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DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad 183

Nithe i dtosach suíonna - Commencement Matters 184

Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence 184

Disability Issues 187

Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence (Resumed) 190

Youth Services 191

Recycling Policy 194

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business 197

Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks Act 2022 (Designation of Fingal and Wexford County Councils) (Parts of Administrative Areas) Order 2026: Motion 210

Delivery of the National Broadband Plan: Statements 216

Public Health (Single-Use Vapes) Bill 2025: Second Stage 226

SEANAD ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 28 Aibreán 2026

Tuesday, 28 April 2026

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach i gceannas ar 2.30 p.m.

Machnamh agus Paidir.

Prayer and Reflection.

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad

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

Senators Patricia Stephenson, Fiona O'Loughlin and Anne Rabbitte - The need for the Minister for Social Protection to provide an update on travel supports for victims of domestic and gender-based violence.

Senator Tom Clonan - The need for the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to make a statement on the requirement for DA103 forms to be completed for disability allowance and invalidity pension applicants availing of certain courses with the Tipperary Education and Training Board.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove - The need for the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality to make a statement on the provision of funding in 2027 for two autism support workers for the Home Youth Liaison Service in Sligo-Leitrim.

Senator Malcolm Noonan - The need for the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment to make a statement on the timeline for the introduction of a scheme to provide investment in sorting technology for the material recovery facility network.

Senator Robbie Gallagher - The need for the Minister for Transport to make a statement on the provision of additional funding for road maintenance due to the sharp rise in the cost of materials.

The matters raised by the Senators are suitable for discussion and I have selected Senators Patricia Stephenson, Fiona O'Loughlin and Anne Rabbitte, who are sharing their time; and Senators Tom Clonan, Nessa Cosgrove and Malcolm Noonan and they will be taken now. Senator Robbie Gallagher may give notice on another day of the matter that he wishes to raise.

Before I call on the first Senator, I welcome our visitors from Castlecomer Community School, who are guests of Senator Stephenson. The Minister, Deputy Calleary, is most welcome to Seanad Éireann.

Nithe i dtosach suíonna - Commencement Matters

Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence

Senator Patricia Stephenson: I also welcome the students from Castlecomer. I also warmly welcome the Minister, Deputy Calleary, to the Chamber today. Last October, I introduced the Domestic Violence (Free Travel Scheme) Bill 2025, which was to provide for three months of free travel to people fleeing domestic violence to support them to rebuild their lives. This Bill was intended as a small measure to support survivors who have no means of escaping a violent home. Of course, it was designed as only one intervention to strengthen the overall protection of survivors in tandem with other supports. Since October, I have been working with the Minister to roll out the scheme and I am delighted that he has come here today to launch it. I thank him for this commitment to this issue. He expressed his commitment last October and he has followed through. I note that and I note his collaboration. It has been a pleasure to bring this forward collaboratively.

My Bill acknowledged that leaving is not a single act. It can take months or years and, for many women, it comes with a significant cost. Fleeing to a refuge that is far from your workplace, from your child's school, from your family and from court results in additional travel costs. This is a highly traumatic period that takes immense courage. The introduction of a non-means-tested travel supplement for people living in this nightmare situation recognises that financial burden and aims to alleviate some of that pressure.

Domestic violence is an epidemic in our society. This year alone, we have seen five women tragically killed on the island of Ireland: in the North, Amy Doherty and Ellie Flanagan; and, in the South, Scarlett Faulkner, Linda Costello and Milena Ostojic. I offer my sincere condolences to their loved ones, who now must tragically comprehend life without them. Last year, 67,000 domestic violence-related calls were made to the Garda. That amounts to an average of one call related to domestic violence every eight minutes. That is an appallingly high figure.

When I researched my Bill, I engaged with front-line organisations and I heard directly from survivors about this gap in provision. There are many other gaps for survivors. Many of them are financial. Free legal aid has a threshold of €18,000 but many women suffering from financial abuse simply do not have access to their income or bank accounts and so are unable to pay lawyers or solicitors. That is a significant barrier to justice for them. Many women find themselves travelling incredibly long distances to court hearings. That is another major financial challenge. Courts are often weaponised by abusive partners who do not turn up to hearings and who drag the process out for months or years.

There are all financial burdens that come with fleeing domestic violence. That is why this initiative, despite being small and modest, will contribute to the overall protection of survivors.

I again thank the Minister for bringing this to fruition and for following through on his commitment.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I thank the Minister for being here today. I know from previous conversations that he took this by the horns. I also thank my colleague, Senator Stephenson, for bringing this to the Minister's attention. My colleague Senator Rabbitte and I have worked closely with him, as have many of our other colleagues. There is no doubt that we have to put a number of different supports in place for those who are suffering from domestic abuse, which is an absolute scourge on our society. A cross-departmental and cross-government approach must be taken. That is why it is incredibly welcome that the Minister is playing his part in bringing something very significant to the table.

In my county of Kildare, there is a very concerning rise in domestic and gender-based violence. Over two years, there has been a staggering 30% increase. Organisations like Teach Tearmainn do an excellent job. Teach Tearmainn gives a lot of support not just to those who are in the refuge, but to those who are outside of it, with the courts and so on. However, it is struggling to keep up with the numbers. While we do have strong local services and dedicated front-line staff, their efforts are often hindered when individuals cannot physically access help. That is why travel supports are not a luxury, but an essential lifeline. Against this backdrop, the importance of travel supports cannot be overstated. Access to safe and reliable transport can be a critical barrier for those who are trying to escape domestic and gender-based violence and ensure some normality for their children in terms of going to school and so on.

Many victims, particularly in rural areas, simply do not have the means to travel to refuges, court services or vital support organisations. That is why this is an absolute key step change. I thank the Minister for all the work he has put into this debate. Today is a red-letter day in terms of the supports that can be offered.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I thank the Cathaoirleach for his leniency on this particular matter. I thank the Minister for being here. I thank all the Senators who throughout last October contributed to this Bill when it was brought forward. While there was a time delay amendment on it, the Minister worked furiously to ensure it was not dragged out. The Minister and his team have ensured we are here today talking about travel supports. The first step forward when a person decides to leave their home is that they have a next-step plan.

Senator Tom Clonan: Hear, hear.

An Cathaoirleach: There is a vote being called in the Dáil on the Order of Business. I am not too sure whether the Minister has to go.

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Dara Calleary): We will not delay them too long. I thank the Cathaoirleach's team for facilitating this. I thank Senator Stephenson, the Civil Engagement Group and Senators O'Loughlin and Rabbitte for their work on this since last October. I hope it shows that the Seanad is not all about big speeches and grandiose speeches. I thank everybody for liaising with my adviser, Craig Dwyer; with officials in my Department; and, most importantly, with groups in this area to try to get a response as quickly as possible to Senator Stephenson's Bill.

The House will be aware that tackling domestic, sexual and gender-based violence is a major priority. The programme for Government includes a number of commitments in this regard. While many of those commitments fall under the remit of my colleague, the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, this is an issue that requires not just a whole-of-government approach, but a whole-of-Oireachtas approach. To this end, since October we have engaged with the Senators, but also with Cuan, Women's Aid, the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre and Safe Ireland to identify the issues faced in relation to travel and to develop solutions for domestic violence victims with travel costs. It has been agreed that a protocol, mirroring the one in place for domestic violence rent supplement, should be developed to support victims of domestic violence. Accordingly, we are introducing the domestic violence travel supplement in agreement with the representative groups.

As already agreed in the case of the domestic violence rent supplement, a person who is fleeing domestic violence will not have to satisfy a means test, nor will their employment status or participation in education be taken into account when determining their entitlement to this supplement, and neither will they be required to be in receipt of a social protection payment. These conditions, which typically apply in the case of travel supplement payments, will not apply for an initial three-month period. This will not only broaden entitlement to the payment, as requested by the Senators and the advocacy groups, but it will also significantly reduce the need for applicants to provide documentary evidence of their means and their status. We know that providing such evidence is incredibly difficult for a person who may depend on a partner or former partner, who has subjected them to violence, and does not wish to have contact with that person.

The value of the supplement paid to an individual will vary on a case-by-case basis. It is important that rather than setting a standard rate, we are flexible and we build the support around the need of the individual, taking into account, for example, the number of children they may have to support, the number of journeys they may have to make, the distances they have to travel and the modes of transport they have to use. These issues were highlighted on the evening of the debate on the Bill in October. Our community welfare officers have a great deal of experience in responding to these types of difficult situations. They will be flexible in ensuring that a person is not left without the support they need. While the payments will be administered by community welfare officers, confirmation will be required to process the claim, such as a referral from a Cuan-funded service provider, a copy of a court order or written evidence from a member of An Garda Síochána or a healthcare professional. After the first three months have passed, a person may be provided with a further three-month extension of the supplement. However, at that stage, payment will be subject to the usual means assessment alongside a review of a person's eligibility. I have asked my officials to ensure this supplement is available as soon as possible.

It will be in place from 5 May. I thank Senator Stephenson and her colleagues in the Civil Engagement Group, as well as Senators O'Loughlin and Rabbitte, for their ongoing engagement over the past six months. I look forward to working further on this agenda because we have so much work to do in this space.

An Cathaoirleach: We are not too sure whether there is a pairing arrangement in place for the Minister. In the height of safety, we will allow him to go to vote. Senator Stephenson is still to respond if the Minister is able to come back after the vote.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I will be back.

An Cathaoirleach: I ask the Deputy Leader to propose the suspension of the House for the duration of the Dáil vote.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I so propose.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 2.45 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.47 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 2.45 p.m. and resumed at 2.47 p.m.

An Cathaoirleach: We will take the next Commencement matter as we have the Minister of State, Deputy Harkin, present. It is in the name of Senator Clonan.

Senator Patricia Stephenson: Can I finish my last minute?

An Cathaoirleach: The Minister is coming back.

Senator Patricia Stephenson: That is fine.

Disability Issues

Senator Tom Clonan: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit chuig an Seanad. I congratulate my colleagues on both sides of the House for their initiative in the previous Commencement matter, especially on a day when another woman has been murdered. Anything that we can do to support women and children in these violent circumstances is very much to be welcomed.

I am sorry that the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Calleary, is not here but this is something that, perhaps, the Minister of State could relay to him. I visited Cluain Training Centre in Clonmel. It is located in what used to be an old boot factory in Clonmel. It provides the most amazing resources for disabled people and people with mental health challenges. As is often the case in Ireland, it is kind of a patchwork quilt of services and supports. It was originally set up as a voluntary intervention by the Tipperary mental health and voluntary housing association back in 1993 but the building has now passed into the possession of the State.

Unfortunately, due to an anomaly, students wishing to undertake what is called a special training programme or specialist training provision have to complete an administrative process whereby they must fill out a DA103 entitlement form and have their disability allowance, invalidity payments or social welfare payments transferred over to Cluain Training Centre for the period of their training. In turn, it has the administrative burden of paying those sums over to those students.

There are a couple of anomalies in this regard. First, it creates an extra administrative burden for the Department of Social Protection staff, whom I believe are located in Longford.

Second, and most importantly, for people with mental health issues, who may be nervous or concerned about their payments, it has a chilling effect on their ability and willingness to participate in the courses. Many of them do not take up the course because they are terrified of transferring their payments over to another agency. It is difficult for many of our disabled citizens to carry out this completely anomalous and unnecessary administrative burden.

We are asking the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Calleary, to please join the dots and end this anomalous practice because the Tipperary Education and Training Board is providing services for between 60 and 70 adults in the Clonmel area. It is the only service in south Tipperary, and this is really having a negative impact on its ability to do its work.

I visited the centre and I pay tribute to the great work Patricia O'Meara is doing there. She is a former student of mine. There is such a lovely sense of community there and I saw all of these young adults and older citizens involved in all sorts of very therapeutic, stimulating and constructive activities. As a parent and a carer to a young man who is disabled, I have seen some of the day service opportunities around the State and some of them are in very anonymous buildings in industrial estates away from the community. This is at the beating heart of the community in Clonmel. It is a beautiful thing, and it troubles me to think that something like this, a small administrative matter, is getting in the way of the incredible work Tipperary Education and Training Board is doing and the solace it brings to all of those 70 families, in addition to the service users.

Will the Minister talk to the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, to see if the HSE could contribute some funding for the renovation of this beautiful old building to allow the service to continue using it?

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Marian Harkin): I thank Senator Clonan. There are a number of asks there. He is obviously talking about the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Calleary, but it seems that the Departments conferred on this Commencement matter and decided it fell within the remit of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science places a high priority on inclusion across further and higher education. This work is closely aligned with the programme for Government, the national human rights strategy for disabled people and the forthcoming further education and training, FET, strategy.

Let us deal with the two issues the Senator raised, the disability allowance and the invalidity pension. For those in receipt of disability allowance, what happens is, as the Senator said, an administrative change. When they start a FET course, their disability allowance is paused and they are paid a FET training allowance instead. This is usually €254 per week or the same amount as their disability allowance if that is higher. When the learner leaves or completes the course and the Department of Social Protection is informed, the disability allowance is then automatically reinstated, but it is important to say there is no loss of either the allowance or the services provided.

The Senator is really speaking about the payment arrangements. They are arranged between the Department of Social Protection and SOLAS nationally and have been place since 2001,

25 years ago. The Department of Social Protection has advised that the suspension of disability allowance payments while on full-time FET training is a fundamental element of the agreed national funding model and ensures consistency in payment structures across all education and training boards and training providers. I reiterate that there is no financial loss to anybody involved here.

Those in receipt of the invalidity pension must apply to the Department of Social Protection for an exemption before starting the course. When approval is given, the learner stays on invalidity pension throughout the training and continues to be paid as normal.

As I have said, there is no loss to anybody who is on this course. As well as that, there are a number of other key supports for students with disabilities. We have the fund for students with disabilities, which enables education and training boards to put vital supports in place in order that learners can participate on an equal footing with their peers. In 2024 alone, over 3,500 learners benefited from these supports and there was a further commitment in budget 2026, with an extra €2 million being secured. This new, dedicated funding also includes transport supports for learners with intellectual disabilities.

That helps to remove a barrier to participation. In addition, there is a real emphasis on capability across the system to help mainstream FET programmes and make sure they are accessible to people with disabilities. The whole idea of universal design and reasonable accommodations is very much to the fore.

SOLAS has advised that in 2025 almost €45 million was allocated to specialist training providers, and that includes Cluain, in Tipperary. It is part of that. Approximately €18 million of this funding goes to training allowances for learners. I will, as the Senator asked, speak to the Ministers in question. I am interested to hear the Senator's further response.

Senator Tom Clonan: I thank the Minister of State for actually addressing me and addressing the question as opposed to reading out some script written by a public servant, which generally fails to address the underlying issue.

I hear what the Minister of State says. It is an historical arrangement and an agreement that goes back 25 years, but asserting that does not make it the right thing to do. This should be client focused and person focused, and should not preserve an administrative system that is simply anachronistic. I cannot see any reason it would benefit the State, the person or the service by transferring this money by way of an anomalous requirement that was set out 23 years ago. That we have just always done it this way is not a compelling argument for keeping it that way. I am mindful that they have their own local representatives down there. There are Senators in this Chamber who live in that constituency. They are so much *in extremis* and in such difficulty that they have reached out to me to raise this issue. I have seen the work they do. It is not a big ask. It will not cost the State anything. In fact, it will save the State money because they will not have to do this bureaucratic administrative process which is completely unnecessary and is having a negative impact on the very people who might benefit from these courses. I appreciate the Minister of State's sincerity.

Deputy Marian Harkin: It says here that the suspension of disability allowance payments while on full-time FET is a fundamental element of the agreed national funding model. It goes

on to say that it ensures consistency in payment structures across all ETBs and training providers, and that would include Cluain in Tipperary. I will certainly go to the Department, but it does seem that while what the Senator asks could be of benefit, maybe the impact of it on the systems that are already in place might be substantial. I cannot really answer because it is not within my area of expertise, but I understand what he says, especially that it can be offputting when people with disabilities are faced with extra forms to fill. It is my understanding that the providers in question provide a lot of support to those people, but I will try to find out a little more on that specific issue.

Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence (Resumed)

Acting Chairperson (Senator Chris Andrews): I welcome the Minister, Deputy Calleary, back to the House to finish the matter that was interrupted earlier. Senators Stephenson and Rabbitte have a minute between them.

Senator Patricia Stephenson: I thank the Minister for coming back. I also extend my thanks to Senators O'Loughlin and Rabbitte, in particular Senator Rabbitte, who spoke passionately about this last October. I want to put that on the record. When we talk about free travel and the financial burden, it is so much more than that because it is actually giving women and people who experience domestic violence back their agency after years of living in an abusive situation where their power has been taken away from them, their decision-making has been taken away from them and they have lived under this fear. This is not only a financial provision; we are actually empowering them and helping them to believe in themselves and trust themselves. That is why this is such an important intervention, and hopefully we can find similar interventions.

I know the domestic violence rent supplement has been introduced but I hope we can find other interventions in that space that give back agency and power to people who have had so much of that removed from them through living in that violent situation. This is what this does so well and it is a real model that we can bring forward in other areas.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I thank the Chair for his indulgence in letting me in, and the Minister for his listening ability. It was really pragmatic of him and his Department to take on board what was said that night. It does make a difference here in the Seanad that we can work across party and get jobs done even if they are small, but this is huge. It is a small step in the right direction. It will have a huge impact on a lot of women when they make that step to go forward to leave the home to know that there is travel support there for them that is non-means-tested and flexible depending on the number of children they need to support.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I reiterate my thanks to Senators Stephenson, Rabbitte and O'Loughlin, the Civil Engagement Group and all the Senators who spoke that night because it really brought this issue home to me. We have outlined the details of the protocol. The payments will be administered by community welfare officers in my Department, who are available online as well. I emphasise that people do not have to make physical contact with them. It can be done online.

We have gone through the levels of payment and the additional costs. To touch on Senator Stephenson's point, there are other forms of financial assistance available through additional needs payments to assist with essential expenses such as rent deposits, rent in advance and household bills that cannot be paid from weekly income at a particular time. They are means-tested but the service is there to provide assistance.

As I have said, we have so much more work to do in this space and all of us need to talk about the supports that are available, grow those supports and ensure people know that support is there when they make that incredibly courageous decision - that the support and back-up is there. I thank Cuan, Safe Ireland, Women's Aid and the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre for working with us on this, but I am very conscious that this is only a small step and we have a lot more to do.

I thank the Upper House. This is probably the kind of forum where this can get done, more so than in the Dáil, frankly, because of the shared commitment of everybody here to this.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Chris Andrews): I acknowledge Joseph P. McGill, who is Honorary Consul in Detroit. He is very welcome. He is a guest of Deputy John Paul O'Shea and is in good hands. I am sure Deputy O'Shea will be delivering lunch to Mr. McGill later.

Youth Services

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: The Home Youth Liaison Service, HYLS, has been helping young people and families in Sligo and Leitrim since 1989. The difficulties young people face often become identifiable in school through behaviour or academic performance but the root cause of the difficulty is rarely seen in school alone. It can originate at home and affect a young person's life there and within the wider society.

The HYLS takes an holistic approach to a young person's difficulties. It is a one-stop shop for services. Support does not begin and end at the school gate or at the beginning and end of the school day. The service is a genuinely wraparound service offering an immediate and integrated response with the objective of improving and enhancing the life and future outcomes of the young person who uses the service. I know this because I worked in the service for 17 years.

I can attest to the wonderful work it provides on the ground and the need for it.

The autism support worker role came about as part of a needs-based response in conjunction with the work of the Sligo Leitrim Children and Young People's Services Committee, CYPSC, and the HYLS. It was specifically developed because there was a need to support young people with autism.

Since 2024, the autism support worker has been offering social, academic, behavioural and communication supports, as well as practical supports, to young people with autism at the times of their lives when they need them most. I refer to times of transition, such as moving into exam years and leaving school. Young people themselves identify these times as when they require support the most.

This service is valuable, worthwhile and sought after. The numbers prove this. In its first year of operation, the service supported 36 young people with autism in Sligo. By March of this year, in a period of just three months, a total of 68 referrals had been received by the service, along with a further 40 initial inquiries. The fact that the majority of these referrals were made by the schools themselves or by Tusla demonstrates the value of what the service offers. It is appreciated by those who work with young people, the young people themselves, their parents, the schools and other organisations that work for and support young people.

On the matter of professional engagement, both the children's disability network team and the HSE, including the child and adolescent mental health service, CAMHS, are making referrals to the service, as are Foróige and young people themselves. It is a clear indication of the work the HYLS does on the ground. Given the success of the service, Sligo and Leitrim sought funding to have the post extended. It has been extended until the end of 2026. Also sought was the creation of a new post, for six months, in Leitrim. That has happened, so the service is really grateful. Performance indicators show the measurable impact of the work straight away. The impact can be seen in attendance patterns and engagement with all personnel working in schools. Providing the support to young people in school has a very tangible, measurable impact.

It has been proven that the engagement of the autism support worker by the HYLS has been effective. It has been effective, particularly for a vulnerable group of young people, as the Minister of State will know from her role. I ask that the required commitment be made. I know from working in the voluntary and community sector – we spoke about this during the youth work debate – that it is very hard for youth workers, social care workers or anyone working with annual funding to plan for future needs. Therefore, they are looking for a commitment for an additional year. They are not looking for long-term multi-annual funding yet. The service is looking for a full commitment to the effect that both of the posts will be funded and supported for 2026. This would mean a total annual cost of €125,000, which, for the service the staff provide, is a drop in the ocean.

Minister of State at the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Emer Higgins): I thank Senator Cosgrove for raising this important issue and giving us all the opportunity to commend the fantastic work happening on the ground. The service is absolutely amazing. We need many more such services across the country. I thank the Senator for the role she played in working with the service before becoming a Member of this House.

I, as Minister of State with responsibility for disability, alongside my colleague, the Minister, Deputy Norma Foley, remain fully committed to providing the necessary supports for children and young people with disabilities and their families throughout the country, including in Sligo and Leitrim.

In 2023, through its own consultation process, Sligo and Leitrim CYPSC identified that for young autistic people, there are poor transition support processes in place in terms of education, training and employment, as the Senator said herself. In response to this, on foot of significant collective planning and resource gathering by Sligo Leitrim CYPSC and the HYLS, an autism support officer was employed in May 2024 with the specific purpose of supporting autistic young people on a pilot basis.

Through its local funding programmes, which supported the local partners, Sligo Leitrim CYPSC put in place and evaluated this project. The project itself was developed to test and to evaluate the model with a view to then making a business case for funding and to mainstream the service. An evaluation of the project was completed and formally launched in December just gone.

It was launched to review the impact of the approach and the model of working. As the Senator said, it is a clear affirmation of the work being done on the ground. That evaluation report has recommended the project's expansion as a model of good practice and sets out the funding needs to expand the service. This would require mainstream funding to be identified because the existing funding resources available through the local partners will not be able to sustain the overall project in the long term. Recurring funding therefore, is required to secure, sustain and expand the service across the Sligo-Leitrim area. The HSE West and North West disability service met with the Sligo and Leitrim children and young people's services committee and the home youth liaison service in March of this year. The HSE service sought feedback on the home youth liaison service's autism support service from the CDNTs, primary care services and child and adolescent mental health services in the Sligo-Leitrim area, with feedback being overwhelmingly positive. The annual recurring funding requirement being sought by the home youth liaison service to sustain the autism support service and to expand same to all secondary schools in the Sligo area via the recruitment of a second autism support officer is €125,000. It has been agreed with the national HSE access and integration team that once-off funding of €78,125 will be used to support the service to the end of this year and that funding can be provided from within an identified allocation in the 2026 national service plan. This also includes the recruitment of a second autism support officer for the second half of this year. Arrangements are currently under way to have the required contractual arrangement between the HSE and the HYLS put in place in order to have the once-off 2026 funding drawn down by the home youth liaison service.

Further to a meeting of all parties on 13 April arrangements to progress the funding allocation will be progressed between the HSE West and North West disability services with the Sligo and Leitrim CYPSC co-ordinator and the HYLS manager. This will happen in the coming weeks. Consideration for further recurring funding for 2027 would be subject to the Estimates process and a new application funding form would therefore need to be submitted by the home youth liaison service

Acting Chairperson (Senator Chris Andrews): I thank the Minister of State. Before Senator Cosgrove responds, I want to welcome Rehins National School from County Mayo, guests of the Minister, Deputy Calleary. He was in just a few minutes ago and he asked that the teachers would ensure that students would not have any homework for the rest of the week, so they might consider that. The Minister said he would put in a word to make sure that happened. They are very welcome and I hope they enjoy their visit.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: I thank the Minister of State for recognising the wonderful work. It is outstanding and I am not just saying that because I worked there for so long but it is an incredible service. Like any service that operates on a yearly basis, it is very hard to plan. I understand that there will be Estimates and the fact that the CYPSC co-ordinator is liaising with HSE and the HYLS manager. It is all very positive and I welcome the fact that the Minister

of State has recognised the impact it has. I just want to quote what people have said. One parent talked of the confusion immediately after their child received a diagnosis of autism. "We were left without knowing who to turn to, what to do, where to go, and the autism support officer changed all that." Another spoke of being given a listening ear which, "left me with a feeling of being understood as a parent." Another parent said, "He now has friends, he's got like-minded peers, feels accepted, and even chats to them on the phone." These are not isolated comments. Every parent just wants to make sure that their child is happy in school. Not only is this life changing for the young person and their family, it is also cost-effective in the long run. Everyone wants to enjoy school and the longer people are supported to stay in school adds to the success rate they can go on to when they finish school. I am sorry for going over time but multi-annual funding is definitely the key to ensure that these services are fully supported.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I fully agree and I totally understand that it is difficult for the service to plan going forward. However, those are the constraints under which we operate.

I can totally understand that it is difficult for the service to plan but those are the constraints we operate under. I pay tribute to everybody doing such incredible work. The Sligo-Leitrim autism support service consists of a universal referral system. It consists of weekly one-to-one support which is tailored to each young person and his or her individual needs and aspirations. It enhances personal and social development, and encourages integration into education and training. It assists young people with navigating challenges and bridges the gaps in services. To use the Senator's phrase, challenges do not end at the end of the school day or at the school gates, so the service is really important in bridging that gap for families. Of course, it also provides for onward referrals.

There are some really good statistics in terms of the 36 young autistic people who are listed as active on the service's books. Seven young people's cases have been closed as their needs were met, which is really important. I found it particularly interesting that the majority of young people engaged in the service peaked at key stages of transition in their school lives, specifically from second year to third year, the transfer to leaving certificate, and the transfer on to further education and training after leaving school. That is what we want. We want examples of programmes that are really effective during these key transition points. We know that is where the pinch points often are for families and for the young people themselves. I commend the service and thank the Senator for raising it in the Seanad today.

Recycling Policy

Senator Malcolm Noonan: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit. The programme for Government, published in January 2025, contains a commitment to provide investment in sorting technology in Ireland's material recovery facility, MRF, network. This is a really positive commitment in the programme for Government, but in the time since the programme's publication, no progress has been made. I hope the Minister of State can update the House on progress on this commitment. The recently published Whole of Government Circular Economy Strategy 2026-2028 is another really positive step in circular economy policy. However, in regard to sorting technology, the strategy contains an action to enhance the regulatory conditions required to promote further investment in packaging waste sorting

systems. This does not accurately reflect the programme for Government commitment and it is unclear what the action means in practice.

A revised waste action plan for the circular economy is set to be published later this year. It is vital that this contains an action akin to that of the programme for Government and sets out a practical pathway as to how the Government envisages that this action will be achieved.

The need for sorting technology is especially pertinent in light of the upcoming packaging and packaging waste regulation, PPWR, obligations facing Ireland. The Environmental Protection Agency has reported that without a significant increase in recycling, Ireland will not meet legally binding targets under the PPWR. Sorting technology is a cost-efficient and straightforward solution that could increase recycling rates for multiple packaging materials. I would appreciate an update on the progress made to date on the programme for Government commitment to provide investment in sorting technology in the MRF network.

The waste action plan for the circular economy is in the Minister of State's remit. What is the timeline for this plan's publication? It is important to note that an investment of only €3.5 million could fund the sorting systems across the MRF network. Automated sorting technologies have the capacity to identify, pick and sort cartons in Irish MRFs into their own dedicated streams without making huge changes to the configuration of the MRF. This demonstrates the potential to increase recycling at scale if the technology was rolled out across Ireland's wider MRF network.

While the deposit return scheme has been really successful for PET bottles and aluminium cans since its inception in 2024, MRFs have lost access to a significant stream of materials for recycling and need to look elsewhere to bridge this gap. Investment in automatic sorting technology in key MRFs could rapidly scale up Ireland's ability to segregate packaging materials and significantly improve recycling processes and rates in years to come. I look forward to the Minister of State's response on this issue.

Minister of State at the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Alan Dillon): I thank Senator Noonan for raising this issue because it goes to the heart of how we are moving from simply managing waste to genuinely valuing materials.

I will start with an important point for the House, which is that waste collection and waste treatment in Ireland are almost entirely operated by private companies under permits and licences issued by local authorities and the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA. This includes our material recovery facilities, MRFs. When we talk about additional investment in advanced sorting technology, the primary responsibility lies with the waste industry itself. However, I acknowledge that the industry is already progressing a number of investment proposals, some of them in partnership with the extended producer responsibility schemes. Indeed, I had the opportunity when I took up the role of Minister of State for the circular economy to visit many of these processing plants, such as Panda and Thorntons, which take in a huge amount of municipal waste and are investing heavily in their systems.

The role of my Department is different but crucial. Under the Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy, WAPCE, our job is to set the policy direction while strengthening regulation and ensuring the right conditions are in place so that the recyclable materials are captured here in Ireland and not lost to incineration or export. This work is under way and the national waste

management plan, NWMP, which was published in 2024 by the regional waste management planning offices, set out specific actions to address gaps in domestic waste treatment infrastructure, including improved sorting and recovery capacity.

In parallel, the extended producer responsibility schemes operated under the polluter pays principle have a key role in funding and supporting investment that improves recycling outcomes. The update on the action plan for the circular economy will commence in 2026. This will align with the most recently published circular economy strategy for 2026 to 2028, which was published in March. This updated plan will set the direction of infrastructure needs, including how we increase the capture of recyclable materials and reduce our reliance on incineration. That is being worked on and I am being briefed as regards when it will be published in the coming months, if not weeks.

While I cannot today announce any specific start date for any State-funded sorting technology, the policy framework is very clear. We have the regulatory signals with regard to the EPR schemes now in place. Even with the likes of Repak, we have extended it to a ten-year duration, which gives certainty to the sector that it can invest in that type of technology and align exactly with the type of investment the Senator outlined earlier.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: I welcome the point the Minister of State made on how the commitment will be met, because it is a programme for Government commitment. I appreciate that, as he stated, the role of the Department and Government is largely in setting policy. However, this is a programme for Government commitment, so it is criticat to give certainty to the sector that this commitment is met and that a timeline is laid out for that. The packaging and packaging waste regulation, PPWR, as I mentioned, was adopted by the European Parliament in April 2024, replacing the packaging directive. This is the key policy on packaging recycling for the coming decade. The PPWR requires that packaging waste is recycled at scale, meaning packaging waste must be separated, collected, sorted and recycled through installed infrastructure.

I welcome the fact the Minister of State made a commitment to putting the funding in place. As I said, it is a modest scale of funding. This is material that, if it is not diverted for recycling, is going to end up in the big hungry beast out in Poolbeg. It is not just highly recyclable materials but also material that is highly calorific and valuable for incineration. I hope the Government will make this much-needed investment in the sector as soon as possible.

Deputy Alan Dillon: Again, I acknowledge Senator Noonan's questions and I understand the urgency in regard to investment in critical infrastructure. However, any proposal for direct public investment in sorting technology would need to be evidence based.

It would also need to be costed and justified, given the sector involves a large number of commercially operated firms. We would have to understand that where there is clear market failure, the absence of the EPR-funded investment alone is insufficient. That is why we want many of the EPR operators to work with the sectors on how we can continue to deliver measurable improvements in recycling outcomes. That is where we want to get to in achieving the targets, which have been challenging in recent years, to say the least.

However, with the new PPWR, there is an opportunity to reduce unnecessary packaging, increase demand for recycling content and create a stronger and more stable market for recyclate. That is what we all want to achieve. We want to give certainty to investors, allow for multi-year funding commitments and support large-scale investment in waste infrastructure, including advanced sorting and recovery facilities. We will see the new EU regulation, national policy and EPR funding all being aligned and put in the same direction. That will increase recycling rates and reduce incineration, while also keeping valuable materials in circulation within the economy.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 3.26 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 3.32 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 3.26 p.m. and resumed at 3.32 p.m.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: The Order of Business is No. 1, motion re Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks Act 2022 (Designation of Fingal and Wexford County Councils) (Parts of Administrative Areas) Order 2026, to be taken at 4.45 p.m. and to conclude at 6 p.m., if not previously concluded, with the time allocated to the opening remarks of the Minister not to exceed eight minutes, group spokespersons not to exceed ten minutes, time can be shared and the Minister to be given no less than seven minutes to reply to the debate; No. 2, statements on the delivery of the broadband plan, to be taken at 6.15 p.m. and to conclude at 7.45 p.m., if not previously concluded, with the time allocated to the opening remarks of the Minister not to exceed ten minutes, group spokespersons not to exceed eight minutes, all other Senators not to exceed five minutes and the Minister to be given no less than ten minutes to reply to the debate; and No. 3, Public Health (Single-Use Vapes) Bill 2025 - Second Stage, to be taken at 7.45 p.m. and to conclude at 9 p.m., if not previously concluded, with the time allocated to the opening remarks of the Minister not to exceed ten minutes, group spokespersons not to exceed eight minutes, all other Senators not to exceed five minutes and the Minister to be given no less than ten minutes to reply to the debate.

Senator Evanne Ní Chuilinn: I want to speak about a wonderful group of students I met in my community yesterday. I visited St. Audoen's National School in Dublin 8 and sat down with the children from the older classes in the school. We had a great chat and spoke about life, politics, sport, writing and journalism. We chatted about the importance of democracy and the changes they brought about in their school as a result of their student council. I was delighted to spend my morning with the best and the brightest of us and I am grateful to Principal Geoff and his teachers for inviting me in for a chat.

Unfortunately, we are failing those children and their families and teachers because people who live in the south-west inner city of Dublin are dealing with some of the most alarming socio-economic realities. A report launched last week by Sporting Liberties told us the crime rates in the area are double those of the national average, as are drug-related deaths. The research for the report, produced independently by Barra Roantree of Trinity College, told us that four in ten of the children I met will go on to secondary school in the area. Some will leave the area to go to secondary school, but unfortunately many leave school altogether. The progression rate to third level is 36%.

Education opportunities are curtailed; health provision, both physical and mental, are negatively affected; and we are back to a postcode lottery. Being born in Dublin 6 does not make you any more worthy of a vibrant community, a local education, a football pitch or a swimming pool. Yet, the children of the south-west inner city have nowhere to run around and emulate their heroes. The girls' football team at St. Audeon's has won multiple trophies and they look up to our women's national football team but they have no chance of honing their skills on the postage stamp of a yard I saw at the school yesterday. In fact, half of the primary school students in the area never participate in organised sport outside of the school. That is because there are no facilities in their area. This in turn leads to poor health outcomes and poor social outcomes.

Luckily for us here in the corridors in the power, we have an independent report with a set of recommendations. I put on record my support for those recommendations. We need a south-west inner city task force, not dissimilar to the north-east inner city task force. We need ring-fenced funding of €8 million per year and a programme implementation board with an independent chairperson. Former Taoiseach Enda Kenny set in motion the wheels of the very successful north-east inner city, NEIC, task force, which has seen €61 million of well-spent public money. I call on this Government to do the same for the south-west inner city. This is not party political, nor should it be. I know this will be supported by all reps in the area, most of whom attended last week's launch in Griffith College. Our children in Dublin 8 deserve the same access to health, education, community and sport facilities as much as the children in Raheny, Rathgar or Ranelagh.

I thank the Deputy Leader. I want a debate on this issue in the Seanad and I intend to bring this request directly to our Cabinet Ministers.

Senator Alison Comyn: I begin by marking Workers' Memorial Day today and remembering all those who lost their lives or were seriously injured through going to work. A ceremony was held today in the Garden of Remembrance in Dublin, which was a really important reminder that workplace safety can never be taken for granted. The figures are quite stark. Last year, 63 people lost their lives in workplace incidents, which was a 75% increase on the previous year. Thankfully, fatalities are lower so far this year but even one death is one too many. Behind every statistic is a devastated family and a community left grieving. Many of these incidents, as we know, happen in sectors that are hugely important to rural Ireland, including farming, fishing, transport and construction. Today should also be about renewing our focus on workplace safety and awareness.

I also welcome the fuel support measures announced today by the Taoiseach, Deputy Micheál Martin, for farmers, hauliers, contractors and fishers. These sectors have been under enormous pressure recently, as we all know, due to rising fuel costs. Practical supports like this are very important. Up to 120,000 farmers and 1,500 agricultural contractors will benefit and, combined with previous excise reductions, the measures amount to a reduction of €274 on every 1,000 litres of green diesel purchased.

In my remaining time, I will briefly raise the decision by my own local radio station, LMFM, which is based in Drogheda but broadcasts right across the north east, to discontinue its Sunday morning mass broadcast. I have received a huge number of messages from listeners, particularly older and more vulnerable people who are sometimes those who are taking care of

somebody else or have mobility issues themselves. They are deeply upset by this decision. For so many people, especially those living alone or unable to attend church, this was not just a radio programme. They actually set their clocks to it. It was at nine o'clock on a Sunday morning and they wanted to hear their own local priest. It was part of their weekly routine and a really important source not just of communication and connection but of comfort. We have been told that online services are available but I know many elderly listeners to the radio station simply do not have the technology to try and stream something online. They were panicking looking for email addresses and everything. Turning on that radio station on a Sunday morning was a simple, familiar and accessible way for people to stay connected. As somebody who started their broadcasting career - dare I say it - almost 40 years ago in what was called Boyneside Radio at the time, it provides an amazing service with incredible current affairs, community services, etc. I would hate to see this one go by the wayside. I hope that some alternative arrangement could possibly be made, particularly for those people right across the north east because this service really was a lifeline.

Senator Sharon Keogan: A story reported this morning in the *Irish Examiner* relates to the announcement that the HSE has launched an investigation into the alleged transfer by the charity Autism Initiatives Ireland of over €1.5 million to the UK.

The transfers are alleged to have taken place as far back as 2019. Rather than dwell on the specific details of the case, which are to be investigated, I want to address what this story reveals about the wider state of public infrastructure and support in this country, or more accurately the alarming absence of it. A cursory glance at the autism service landscape reveals a system defined by fragmentation and disorder. Dozens of NGOs and charities operate in this space, many almost entirely funded by the taxpayer. They often deliver overlapping services with little evidence of co-ordination, strategic planning or enforced efficiency. This is just one area - autism - and we could also touch on homelessness, disability, mental health and other marginalised groups more broadly.

What we are seeing is a State that has offloaded the delivery of core public services to NGOs without building the institutional architecture required to govern such a model properly. Responsibility has been blindly outsourced. We had that responsibility when Benefacts was there but they got rid of it back in 2023. Oversight exists largely on paper. Service level agreements measure activity rather than outcomes. Audits occur after money has been spent. Regulators are focused on compliance rather than value for money. There is no single authority tasked with ensuring the basics of governance. This creates a system where inefficiency is tolerated, waste goes unchallenged and risk accumulates quietly until it emerges as a headline like the one we read today. The problem here is not charity and it is not goodwill; the problem is a hollowed-out State that no longer designs, manages or disciplines the system it funds. Until we rebuild real public institutions capable of doing that work, controversies like this will not be the exception; they will be inevitable. We would like a debate on this matter.

Senator Conor Murphy: I join my Seanad colleague in acknowledging the events for workers this week. This is trade union week, leading up to the May Day celebrations. We acknowledge the workers who have lost their lives in very dangerous circumstances. As she says, such instances have thankfully lessened over the years. Yesterday, there was a similar ceremony at Stormont which I had the privilege of speaking at over a number of years. It is

important on both sides of the Border to acknowledge that and to acknowledge the sacrifices workers have had to make at times to pledge to ensure conditions continue to improve for workers right across the island.

Earlier, there was a presentation in the audiovisual room from the Irish Congress of Trade Unions about its quality employment and good jobs document and the promotion of a new economic model. It made the case that good jobs should be at the heart of the economy. It is not simply about pay; it is about conditions and having a supported and fulfilled workforce, which is a key component for any successful business. The quality jobs argument includes a legal right to collective bargaining, a legal right for trade unions to access workplaces and greater supports for workplace representatives. As I said, that not only improves the conditions of those in the workplace but has been proven in many studies to give a much more effective, motivated and collaborative workforce. It is of benefit to public sector or private sector businesses to ensure workers are treated correctly in the correct fashion. The ask of the Government is to fully implement the EU adequate minimum wages directive. The programme for Government committed the Government to publish an action plan for collective bargaining in 2025 as part of the fulfilment of the EU directive. That remains outstanding. We are midway through 2026 so I would appreciate it if the Leader would raise a query as to where we are with that with the relevant Government Ministers and what the cause of that delay might be.

The trade union leaders from ICTU also made reference to the fact that even though we often lag behind on a number of things on the Northern side of Border, in this case my colleague, Caoimhe Archibald, is beginning to bring the good jobs Bill through the Assembly to put it into legislation.

It will put the rights of workers and unions in the workplace at a much more advanced stage than is the case across the rest of Ireland. There are some lessons that could be learned from that legislation. It moves things in advance of anything that obtains in Britain as well. There are good measures that can be brought in. ICTU is an all-Ireland body and it wants to see standards collectively raised across Ireland for all workers. I ask the Leader to specifically check those points and to offer our support and solidarity for all workers in this trade union week.

Senator Margaret Murphy O'Mahony: It is with deep sadness that I stand here today to pay tribute to my good friend and former colleague Councillor Joe Carroll from the Skibbereen local electoral area, who we laid to rest yesterday. Anyone who knew Joe or ever met him would have known he was a larger-than-life character. Joe played hard and worked hard. You always knew where you stood with Joe. Sometimes that was good and sometimes it was not so good, but it always came from a good place. He was full of advice, friendship and fun. It is so sad and so ironic that he went so close to our other colleague, Councillor Patrick Gerard Murphy. They travelled the length and breadth of the world, not to mind the country, so it is nice that they are back together again. No doubt "The Old Dungarvan Oak" is getting a good rendition up in heaven.

Joe was elected to Skibbereen Town Council in 1999. He was elected to Cork County Council in 2004. His greatest political honour was to be elected mayor of our great county, County Cork, in 2024. He did this with great honour and prestige and he did an excellent job. He really made it his own. I would like to pay tribute to my good friend today.

An Cathaoirleach: I join with Senator Murphy O'Mahony and all colleagues in expressing our sympathies to the family and huge number of friends of Joe Carroll. He was a character in every sense of the word, but he was also a great servant to all the people down in west Cork. Obviously, it was a great honour for him and his family that he was the mayor of the county, and as the Senator pointed out, he did so with distinction. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam dílis.

Senator Mark Duffy: Today I would like to raise DEIS status for schools. It is a brilliant programme for schools that benefit from it. I got a benefit from it in my own time in primary school. I call for the Leader's support in arranging a discussion with the Minister for education on schools that have missed out on either DEIS status or the home school community liaison element of DEIS support. I think in particular of Scoil Naomh Bríd in Ballycastle, an area that I raise regularly on the floor of Seanad Éireann. It is a three-teacher school with 73 students. A third of the school comprises students from international protection. It is a very rural, isolated area that, according to the Pobal index, has areas of deprivation. While it is a very vibrant community and school with brilliant staff and students, they do need support. There are vulnerable students, be they locals or recent arrivals, as well as students with additional needs and they need to be supported. DEIS status is there to support those most in need and those most vulnerable. I ask that schools like Naomh Bríd would be considered for support through the DEIS support initiative, in particular for home school community liaison officers and supports. While I think in particular of the inclusion of Ballycastle's national school, Scoil Naomh Bríd, in any future support, I would welcome a broad discussion on DEIS schools.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: Yesterday, we read in the *Irish Examiner* that defence spending is still at 0.2% of our GDP, the lowest in the entire European Union. The tiny island of Malta spends 3% on defence. We also note that the Garda has been awarded an additional €165 million for the Presidency of the EU. There is no word whatsoever as to what will be provided to the Defence Forces for the Presidency of the EU. In light of the constituency she lives in, the Deputy Leader will have some understanding of where I am coming from. She is probably one of the few in the Oireachtas who fully understands what goes on within defence. Given that the current central focus of the EU is defence and security, how can we take on the Presidency when we are spending 0.2% of GDP or 0.3% of GNP, which is more or less the same as GNI? How can we credibly take on the European Presidency and guarantee the safety of the senior government leaders who will be coming to this country?

I ask the Deputy Leader to use her own influence to have the Minister for Defence come in here to discuss the security of the State over the period of the EU Presidency. The public has the right to know how we will behave as a sovereign nation to defend not just ourselves, but our colleagues and friends from Europe who will come to this country. At this point in time, I see nothing to reassure me. It is almost certain that we will suffer massive cyberattacks and that we will have other issues to contend with. Sadly, as a result of the Zelenskyy visit, we cannot run around the place clapping ourselves on the back and saying how prepared we are. We are ill prepared. I ask the Deputy Leader not just to use her offices here today to call for a debate, but to use her influence within her own parliamentary party to raise the matter and put more focus on it.

Senator Mike Kennelly: I raise the issues surrounding the operation of the targeted agriculture modernisation scheme, TAMS, which is a farm investment grant scheme run by the Department of agriculture, and how we can make the system more accessible and workable for farmers. There is growing frustration across the sector with the current ranking and selection process. That is the main barrier. Many farmers applying for slurry storage, solar PV and other essential investments are being ruled out, even where they are trying to meet new environmental and regulatory requirements. In some cases, only 10% of solar applications are being approved. Delays in processing are adding further uncertainty for the farming community.

Farmers are also raising concerns about the exclusion of domestic farm dwellings on the same MPRN that is included on the application, the financial risk of paying non-refundable grid assessment fees and the wider issue of outdated rural grid infrastructure. These are practical barriers that are preventing farmers from investing in renewable energy and compliance measures. This is affecting dairy, dry stock, tillage and mixed farms across the country. I call on the Minister for agriculture to come to the Seanad to make a statement and to have a debate on this issue, on how the system can be streamlined, how delays can be reduced and how we can ensure that farmers who want to invest in sustainability can do so effectively, making the scheme genuinely accessible to the people it is intended to support.

Senator Chris Andrews: Dublin is in the midst of what is arguably the worst housing crisis since the establishment of the State. Private rental tenants are under huge pressure to make ends meet. Absolutely no progress has been made. Rents are going up every year. Rental property is only getting more difficult to find. Properties available under HAP, which has unfortunately become the backbone of our broken social housing system, are practically non-existent. Prospective tenants need to be making six-figure salaries to come anywhere close to affording rent in any new-build apartment complex in the city. In the docklands and elsewhere in the city, apartments and buildings are lying empty because only a miniscule proportion of the population can actually afford to live there and the developers will not lower the rents as that would reduce the speculative value of their properties.

The buildings lie empty while people sleep on the streets outside. In the middle of a housing crisis, homes are being treated like commodities that are built, bought and sold solely in the interests of the wealthy. Behind all the statistics, communities are being divided, split up and forced out from where generations of their families have grown up. Three and four generations of families are being forced to move out not because there is no housing in the area, but because the Government's policy on housing has meant that local inner city families cannot afford these insane eye-watering prices. What we have now are homes without people and people without homes in this city.

When the Government talks about its housing plan, which is called Delivering Homes, Building Communities, I find it ironic. The homes that the Government are delivering are not being delivered to inner city communities like the families of those in Mercer House or Digges Street Upper. These communities cannot afford to pay these eye-watering prices. It is dividing communities, not building them. We need the Minister for housing in here who, certainly for residents in the inner city, Pearse Street and Ringsend, the invisible Minister. We need to see him here to explain what he is going to do to support inner city communities.

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome to the Distinguished Visitors Gallery, Mr. Gordon Prentice, who is a former Labour Party MP from Britain and represented Lancashire back in the day. I am sure he is sorry to be missing out on all the action in Westminster today.

Senator Pauline Tully: I also want to raise a housing issue, which is the social housing income thresholds. Currently, there are three bands. Band 1 is for city areas and commuter counties around Dublin and €40,000 is the threshold, band 2 is €35,000 for a number of other counties and band 3, which County Cavan is in, is only €30,000. I was contacted by a person yesterday. She is a single parent with four children who is working and she is above the social housing income threshold for Cavan. She has just received an eviction notice even though she has been renting the same house for 11 years. She has not got a hope of getting another rental at a price she can afford. There is very little available and what is available is priced out of the market. She cannot look for housing supports, such as HAP. Single people do not have a hope if they are working. It is not much over the minimum wage. Most families also get the working family payment, which they need, but it pushes them further over the threshold. It is means that they have nowhere to live. They are forced to go back and live with other family members or to seek homeless accommodation.

We need a proper debate on the social and affordable housing targets and having a good look at what is happening in each area. I call on the Minister for housing to come in here to address this issue, so we can have a good debate and really look at what is happening around specifically social housing, thresholds for social housing and supports for people who are just above the threshold. There is nothing there. They do not have the option of getting a mortgage and buying. We need to see a lot more affordable houses available and vacancy rates addressed.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: I would like to raise the issue of overcrowding in our prisons today. The current state of our prison system is concerning. Overcrowding has been flagged for years by the Irish Penal Reform Trust. The situation is deteriorating rapidly. Recent figures show that approximately 66% of prisoners - 3,586 out of a total prison population of 5,463 - have previously served time. That tells us that the system is not rehabilitating effectively. People are being released within one day of entering the prison system simply because there is not space. In 2024, over 1,000 prisoners were released within 24 hours on temporary release. There are even warnings from within the Prison Service that overcrowding is increasing the risk of violence and rioting. We need to address the strange inconsistency in sentencing. We regularly see repeat offenders receiving suspended sentences. Let us imagine the frustration of our gardaí who make the arrest, complete the paperwork, send the file to the DPP and when the case goes to court, the individual walks free. People know that they can flout the law without a fear and continue to do this in a revolving door system.

4 o'clock

Years ago, we saw a man imprisoned for six years for falsely labelling Chinese garlic as apples to evade high customs duties. Yet, every week or so, we see individuals who are found with the most horrific child sexual abuse material being given suspended sentences. Where is the sense of justice when financial crimes are treated more harshly than the abuse of children? Who are we looking after? We have cases like Detective Garda Eamonn Cunnane, a respected officer who, during the lockdown, lent an unclaimed bicycle to an elderly neighbour in rural isolation. As a result, he faced a criminal investigation, suspension and a four-year ordeal that

took a profound personal effect on his life. Meanwhile, serious repeat offenders are cycling through the system with minimal consequences and laughing. Is the Minister concerned with sentencing? Does he believe prison overcrowding is influencing these decisions? Will the Government build a new prison or will we be debating overcrowding in another ten years?

Senator Shane Curley: Earlier this week, Gaelscoil Riada and Coláiste an Eachréidh received the great news that they have been issued with a letter of intent to go to construction, which is huge news for them. Déanaim comhghairdeas leo. Tá mé an-sásta dóibh. However, this was met with dismay by other schools, such as Carrabane National School just outside Loughrea, which has been waiting a long time – over 20 years – to get to construction phase. Four months ago, the announcement was made that it was sanctioned to go to stage 3 which, in my opinion, should be the green light to see diggers on the ground and construction commenced. This is a 20-year saga. The school is in a dangerous condition and teachers are teaching in dangerous conditions. Students are not in fit-for-purpose classrooms. This needs to be sped up urgently.

The process already collapsed once many years ago and the school was sent back to square one. The builder at the time pulled out. The school is now faced with going back to square one again after having gone through the entire process a second time up to stage 3. We do not need to see a third round of going back to square one for Carrabane National School. I am asking the Deputy Leader to talk to the Minister, Deputy Naughton, and ask her to directly intervene with the buildings unit in Tullamore of the Department of education. This is genuinely urgent because the builder is about to pull out for a second time. We do not need to see Carrabane National School losing out for a second time.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: This week is trade union week. It was a pleasure to attend an informative session in the audiovisual room by Owen Reidy of ICTU and Neil McGowan of SIPTU. They set out their vision for a new economic model that puts quality jobs at the centre of all development. Sinn Féin's good jobs Bill is currently before the Northern Assembly, which will hopefully be enacted before the next Assembly elections in May 2027. Not only will this put it on the record and stop the scourge of zero-hour contracts but it will also provide much stronger protections for collective bargaining in the workplace. The absence of similar legislation here shows us that we need to update our employment legislation. The Labour Party has put forward four different pieces of employment legislation so far between the Dáil and the Seanad that have not been supported. We are supportive of Sinn Féin's Private Members' motion that is being discussed today in the Dáil.

The cost-of-living crisis is having an impact on the daily lives of ordinary PAYE workers. Inflation is having a negative effect on the living standards of all workers, particularly on those earning the least. This can be felt. People's wages are not going up, even for those who might have got a pay rise, because there is no indexation with inflation. We seek a mini-budget to address this that includes a double indexation of tax bands and credits. We see this being paid through the withdrawal of the VAT cut to hospitality giants and multinational corporations.

Employers often peddle the line that trade unions are no longer relevant, but a new research study has shown the opposite is true. The Working in Ireland Survey 2025 found that 44% of workers in Ireland are not in a union, while 52% of young workers have said that they want to be part of a union. However, Ireland continues to lag farther behind. It is frustrating that during

trade union week and in the run-up to May Day on Friday that Ireland lags behind every other country in Europe when it comes to our collective bargaining rights.

Senator Maria Byrne: I welcome the announcement last week from the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, that there will be an implementation plan for the Family Courts Act 2024, which represents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to fundamentally improve how we deliver family justice in this State.

The move towards dedicated family court divisions with specialist judges and more accessible structures is both necessary and overdue. It is essential, however, that the first phase of implementation is grounded in locations that can best demonstrate the model's effectiveness from the outset. In that context, I want to strongly advocate for Limerick being one of the initial phase 1 venues. Limerick is already one of the State's most significant judicial centres outside Dublin and Cork. Limerick hosts a substantial volume of High Court and Circuit Court sittings with more provincial High Court and Circuit Court sittings than any other location. Limerick has clearly demonstrated its capacity to support complex and high-level court business. This is further reinforced by the fact that the Central Criminal Court now sits in Limerick on a full-time basis alongside two sitting Circuit Criminal Courts. These developments reflect a clear recognition of Limerick's capability, infrastructure and strategic importance within the judicial system.

At District Court level, the case for Limerick is equally compelling. The city carries a significant family law caseload alongside a high volume of cases involving the child and family agency, Tusla. This demonstrates an established and ongoing demand for family justice services in the mid-west and highlights the importance of locating one of the initial family court divisions in the region where it will have an immediate and meaningful impact. Importantly, Limerick also benefits from having two court houses for criminal and family law at Merchant's Quay and Mulgrave Street. This is a critical, practical advantage. It allows for a more appropriate and sensitive environment for parties before the family courts, many of whom are dealing with deeply personal and often vulnerable circumstances, by avoiding the overlap with criminal proceedings that can arise in shared court settings. Such a separation is entirely consistent with the objectives of the Family Courts Act in creating a more humane and user-focused system. I have written to the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, about the delivery of this, but I also ask for the Leader's support in relation to it.

Senator Rónán Mullen: I welcome the fact that the British Government has now committed to introducing social media restrictions for under-16s. It is going to consult on whether to introduce an outright ban, but what is guaranteed is that some form of age or functionality restriction will be brought in. The first point I would like to make is that this has come about as a result from pressure from the House of Lords, which on four occasions voted for amendments to the UK Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill that were brought forward by Opposition members. I would like to point to what a healthy sign that is of a democracy. For us in the Seanad, also in a review Chamber, it would be a very positive development if we kept the ball pucked out to the Government in the same way on legislation from time to time by insisting that certain issues be visited and revisited. We did with some considerable success some years ago in the context of hate speech, but we should do more of it in this House.

My second point has to do with the merits of the case for a social media ban. I worry that our Government could be too deferential to big tech in all of this. I am also unimpressed by supposed defenders of children's rights and welfare, such as the Children's Rights Alliance, who seem to me to be sometimes more interested in vindicating children's rights even if it comes at the expense of their welfare. The kinds of excuses I hear for not introducing some kind of ban have to do with putting pressure on parents or children, or children finding other sources, maybe more unregulated spaces. All that seems to do is mirror the talking points we get from big tech about this. What needs to be focused on here is not a blanket ban on social media access for children *per se* but, as they have done in Australia, a ban on accounts being created by children because it is when accounts are created that children on social media can be particularly targeted. Of course, such a social media accounts ban is a necessary but not sufficient condition for improvement in this area. We need to look at design integrated functions that cause problems like infinite scroll, recommender systems, algorithms and so on. I say "well done" to the British House of Lords.

We should follow its example if our Government proves, as I fear, to be too timid on this issue.

Senator Martin Conway: I call for a debate on the regional airports strategy. We hear a lot of talk about Dublin Airport and the removal of the cap and so forth. I am of the view that a cap in Dublin Airport does not necessarily benefit regional airports anyway, so lifting the cap, if it is good for Dublin, can be good for Ireland. That said, however, I am a big believer in our regional airports, particularly Shannon Airport. The debate taking place concerning the cap in Dublin Airport means there may be a lack of focus on our regional airports. We have had huge success with Knock Airport. We have seen Ryanair recently announce additional flights. Cork Airport is part of the DAA group so it is not considered a regional airport, but certainly Shannon and Knock, as well as Donegal and Kerry, are regional airports.

We need to refresh the regional airports strategy. We need to explore new and innovative ways of developing additional business. I commend the management team at Shannon Airport on the phenomenal work it has done in driving the airport through Covid and to its remarkable success to date, but a huge amount more can be achieved. We are all looking forward to the Ryder Cup next year, when Shannon Airport will be the base, hopefully, for a significant amount of activity, but I believe that tourism in this country is an all-Ireland business, particularly in the west of Ireland. Our airports are our connections to the rest of the world. Our airports along the west coast, particularly Shannon, can and should be used an awful lot more. I would like to hear from the Minister as to what his thoughts are on the next four or five years for our regional airports.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I thought I was going to have a quiet afternoon. That was not to be, but I thank the 19 Senators who contributed this afternoon.

We started with Senator Ní Chuilinn, who spoke about St. Audoen's. I think the children who go to school there are across Dublin 6 and Dublin 8. She spoke about a very pleasant morning spent with the children talking about the importance of democracy and about issues and concerns they had. Many of us have spoken in the past about our engagements with young people. Every time I have that within a school I come away enthused by what they are thinking about and talking about. It is just wonderful to see how engaged they are. Obviously, there

are concerns such as those Senator Ní Chuilinn spoke about in relation to Dublin's south-west inner city and the report that was launched last week stating that only about four in ten primary school pupils in the area go on to secondary schools in the area. Some, obviously, go to secondary schools outside of the area, but that statistic is quite alarming. Only about 36% go on to further education. There is a huge lack of sporting and education facilities. That leads to poor health and social outcomes. It is clear from what the Senator said that clear recommendations have been given and that a task force and ring-fenced funding have been requested for the area. Every child, no matter where they are, whether they are in a deprived urban setting or a deprived rural setting, deserves access to good-quality facilities. It seems, certainly from what Senator Ní Chuilinn said, that we need to have a task force set up for that particular area. We will look for a debate with the Minister about that.

Senator Comyn spoke about Workers' Memorial Day, as did Senator Murphy and Senator Cosgrove. It is important that we look back with sadness on those who died in workplace accidents. The fact that 63 people died last year, which was a 75% increase on the year before, was quite shocking.

I knew one of them: John Maher, who was very fine man. When you know the individual, the family and the community, you see the impact on them. There is also the impact on their work colleagues and those who own the workplace. It has such a shocking impact. Sadly another person - Lukasz Prusik - from the same village of Rathangan died in another workplace accident just last month. I know only too well the impact of these incidents. We need to put a lot of focus on ensuring our workplaces are very safe places. I sometimes hear from local authorities that it can be frustrating when a third of all costs go on making a place safe, particularly when workers are out on the roads, but that is the way it has to be. We need to protect people's lives no matter what. We need to renew our focus on workplace safety. We will look for a debate on that.

Senator Comyn also welcomed the practical supports for farmers, hauliers and fishermen. I know there will be debates throughout the week about that. It is incredibly important.

I am sorry to hear from Senator Comyn about the decision that LMFM has made. I can appreciate how it will affect people who live not just in rural areas but maybe in urban areas as well who are unable to go to mass for mobility reasons. I understand the connectivity they have with their peers and with their brethren when they are able to listen to mass. I know the Senator will be doing her best to persuade LMFM to change its mind on that.

Senator Keogan spoke about funds paid by the HSE in the area of autism that are going to private companies in the UK, according to a particular report. She sought a debate on how funding for public infrastructure is allocated and spent. It is about looking for value for money but it is also about making sure it is the right decision for that individual. When it comes to people, particularly those who are vulnerable and have challenging needs, we have to find a system that is going to work best for the individual. We will ask the Minister to come in for a debate on that.

Senator Conor Murphy spoke about work safety. He said that this is trade union week on both sides of the Border. He mentioned a presentation that was given by ICTU in the audiovisual room earlier about quality employment and good jobs. It is important that we support our workers. Collective bargaining, which has always had success, is something we

certainly want to see. The Senator asked for an update on commitments that were made in the programme for Government. We will look for that. We also offer our solidarity to workers. Where would any of us be without the workers who facilitate every part of our lives?

Senator Murphy O'Mahony spoke about the sad news of Councillor Joe Carroll's very sudden demise. He received a diagnosis four or five days before he passed away. He was an absolutely wonderful character who came into his own as mayor of Cork, a position in which he took huge pride. His death is an incredible blow not just to the community but to all the public representatives in the area, particularly those from Fianna Fáil who have lost Joe Carroll, Patrick Gerard Murphy and Brian Crowley in recent times. It is a very difficult time. We offer our very deepest sympathy to Joe's family, his many friends and all of the Fianna Fáil family in west Cork.

Senator Duffy spoke about DEIS status. The recent announcements with regard to DEIS plus status were certainly very welcome. All the DEIS plus schools seem to be in the cities, particularly Dublin. I do not doubt that those schools need it, but DEIS is needed in the country as well. There are schools that have missed out. We are talking about disadvantage from a rural basis and disadvantage from an urban basis.

I certainly agree that the biggest disadvantage a school has if it does not have DEIS status is not having a home school liaison service. Last year, measures were put in place so that a school would not have to have DEIS status to have a home-school liaison service. It is incredibly important.

The Senator mentioned Ballycastle, where a third of the children are non-English speaking. I can appreciate that there are difficulties. We need to liaise with families to ensure everybody is on the same page.

Senator Craughwell noted defence expenditure is still at 0.2%. Although welcoming the fact that the Garda has received an additional budget of €165 million, he stated we are not seeing such an increase for defence. The Senator asked how we can take on the EU Presidency. I would say we are taking it on extremely well. The Minister of State responsible for European affairs, Deputy Thomas Byrne, has liaised on an ongoing basis with the EU affairs committee. We have had statements and debates in this House on the Presidency. The EU affairs committee had a debate with the Minister of State only two weeks ago. I thank all the staff in the Department of foreign affairs, but also staff cross-departmentally, for their preparations to showcase Ireland and to ensure the lives of people going about their daily business will not be impeded unnecessarily. We can certainly ask the Minister of State responsible for EU affairs to come back, but just because we do not necessarily see the preparations does not mean that they are not happening. On security, obviously much of the work has to be kept under wraps and will not be made public; however, we will ask the Minister for Defence to come to the House to speak about it.

Senator Kennelly spoke about the operation of TAMS and the fact that it is causing concern among farmers owing to a lack of simplification and a lack of clarity over what is covered. We absolutely need to address this. It is a difficult year for farmers, no matter what sector they are in. The nature of farming is such that you can have a good year one year and a bad one the next. Given what is happening in the world, not just in terms of the affordability of fertiliser but also its availability, as well as in terms of energy costs and so on, this is a very difficult

time. We need to have absolute clarity on the barriers in place under TAMS and on what is covered in respect of refunds. This affects farmers right across the country. We need to have a debate on this with the Minister for agriculture and I will certainly look for it.

Senator Andrews spoke about housing and the impact of the lack of rental housing, particularly in the city centre. I appreciate that this is difficult. For 2026, there has been a total of €11.3 billion in funding to directly support housing with about €9 billion of that going towards capital housing. We have approximately €2.9 billion going into social housing. There was a 20% increase in starter home supports delivered in 2025. In quarter 1 of 2026, there has been an increase of 184% compared with quarter 1 of 2025. By any standard, that is a huge jump. There was an increase of 293% in respect of new homes commenced in March 2026 by comparison with March 2025. As we have said repeatedly, the only way to have enough houses to rent and to try to bring prices down is by having homes available. Under the relevant Minister, Deputy Browne, we have seen a huge increase in this regard.

Senator Tully spoke about the rent thresholds available through local authorities and the three different bands that apply. For Dublin and the commuter belt, the threshold is around €40,000. The threshold for the second band is €35,000. I appreciate that in Cavan the amount is at the lower end of the scale, at €30,000. I am aware that the Minister is examining this and engaging with local authorities on the barriers and challenges people face in accessing supports. I expect the thresholds to go up significantly.

Of course when the bands go up, that takes away from the available amount of money as well, so there is a difficulty either way.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly spoke about overcrowding in prisons, inconsistency in sentencing and the revolving door system. Obviously, we cannot speak about specific offences, but it is very frustrating to see repeat offenders. Any one of us who has been inside listening to cases in the court will have heard of people being up for their 50th or 60th time. It is really difficult. I have no doubt it is very difficult for the gardaí who are dealing with the same offenders as well. It absolutely needs to be dealt with, both in terms of the protocols that are there and in terms of the Judiciary.

Senator Curley spoke about good news and bad news. The good news is that two Gaelscoileanna in the Loughrea area have been issued with letters of intent. The bad news is that Carrabane National School, in the same area, is at stage 3 but still does not have the letter of intent after 20 years. I would suggest that Senator Curley put in a specific Commencement matter about that.

Senator Cosgrove spoke about workers and the cost-of-living crisis and the impact on PAYE workers. That is true, but we also have to remember that the same cost-of-living crisis has an impact on those working in the private sector. It is also a difficult time for employers in the private sector in terms of paying into the pension scheme and the increase in wages. There are certainly issues around the cost of living, but I would say it applies to PAYE workers and those working in the private sector and business and enterprise too.

Senator Maria Byrne spoke about the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan's, recent announcement about dedicated family provision in the courts and put a very strong case forward for Limerick to be considered as one of those areas. Any of us who has been to the family courts will know how difficult it can be. I remember being in Dolphin House one time. It is difficult. We need

to have those family court situations when we see the increase in domestic violence alone, to take that as just one statistic. Obviously, those cases all have to go through the courts too, as well as so many other very civilised sets of arrangements, which can cause trauma to all of those involved. We need to see a good geographical location. I have no doubt the Senator will make that excellent case to the Minister and that he will take it on board.

Senator Mullen spoke about the British Government having committed to looking at social media measures for under-16s and having a consultation. Certainly, it is to be welcomed. The House of Lords had a lot to do with bringing that about. The Senator mentioned what is happening in other jurisdictions, particularly Australia. The Government has agreed to keep a watching brief on this as it is one of the huge issues of our time. The anti-bullying unit in DCU has done incredible work and research on bullying through social media among those under 16. I was fortunate enough through the education committee to get to see a lot of the unit's statistics and what it is doing. It would be no harm if we looked for another debate, particularly on what is happening in other jurisdictions because that is important to inform what we do here. It is a cross-departmental issue. It does not lie with just one Minister, which is the way it should be. There has to be accountability across government and across the Cabinet. We will look for a debate on that.

Senator Martin Conway called for a debate on the long-term strategy for the regional airports. It is not all about Dublin and the cap being lifted, and he is correct about that. He praised the excellent teams at Shannon and Knock. I will add Farranfore in Kerry because the team there does great work too. I have never flown into Knock but I have flown into and out of Shannon and Farranfore as well. The Senator is right when he says that for tourism, business and connectivity between families it is hugely important, so we will look for that debate.

Order of Business agreed to.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 4.30 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 4.48 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 4.30 p.m. and resumed at 4.48 p.m.

Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks Act 2022 (Designation of Fingal and Wexford County Councils) (Parts of Administrative Areas) Order 2026: Motion

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: I move:

That Seanad Éireann approves the following Order in draft:

> Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks Act 2022 (Designation of Fingal and Wexford County Councils) (Parts of Administrative Areas) Order 2026,

a copy of which has been laid in draft form before Seanad Éireann on 12th March, 2026.

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy James Browne): I thank the Leas-Chathaoirleach and Senators. I welcome the opportunity today to outline for the House the motion to designate parts of the administrative areas of Fingal and Wexford County

Councils under the Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks Act 2022. During my time as Minister, I have had the opportunity to meet many people affected by defective concrete blocks. I have listened to their concerns directly, as well as the issues raised by local representatives and advocacy groups on this matter, as well as many in this Chamber.

I am aware that while the nexus of the defective concrete blocks issue is concentrated in the north west, it does, unfortunately, affect a small number of homeowners in other parts of Ireland. Wherever it does, the Government stands ready to offer financial assistance to help people fix their homes and move on with their lives. It is for that reason that I am before Senators in the House to put forward the motion, which will extend the hand of assistance under the defective concrete blocks schemes to parts of two more local authorities, those of Fingal and Wexford. The number of homes affected in both administrative areas is, thankfully, relatively low. While mindful of the cost involved and our responsibility to ensure taxpayer funding is appropriately spent, the Government remains committed to flexibility and fairness when it comes to dealing with the situation faced by those affected by defective concrete blocks.

Section 5 of the 2022 defective concrete block Act provides a mechanism whereby additional local authorities that believe homes in their functional area have been damaged by defective concrete blocks can request inclusion in the scheme via the established mechanisms. This statutory designation process can commence following a request by a local authority or by me as the Minister to the Housing Agency. The Housing Agency then conducts technical testing of dwellings in each local authority administrative area.

As soon as practicable after the completion of any testing, the Housing Agency makes a recommendation to me as Minister on whether an order to designate the whole or part of a local authority's administrative area should be made by the Government. Both Fingal and Wexford county councils, together with the Housing Agency, have now completed this process. The Housing Agency provided me with detailed reports and laboratory test results confirming the Housing Agency's recommendation to me that an order be made under section 5(9) of the Act, designating a part of the administrative areas of Fingal County Council and Wexford County Council as being covered by the defective concrete block, DCB, scheme. The areas covered in Fingal are Ballyboughal, Lusk, Rush and Skerries. This totals 39 dwellings, while the areas covered in Wexford cover Bunclody and Enniscorthy, with one dwelling in each location.

Damage to dwellings within the administrative areas of both Fingal and Wexford county councils confirms there are dwellings exhibiting the typical defects as identified under the standard that underpins the DCB scheme, IS 465. Some of the typical defects encountered include disintegrated blocks and pattern-like cracking. The damage is evident at dwellings at various locations across the local authority areas.

Looking briefly to the past, Senators will recall that the first defective concrete block grants scheme, often referred to as the 90:10 scheme, came into effect in January 2020 and includes counties Donegal and Mayo. Building on the work of that scheme, the Government approved a Remediation of Dwellings Damaged By the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks Bill 2022 on 21 June 2022. The Bill passed through both Houses of the Oireachtas and was subsequently signed into law by the President on 23 July 2022. This current scheme included an unprecedented suite of improvements. The scheme still represents what I understand to be the

largest State intervention in addressing defective buildings anywhere in the world. The scheme's estimated cost is approximately €2.2 billion excluding inflation.

A number of changes were introduced by the original legislation, which included a Government guarantee in regard to remediation works, other than full demolition and rebuild, through eligibility, if required, for a second grant for a period of 40 years; provision of alternative accommodation costs, storage costs and costs for immediate repairs; a key role for the Housing Agency; the extension of the scheme to Clare and Limerick; the introduction of an appeals panel; and increased scheme caps and grant rates.

In 2024, the grant scheme cap was increased again by the maximum permitted, 10%, to €462,000, along with an increase in the scheme grant rates. Sligo County Council also became the fifth area to be designated under the scheme in 2024. I now propose to add parts of the administrative areas of Fingal and Wexford local authorities under the scheme. The designation brought forward today aims to further improve access to the grant scheme for impacted homeowners in these areas and I believe the designation will go a long way to address the needs raised by the homeowners in their correspondence with my Department.

The draft motion today follows on from the recent DCB amendment Act 2025, which was passed by both Houses of the Oireachtas in December last. Senators will recall some of the main provisions of the Act, which will also assist homeowners in the newly designated areas. The Act widened the group of relevant owners that can avail of the recent increases in the grant scheme caps and rates. It also extended the time within which homeowners can complete the works to their homes. These necessary changes were as a direct result of the continuous engagement by my Department and the local authority sector with homeowners. It illustrates our commitment to continuous engagement and improvement when it comes to this significant scheme.

The memo for Government on the general scheme for DCB in June 2022 noted the cost estimate for the scheme as €2.2 billion, excluding inflation. Provision was made within the cost estimate for the homes thought to be impacted and eligible for the grant assistance within the counties of Donegal and Mayo, and the likely number of impacted homes if the scheme were to be extended to the counties of Clare, Limerick, Sligo and Tipperary. Given the possibility that the spread of impacted homes could be wider than these six counties, and to be prudent, an additional 1,100 homes are included in the overall 7,500 estimate of the number of homes expected to be eligible for the grant assistance, which informed the estimate. My Department keeps all aspects of the scheme under continuous review and I am conscious that since the estimate was made, new information has come to light from the local authority sector and others that means this costing has to be looked at again. This process is now in progress with my Department.

The cost implications of the inclusion of Fingal and Wexford is based on the reports I have received and it is difficult to estimate with a high degree of accuracy. However, based on the average cost of remediation under the scheme currently and the likely number of dwellings affected, an approximate cost of €15.5 million is predicted. It is important to note this will be incurred over a number of years so the cost in any one year will, in the context of the overall scheme's costs, be minimal and will not involve any additional requests for funding from the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation at this time.

I am satisfied the scheme is delivering for many homeowners in affected counties, with more than €235 million spent on the scheme to date. I remain acutely aware that it needs to be closely monitored and changed as our experience and knowledge of this complex issue develops. The motion to extend the scheme to more affected areas is reflective of this commitment. If passed, it will bring the total number of counties designated under the scheme to seven and it builds on the Government funding for DCB work that continues to be provided as and when required on an annual basis, with a record €175 million allocated to fund the scheme in 2026.

I have met with various stakeholders throughout my time as Minister, including representatives from action groups, along with a large number of county councillors, Senators, TDs and MEPs from all parties and none and senior management of local authorities. Each group raised important matters, including the need to extend the eligibility of the scheme to more administrative areas. Many adjustments, such as the designation, are essential interventions and I place on record my appreciation for the collaboration we have had up to this stage with members of local authorities in assisting us in progressing this, as it is urgently required. I want to ensure that homeowners receive the help they need and I believe today's motion is another key step in further assisting homeowners. With the support of the Houses, I hope to have this progressed shortly. I look forward to hearing the contribution of our Senators.

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: This is a good day for those homeowners in Wexford and Fingal who will finally be included under the scheme. I thank the Minister for his ongoing engagement with me on this issue. As he outlined, some 39 homes are thought to be affected in the Fingal area; one in Ballyboughal, two in Lusk, 30 in Rush and six in Skerries. This is a legacy issue, as the Minister outlined. This legacy has been hanging over the heads of those people for a long time. They will finally, if the motion is passed, be able to get their homes remedied and they can move on with their lives.

I have met people impacted by defective blocks and many families who were impacted by pyrite prior to this. There is an enormous impact such a defect on their home has on their whole lives. Their health, well-being, how they conduct their lives, family planning and future plans for their families are completely encompassed in how their home will be remedied, going forward. This is a very important day and I think of those 39 families, particularly in my own area but also in Wexford, and the many other homes that will be remedied as a result of the Minister's work on this issue.

I am glad there is a sufficient budget within the Department to adequately address these defects. I thank the Minister for his quick engagement and with the agencies under his control, such as the quick engagement with Fingal County Council, to make sure these homes can be included in the scheme. I look forward to this motion passing so that we can move on and let these people get the remedy they deserve.

Senator Joe Conway: The expression we sometimes use in politics "pushing at an open door" comes into play here. It is pushing at an open door as we have the legislation and we have the wherewithal. It is now just a matter of exercising our will and giving our say-so to extending this to the two local authority areas of Fingal and Wexford, the Minister's own county.

This is just a matter of simple equity. Under the legislation, the people in the north west, Clare and Limerick deserve and of right can take recourse to the legislation so it obviously is a no-brainer, as they say nowadays, that the other two local authorities be included since the Housing Agency has designated the condition to be a real and not a putative or imaginary one. The Seanad Independent Group is fully behind this motion.

5 o'clock

I welcome the motion. We are very much indebted to the county and city councillors around the country who were not only in the vanguard in alerting us to this problem way back but who have also, with great assiduity and doggedness, brought it to the forefront of the political agenda and succeeded in getting legislation that meaningfully dealt with the problem. Local authority members are still watchful. There will be several instances of local authority members who, no doubt, will bring further evidence of the matter to be examined by the Housing Agency. If proof were ever needed, it would be evident in the efficacy of the local authority members, how close they are to their constituents and how they empathise with the difficulty Senator Clifford-Lee mentioned, allowing the people to get on with their lives after the trauma of having had their homes, their castles, whipped from under their feet. We applaud the Government in taking these measures in the two local authority areas, but we also want to underscore the efforts of local authority members who worked with the Minister with great tenacity and vision to bring about this legislation and, hopefully, see it extended in this House this evening.

Senator P. J. Murphy: I thank the Minister for joining us here in the Seanad to discuss this motion. I will be brief. This is a very positive motion. What we are discussing here is our willingness to facilitate an additional 41 homeowners affected by defective blocks in getting the financial assistance package from the State to remedy the problems with their homes. Two of the properties are in County Wexford, in Bunclody and Ferns. In Fingal, there is one in Ballyboughal, two in Lusk, 30 in Rush and six in Skerries. This is a very positive day for all the property owners. Today will see a weight taken off their shoulders, knowing that they are one step closer to being able to reach out for financial assistance from the State.

Questions might often be asked, including by me, about some of the aspects of the scheme and its effectiveness, but that is not what we are here to discuss today. We are here to ask whether we are willing to facilitate the 41 homeowners. We absolutely must. It is the right thing to do and it is very positive for them. It is our duty to facilitate them. That is all I will say on the matter. I thank the Minister.

Senator Chris Andrews: I thank the Minister for coming in. I welcome the extension of the grant scheme to Fingal and Wexford. It is long overdue. Unfortunately, it took too long for the Minister to reach a decision on the extension of the scheme to these areas. Homeowners in terrible situations have been left waiting for far too long for a decision. They have faced years of uncertainty, with their homes falling down around them. Their inability to sell or safely live in these homes has caused immense anxiety and financial strain. It is incumbent on us now to ensure that those affected will not have to face a further unacceptable wait as the councils set up the necessary administrative arrangements to process grant applications.

It has been said that the scheme in which the homeowners have been included is not working and, as has been alluded to, requires radical reform. It does not provide 100% redress. Many homeowners still face bills of tens of thousands of euro. Even with the grant, many are not applying because they know they cannot make up the shortfall. It is taking far too long for applications to be processed through the local authority and the Housing Agency. The failure to provide staged payments or bridging finance is also causing many people not to apply. Even with grants approved, people cannot afford the upfront costs.

In addition, the ongoing delay in the review of IS 465 means grant decisions are not being made on the basis of the most up-to-date science, and options concerning full demolition or the inclusion of foundations are not being offered, even where these options are supported by science.

It is also very frustrating that there has been no progress to date on the inclusion in the scheme of social housing impacted by defective concrete products. Gallery Quay and Poolbeg Quay in Ringsend are examples of properties with serious defects that are not included. What is needed is a complete end-to-end scheme, run by the Housing Agency, as was delivered for Leinster pyrite, to ensure all homeowners and tenants impacted by defective concrete products get 100% redress in order to be able to live in safe and comfortable homes.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: I welcome the proposal to extend the scheme to Fingal and Wexford, but we have to be honest with the people who will be availing of it. It is still not working and I do not believe it will be of much help to the families in the affected areas. We are dealing with a crisis that affects up to 25,000 homes across the State, with entire communities living in houses that are cracking, crumbling and in some cases unsafe to live in. I have been to Donegal and seen homes affected by defective concrete, where families are worried anytime there is a strong wind or a storm. If you talk to my colleague Mary T. Sweeney from Donegal, she will tell you that the system has failed homeowners there.

Ireland relied on out-of-date EU standards, and manufacturers were allowed to self-certify. Our local authorities had neither the power nor the resources to carry out independent inspections, and that continues. Local authorities need to be properly and fully resourced. Since 2022, only 69 homes have been fully remediated under the scheme. We cannot say a scheme is properly working when only 69 homes out of 20,000 have been completed. Families are exhausted and traumatised, and there is intergenerational trauma now. One study found that 30% of respondents have severe depression as a result of the defective block crisis. Full demolition and reconstruction are the only viable solution, which means 100% redress. Anything less is just a sticking plaster. The State can deliver an end-to-end scheme, not a grant scheme, that actually rebuilds homes. Resources, resources, resources.

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy James Browne): I thank the Senators for all their contributions. This is a very serious issue and it greatly affects those families concerned. The scheme is very effective. Almost a €250 million has been drawn down already, and that is very much reflective of how effective it is. I support the motion to designate additional areas in Fingal and Wexford.

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 5.09 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 6.18 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 5.09 p.m. and resumed at 6.18 p.m.

Delivery of the National Broadband Plan: Statements

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister to Seanad Éireann. I thank him for being here. The Minister will speak for ten minutes, group spokespersons for eight minutes, all other Senators will speak for five minutes and he will reply no later than 7.35 p.m. The statements will conclude at 7.45 p.m.

Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach agus le Comhaltaí an tSeanaid as an deis cúpla focal a rá ar an ábhar seo um thráthnóna. I thank the Cathaoirleach and the Members for the invitation to say a few words on the national broadband plan, NBP. The plan is the Government's initiative to deliver high-speed broadband to every household, business and farm in Ireland, ensuring all premises in the country will be covered by a gigabit network no later than 2028. It is the largest infrastructure project in rural Ireland since rural electrification, spanning 96% of Ireland's landmass. The NBP is delivering high-speed broadband to over 1.1 million people in more than 23% of premises in the State. It includes over 65,000 farms, 26,350 non-farm businesses, 693 schools and 27 islands and is fast transforming these communities.

There are currently over 52,675 farms, or 81%, with access to this service and over 23,035 are already connected. In addition, more than 21,690 non-farm businesses, or 82%, now have access to the service, with 5,065 already connected.

The plan is a core element of the implementation of the digital connectivity strategy published in December 2022, which sets out the commitment that all Irish households and businesses will be covered by a gigabit network no later than 2028 and all populated areas covered by 5 Gb by 2030. These goals will be maintained in the updated strategy which the Department will publish this year in support of the aspirations in the recently published national digital and AI strategy.

The national broadband plan is supplying fast, reliable broadband by laying 140,000 km of fibre cable, utilising over 1.5 million poles and over 16,500 km of underground duct networks. That gives an indication of the scale of it. As one of the largest public investments in the State's history, it is designed to address market failure by ensuring universal high-speed broadband connectivity and supporting balanced economic growth, competitiveness and social inclusion across all regions.

The Programme for Government 2025 - Securing Ireland's Future sets a number of targets which include the completion of the installation of high-speed fibre broadband to 1.1 million people, including homes, farms and businesses nationwide, by 2026. Ensuring that all communities across Ireland, including those in rural and remote areas, can access high-speed broadband is a key priority for me and for the Government. We are delivering strong progress on this challenging target. Deployment momentum is strong and the main infrastructure build is scheduled to be complete by the end of 2026, bringing the project in ahead of schedule and running under budget.

In addition, commercial deployments have also advanced strongly with the latest figures released from the regulator showing 90% of premises now have access to gigabit connectivity, which is a significant increase of 32% since 2020, just six years ago. We are leading many of our European neighbours in digital connectivity and are ahead of the EU 27 average for gigabit connectivity. This is good news for competitiveness at home and abroad, enabling businesses in Ireland to reach a wider market, while reducing costs and improving productivity.

The majority of digital connectivity across the State will be delivered through commercial investment by the telecommunications industry, complemented by the roll-out of fibre, across mainly rural areas, under the national broadband plan contract. The national broadband plan contract, signed on 19 November 2019, provides for a future-proofed high-speed broadband network to be deployed by National Broadband Ireland, NBI, to people living and working in the intervention area. It is expected that some 600,000 premises will be passed including new builds.

The national broadband plan's operational model separates the country into commercially served areas, commonly called blue areas, and intervention areas, called amber areas, with different delivery routes and expectations for end users. The national broadband plan network will offer premises in the intervention area a high-speed fibre broadband service with a minimum download speed of 500 Mbps from the outset and already offers 1 Gbps and 5 Gbps services for those who want to avail of higher speeds. The network is future-proofed to deliver up to 10 Gbps speeds.

Deployment momentum by NBI is strong and the main infrastructure build is scheduled to be completed by the end of 2026, on time and on budget, as per the original contractual deadlines. As of 17 April 2026, deployment progress includes the following elements: 100% of surveying and design work is complete; over 465,810 premises have been passed across all counties in the country; over 486,140 premises - 86% of the intervention area - are available to order or pre-order high-speed fibre broadband via retail service providers; over 172,790 premises are connected with uptake rates in early deployment areas exceeding initial projections; over 500,000 premises are undergoing main build works; 955 strategic connection points are installed comprising 283 public sites and 672 primary schools in the intervention area; and 72 retail service providers are contracted to NBI.

The latest information on when high-speed broadband will become available to premises in the intervention area can be found on National Broadband Ireland's website at *www.nbi.ie*. This website is regularly updated providing the expected timeline for delivery and status of any works that are initiated at any point in time. NBI also has a dedicated email address, which can be used by Oireachtas Members for specific queries.

Alongside the NBP intervention contract, commercial operators also continue to upgrade their networks throughout the State to primarily urban areas and contribute materially to achieving the digital connectivity strategy targets. Commercial fixed-line operators are currently delivering or have plans to deliver high-speed broadband services in the non-intervention area. For example, Eir has already passed over 1.5 million homes across the State, an event we marked in Oranmore recently. SIRO has reached a milestone of having passed over 700,000 premises for full fibre. Virgin Media has advised the Department that it has upgraded over 700,000 premises with full fibre. The Department is continuing to monitor these upgrades to ensure the EU digital targets are realised and any unnecessary barriers to this

investment are addressed to mitigate the risk of any areas where providing a gigabit service is challenging. Information gathering and detailed analysis is ongoing with operators to understand the full scale.

The national broadband plan remains on schedule and within its approved financial budget, reflecting robust programme governance, disciplined cost control and effective delivery oversight. The maximum State subsidy for the project is €2.7 billion over 25 years. The total cost of the programme since 2020, when the NBP network roll-out commenced, is €1.543 billion to date. This figure largely comprises payments of €1.488 billion made to National Broadband Ireland under the contract for the construction of the national broadband plan high-speed network. This also includes fees for external advisers, who assist the Department in governing and monitoring the contract obligations of National Broadband Ireland. The budget allocation this year, adopted by the Oireachtas, is €433 million.

The national broadband plan delivers more than connectivity. It drives economic growth, social inclusion and community development by enabling remote work, digital learning, telehealth, new business opportunities and a range of other things. The plan is a central pillar of rural development, and supports community and social well-being, economic vitality, connectivity, and digital transformation.

In 2024, the Department published the first independent interim evaluation report of the plan. Unsurprisingly the results confirm significant incremental benefits for the plan over the 25-year appraisal period with an increase in total benefits of up to €5.9 billion compared with the original 2019 estimate of €4.4 billion. This increase is primarily generated by the structural shift to remote working and the benefits that will accrue, in particular to workers living in the intervention area with relatively long commutes to their workplace. We have begun the process of a further evaluation report, which will be published in 2027. I am confident the report will show the continued benefits being realised by the delivery of the national broadband plan to society and the country as a whole.

Senator Evanne Ní Chuilinn: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a bheith anseo sa Seanad anocht chun an t-ábhar tábhachtach seo a phlé. The national broadband plan, as the Minister said, is the single most significant investment in our telecommunications infrastructure in the history of the State. However, it is not just about providing access to the Internet. It is about ensuring that communities across Ireland are supported economically and socially, that we connect communities and that no town, village or home is left behind as we digitise.

The NBP is one of the largest capital investment projects, started and supported from the outset by Fine Gael, targeting investment in rural communities, ensuring that every home in Ireland will be connected to high-speed gigabit broadband. It is a project that levels the playing field in the digital era, thereby ensuring that every family, school, business and farm can rely on high-speed broadband utilising the opportunity for connection, commerce and communication.

Considering the expertise we have in Ireland in digital technologies and with the opportunities for new technology business startups, access to high-speed broadband cannot be a barrier to entrepreneurship and innovation in the digital space in rural areas. As we become increasingly reliant on digital technologies, not just in our economy and society but as public services are increasingly digitised, it is only right and just that we invest in communities' ability

to access these services. However, delivery on the broadband connectivity must be matched with ensuring network resilience and investment in resourcing for enhancing digital literacy so that no generation is left behind in accessing the Internet.

Since the broadband plan was signed off by the former Fine Gael Minister, Richard Bruton, NBI has laid cables for more than 444,000 homes, schools, farms and businesses with more than 157,000 premises now connected to high-speed broadband as a result of the plan. The project has been steadily delivering for rural communities, ensuring the digital divide between rural and urban areas decreases. The project has been backed by Fine Gael at every step from its launch to delivery and as a result, the plan now connects more than 400,000 people to high-speed broadband.

This is ahead of NBI's projections for where it would be by the end of 2025. While we have faced significant inflation in recent years, the roll-out of the NBP has not been affected and is being delivered ahead of schedule and on budget, as the Minister has said, despite inflation of almost 22% since its launch in 2020.

The plan has also front-loaded broadband connection points in many communities that NBI has not yet passed or connected, ensuring there is still access to high-speed Internet in the area before the full roll-out. This strikes at the heart of what the NBP is all about, ensuring no home, school, business, family or farm is left behind in the digital age.

The plan is projected to have passed all homes in its intervention area by the end of this year, with a take-up rate already reaching nearly 60% in areas the plan first passed in its early phases. On completion, the NBP will provide high-speed broadband access to more than 570,000 premises, including 1.1 million people, 65,000 farms, 44,000 other businesses and 679 schools, with a minimum speed of 5 Mbps and a network future-proofed for speeds up to 10 Gbps, ensuring communities will be connected for generations to come no matter where they live.

We are so proud of our many digital exports in Ireland, with leading start-ups in tech across the country and a highly educated workforce in the digital space. The NBP roll-out now means that wherever you want to start a business, you will have access to high-speed broadband, supporting innovation and job creation in every community, not just concentrated in our bigger towns and cities.

According to the EU Commission's Digital Decade country report, we are exceeding EU averages in infrastructure roll-out, with 90% 5G coverage and 74% of premises able to avail of fibre broadband. The NBP has positioned us to take advantage of the opportunities for future business creation in the AI, cybersecurity and other new technology spaces and allows us to continue leading in the digital era with domestic home-rown businesses.

As we continue to digitise our public services with applications for public grants, payments and other schemes increasingly focusing on online application platforms, we must make sure that nobody is left behind without the basic digital literacy to access these public services. While the access to broadband may be there, there is still a body of work to be done to improve overall digital literacy rates. We know there is a generational gap in digital literacy, with younger, digitally native generations being streets ahead of older generations. This is not just an older person's issue; there are many people who lack the digital skills necessary to properly navigate the digital space and we must also now invest in people's ability to access digital

technology. It is not right or fair that we would continue to digitise our public and many other services without also providing the knowledge and skills base for people.

I appreciate that considerable effort is being made across the Departments of children and education under Ireland's Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy 2024-2033 to ensure every young person has the digital literacy to thrive in their educational and social spaces, but there is still a fundamental gap in literacy rates. Many organisations do great work in providing digital literacy resources for older people, including Age Action, Age Friendly Ireland and many local authorities through our public library network, but this must be supported by an overarching Government strategy, which is simply not there yet.

We have invested in technology and the network to allow people to access the Internet, but we must now invest in our people. We must invest in their digital skills and literacy so that they can fully utilise the benefits of the high-speed broadband we have invested so much money in. There is no doubt the NBP is one of the most significant investments in the history of the State to support rural communities. It is a transformative infrastructural project that will connect communities for generations to come and will reduce the digital divide between urban and rural.

It is a plan that Fine Gael started, supported and backed every step of the way because we believe that if we are to continue to lead in new technologies and take advantage of the opportunities new technologies like AI present, these opportunities must be available for everyone in our society. The NBP does this by providing reliable, high-speed, future-proofed broadband connection to over 570,000 premises. The investment is paying off already, with connection rates of 60% in the areas first passed by NBI. However, we must ensure we are not only putting the infrastructure in place but empowering people with the skills and literacy they need to utilise this digital connectivity through our national digital literacy strategy, targeted especially at generations that are not digitally native. This is to ensure that in the same way the NBP eliminates geography as a barrier to the digital world, we will not let age become a barrier to accessing these vital technologies.

I thank the Minister for coming to the Seanad today for this debate, and I look forward to the rest of the discussion.

Senator Alison Comyn: Tá fáilte roimh an Aire um tráthnóna. As Fianna Fáil's spokesperson on media and communications, I welcome the opportunity to speak on the delivery of this vital national broadband plan, and more importantly, what it is already beginning to mean for communities right across Ireland.

When we talk about broadband, we are talking not just about cables under the ground or fibre up the poles but about a student in rural Louth, Donegal or Kerry being able to attend an online lecture without the screen freezing every few minutes or about a farmer submitting forms online in minutes, rather than having to drives miles to find a reliable connection. We are talking about older people being able to access telehealth services, families being able to stay connected and small businesses finally having the digital infrastructure to compete on a level playing field. Perhaps most importantly, we are talking about people having the choice to live and work in their own communities.

Most of us in the Chamber know what happens when the broadband drops at home for even ten minutes. There is panic and pandemonium. The children are shouting that there is no Wi-Fi, half the house grounds to a halt and suddenly we seem unable to function. As nice as that sounds for a small time, we can only imagine the absolute frustration of families and businesses that have lived for years with poor or unavailable connectivity. Nobody is taking that progress for granted. While some communities are still waiting, thankfully many are now finally beginning to see real movement and real hope that they too will soon have the reliable service most of us now depend on every single day.

There are more people living and working in rural Ireland than at any point in the history of the State. That is a remarkable transformation. The increase in remote and hybrid working following the pandemic has been hugely positive and transformational for rural Ireland. It has allowed people to return home, remain local, raise families in their own communities and contribute to rural economies in a way that simply was not possible a decade ago. However, none of that works without connectivity and that is why the national broadband plan is so important.

As the Minister mentioned, it is one of the most ambitious infrastructure projects ever undertaken by the State. Sometimes we lose sight of the sheer scale of what is being delivered. As he mentioned, the plan aims for 100% coverage in the intervention area, meaning that by the end of this year over 500,000 premises, including around 65,000 farms, 26,000 businesses and 672 schools will have access to high-speed broadband infrastructure. That means well over 500,000 people will have access to fibre broadband if they choose to connect. What is really important about this project is that it was deliberately designed so that the entire country would progress at the same time, rather than moving county by county or region by region.

This matters because rural Ireland has waited long enough for equal access. If I may, I might reiterate some of those numbers that have been mentioned by my colleagues here. As of 17 April, more than 465,000 premises had been passed, with over 170,000 already connected to the network. That is almost 500,000 premises that can now order or pre-order broadband. Importantly, the project is expected to be completed on time and under budget, with the main infrastructure build due to be concluded by the end of this year. This is huge progress by any measure.

While national figures are important, local communities want to know one thing: when it will reach them. I was very pleased to see Togher in County Louth, only down the road from me, included among the 27 areas around the country now at the network build in progress stage. For many people in rural parts of Louth and around the country, reliable broadband has been an ongoing frustration for decades. Families, remote workers and local businesses have often felt left behind despite being only a short distance from major urban centres and the two largest towns in Ireland. Seeing real progress happening now on the ground in places like Togher is genuinely welcome and shows that the plan is reaching communities that need it the most.

The ambition of this plan is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that even some of our offshore islands are now being connected. Inishbofin, Inisheer and Inishmaan are due to be connected late this year, while many other island communities are already at the broadband available to order or pre-order stage. This sends a really clear message that no community, no matter how remote, should be left behind in modern infrastructure.

It is also important to recognise the role of the broadband connection hubs and points. These public facilities, whether community centres, libraries, sport centres or enterprise hubs, become a real lifeline in many rural areas before the fibre roll-out is available and has arrived. Over 283 public sites are now connected and offer free public access. For some communities, these hubs meant people could work remotely, students could complete schoolwork and families could stay connected during extremely challenging periods and schools, as has been mentioned, have benefited significantly.

All 672 primary schools within the intervention area received technical connectivity ahead of the fibre roll-out to ensure children in rural Ireland and all across the country were not left waiting for digital access.

Around three quarters of these schools have transitioned from wireless solutions to permanent fibre connections. This is hugely important because digital inequality in education quickly becomes educational inequality. While we acknowledge the progress, we also know there is a little bit more work to do. Broadband black spots remain around the current intervention area and I welcome the programme for Government commitment to tackle those areas that may not otherwise be served commercially. No community should be left without broadband because it falls outside a particular map line.

I also welcome the wider digital connectivity strategy, which aims to ensure all Irish homes and businesses are covered by a gigabit network no later than 2028. That ambition is an absolute necessity. Digital connectivity is not a luxury; it is vital. If we are serious about balanced regional development, climate goals, reducing commuting pressures and sustaining rural communities, connectivity has to remain central to Government policy. As spokesperson, I welcome the continued progress of the national broadband plan. It is transforming rural Ireland and the entire country in a practical, measurable and lasting way. There is still work ahead but communities are now seeing tangible progress. For families in places like Togher and countless other rural and urban areas across Ireland, high-speed broadband is no longer some distant promise; it is actually becoming a reality and one I am really looking forward to seeing to its entirety. I thank the Minister of State for coming to this very important debate today.

Senator Chris Andrews: Storm Éowyn was the first big test for this Government in the new Dáil term and it took almost three weeks for power and connectivity to be restored to all homes, farms, schools, businesses and clubs. The Government failed that first test but lessons have to be learned. Ministers cannot just sit in meetings or berate Internet providers. We will have other storms similar to Storm Éowyn and power and connectivity will be lost again, especially in rural Ireland. We must do everything to mitigate risks. We must make proactive steps now and into the future to remove potential threats to the network. Storm Éowyn took down over 6,000 telecoms poles that have had to be replaced, along with vast expanses of cables. The majority of this damage was caused by extreme wind hitting diseased and damaged trees.

The length and breadth of this country, there are elderly people doing their best to live independently who rely on health monitoring and pendant alarms. When that damage was caused a number of elderly, vulnerable people had no monitoring in place for an extended period throughout the country. Clearly, that is not acceptable and our citizens' lives are at risk if they cannot call for help. It has been over a year since Storm Éowyn. What will the

Government's proactive multi-departmental approach be? Clear proactive actions can be taken now. The Government can review the tree cutting capabilities each local authority has so they can respond adequately when we have another storm event and to tackle trees on public land. It can ensure that landowners are complying with the Roads Act 1993 to remove diseased or damaged roadside trees throughout the State. The Department must engage with pendant alarm providers to identify the vulnerable service users, where they are and what type of network they are connected to. The expert advice we received is that home monitoring health alarm customers should be migrated from copper landline-dependent devices onto newer hardware devices with a mobile network backup. Home monitoring health alarm customers should also be migrated onto modern devices that work with fibre to the home, FTTH, broadband, where such networks are available to them. FTTH networks are significantly more resilient to storm damage than copper landline networks and are more easily repaired. The Government needs to also look at maintaining a stock of monitoring devices that would enable mobile networks that can be deployed by the providers, following major storms to impacted customers likely to experience extended fixed line outages. There is a lot of work to do and there are concerns among rural communities.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I welcome the Minister of State to the House and thank him for his opening remarks, setting the scene and explaining the current situation. In an era when connectivity is as essential as electricity or clean water, the national broadband plan is reshaping the future of rural Ireland and ensuring that no community, no matter how remote, is left behind. When the plan was first published, I had the privilege of serving on the Oireachtas joint committee on communications. It was an extraordinary moment to be directly involved in shaping a project of such national importance and the then Minister, Richard Bruton, did extraordinary work at that time. From the outset, communities recognised the transformative potential of the plan, and those of us who believed in the plan made sure it went through the committee. I was proud to support its ambition to deliver high-speed broadband to every corner of Ireland. Being part of that work, helping to advance a vision that is now becoming a reality in communities across the country, remains one of the most rewarding responsibilities I have had. Seeing the success of the follow-up today, especially in counties like my own, which I will go back to the figures on later, I am extremely proud of it and to have been one of three committee members from my party then. That early vision has since grown into one of the most ambitious infrastructure projects ever undertaken by the State. The NBP represents a bold commitment to deliver high-speed fibre broadband to every home, farm, school and business in the country, not just in our cities and towns, but in our villages, our remote townlands and our offshore islands. According to National Broadband Ireland, this is the largest telecommunications project in the history of the State, involving the deployment of fibre across 1.5 million poles and the installation of 142,000 km of new fibre. To date, the roll-out has achieved remarkable milestones. Almost 500,000 detailed surveys have been completed, laying the groundwork for precise planning and efficient construction. Over 2,800 people are now working on the project, bringing together expertise from Ireland and around the world. Their work has already delivered fibre infrastructure to many parts of the country, including some of the most challenging terrain Ireland has to offer. One of the clearest indicators of success is the progress in the State's intervention area, those regions where private operators have no plans to invest. This area involves more than 564,000 premises and 1.1 million people. These are families, farmers, small businesses and schools that would otherwise not have access

to normal, modern life. Yet today, thanks to the national broadband plan, high-speed fibre is being delivered to them reliably and affordably.

In Cavan, the NBP is delivering clear and measurable success. According to reporting, up to a few weeks ago, almost 14,800 premises in the county can now connect to the new fibre network, representing the vast majority of the 17,000 premises in the intervention area. The county was among the earliest in the country to see active roll-out and at one stage recorded some of the highest uptakes. Work is now concentrated in the final remaining areas around Bawnboy in west Cavan. Local broadband officers note that most premises are expected to be fully connected by the end of 2026, so it is a huge success. The success of the broadband is not measured in kilometres alone, but in the fact that students in rural schools can now access digital learning tools, small businesses can trade globally from a village in the west, a farmer can adopt smart technologies, medicine can be delivered and there is even talk of e-wards, and we can connect from home and work at home. As we look ahead, the work continues as new homes built in the intervention areas over the past 25 years will also be connected, ensuring that this investment serves not only today's generation, but the next.

As the roll-out progresses, more communities will see the benefits of a network designed not just for today's needs, but for the demands of the decades to come. What is wonderful about this is the equality that is in it. It does not distinguish between areas or people. Everybody is getting it and it is making a real difference.

Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): I thank the Cathaoirleach and Members for their contributions. For the benefit of the House and given the geography of some Members present, I will put on the record that in County Cavan the total investment under the plan is €65 million, the intervention area is 16,780 premises, the number available to preorder at the moment is 15,087 and the number of premises being passed is 14,826. I advise Senator O'Reilly the work will be finished in September.

People often think of Dublin as an urban area, but the investment in Dublin is one of the largest considering the size of the county – it has one of the smallest land-masses - at €48 million. The intervention area comprises 12,971 properties and 10,397 have been passed.

I advise Senator Comyn that County Louth, which also has a relatively small land-mass, is attracting a big investment of €33 million. The intervention area is just short of 9,000 and the total number of premises passed is 6,817. The work will be finished in August. The first counties to be finished in their entirety will be Kilkenny, Longford and Westmeath, which will be finished in June. I thank people for their remarks on the impact the project has made.

On weather, following the devastation of Storm Éowyn, the Government committed to improve resilience in the telecoms sector. I should point out that the Government does not own the telecoms sector, but is an important player in it. The Department continues to engage with a broad range of stakeholders. While Senator Andrews might say we are sitting around, sitting around involves a bit of work every now and again, as is happening at the moment. I would not care if anybody said Senators are just sitting around. They are actually at work.

The Department established a telecoms resilience group, which is a voluntary Government regulator and industry forum chaired by the Department to promote resilience and the high availability of telecoms infrastructure. The group was formed to drive collaboration and co-

ordination between industry and State entities in the event of incidences. Atlantic hurricanes are landing in Ireland. These are no longer just storms and the winter is particularly difficult. The first thing that is needed for a telecoms network is a power source. People understand that when isolated places, such as the areas I represent in County Limerick, are left without power for a long time, a power source is needed to provide a telecoms service, notwithstanding the fact that thousands of poles in the telecoms sector were flattened by the storm. Since its establishment in 2025, the group has agreed a number of measures to prioritise resilience across the sector through the national emergency co-ordination group. This year the group will examine prioritisation within the fixed fibre network to ensure a similar level of resilience can be progressed.

As a rural Deputy, I would be very slow to take on board the suggestion Senator Andrews made about landowners. Many are isolated rural and vulnerable people and, as the Cathaoirleach knows, many are elderly. If we want to transfer liability for dangerous trees to vulnerable older people living on the side of a mountain in south Kerry or west Limerick, I am sure that would not go down well. I am not so certain that is his party's position. If it is, it is certainly a new one on me that he wants landowners to be responsible for taking down trees. There are millions of them and it will cost people a lot of money. I do not know how the Senator will fund that, unless he levies landowners. I urge him to be cautious. It would not do his popularity in rural County Limerick any good.

Senator Chris Andrews: I am not sure. The Minister of State might have misheard me.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I am sure his colleague, the Senator from Limerick, would not agree with him on his position to levy the landowners in County Limerick with the responsibility of taking down trees.

Senator Chris Andrews: I think you misheard me.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I put on the record of the House that I am totally and absolutely opposed to that because many elderly people living on their own, including on my road, have ash trees and everything else that are half dead. If the Sinn Féin position is that people have to pay for the cost of cutting them down, that is news to me.

In general, I welcome the responses from Senators with regard to the progress that has been made. When I came into the Oireachtas 15 years ago, the first word out of everybody's mouth was "broadband" and people asked when they were going to get it. The success of the programme means that very few people now mention broadband. That is attested by the fact that Senator Andrews, and we might have our differences, at least turned up. He is the only Member of the Opposition to turn up to talk about something as important as national infrastructure. It is the biggest investment in State infrastructure since rural electrification. It says an awful lot about the rest of the people who will be crowing about rural Ireland that they are not even here tonight.

Senator Chris Andrews: Can I say something?

An Cathaoirleach: Tá deireadh leis an díospóireacht. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as teacht isteach chuig an Teach seo inniu agus páirt a ghlacadh sa díospóireacht.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 6.55 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 7.46 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 6.55 p.m. and resumed at 7.46 p.m.

Public Health (Single-Use Vapes) Bill 2025: Second Stage

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

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): I am delighted to be here to introduce the Public Health (Single-Use Vapes) Bill to this House. This is the first of two Bills we are bringing forward on vaping. This Bill is a short one with a single purpose, which is to ban the sale of disposable electronic cigarettes or vapes. Like many people here, I regularly hear from parents, teachers and coaches who are concerned about the impact that vapes and nicotine use are having on children's health. The sight of discarded vapes littering our towns and villages is also a huge problem as they are harmful to the environment. Ireland has a long and proud history of tackling the public health issues caused by tobacco, dating back to our world-famous indoor smoking ban. This Bill will continue that tradition.

All of us have seen the rise in vaping among our young children and young people in recent years, particularly since single-use vapes hit the market. Our Healthy Ireland survey tells us vaping among 15- to 24-year-olds went from 4% in 2021 to 20% two years later. E-cigarette use by people who had never smoked went from one in 25 in 2021 to one in six by 2024. Again, young people aged 15 to 24 are the group most likely to vape despite never having smoked. This is strong evidence that young people who vape are more likely to go on to smoke. There is a great concern that a big rise in vaping among young people could impact our efforts to drive down smoking, which continues to be the biggest prevalent cause of death, disease and disability in our country. This Bill removes the cheapest, easiest to use and most environmentally harmful vapes from the market. These products are disproportionately used by young people. We are following several EU member states such as France, Belgium and Bulgaria, which have banned these products. In June last year, a ban came into effect in Northern Ireland. This Bill will mean we have an all-island response to this issue.

We are also bringing in a further law on nicotine-inhaling products and nicotine consumption products such as pouches. Last week, I introduced the Public Health (Tobacco Products and Nicotine Inhaling Products) (Amendment) Bill 2026 to the Dáil. For nicotine-inhaling products, that Bill will restrict the colours and imagery on packaging and on the devices themselves to make them less eye-catching and appealing to our children. The Bill will also ban the sale of devices resembling or functioning as other products such as toys or games. This is to ensure the Irish market does not progress into multi-use devices with features that would especially attract our young people. It will also restrict the flavours for sale and prohibit all flavour descriptors and language other than basic flavour names. This is to remove the marketing potential of the use of child-friendly flavour names.

The point-of-sale display and advertising of these products in everyday supermarkets and convenience stores will also be prohibited in order that our children are not exposed to these products in their everyday lives. It will also make clear that these products are not the same as ordinary grocery goods.

This Bill has created a new category of products called "nicotine consumption products". This category includes pouches and any other products for recreational consumption of nicotine other than tobacco, nicotine-inhaling products and medical products. Any new products for recreational consumption of nicotine will automatically fall under this provision. It is also important that our law is future-proof so that we are not caught off guard by the next product that comes around the corner. Future nicotine consumption products will be prohibited for sale to persons under the age of 18. In addition, the display of these products at the point of sale in our general stores will be prohibited and advertising of these products in store will be banned in all retail outlets. We can all understand how a child might be attracted to vapes, with their colourful appearance, attractive flavours and flavour names and the variety on display in our ordinary grocery shops and newsagents. The new law will ensure that the visible presence of these products is reduced and it is made clear these products are not the same as ordinary groceries.

While we are acting now to protect our young people, EU-wide law would be most effective. The legislation must keep pace with a rapidly changing market to protect children and go further to drive down smoking rates across the EU. On 2 April the EU Commission published an evaluation report on a tobacco control legislation framework, including the tobacco products directive. This paves the way for a formal proposal for a revised directive. The Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, and I have committed that Ireland will do as much as it can to progress a revised directive if the proposal is published by the Commission during our EU Presidency. That would be really important for us. We are putting in place strong measures to reduce the appeal and availability of vapes and pouches to young people in Ireland and we hope there is more regulation to come at EU level.

The Bill before Senators is the first of these measures. There has been widespread support for this legislation in the Dáil and I look forward to our discussion on it. I will take Senators through the Bill to outline the content of each section. Part 1 relates to preliminary and general matters and contains sections 1 to 8. Section 1 provides for the Short Title of the Bill and for the commencement of its sections. Section 2 is the definition section and sets out the category of products that will be prohibited from sale under this Bill. It provides that a vape must be both refillable and rechargeable, or be otherwise designed and intended to be reused, to avoid the ban. Section 3 ensures that the Bill will not apply to medical devices, accessories for a medical device or medical products. Section 4 is a standard section providing for the residence of a body corporate or unincorporated persons. Section 5 provides power for the Minister for Health to make regulations as needed. It also provides that any regulations must be laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas. Section 6 is a standard section providing for the service of documents. Section 7 provides for a six-month transition period from the commencement of the prohibition. This gives our supermarkets, convenience stores, specialist shops and others that sell these products six months to make whatever business arrangements are necessary to comply with this prohibition. Section 8 is a standard section on expenses.

Part 2 relates to the prohibition on single-use vapes and its enforcement and contains sections 9 to 13. Section 9 sets out the prohibition on the retail sale of single-use vapes in the State. It provides that it is an offence for any person to contravene it. Section 10 provides for the appointment of authorised officers for ensuring compliance with this Act. The Act will be enforced by our national environmental health service, which is the body that enforces the rest of our tobacco control and related law. Section 11 is a standard section that provides for the indemnification of the authorised officers. Section 12 provides for the powers of our environmental health officers to ensure compliance with the Act. This includes powers to enter a premises if there are reasonable grounds to believe that vapes will be found there or documents or other records relating to vapes; to inspect such premises and take copies of documents or records; to remove and detain any vape, or component of a vape, or any documents or records, where the officer has reasonable cause to suspect that there has been a contravention of this Act; and to require any person to provide relevant information, including for the purposes of ascertaining the ownership of websites. Section 13 provides for a prohibition notice in the case of contravention of section 9. A prohibition notice can direct a person that the contravention should cease immediately, require a single-use vape to be withdrawn or recalled from the market, or require that a single-use vape be disposed of or destroyed. The Bill provides for an appeal against a prohibition notice to the District Court within seven days. It also provides that if a prohibition notice has been served, but the contravention continues, the national environmental health service can apply for a High Court order to prohibit that continuation.

Part 3 is on penalties and miscellaneous provisions. It covers sections 14 to 20, inclusive. Section 14 provides for penalties for first and subsequent offences under the Act. A person guilty of an offence under the Act is liable for a first offence to a fine of up to €4,000, or to imprisonment for a term of up to six months, or to both. For any subsequent offence a guilty person is liable to a fine of up to €5,000, or to imprisonment for a term of up to 12 months, or to both. Section 15 is a standard provision on defences for offences under the Act. Section 16 is a standard section that provides for the liability of officers of a corporate body in the case of an offence by that corporate body. Section 17 allows the national environmental health service of the HSE to bring proceedings for an offence under this Act. In addition, it provides that on conviction, the court can order the person convicted to pay the costs and expenses incurred in relation to the investigation, detection and prosecution of the offence. Section 18 provides that offences may be prosecuted up to 12 months after being committed. Section 19 provides for an offence of providing false or misleading information in purported compliance with this Act. Section 20 provides for a process of disclosure which includes protections against the sharing of information that is legally privileged.

I commend this Bill to this House.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Garret Ahearn): I thank the Minister of State very much. The first speaker will be Senator Keogan.

Senator Sharon Keogan: I thank the Acting Chair. The Minister of State is very welcome to the Chamber. The objective of this Bill is sound and broadly shared across this House. Disposable vapes are wasteful, environmentally damaging and far too accessible to children and young people. The decision to remove them from the market is justified and overdue.

However, as legislators our responsibility does not end with good intentions. It begins with asking whether the measures we put in place will deliver the outcomes we seek or whether, through gaps in design, they may create new problems while failing to solve the old one. It is fair to say the Bill before us is not one that turns on deep moral questions or contested legal principles but is rather technical public policy legislation aimed at achieving a practical objective and we should interrogate it as such.

That is why correspondence I received recently from the Irish Waste Management Association, IWMA, which I understand many other Senators also received, deserves careful attention. What it outlines is deeply concerning. While the IWMA fully supports the purpose of this Bill, it questions whether the current wording risks repeating the mistakes seen in other jurisdictions, especially the UK, where bans on single-use vapes were followed not by reduced harm or waste but by a shift in the market towards so-called multi-use devices. These devices, we are told, contain significantly larger lithium batteries, hold far more liquid and are often only marginally more expensive than disposable vapes. In practice, they become semi-disposable products that are heavier and more dangerous in the waste stream and far more likely to cause fires in bin lorries and recycling facilities. This is not a theoretical concern. Ireland's waste sector has experienced repeated, devastating fires in recent years and the reading is quite shocking. Over the last five years at least eight major Irish waste and recycling facilities have suffered catastrophic fires, many of which were linked to lithium battery incidents, and these resulted in closures, rebuilds and severe capacity loss. Out of nine facilities sorting household dry recyclables, three are currently out of action due to fires.

8 o'clock

Maybe, one more fire could tank our national capacity for recycling. This is unsurprising for anyone who is aware of the nature of lithium battery fires. These fires reach temperatures of up to 1,400°C. The released toxic gases are incredibly difficult to extinguish and can reignite even after being extinguished. To this end, banning single use vapes is a laudable and necessary measure as it is simply insanity that they should be so easily bought and then so easily thrown away into ordinary bins. However, if this Bill inadvertently accelerates the movement towards larger single-use battery devices then we will have succeeded in banning one product category while worsening the underlying environmental and safety risk. That would represent a failure of policy design, not because the aim was wrong but because the system effects were not fully thought through.

I will not ask to block or abandon this Bill but I ask quite reasonably for space and time to get the details right. I would like to ask whether the definition of "reusable" is robust enough to prevent manufacturers gaming the system, whether battery size, design and disposability should be addressed directly and ask whether producers responsible for end-of-life disposal should be made explicit rather than assumed. These are precisely the sort of questions that Committee Stage exists to answer. To this end, I will be looking to bring forward amendments that will attempt to address these issues. I invite the Government and all Members of the Chamber who are interested in contacting me to collaborate in making these amendments. For example, we could look at measures that distinguish genuine reusable products from quasi-disposables that take account of lithium battery fire risk and restrict certain battery sizes. We can also look at measures that mandate producers' responsibility for damages done to waste

systems and perhaps even strengthening the existing penalties on those who throw these vapes into the wrong bins.

None of this delays the Bill. It simply ensures that we are not back here in two years' time legislating to fix a problem we could have anticipated today.

Senator Maria Byrne: I thank the Minister for coming to discuss this all-important issue and to bring forward the Public Health (Single Use Vapes) Bill 2025. I will be supporting this Bill. As the Minister outlined, it is important due to the fact that bubble gum and different flavours and colourful packaging make it attractive to young people. It is to be welcomed that it will be banned, basically. There has been a lot of pressure on young people to vape because they were being told that smoking was bad for them. However, they have turned to vaping. A lot of young people are seen vaping. This is the single-use vape. That is what you see being promoted in shops. While cigarettes are behind a blackened-out screen and can no longer be seen, vapes are still openly on sale especially in shops. There are actual vape shops selling only vapes. It is to be welcomed that a Bill is being brought forward to propose the banning of it. I understand it is difficult to ban them completely and that is why the Minister is supporting vapes that can be refilled or reused. You have to start somewhere. That is the kernel of this Bill.

I have a few questions. I assume the Department will write to small retailers, or indeed all retailers, to inform them of the "do's and don'ts" including the underage issue. A question I do not see addressed and that I would like to highlight is how somebody buying a single-use vape in another country and using it here will be handled. I realise there will be officers with authority but if it is bought in another country I am not sure that will be covered by this Bill. It is usually groups of young girls who you see actually vaping. They have the single-use ones, which look slightly smaller, more like a lighter, square and butty. I have a concern over that.

The Irish Heart Foundation and the Irish Cancer Society had a concern around whether the Bill is strong enough. Will the Minister have engagement with them? Perhaps she already has, because while they are firm supporters of what she is trying to do, they would like to have that conversation, if possible before bringing forward the next Stage. I commend the Minister on what she is doing. It is important to focus on the under-18s and the single use as the starting point and then develop it from there. I had a Private Members' Bill here about three years ago in relation to vaping and banning in stages like that. I look forward to supporting this Bill.

Senator Joanne Collins: I will start by saying I am a vaper, so I am slightly biased on this. I do not use disposables. I used to until I discovered that the same flavour as the disposable can be bought in the bottle of juice and it is actually cheaper to use a reusable. That is one thing that Members have wrong; it is not cheaper to use disposables. If you were to smoke it like a smoker would smoke it, one reusable cigarette or vape will only last for a day.

I completely agree this is not for children. It is not for under-18s. I would like to see the target age of smokers or vapers not being 18 to 25 or 15 to 25 but rather, I would like to see the figure at 15 to 18 years of age. On turning 18, a person is legally allowed to smoke cigarettes or vapes.

The next Bill that is coming in was mentioned. I have no problem with banning disposables. I have not smoked a disposable vape in probably two years until I got caught once when I left my rechargeable here one day and I had to buy one at the train station because I thought I would not make it home without my nicotine. I put my hand up, I love my vape. The banning of the flavours is the wrong way to go. I started on my vape on a nicotine flavour and it lasted me two-and-a-half days and I went back on cigarettes because it was absolutely disgusting. As horrible as they were, cigarettes were a hell of a lot better. Many people I have spoken to agree with me that if flavours were not available we would either go outside the State to get them, with the risk of getting something that is not up to the standard that exists here, or go back on cigarettes. We are going to have problem where suddenly more people go back to smoking cigarettes.

I get that they are not for children but change the packaging. Put them behind a wall as was done with cigarettes. People know the flavours they want and do not need to see the colourful box to decide what they want. People go between a couple of flavours. They are fruit flavours. It makes me feel better having a fruit flavour than smoking a cigarette. I actually feel healthier for it. In any pub or off licence there are bottles of WKD, which are blue and fun to look at and there are the new West Coast Cooler flavours that look like Red Bull cans. A law is in place that children cannot buy them. It should not need a prohibition or outright ban for everybody. The laws that are in place should be enacted. They should be enforced so that children cannot buy them. It is the same with bottles of cider. There is not just one flavour. It is not just apple, there is a strawberry and lime cider. I am entitled to buy it because I am over the age. There are different flavours. There will not be a ban on all cigarettes except for one flavour.

We are not going to say that we are only going to smoke Silk Cut Ultra going forward in this country because there is less nicotine in them. We need to think fully and talk to all sides. I know about the Irish Heart Foundation and the waste side of it. Responsible Vape in Ireland make some very good points. They completely agree that children should not be buying them. They are not supposed to be marketed at children. That is the fault of the packaging. I am sure people would be quite happy to put it into generic packaging and do what they did with cigarettes. That would allow people who came off cigarettes, whether it was for cost or for health, to go on vaping instead because they probably felt it was not as bad. We have to think about the adults who are going to be affected by this and we have to look at what could happen down the line. A full, outright ban will lead to a lot more smokers. Then we will have another problem on our hands and we will go backwards. The Minister of State needs to be very careful as to what she bans and what she regulates. I completely agree, I do not like to see children - only last week I was going through some of my old handbags and I found a couple of old disposables that I had thrown in there. They are everywhere and I know that, because I see them everywhere. I do get that there is a waste disposal issue and that side of it. However, it is cheaper to buy a reusable cigarette. Senator Keogan was saying there are multi-use ones where you charge them but you do not fill them, which are cheaper again. They might fall through the cracks of this legislation.

Senator Michael McDowell: I welcome the Minister of State. Clearly this is a complex issue. It is complicated by European law and by the points that have just been made about adults, children and the like. It is complicated by the concept that, while tobacco consumption

as a way of getting nicotine is manifestly worse for health than vaping is, nobody knows really what the long-term consequences of vaping actually are.

As a general point, there is confusion in this society on the part of those people who want to legalise cannabis on the one hand and, at the same time, wipe out tobacco consumption. There is a very strong correlation between consumption of tobacco and of cannabis. When I was Minister for justice, I had to wrestle with the problem. People asked me why, since I was a liberal, I did not allow people smoke cannabis. It is for the very simple reason that if it is legalised, an 18-year-old can get it and give it to a 14-year-old. The qualities of cannabis, the psychological and psychiatric effects, are very serious.

The Minister of State is proposing to bring in further legislation on this matter. I know this is highly qualified, and very unusually qualified, by the European dimension, which is strange indeed. The Italian Government has complained about Ireland to the Commission so we are on thin enough ice, or a tightrope, before we start.

I would just like to point out a few things about the Public Health (Tobacco Products and Nicotine Inhaling Products) (Amendment) Bill 2026, particularly in page 23, subsection (7), which deals with licensees' obligations. Section 26A(7) provides that:

> "This section shall not apply to a premises or a website (or otherwise online) which wholly comprises the sale of nicotine inhaling products or mainly comprises the sale of nicotine inhaling products, provided that the only other products sold at that premises or from that website (or otherwise online) are—
>
> (a) nicotine consumption products,
>
> (b) vapes,
>
> (c) vaping substances, or
>
> (d) accessories related to the functioning or maintenance of nicotine inhaling products or vapes."."

What are we doing here? We are saying that the prohibition on advertising, provided for in subsection (2) of the same section 26A, through circulars, leaflets, pamphlets and brochures does not apply to somebody who specialises in the sale of vaping products. I can see what it says but I do not know what the logic behind it is. There is a shop at the top of upper Merrion Street, which seems to be a vape shop alone. I am always struck by the fact that they can pay a rent and carry on a business right in the city centre, apparently in circumstances where they could avail of section 26A(7). I really wonder if we actually want to say that the ban on advertising leaflets and the like does not apply to websites exclusively dealing with vaping products. We will have to look at that on Committee Stage. There is another point I want to make in my limited time. Section 28B deals with supply. It provides that: "A person shall not sell by retail, or cause to be sold by retail, a nicotine consumption product to a child." It does not stop a 17-year-old or an 18-and-a-half-year-old from going in and buying the half the shop and giving it to 15-year-olds directly outside the premises. Is that okay? Is it okay for a 15-year-old to ask an 18-and-a-half-year-old to go and buy a month's supply of vaping products? We really have to think this through.

The Minister of State is in the embarrassing position, if I may say that, of having two Bills in the pipeline, of which this is one. I really do think we have to look around a few corners and ask ourselves whether this Bill is in a fit condition to be passed in its present form, even if something else more serious is coming down the tracks. I will leave it at that.

Senator Martin Conway: I welcome the Minister of State to the House, and I welcome the legislation. Senator McDowell makes some pertinent points with which I agree. The example of the 15-year-old asking the 18-year-old extends to off licences, lottery tickets and all these other things as well. It is a major issue. As a former retailer, I have fierce sympathy for retailers. They are usually employing staff, and a lot of weekend staff in particular are only 17, 18 or 19 themselves. It is very difficult and very awkward.

The global point I wish to make is that the former Ministers, Stephen Donnelly and the Tánaiste, Deputy Harris, both brought in Bills. We have had a couple of different Bills on vaping. It is painstakingly slow. I am a big believer in getting legislation right and that does take time; I totally understand that. I also acknowledge Senator Collins and admire her for giving up cigarettes. If vaping is helping in that regard, that is a good thing.

I had a discussion with the Minister for disabilities in Australia when he visited Ireland in 2024. He said that vaping is actually illegal in Australia in the sense that you can only vape if you have a prescription to get a vape. I would love us to get to that point in Ireland, so somebody who is giving up cigarettes and needs an intervention to do that goes to their GP, gets a prescription, and vapes, as opposed to children and young people vaping with the danger of leading on to smoking and other substances. We need to actually grasp this out-of-control nettle and deal with it. You cannot walk on any main street in this country but you will notice the proliferation of these vape shops. In Ennis there are four or five of them. I was recently in Arthur's Quay shopping centre in Limerick. As soon as you go in the door, the first thing you see is a vape shop. I was in a SuperValu supermarket at the weekend and the brightest and most striking feature behind the customer service checkout was the vaping display.

Why in God's name can we not just get rid of all advertising of vapes in shops? These shops would then have to comply with the style of a town. There is nothing as bad as seeing these awful vape shops lit up at night creating the temptation and attraction for young people. We are a great country but we were a great country when it came to what Micheál Martin did in March 2004 when he banned smoking in pubs. Publicans went on television at the time and said they ran the country and you hold your meetings in our premises. They did not run the country and the smoking ban at that stage was contentious but if one was to propose reintroducing smoking in pubs now, 98% of the population would go against it. I firmly believe vaping is the next challenge we need to deal with head on. There is no reason we cannot be the standard-bearers and set the standard in Europe in dealing with vaping. The first thing we need to do is remove signage over these shops and put vapes under the counter the same as cigarettes. I support getting rid of single-use vapes. That is appropriate. It has taken too long to get to this stage. It also took too long to prohibit under-18s from buying vapes. We ultimately need to make it very difficult for people over or under 18 to get their hands on vapes. The research is fairly clear that vapes lead on to other things. We owe it to the young people of this country not just to tell them vaping is wrong but to demonstrate it by removing it from our main streets, shopping centres, SuperValus and elsewhere where they are in your face as soon as you go in the door. We still have work to do on smoking. We need to ban smoking

outside schools, pubs that do food and restaurants and places like that. There is a lot of work to do on smoking as well. The Minister of State is doing a good job and I know she is here to listen. I have no doubt but the final Bill might, I hope, reflect some of our concerns.

Senator Paul Daly: I welcome the Minister of State and compliment her on the great work she is doing on this Bill. I apologise there was nobody here from her own party. There was a misunderstanding and I am here now with no homework done. As a reformed smoker for the moment anyway because you are never completely off them, I can probably speak on this topic without have done the proverbial homework. The Bill does not go far enough. I am speaking personally in that I think vapes should be banned, end of story. I would have cigarettes 100 times a day before I would touch a vape. I probably could have given up smoking a lot sooner if I had given in to the temptation to use them as a way of getting off cigarettes but I would not, thankfully, let myself inhale something I had not got a clue what was in it. That is not to justify cigarettes - at least I knew what was in them and what I was smoking. A good friend of mine said if you want to stay smoking, smoke a cigar because it is pure tobacco and you will not get a better smoke. A cigarette has some additives but a vape has God knows what. The single-use vape thing takes from the whole health side of this Bill. It sounds as if this is a litter issue and the Bill is being introduced to avoid unwanted litter and disposable vapes. It actually is a health Bill being introduced for health purposes. I would ban them all. I had a good social conversation with the principal of a secondary school about a year ago. While he had a list the length of his arm of asks when it came to the educational needs of the school, when he had the ear of a politician, his one request was to ban vapes. He said they would know in the afternoon students were after having - it would not have been vanilla - in a vape at dinner time. It was obvious. While some were over 18 and you could not stop them vaping in their own time during lunch, it was not vanilla they were vaping, was the way he put it. It was hard stuff. How do we know what is in them and who puts what into them? I welcome the Bill. The Minister of State will have our full support. It is a move in the right direction. It is a personal opinion that they should be banned in their entirety but at least the Minister of State is making an effort and starting the wheels in motion. If disposable vapes are banned, I also agree with what was said by previous speakers that they are too obvious and evident. We have done it with drink in off-licences and supermarkets where they have been put behind closed doors. We have done it with cigarettes, taken away the branding and put them behind closed doors. When you walk into a shop now, you would not know if there were cigarettes there or not. If you walk down any street in any rural town, along with the bookies, the coffee shop and a few other mainstays, there is a vape shop. This is big money business when they can have stand-alone shops. When big money is involved, there is a big battle to fight. I compliment the Minister of State and guarantee our support through the process of the Bill.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): I thank all Senators for their contributions on this debate. I look forward to continuing engagement on the Bill on Committee Stage. Some Senators had to leave so I will come back to them on the issues raised. We are working with retailers and there will be notification. On single-use vapes from another country, this Bill applies to sales in the State. We cannot legislate for sales in other countries. Many other EU countries have banned them and an EU-wide law is coming in. I will meet any groups or organisations Senators would like us to meet.

Senator McDowell spoke and I thank him. To clarify, there are two Bills. The Bill he spoke about is the second Bill, not the single-use vape Bill we are discussing tonight. We have two Bills on the advice of the Office of the Attorney General due to the regulatory framework for single-use vapes being different from that of the nicotine inhalant products. The issues he raised are very relevant. I assure him in the second Bill I will do what I can to work on that. There are many different opinions and many people feel to differently whether it is cigarettes and vapes. When the second Bill was in the Dáil last week, flavours were brought up on several occasions by Members. I thank him for raising it too. Enforcement is important. The Public Health (Tobacco Products and Nicotine Inhaling Products) (Amendment) Bill 2026 introduces a range of new enforcement tools. There will be compliance and prohibition notices, fixed-payment notices, a minimum licence suspension period following conviction and a revocation of licence after conviction if someone has two convictions. On resources, enforcement of tobacco and nicotine inhaling products legislation was highlighted as a priority action in 2026. The national service plan is part of this. Thirty additional WTEs have been allocated to the national environmental health service. It is recruiting these posts. They are expected we hope in mid-2026. On the proposals to extend the existing smoking-free legislation to vaping and prohibited smoking in outdoor areas, this has come across a lot of the time. It was subject to public consultation in 2024 alongside measures to regulate nicotine inhaling products. That is vaping and smoking in public which has constantly come up. The legislation programme pursued included the measures most likely to reduce vaping among young people. However our national tobacco control policy, tobacco-free Ireland, is currently being reviewed. Senator McDowell is right - working with our EU counterparts will play a huge role in this. The review will be considered in the full range of existing legislation and measures to protect the public from second-hand smoke and aerosols and whether these should be strengthened.

We are looking at this in the context of the EU Council recommendation on smoke and aerosol-free environments, which recommends that member states protect the public from second-hand smoke and aerosols in a range of indoor and outdoor settings. This is just part of what is being looked at. It is important because a lot of money has been invested in the prevention campaign for vaping. Some €300,000 was allocated in budget 2025 to develop and run a youth vaping prevention media campaign and €200,000 was given in budget 2026 to continue this campaign. The first thing that has to be said is that you cannot sell vapes to under-18s. You are breaking the law. You cannot do that. It is illegal to sell vapes to under-18s; you cannot do it. This campaign provides evidence-based messaging to young people, as well as information and support to parents and guardians about vapes.

The first phase of the campaign, aimed at parents and guardians, was launched in 2025. This included digital advertising and radio campaigns. We are very mindful that we are living in an era where for young people, a lot of things are digital. We have to be mindful of that and of how we get the prevention campaign out there. The second phase of the campaign is aimed at children and young people. It was launched in March of this year. We got influencers and a content creator to reach young people through social media. Again, we had to very much focus on social media and I believe it is the first time the HSE had influencers doing this. I thought it was really important to target our young people on this. As part of the campaign, a letter was sent to schools encouraging teachers and parents to learn more about vaping and to download the resources from the HSE. Since then, over 8,000 leaflets have been sent out. It

is hoped that this campaign will also contribute to the continuing decline in tobacco use among young people, given the association between vaping and subsequent smoking in adolescents.

There is another area that comes up all the time; I am raising it in the last few minutes here. We are talking about what is called a smoke-free generation. In November 2024, the Public Health (Tobacco) (Amendment) Act 2024 - Senator Paul Daly spoke about this - was enacted. Under this law, Ireland became the first country in the EU to raise its minimum legal age for sale of tobacco products to 21. The measures will come into effect on 1 February 2028. We are really making good strides and we need to do more. Our national tobacco control policy, Tobacco Free Ireland, is currently being reviewed and one of the central goals is to set out a pathway to end the epidemic of smoking-related harm in Ireland. All measures to fulfil these objectives will be considered, including a general ban, which is the smoke-free generation. That is another thing. We are all working on the quit smoking campaign.

Our objectives are clear. We want to put in place a law that is effective, proportionate, firm and focuses on protecting public health and the environment. Ireland is acting and doing its best in how we act decisively. In doing so, we are moving ahead of many of our European counterparts. An EU-wide approach would significantly strengthen the impact of our national action and ensure member states are supported in their efforts. That is why both I and the Minister for Health have consistently called for a revision of the tobacco products directive as soon as possible. However, we cannot afford to wait for EU actions. We have a responsibility to act where we can to protect the health of our children and young people. That is what this law and this next Bill I will bring to the House aims to do.

This legislation is about prevention. By banning single-use vapes, we are taking further action to protect our young people from nicotine addiction and to prevent a new generation from becoming dependent on these products. Single-use vapes are designed to be cheap, attractive and easy to use. This is a contribution to the normalisation of nicotine use and it seems to have become normalised now. It is not good for our environment and public health either.

This Bill prioritises the protection of children and young people from these harmful and addictive substances. I know it is an issue that all public representatives are concerned about and I hope Senators will work with us on these issues. This is about protecting health and well-being, particularly for our children. I thank everyone for raising the really relevant issues and concerns they have today. As I said, I will be in again with our second Bill. It is important that we all work together. This legislation is vital. I know there are challenges, as other speakers have said, but this is about our young people and what we need to do to move as quickly as possible.

Question put and agreed to.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Garret Ahearn): When is it proposed to take Committee Stage?

Senator Paul Daly: Next Tuesday.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Garret Ahearn): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Committee Stage ordered for Tuesday, 5 May 2026.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Garret Ahearn): When is it proposed to sit again?

Senator Paul Daly: Tomorrow at 10.30 a.m.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Garret Ahearn): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar athló ar 8.35 p.m. go dtí 10.30 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 29 Aibreán 2026.

The Seanad adjourned at 8.35 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 29 April 2026.