there is very little difference between this type of talk and the lines we hear from big tech. We need to be aware

of this. There is a lot that is good in the motion but we need to go much further and we need to do so quicker.

**Senator Gareth Scahill:** I welcome the Minister. I thank my Fianna Fáil colleagues for tabling the motion. I will begin by referring to a short film available online called "Let's Change the Norm". I am sure people are familiar with it. It was released by Smartphone Free Childhood in the US. It struck a chord with millions of people because it highlights something that many of us, especially parents, can see happening every day. The film shows how smartphones and social media place huge pressure on our children and calls for a return to a childhood filled with play, real relationships and real-world experiences. The film makes the very simple but powerful point that we ask children to deal with adult-sized challenges before they are ready. There are constant notifications, online bullying, addictive platforms, harmful content and, increasingly, serious risks such as hacking and exploitation. As a parent this is deeply worrying. It is not just about a debate in the Chamber but the reality for families throughout the country. At the same time, we must recognise the bigger picture.

As the motion sets out, we are at a pivotal moment in our digital transformation. Artificial intelligence is changing how we live, how we work and how we interact. Ireland is in a very strong position. Through Digital Ireland - Connecting our People, Securing our Future we have a clear plan to grow our digital economy and lead in AI. The programme for Government reflects this ambition to use technology to improve public services and grow our economy. We are also playing a leading role in Europe through our engagement at EU level, including through the D9+ group, and we are helping to shape digital rules that support innovation and strong protections. As we prepare for Ireland's Presidency of the Council of Europe in 2026, we have a real opportunity to lead on this. We will host an international AI and digital summit and we will help to shape Europe's approach to technology for years to come. Leadership is not just about innovation; it is also about responsibility.

While technology is moving fast, the risks for children are also growing and this is why the motion is important. It recognises that Ireland now has a stronger online safety framework, including the Digital Services Act and the work of Coimisiún na Meán. It also makes clear that we cannot stand still. New challenges will continue to emerge and we must be ready to respond. We also need practical solutions. A key area is age verification, and we need to be able to clearly identify when a child is online and ensure they are protected from inappropriate content. This morning on the plinth, I met a primary school group Senator Cathal Byrne had up from Wexford. We answered a couple of questions from the primary school going kids. One of them mentioned that when they watch YouTube videos sometimes inappropriate ads come up. This was a 12-year-old boy. He said there were inappropriate ads and asked whether we were doing something and what were we going to do to stop this content coming up in front of him.

Ireland is already working on this and that includes plans for a pilot age verification system with the major platforms. I must highlight the fact that X has still to acknowledge whether it will participate in this scheme. Alongside this, the development of a digital wallet offers real potential. It could provide a secure and privacy-friendly way for people to verify their age online without sharing unnecessary personal information. This is an important step in building trust in the digital system. The motion also calls for action at European level, including discussion on a digital age of majority and stronger rules to protect children under 16 on social media. These are not easy issues but they are necessary.

We also need to remember that online safety is not just about regulation or technology; it is about people. I am sure colleagues have all received emails in the past week from youth organisations, which play a pivotal role throughout Ireland. They provide safe trusted spaces where young people can talk about what they experience online. They offer support when things go wrong and they help young people to build the skills and confidence to navigate the digital world safely. If we are serious about online safety we must continue to support and invest in this work. Safety online starts with trust, relationships and education online.

In the end, this is about balance. We want Ireland to be a leader in digital innovation. We want to grow our economy and embrace the digital opportunities of AI but we must do this in a way that protects our children. We must make sure that progress does not come at the cost of childhood. "Let's Change the Norm" is a powerful reminder of what is at stake. Today, through the motion, we have a chance to respond and build a digital future that is not only innovative but also safe, fair and centred on the well-being of our young people.

**Senator Pauline Tully:** I welcome the motion for the most part. There is nothing I can disagree with bar that Ireland has a robust online safety framework. We have an online safety framework but I am afraid it is not robust enough and it does not keep up with ever-changing technology, which is a concern. We all know that access to the Internet and the use of AI has many benefits and positives. It can be beneficial for businesses and individuals, and we can see how public services and innovation can be improved. We have heard about enhanced health care, diagnosis, drug discoveries, improved productivity and creativity and dealing with repetitive tasks. There are many positives but it is not a force for good. The concept and the technology can be used in whatever way the user intends. It needs to be regulated and this is important. There are many malicious users who misuse and manipulate the tools they find online.

There are many dangers with AI. We can see a possible loss of jobs in certain areas, privacy risks, copyright infringements and the spread of misinformation, which is a big issue. We have all suffered abuse online. If many people were to use their own names, they would not put their comments online because if we met them on the street they would not say it to our face. We wonder how many of the accounts are real. We hear about bots. If we had properly verified accounts for every user, it would cut out an awful lot of the misinformation and abuse online.

Recently there has been a lot of talk about the generation of illegal material through AI tools such as X's Grok and other platforms with similar tools. They are being used to generate images that are child sexual abuse material and deepfake naked images of people online. We ask ourselves why these features exist in the first place, especially in relation to children. It is just horrific. A lot more needs to be done about the companies because they have got away with decades of not being regulated. There needs to be strict regulation and strict procedures for dealing with this information. We have to recognise that non-consensual AI nude deepfakes are a form of digital domestic, sexual and gender-based violence and this is what they need to be called out as. There is a loophole in existing Irish law which criminalises the distribution of non-consensual intimate images, including deepfakes, but not their creation.

Coco's Law was introduced in 2020 and we are all familiar with it.

It criminalises the non-consensual recording or distribution of intimate images, but there is a lack of certainty over whether the Act covers the generation or creation of intimate images. It does not clearly state that the generation of a deepfake sexual image of an adult is illegal.

My colleagues Deputies Devine and Carthy introduced a Bill to the Dáil recently to amend Coco's Law. They want to make three straightforward changes: to explicitly criminalise the non-consensual creation or generation of intimate images and videos through the use of AI, to extend the statute of limitations from two to five years for some summary offences and to increase the maximum penalties upon conviction. I welcome the fact that was not opposed by the Government. I ask that it go to Committee Stage as quickly as possible and that it proceed to amend the Act and be written into law. Ireland's AI advisory council has recommended the creation of a specific offence of creation or generation of AI deepfakes.

The ban on under-16s using social media that was introduced in Australia is a blunt tool. It might seem easy to do that but social media does not extend to gaming, educational tech or wider digital ecosystems. There are ways in which children can be abused online or subjected to unsavoury content other than on social media. Before introducing a ban, we should consider everything. We need to talk to young people and organisations representing them, to parents and to the tech companies. The tech companies have operated for decades without meaningful child safety regulation. We have to do something to enforce safety by design.

We know children's overuse of online platforms is dangerous, as is their being subjected to unsavoury content. However, sometimes the use of online platforms is beneficial. During Covid, I was very thankful that my children could engage with their friends through playing games online. They could not see them because they were not allowed to mix or go to school. It was a way for them to stay in contact with people so it was beneficial at that time. We also need to invest in physical youth spaces for young people to meet others who may not be part of a sports, drama or other organisation. They can go somewhere safe and talk to an adult who is not a parent, with whom they might feel more comfortable discussing unsavoury content or illicit images they have seen online. They can discuss what is real and not real in a safe space. I would advocate for much more investment in physical youth spaces to address these issues.

**Senator Patricia Stephenson:** I really agree with the spirit of this motion and I am delighted we have the opportunity to discuss these issues because they are pertinent and pervasive and they affect everyone across the country. I have a challenge with some of the wording, such as "Seanad Éireann ... agrees that ... Ireland has a robust online safety framework". We are repeatedly told Ireland has some of the strongest online safety regulation in Europe. I do not think we can make that argument given what we have seen over the past few months.

We are also told the era of self-regulation by big tech platforms is over, yet at EU level, particularly with the digital omnibus proposals, self-regulation is back on the agenda. These proposals risk stripping back many hard-won rights and protections and will weaken enforcement architecture around the digital space. This is something the Government has explicitly come out in support of. The idea we can self-congratulate about the era of self-regulation being over is not in line with what is happening at EU level or with the Government's position on the digital omnibus. We cannot declare victory in that space when so many safeguards are actively being diluted at EU level. The omnibus package completely undermines user protections we have achieved up to this point.

Here at home, it feels as though responsibility is being pushed back onto parents, children and victims, rather than it being placed where it belongs, on the platforms that design and profit from these systems, on the Government and on us as legislators. Our regulator, Coimisiún na Meán, stated at the Oireachtas AI committee that it does not have the power to directly take down sexual abuse images. This is a clear failure. Victims of image-based abuse should not be left to navigate opaque reporting systems that seldom work, while harm spreads in seconds. The Data Protection Commission told the committee that the so-called nudification apps had not come onto its radar until the Grok scandal. Nudification apps have been around for many years, so the idea they have only come onto the radar as a consequence of the Grok scandal shocks me and makes me we do not have a robust safety framework. I do not think we are ready for the new challenges that face us. These nudification apps were not hiding. They were in plain sight, yet they did not come onto the radar until there was a massive scandal. That really concerns me.

We have an issue with reactive, crisis-driven policymaking when it comes to AI. We are not anticipatory. Academics are writing about this. The risks are well noted, so there is no reason we should not be reacting better. There is a fundamental structural contradiction. We speak about digital excellence and innovation, yet online safety is housed in a Department whose core mandate is enterprise and industry. I do not think AI protection and regulation belongs there. I do not think it makes sense. There is an inherent tension in this. Regulation must be robust and independent, not influenced by any economic interests in any sector, particularly when it comes to the safety of children.

The Social Democrats do not support a blanket ban for under-16s from social media because bans are blunt instruments. They risk driving young people into less visible, less regulated spaces and do nothing to address the design of the platforms. We can take children off online spaces and make it more difficult for them to access them, but we are not making those spaces safer or doing anything to address the negative algorithms that push hateful comment to us, to children and to people across society. They create toxic online communities, which is spreading into our everyday space. Let there be no doubt about that.

We need regulation of these companies, with meaningful penalties and prosecution of individuals in companies responsible for perpetuating these harmful conditions. That is why it is important we look at making the Internet a safer space. The Internet is here to stay. We all access and use it and will all use it forever. The idea of taking children off it and not trying to make the space that exists safer seems pointless. They will get to 17, go onto these toxic spaces and be influenced. We have seen adults take their own lives because of the influence of chatbots. We see a lot of harm to people over the age of 18 all the way up to later in life. It is absurd that we are not trying to tackle the safety of those spaces.

We cannot continue with a model that treats these companies as neutral hosts. These companies are not passive actors. They use algorithms to amplify, recommend and monetise content. They monetise our shock, our horror and our clicks. They want to keep us on the screens for longer so that they make money off us. They curate, prioritise and profit. If any company exercises editorial control and profit-driven amplification, then it should carry responsibilities as a publisher. That means real liability for systemic harms, real transparency around recommender systems and real consequences when platforms fail to act. Online safety

needs to be much more than parental education or responsibility falling solely to parents through TV adverts. It requires structural accountability.

We need stronger enforcement powers, anticipatory regulation of emerging harms like AI-generated abuse, genuine independence and oversight, and a clear shift in responsibility back to the companies that design and profit from these systems. That is how we protect users and children. That is what online safety looks like. I cannot support this motion, not because I do not agree with the principle of it or because I do not welcome the opportunity for this debate, but because I cannot say Ireland has a robust online safety framework at this time.

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Pat Casey):** Senator Higgins has six minutes for her 11 amendments, so the best of luck.

**Senator Alice-Mary Higgins:** Thank you. I am grateful to have the debate. I acknowledge the sincerity of the contributions made by Government Senators but there is a deep tension here. There has been a recognition of the areas of concern and the speeches we have heard are driven by concern, but so many of the calls in the motion are about the economy. There needs to be an honest discussion and that is what a number of my amendments do.

It has almost become an article of faith that any time you mention AI you must begin by saying it has wonderful benefits and referring to the wonderful benefits of AI. You have to begin with that and then act as if there are some accidents that happen along the way, or it is unfortunate the children got to it. In fact, we need to be clear that there is a genuine and heavily lobbied agenda, which is about the dilution of protections. There is an economic push as well. Ireland is trying to ride these two horses by speaking about how we want to be great regulators but also about how we want to really fast-track it and make all our public services use AI as quickly as possible. We want to have it permeate every area of society and get as many data centres built as quickly as possible, but we also want to be respected regulators. I actually agree with Senator Mullen. You can look to both, but you need to choose a priority. Sadly, that is not really reflected in this motion when we look at the language. There is a reference to how we need to "reap the benefits". I again suggest that we should be looking at the risks. Strangely, in the middle of a motion about online safety there a reference to "the full implementation of Digital Ireland's 20 high-level objectives and 90 specific deliverables". Just to be clear, I looked at the deliverables. One of them is to "Implement the 'Large Energy User Action Plan' to attract ... very [high] energy intensive industrial developments." Where is that in online safety? Where is the consideration? I am worried that in the actual cause, it is all about the economic bit. The motion also contains language like "the misuse of digital tools." Let us be clear. We know these tools are designed. It is not they are being misused or that the wrong people are using them. It is how these tools are designed.

I agree and support the idea that we should not just be advancing but implementing the AI Act. What I am concerned at, and we need to be honest, is the dynamic. I have amendments on this. The digital omnibus, which is happening right now, is not about strengthening and closing the loopholes. It is about more loopholes and more self-regulation. It is about taking whole sections out of GDPR to make exemptions to data protection for the training of AI algorithms. That is what is in the omnibus. That needs to be challenged. If Ireland was serious, we would be challenging that rather than following. I support amendments Nos. 2 and 3, in the names of Senators Sarah O'Reilly and Mullen, because they are honest about the language.

They say that "recent controversies around the use of deep-fake technologies ... reveal the lack of an enforcement culture and the inadequacy of regulatory structures," and they need to be stricter. Let us be clear: we are not in an adequate issue. That discussion about horrendous business practices by major, wealthy corporations has somehow segued into being all about the discussion of children and 16 and that age. I acknowledge that Senator O'Loughlin said it is not actually the kind of golden bullet that is presented. It has to be wider. Unfortunately, in the motion that is the focus piece.

I will highlight two important things that I have amendments on. I hope amendment No. 12 might be supported. It focuses on the idea in the motion that we can protect children by "supporting Coimisiún na Meán to improve awareness and reporting" of these images. By referring to "awareness and reporting", we are again putting it back on the children. What we actually need is awareness, reporting, investigation, sanction and prosecution of the AI generated non-consensual images. Sadly, we do not have Coimisiún na Meán using the full powers it has under the online safety Act at the moment or the safety code. It is instead deferring to an investigation at European level.

Maybe the Minister of State might comment on this. I fundamentally disagree with the language about how Coco's Law unfortunately does not apply as it is not distribution. Let us be clear: it is distribution. Grok does not create and sell the link. If you were to ask Grok to create an image, it creates that image. I know they will not say they publish it. It makes that image in the public space so that the public can see. It has distributed that image, to be clear. Not just that, but what is also in Coco's Law is the threat to distribute. The very fact of Elon Musk standing there saying "Here is a picture of me in a bikini; you can do this to anyone" is, right there, a threat to distribute inappropriate images. I do not accept that Coco's Law cannot be applied, and I certainly do not accept that the child pornography legislation - it should be called the child sexual abuse material legislation, as Senator Flynn said - cannot apply.

I really urge that we have an honest discussion because we have an immense power here in Ireland as key regulators. We are going to be key during the EU Presidency. However, if we try to have a little chat about safety on the fringes of a conversation that is urging the industry to go faster, we will not be stepping up to what I think is one of our greatest moral responsibilities to our colleagues across Europe. I really urge that safety and strengthening regulation be the centrepiece and that we do not let that be marred by the desire for more and faster money-making in this area.

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Pat Casey):** I call Senator Sarah O'Reilly.

**Senator Alice-Mary Higgins:** I have to mention, in a single line, one of my most important amendments. It is about this whole House. I really want an answer from the Minister of State. I refer to my amendment calling on the Government to implement, or amend and implement, section 30 of the Data Protection Act 2018, which this House passed unanimously after it had been proposed by the Government.

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Pat Casey):** Okay, Senator.

**Senator Alice-Mary Higgins:** It calls for a limit. It bans the real issue, which is the profiling of children and the micro-targeting-----

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Pat Casey):** Sorry, Senator-----

**Senator Alice-Mary Higgins:** My apologies. That is exactly the point on advertisements. We already said, as a House, that advertising to children should not be allowed. However, it has never been commenced as a section. I would like an answer on that.

**Senator Sarah O'Reilly:** I welcome the Minister of State, and I welcome the debate. Like Senator Mullen, I do not think this motion goes far enough. I am seconding the amendments. I thank Senator Mullen for bringing forward such important clarifications and asks when it comes to the criminal and civil responsibility of companies. Many of the dangers surrounding social media and online access relate to pornography. These large companies distribute pornographic material, often including child sexual abuse material that is readily accessible at the touch of a button. We have companies hosting videos that either contain sexual violence or endorse it in some capacity. These companies, like Aylo Billing, which owns PornHub, are based in Dublin. In 2020, they took in €260 million in revenue. They are bringing in hundreds of millions in revenue every year but take no responsibility for the harmful content they are profiting from. The Exchequer is also benefiting from these companies. We talk about Grok and age verification, but I believe we are allowing large companies to get away scot free. Should the responsibility be left to the young consumer or to the multinational corporations producing this material? These amendments provide us with the platform needed to hold corporations responsible. They will provide for criminal and civil liabilities if these corporations do not uphold safety standards. Is the Government prepared to introduce legislation that will hold companies responsible for ensuring children are not exposed to pornographic or sexual abuse material? It seems that the reason there is not a harsher clampdown on major corporations is that even though there may be ethical objections to how they are operating, the Government considers the revenue from corporation tax too valuable to lose. This is at a grave cost to the protection of our children. Legislation that targets corporations would send a message that Ireland has strict enforcement when it comes to the protection of our young people.

**Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion. The Minister of State is welcome to the Chamber and his presence shows that a cross-governmental approach will need to be taken. I will touch on a few points. Chief among them is the impact of AI and social media on our democracies worldwide. We are lucky in Ireland that we have not seen our democratic system totally upended like other countries, but that is always on the horizon.

In every election we have stood in, we can see the creeping influence of social media, foreign influences, the spreading of deepfakes and so on. The different examples internationally are too numerous to mention in the limited time available.

The algorithm is sending people down rabbit holes and is really harmful. We are seeing extremism develop in every aspect of society. That is harmful for society and for the individual. The algorithm does not allow for diversity of opinion. It just picks up on what people have

watched or listened to and feeds them more and more of that. That is really harmful and we need to properly tackle the social media companies in relation to their algorithms. Government must have oversight of the algorithms because they are, in themselves, very harmful.

The digital tools created to cause harm, to undress women and children, have no good or moral purpose. It cannot be argued that they have any role to play in society. They are harmful tools and social media companies need to just ban them. There is no proper functioning reason for them. They have caused harm already and will continue to cause great harm. I commend the Minister of State, Deputy Smyth, on the very strong stance she took when this blew up a number of weeks ago. She tackled the social media companies head-on.

I was listening to a discussion on "Morning Ireland" earlier in relation to an Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, report showing a big fall-off in school attendance across the country since Covid. The drop in school attendance has led to lesser outcomes for the children involved. I cannot help but wonder whether the impact of social media on young people's lives has led to this drop-off in school attendances. We see anxiety rising in young people. Is that linked to social media? I think so. Many teachers have told me children are coming in to school without the fine motor skills that they would expect a five-year-old to have. They cannot turn a page. They have never had a book read to them. They are having difficulty holding a crayon. This is all linked to smartphone use and social media addiction in the home. I say this as a parent and as someone who has often had to stop myself from sitting down for the night and doomscrolling. As parents we have to realise that what we do ourselves is impacting children. If they do not see their parents read a newspaper or book, are they going to suddenly start reading books when they are in school? I do not think so. If children who are starting school have never seen somebody turn a page, that is really worrying and we really really have to look at it. We need to have more awareness of the impact of smart devices in particular. Some of us grew up in an age when children watched TV but smart devices are something completely different. We interact with them in a different manner and they are far more addictive than television was back in our day.

I am really glad to see that we will be prioritising digital safety in the upcoming EU Presidency. Billionaires are profiting off harm and we cannot say that loudly enough. They are profiting off the harm of all of us and we have already seen the devastating consequences of billionaires feeling that no laws impact them, and that is just going to increase. I look forward to hearing the Minister of State's response to the motion. While we might have differing approaches to this issue across the House, it is something that we are all extremely concerned about.

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Pat Casey):** Just before we go to the next speaker, I welcome to the Public Gallery Mr. Richie Farrell from the Farming Rathcroghan project. Actually, I think he has left now.

**Senator Rónán Mullen:** Do not worry as word will get to him.

**Senator Linda Nelson Murray:** I thank Fianna Fáil for tabling this motion. I acknowledge that it is getting much cross-party support and has stimulated much debate here this morning. My colleague Deputy Keira Keogh has done a lot of work on online safety and, as she rightly

says, the primary motivation and aim is securing our children's future. She has said that parents are doing their part in trying to protect their children from online dangers like pornography, cyberbullying and harmful algorithms that can lead to exploitation. Recently we have seen huge strides in online safety but we know that stronger age verification is the key to ensuring we keep young people safe online. There is overwhelming support for age limits and age verification and I urge the Government to do this in the shortest time possible.

I met a lady recently called Emer Mugisha, who developed a fantastic comic book called *CyberDefenders, One Wrong Click*. It allows children to read, in a dyslexia- and child-friendly way, about how just one click when playing a game can cause huge harm. As parents we always feel that we need to be doing more and keeping an eye all of the time on our children online, but sometimes educating children is key. Sometimes, when we think of the online space, we think of Snapchat, Facebook and X but young children are playing games on tablets and are just as vulnerable. We need guarantees from companies like Roblox that they have the best interests of our children in mind.

Now I will move on to another issue and I support what Senator Tully said in this regard. If we are going to put all of these controls on the online space and get companies to invest heavily in it, what are we going to do about the offline space to support our young people? Last Saturday, I was invited to a meeting of the Youthwork Ireland branch in Navan to talk to young people about life, politics and what is happening in Ireland right now. They raised with me the fact that young people really want the right to switch off. They said that if they are sitting at home on a Friday or Sunday evening and something pops up on an app from school or from a teacher, that can give rise to a feeling of anxiety in the pit of their stomach. They spoke of how they would like to be able to switch off from that. Perhaps there should be dedicated times at which these emails come in so that children are not getting them at times when they do not want to see them.

The National Youth Council of Ireland, an organisation that I have met with in the past, also got in touch with me this week. Its representatives explained that sustained, long-term investment in offline youth work is essential to addressing online harms experienced by young people. Youth work organisations build trusted voluntary relationships that create safe offline spaces where young people can share their online experiences, receive accurate information and access non-judgmental support. This is critical and investment in our young people through these spaces is vital. Youth work contributes to online safety in three key ways, providing education and guidance to help young people to navigate the digital world confidently and critically, offering responsive support when online harm or abuse occurs and creating safe online environments that foster connection, resilience and well-being.

The approach to online safety must be grounded in children's rights and reflect young people's lived realities. Online platforms should be safe by design and by default, not as an afterthought, with primary responsibility placed on technology companies and regulators to uphold safety standards. The online health task force reports are welcome. They recognise the importance of youth spaces and recommend stronger investment and cross-departmental co-ordination. Ultimately, reducing online harms requires not only regulation and digital literacy but meaningful investment in offline alternatives like youth centres, arts spaces, libraries and other community facilities so that young people have real-world places to go to. As Senator Clifford-Lee said, we were brought up in the age of television and there might have been a bit

of Space Invaders on the Atari, but young people are exposed to so much more now. They need real-world places to belong, connect and thrive. As one young person said, we might have to sometimes be brave enough to switch the screens off in order to switch ourselves back on, to disconnect in order to reconnect.

**An Cathaoirleach:** Before I call the next speaker, I welcome to the Public Gallery the guests of Senator Sarah O'Reilly from St. Louis Secondary School, Dundalk. You are most welcome to Seanad Éireann. The rule of Seanad Éireann is that there is no homework for the rest of the week. We have now amended that rule such that if visitors come in on a Thursday, there is no homework for the weekend either. We are trying to win friends and influence people. I believe the next speaker is Senator Duffy. My apologies, it is Senator Flaherty.

**Senator Joe Flaherty:** Senator Duffy and I have the same hairstyle. I too welcome the students from St. Louis school in Dundalk. As we listen to the debate, it strikes me that we ought to have students from St. Louis and other schools discussing this very important motion here today.

I am particularly happy that we have said we will not ban social media for people aged under 16 in this country. From having three daughters, I have come to realise how important social media is to them. If we reflect on a time when I was growing up, we all went out and played football in a field. If I tell young people about that now they would nearly laugh because they do not do that. We have created a situation whereby we stopped allowing our children to go out and play in the street. We fostered the situation and have completely changed the landscape for young people, and where they go and how they communicate.

Like the pupils from St. Louis here today, today's generation are now not only digital natives but are completely immersed in the digital world and see it as a key component of their lives. We have to reflect on what Covid did to many young people in terms of isolation, in particular young people who may have had a small circle of friends, or only one or possibly no friends at all in school. Covid was detrimental. For them, social media and the online world was the only way they were able to continue to communicate with friends. Social media and the online world is viewed as being a big bad wolf, but we also have to realise that we now have a generation which has embraced this, along with AI, and also see the ills and pitfalls of AI.

This debate tends to get hysterical and we worry unduly and too much. Sometimes we have to have faith in young people and in the next generation that they can make the right decisions. My colleague spoke about algorithms and the suggestion that companies have to give Governments access to them. It would be more dangerous to give such information to governments than allowing companies to access it. That is an aside.

There is a class action under way in the US, where Meta is being taken to court. The nub of the case is that Meta made its product too addictive. Those who have a shop want people to come into it and if they become addicted to going into it they are quite happy. It is difficult to understand the logic of the case that Meta has made Facebook too addictive. Everybody scrolls on their screens to excess. We have to realise that there has to be a balance.

AI will transform a lot of what we do in the world. It will transform many things we do very well. It will help with isolation, healthcare, the delivery of education and many other

fields. While we have to be mindful of it and ready to stand up and take issue with the industry when the time is right, we also have to realise the important and key role Ireland has played in the emergence of AI. As a society and country, we will play a pivotal role in the future development of AI. That is a positive and affirmative good, in that some of our most able and capable digital natives will go on to play a key role in the development of what will be AI mark III, the next generation of AI.

The difficulty for us as we deal with IT, social media and the AI world is that the products we see today are ones that were developed five or six years ago. At any given time, Apple has at least two futuristic phone models it has worked on, developed and could unleash on the market today. It wants to get the maximum value out of the iPhone 14 or whatever the current model is, and will then develop the next one. We think this is the cutting edge and the worst AI can get is what we are seeing at the minute, but the reality is that businesses and investors have moved significantly ahead of that. In many respects, we are probably chasing the horse after the stable door has been opened.

I welcome the conversation on this and the fact that Ireland taking a very proactive role. We will have a key role to play in this space as part of our role in the European Presidency. I see Ireland as being a statesmanlike figure in terms of the issues we face in Ukraine and the Middle East. I would like to see the Presidency being defined by Ireland leading the EU in taking a strong stance on AI and its future development and on international affairs.

**An Cathaoirleach:** Ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh na delegation from the Norwegian Parliament, guests of the communications unit. That makes me think you are from the communications unit in the Norwegian Parliament. I hope you enjoy your visit here. At the risk of causing an international incident, I will now try to welcome Solveig Rødland, Vilde Urdal Bolstad, Anne Marit Arnesen, Lars Henie Barstad, Kaja Smedal and Jens Christian Koller. Thank you so much for coming. I hope you enjoy your visit to Leinster House.

**Senator Mark Duffy:** I join with the Cathaoirleach in welcoming our visitors from Norway to the Gallery. I thank Fianna Fáil Senators for bringing forward this important Private Member's motion during what is a seminal moment in time. We see the development of and advancements in technology, including AI, and the brilliant opportunities that provides for society, along with incredibly dark elements that need to be addressed and legislated for.

This week I attended an information evening in Ted's Bar hosted by Achill Island Smartphone Free Childhood, led by my colleague, Deputy Keira Keogh, and attended by the local community, including parents and Councillor Paul McNamara. While we are legislators in Leinster House, in order to protect children there needs to be leadership in communities. There have been initiatives in Westport, and the parents of children on Achill Island are showing similar leadership in collectively understanding that there is peer pressure for young people in terms of the use of smartphones and different apps. There are many worrying and addictive features and dark elements that need to be addressed, and that is what we need to do as legislators.

There is also an element of responsibility in homes and communities. The initiative on Achill Island is an excellent example of leadership whereby parents are trying to get together to encourage all parents of children not to get them a smartphone until a certain agreed age. It

is a good example of protecting young people from the harms, peer pressure, potential bullying and all of the other dark features and elements addressed on the floor of the House. I would like to acknowledge the speakers on the night. They included Emmet Major, from Planet Youth Ireland, and Hilary O'Connor, from Westport Smartphone Free Childhood, as well as community gardaí, Shane Nallen and Padraic O'Connor, and the local sergeant, Sinead Barrett. It is a great example of parents, community policing units, civic leaders and members of both Houses of the Oireachtas and the local authority coming together. A local GP, Dr. Noreen Lineen-Curtis, spoke about the health impact, including the mental health impact, phones can have. It was organised by Edwin McGreal and was a great example.

Perhaps it is something we can encourage and support in other towns, villages and communities across the country. Legislation will never keep up with the speed and advances in smartphone and online technology and digital tools. Legislation is often trying to catch up and react to the different challenges that arise every time there is innovation. If there is responsible leadership in communities, that can be mitigated. I want to acknowledge the work of Achill Island Smartphone Free Childhood and the same group in Westport.

1 o'clock

I encourage the initiative in other towns, villages and communities across the country. It is a constructive approach to protect young people. I thank the Minister of State for being here today. I also thank my colleagues, the Fianna Fáil Senators, who have brought this issue to the floor.

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Niall Collins):** I welcome the opportunity to come to the Seanad today. The Government is not opposing the motion. I thank Senators for highlighting the importance of online safety as a policy issue.

The motion notes that online safety is a rapidly evolving area of Government policy, with Departments collaborating closely on various related initiatives. Online safety is a priority for the Government and I will outline ongoing cross-departmental efforts to ensure that the people of Ireland can derive the benefits of the Internet while remaining safe online. I am aware that Senators have tabled amendments to the motion. I know these were submitted with the shared goal of improving and enhancing online safety, particularly for children and young people, and the Government shares that objective. However, we cannot accept these amendments. I am confident the issues raised in them are either covered, to one degree or another, by the Government's national digital and AI strategy or, their good intentions notwithstanding, are not in line with that strategy. I am convinced that the strategy represents a good platform for Ireland to move forward on a wide range of issues covered by the strategy, but particularly enhancing and improving online safety, especially for children.

There have been a number of significant legislative developments that aim to reduce the availability of illegal and harmful online content. In Ireland, Coimisiún na Meán is firmly established at the heart of our online safety framework, which comprises the Online Safety and Media Regulation Act 2022, the EU Digital Services Act and the EU Terrorist Content Online Regulation. With a staff of approximately 300 people, the focus of Coimisiún na Meán is on implementing, supervising and enforcing these legislative obligations and ensuring that designated service providers are compliant with their obligations under the online safety code,

which has applied in full since July 2025. Coimisiún na Meán is supported by levies on the entities it regulates, which is important to ensure adequate resources for the regulator in future.

We are also aware that the rate at which new technologies are evolving requires that we are agile when it comes to addressing potential issues. A recent case in point is the misuse of X's AI tool, Grok, to generate non-consensual intimate images. The European Commission recently launched a formal investigation into this under the Digital Services Act. Coimisiún na Meán played an important role in the lead-up to the launch of the investigation and will continue to assist the European Commission as its investigation progresses.

The Government is currently in the process of implementing domestic legislation to give full effect to the EU AI Act in Ireland. The Act is designed to ensure the development and use of safe, ethical and human-centric AI systems. Good progress has been made. The Government believes that the proportionate risk-based approach taken in the Act is the right one, and that it will provide individuals with safety and fundamental rights while promoting innovation. The use of AI to generate offensive material or to abuse or harass any individual is unacceptable. The sharing of non-consensual intimate images is illegal and the generation of child sexual abuse material is illegal.

The Attorney General and the Minister for justice are examining the current established legal framework to ensure it is sufficiently robust to protect people from digital harms like these. Furthermore, the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport has asked Coimisiún na Meán to develop an information campaign that will raise the public's awareness of online safety issues and draw people's attention to the potentially criminal nature of certain types of content. The Minister has also requested that Coimisiún na Meán collaborate with the AI advisory council to review and update the taxonomies of online harm and ensure AI-enabled harms are captured.

The motion refers to the recently published national digital and AI strategy 2030. This strategy sets out the Government's commitment to working closely with like-minded member states on proposals to restrict social media access for children and young people and notes the Government's preference would be for a decision on the issue of digital age of majority to be taken at a European level. In addition, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced an expert panel would be formed to examine these issues and the outputs of that panel would also be important to consider. The Department of Culture, Communications and Sport is working with the Government's Chief Information Officer and his office on an age verification tool as part of the Government's digital wallet being developed using MyGovID. The age verification tool has been developed to support the application of Ireland's online safety code. A pilot of the digital wallet's use for age verification is envisaged, which will be led by the office of the Government's Chief Information Officer. It will run on a voluntary basis over a period of months. The legislative requirements are being examined and it is intended that the experience and results emerging from the pilot will inform the final shape of legislation. It is important to note that it is not intended that the Government's digital wallet will be the only option for platforms to meet their age verification requirements; rather, it will provide a privacy-preserving and secure option that respects users' rights and helps to safeguard children.

Ireland will hold the Presidency of the Council of the European Union during the latter half of this year and it is the Government's intention to make online safety a priority issue. A youth

forum will be held in the lead-up to the Presidency, the aim of which will be to give young people the opportunity to share their views on online safety. The digital age of majority will be an issue for discussion at the forum. Ireland will also hold a high-level conference on online safety in September as part of its Presidency at which this issue and the views of young people will feature. Ireland will also host the international AI and digital summit in Dublin on 14 October 2026, which is a flagship event of the EU Presidency.

The Senators' motion acknowledges Ireland's position as a leading digital regulatory hub. The Government is committed to ensuring that Ireland fulfils its important role in enforcing digital regulation and to further establish Ireland's position as an EU centre of excellence and leading digital regulatory hub. Ireland is the EU place of main establishment for 15 of the 25 very large online platforms and online search engines, illustrating the State's critical role when it comes to the regulation of online platforms in Europe. We will continue to be a strong voice in Europe, advocating for a balanced, proportionate and coherent regulatory approach, one that fosters innovation and competitiveness while safeguarding fundamental rights.

In November 2025, the European Commission published its simplification omnibus package, which includes proposals to simplify rules on AI, data and cyber security incident reporting. Among the proposals, the package seeks to consolidate several data rules into a single, clear and harmonised data framework, the Data Act, and targeted simplification measures to ensure timely, smooth and proportionate implementation of certain provisions of the AI Act. The package, which supports the EU's strategic positioning as the location of choice for trustworthy digital innovation while maintaining a central focus on data privacy and the fundamental rights of citizens, was welcomed by the Government.

Crucially, we must continue to strive to maintain safety and civility on the Internet. We must ensure that people, young and old, are equipped with the skills required to derive the benefits of the Internet while remaining safe online. Media literacy education is vital in this regard and Coimisiún na Meán has a statutory obligation to promote media literacy in Ireland. Coimisiún na Meán partners with Media Literacy Ireland on initiatives like the Be Smart campaign, which encourages people to stop, think and check that the information they are consuming is reliable. The Department of Education and Youth also has an important role to play in promoting online safety in schools through curriculum supports and digital citizenship initiatives. Webwise is an initiative of the Department to promote safer, better online use through awareness raising and education initiatives targeting teachers, children, young people and parents.

Once again, I thank all the Senators for the opportunity to speak today about online safety and its importance.

**An Cathaoirleach:** Before I call on Senator O'Loughlin to respond, I welcome to the Distinguished Visitors Gallery Deputy David Maxwell as well as a senator from France, Nathalie Goulet. I thank her for being here. Accompanying the senator is a man who is no stranger to the House and has visited quite a number of times, Ian Paisley Jnr. In fact, his father, the Rev. Ian Paisley Snr., sat in the exact same spot many years ago. I thank him for being here as well.

**Senator Rónán Mullen:** Tá fáilte romhat.

**An Cathaoirleach:** I had a great conversation with Ian's father and his mother when they were both on a visit to Leinster House and thanked them, and I will now thank Ian on the record for getting my mother into the Battle of the Boyne opening by Bertie Ahern and his father many years ago.

**Senator Rónán Mullen:** 'Twas the closing of it was the problem.

**An Cathaoirleach:** I think the Senator is talking about the battle itself whereas I am just talking about the interpretive centre. My mother rang me to say she wanted to go, at very short notice. As one can imagine, it was a tough ticket to get. Having exhausted all avenues in the Irish Government, I rang the Paisleys' office and they got my mother to the opening with the late, great Rev. Ian Paisley. That is North-South co-operation at its finest. I thank the Paisley family for that and Ian for being here today.

**Senator Fiona O'Loughlin:** We have had a really good debate. It was very worthwhile to air all of the different views and opinions. The motion speaks for itself as it reads. There were very worthwhile contributions from those who wanted to go further, and from some who did not agree with everything that was in it. I take on board what the Minister of State has said about how the views will be reflected on.

One thing is incredibly clear: we are all concerned about online safety and we want to do the best we can to ensure our young people are kept safe and that they do not have access to all the evils of the dark world of the Internet but also that they have opportunities to use the Internet in a safe and wise way. All of the adults in children's lives have to set an example. I have heard different examples of what has been happening. Senator Duffy spoke about the meeting on Achill Island and bringing everyone together. I attended a meeting in Kildare town last year where a huge number of primary schools, practically all of them in south Kildare, had come together as parents to say the parents wanted to have this at primary school level.

We have so many stakeholders in all of this. People have different views. Internationally, there are a lot of different experiences. We need to learn from the experiences of other countries, but we also want to ensure that during our EU Presidency we shine a light on the good behaviours and do what we can to ensure we do not have the negative behaviours, but also be a leading light in that. In regard to the AI aspect, the fact we are having the special forum in October is important. The two go hand in hand. I really welcome the opportunity and thank my colleagues who spoke on this motion. I have no doubt there will be ongoing debates on online safety but this was an important one. We really appreciate the Minister of State being with us. It shows the crossover between the Department of communications and the Department of justice, and there is a crossover with education too. We need to have collaboration right across government, with the help and support of those in Opposition too. I commend the motion to the House.

Amendment put and declared lost.

**Senator Rónán Mullen:** I move amendment No. 2:

After the fourth paragraph under "agrees that:", to insert the following paragraph:

“- recent controversies around the use of deep-fake technologies to demean, abuse and exploit people sexually reveal the lack of an enforcement culture and the inadequacy of regulatory structures where stricter legal prohibitions are required;”

**Senator Alice-Mary Higgins:** I second it.

Amendment put and declared lost.

**Senator Rónán Mullen:** I move amendment No. 3:

After the fifth paragraph under “agrees that:”, to insert the following paragraph:

“- while the harmonisation of European policy and law is a desirable objective, the Government and Oireachtas must not fail to introduce domestic civil and criminal legislation where this is necessary to secure the safety and welfare of children and vulnerable persons;”

**Senator Alice-Mary Higgins:** I second it.

Amendment put and declared lost.

**Senator Rónán Mullen:** I move amendment No. 4:

After the tenth paragraph under “calls for:”, to insert the following paragraph:

“- legislation prohibiting the use of AI technology within the State for, or the creation or distribution within the State of AI technology which enables, the generation or distribution of nude or pornographic imagery depicting any person real or imagined;”

**An Cathaoirleach:** The amendment has not been seconded.

Amendment No. 4 lapsed.

**Senator Rónán Mullen:** I move amendment No. 5:

In the eleventh paragraph under “calls for:”, to insert the following sub-paragraphs, after the second sub-paragraph:

“- legislation providing for criminal and civil liability where any entity engaged in the provision of online services within the State fails to take all reasonable age verification measures to ensure that children under 18 are not exposed to pornographic imagery or sexualised deep-fake imagery;

- legislation providing for criminal and civil liability where any entity engaged in the provision of online services within the State fails to take all reasonable age verification measures to ensure that children under 16 do not access social media services;”

**An Cathaoirleach:** There is no seconder.

Amendment No. 5 lapsed.

**Senator Alice-Mary Higgins:** I move amendment No. 6:

To delete the first paragraph under “calls for:”, and substitute the following:

“- Ireland to support a strong and responsible digital sector within the economy including indigenous innovation, while protecting data privacy and fundamental rights;”

**Senator Pauline Tully:** I second it.

Amendment put and declared lost.

**Senator Alice-Mary Higgins:** I move amendment No. 7:

To delete the second paragraph under “calls for:”, and substitute the following:

“- the Government to consider and engage with the risks and benefits of digital technologies and AI, and to provide robust safeguards in relation to the use of these tools in our public services;”

**Senator Pauline Tully:** I second it.

Amendment put and declared lost.

**Senator Alice-Mary Higgins:** I move amendment No. 8:

To delete the fifth paragraph under “calls for:”, and substitute the following:

“- Ireland’s Council Presidency to reflect our ambition to be at the forefront of digital innovation and online safety; and to advocate for robust safeguards to protect children, young people, and vulnerable persons from harm in online spaces;”

**Senator Pauline Tully:** I second it.

Amendment put and declared lost.

**Senator Alice-Mary Higgins:** I move amendment No. 9:

To delete the seventh paragraph under “calls for:”, and substitute the following:

“- Ireland to advance and implement the EU’s AI Act during our presidency, and advocate for further reform of the Digital Omnibus Regulation to strengthen data protection for citizens, and provide robust protections for creatives whose work is used to train AI models without consent or compensation;”

**Senator Pauline Tully:** I second it.

Amendment put and declared lost.

**Senator Alice-Mary Higgins:** I move amendment No. 10:

To delete the ninth paragraph under “calls for:”, and substitute the following:

“- the Government to advocate for the development of robust regulatory safeguards at the EU level, to protect children, young people, and vulnerable persons from harm in online spaces;”

**Senator Pauline Tully:** I second it.

Amendment put and declared lost.

**Senator Alice-Mary Higgins:** I move amendment No. 11:

To delete the tenth paragraph under “calls for:”, and substitute the following:

“- the full consideration of Digital Ireland’s 20 high-level objectives and 90 specific deliverables;”

**Senator Pauline Tully:** I second it.

Amendment put and declared lost.

**Senator Alice-Mary Higgins:** I move amendment No.12:

In the eleventh paragraph under “calls for:”, to delete the first sub-paragraph and substitute the following sub-paragraph:

“- supporting Coimisiún na Meán to improve awareness, reporting, investigation, and sanction or prosecution of AI-generated non-consensual intimate images;”

**Senator Pauline Tully:** I second it.

Amendment put:

The Seanad divided: Tá, 9; Níl, 24.	
Tá	Níl
Collins, Joanne.	Ahearn, Garret.
Higgins, Alice-Mary.	Blaney, Niall.
McCarthy, Aubrey.	Boyle, Manus.
McCormack, Maria.	Brady, Paraic.
Noonan, Malcolm.	Casey, Pat.
O'Reilly, Sarah.	Clifford-Lee, Lorraine.
Ruane, Lynn.	Conway, Martin.
Stephenson, Patricia.	Crowe, Ollie.
Tully, Pauline.	Curley, Shane.
	Daly, Paul.
	Duffy, Mark.
	Fitzpatrick, Mary.
	Flaherty, Joe.
	Gallagher, Robbie.
	Kelleher, Garret.
	Kennelly, Mike.
	Kyne, Seán.

	Lynch, Eileen.
	Murphy O'Mahony, Margaret.
	Nelson Murray, Linda.
	O'Donovan, Noel.
	O'Loughlin, Fiona.
	O'Reilly, Joe.
	Scahill, Gareth.

Tellers: Tá, Senators Alice-Mary Higgins and Pauline Tully; Níl, Senators Garret Ahearn and Paul Daly.

Amendment declared lost.

**Senator Alice-Mary Higgins:** I move amendment No. 13:

In the eleventh paragraph under “calls for:”, in the third sub-paragraph after “implementing,” to insert “subject to data protection impact assessment,”

**Senator Lynn Ruane:** I second the amendment.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Amendment No. 14 not moved.

**Senator Alice-Mary Higgins:** I move amendment No. 15:

After “calls for:”, to insert the following paragraph:

“- the adequate enforcement of the provisions that already exist in the Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020 which prohibit the generation and sharing of child sexual abuse material, and intimate image abuse;”

**Senator Lynn Ruane:** I second the amendment.

Amendment put and declared lost.

**Senator Alice-Mary Higgins:** I move amendment No. 16:

After “calls for:”, to insert the following paragraph:

“- Ireland to engage constructively with the Digital Omnibus and AI Omnibus proposals by the European Commission and advocate against measures which would reduce data protections and dilute regulation and enforcement, and to work to strengthen controls in relation to algorithms, recommender systems and the protection of creative work;”

**Senator Lynn Ruane:** I second the amendment.

Amendment put:

The Seanad divided: Tá, 9; Níl, 24.
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Tá	Níl
Collins, Joanne.	Ahearn, Garret.
Higgins, Alice-Mary.	Blaney, Niall.
McCarthy, Aubrey.	Boyle, Manus.
McCormack, Maria.	Brady, Paraic.
Noonan, Malcolm.	Casey, Pat.
O'Reilly, Sarah.	Clifford-Lee, Lorraine.
Ruane, Lynn.	Conway, Martin.
Stephenson, Patricia.	Crowe, Ollie.
Tully, Pauline.	Curley, Shane.
	Daly, Paul.
	Duffy, Mark.
	Fitzpatrick, Mary.
	Flaherty, Joe.
	Gallagher, Robbie.
	Kelleher, Garret.
	Kennelly, Mike.
	Kyne, Seán.
	Lynch, Eileen.
	Murphy O'Mahony, Margaret.
	Nelson Murray, Linda.
	O'Donovan, Noel.
	O'Loughlin, Fiona.
	O'Reilly, Joe.
	Scahill, Gareth.

Tellers: Tá, Senators Alice-Mary Higgins and Patricia Stephenson; Níl, Senators Garret Ahearn and Paul Daly.

Amendment declared lost.

Motion put and declared carried.

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

**Senator Seán Kyne:** Next Tuesday at 2.30 p.m.

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

Cuireadh an Seanad ar athló ar 1.43 p.m. go dtí 2.30 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 3 Márta 2026.

The Seanad adjourned at 1.43 p.m. until 2.30 p.m. on Tuesday, 3 March 2026.