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DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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SEANAD ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 29 Aibreán 2026

Wednesday, 29 April 2026

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach i gceannas ar 10.30 a.m.

Machnamh agus Paidir.

Prayer and Reflection.

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad

An Cathaoirleach: Before I read out the Commencement matters, I welcome to the Distinguished Visitors Gallery the Polish chargé d'affaires, Mr. Artur Michalski. He is a guest of the chair of our parliamentary friendship group, Deputy Malcolm Byrne. Today we mark Poland's Constitution Day to commemorate the adoption of a modern, codified constitution by Poland on 3 May 1791. It was the first country in Europe and the second after the United States of America to do so. The United States is, of course, marking its 250th anniversary this year. Also this year, we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Ireland and Poland. It is a cause of great joy for us that we have built those links. There are over 93,680 people of Polish citizenship living here. They have created communities and organisations that bring them together and also celebrate the bonds between Ireland and Poland. Our diplomatic relations run deep with our membership of the European Union, which has been transformative for Ireland since we joined in 1973 but also for Poland when it joined.

Today in the Oireachtas there will be an exhibition that has been worked on in relation to Countess Markievicz, who played such a huge role. Her husband was an artist and was a leading figure in the cultural revolution in Ireland, part of that important element of our struggle for Independence. Their partnership brought Polish culture and identity to Ireland long before the Polish people who are now living in our country did. It is woven through the fabric of our shared relationships over the last 100 years and beyond. As the convener of the friendship group, Deputy Byrne has put together a most impressive celebration of that life and bohemian Dublin, which is marked in this great exhibition on Count and Countess Markievicz. It is a great symbol of the enduring relationships between Ireland and Poland. I thank the chargé d'affaires, Mr. Michalski, for being here today as we celebrate Poland's national day.

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

Senator Garret Kelleher - The need for the Minister for Transport to make a statement on future funding allocations for road safety initiatives, in particular to provide safe pedestrian and cycle infrastructure in Mourneabbey, County Cork.

Senator Seán Kyne - The need for the Minister for Transport to make a statement on the provision of funding for regional National Transport Authority offices.

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.

Senator Chris Andrews - The need for the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport to make a statement on the arrangements in place for Ireland's upcoming football match with Israel.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin - The need for the Minister for Defence to provide an update on the management of the Curragh Plains, County Kildare, including the prohibition of illegal encampments on these lands.

Senator Mark Duffy - The need for the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to make a statement on the conditions for drawdown of funds for the croí cónaithe property refurbishment grant.

Senator Mike Kennelly - The need for the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to make a statement on the streamlining of the targeted agricultural modernisation scheme.

Senator Cathal Byrne - The need for the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to provide an update on the proposed new campus for the South East Technological University in Wexford.

The matters raised by the Senators are suitable for discussion and I have selected Senators Kelleher, Kyne, Gallagher and Andrews and they will be taken now. The other Senators may give notice on another day of the matters that they wish to raise.

Nithe i dtosach suíonna - Commencement Matters

Road Network

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer.

Senator Garret Kelleher: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit, an Teachta Buttimer, atá anseo chun plé a dhéanamh ar shábháilteacht ar an mbóthar N20 idir Corcaigh agus Mala, go háirithe ag an bpríomh-chrosbhealach ag Mainistir na Móna.

As he is from Cork, the Minister of State will be very familiar with the N20 national primary road between Cork and Mallow and the difficulties faced by local residents in many communities along the route in crossing the road safely. Residents of Waterloo, Whitechurch, Grenagh, Rathduff, Burnfort and Mourneabbey, the latter of which will be the main focus of this Commencement matter, all face similar dangers and challenges crossing the road and going about their daily business, going to work and bringing children to school.

These safety concerns have been exacerbated by the significant increase in the volume of traffic on the road in recent years. Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, has stated:

The existing N20 is not designed for the volume of traffic it is now carrying. The annual average daily traffic reached nearly 18,000 in 2025, an increase from 15,000 in 2016.

The parish of Mourneabbey, south of the town of Mallow in County Cork, is one of the communities that are dissected by the N20. The majority of the community's facilities in the parish, such as Clyda Rovers GAA club, Mourneabbey Community Centre and the local crèche are located on the western side of the N20, while a significant proportion of the local community live in the Burnfort area, on the eastern side of the road.

Local councillor Liam Madden, who raised the issue with me recently, was interviewed on RTÉ Radio 1's "Drivetime". He highlighted the dangers faced by local residents multiple times each day in crossing the road. He described the road as having traffic volumes similar to those of a motorway but without any of the safety infrastructure, such as overpasses or underpasses, that we would associate with our motorways. We are told we have a hierarchy of road users in an effort to protect the most vulnerable when it comes to road design and safety provisions. At the top of this hierarchy we are supposed to give priority to pedestrians, who have no protection whatsoever in the event of a collision. Then come cyclists, horse riders and motorcyclists. Below these we have car and van drivers, who have the protection of their vehicles in the unfortunate event of a collision, and finally bus and lorry drivers.

According to an article by Geraldine Herbert in the *Irish Independent* in May 2024, "The purpose of the hierarchy of road users is to give greater protection to pedestrians and cyclists and to highlight that those who can do most harm have the greatest responsibility to reduce risk to other road users." As traffic volumes have increased on the N20, it seems insufficient consideration is being given to the hierarchy of road users and to the needs of pedestrians and local residents in relation to their own safety.

The difficulty with the Mourneabbey junction compared with places like Rathduff, New Twopothouse and Buttevant, which are also on the N20, is there is no town or small village in the parish directly on the road that would require a lower speed limit to be observed and make an intervention such as a pedestrian crossing or other traffic calming measures viable options.

We are all well aware of the progress being made between the Department of Transport, TII, Limerick City and County Council and Cork County Council on the delivery of the M20 Cork-Limerick motorway, but even the most optimistic forecasts indicate that delivery will not happen for at least nine or ten years. I am also aware of the ongoing contact between Cork County Council and TII on the more immediate concerns and the possibility of an intervention prior to the delivery of the M20, even if it is temporary in nature, to make the road safer for the local community. This is what Councillor Madden and community groups in the Mourneabbey area are looking for, but for these talks to result in a positive outcome a commitment to enable a solution to be delivered is needed. I sincerely hope such a provision can be made either directly in budget 2027 or through TII to deliver safer road infrastructure for the community of Mourneabbey.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Jerry Buttimer): I dtús báire, gabhaim buíochas leis an Seanadóir as ucht an ní iontaigh agus thábhachtaigh seo maidir leis

an mbóthar M20 agus na bóithre máguaird a phlé sa Seanad. I thank him for raising the M20. He is right that the safety concerns are real. The volume of traffic has increased and there is a real fear on that road. I commend the Senator on working with Councillor Liam Madden on raising the matter here and being advocates for it. Councillor Madden met me at the Association of Irish Local Government, AILG, conference last week and spoke about it as well. The points the Senator makes are very important in the context of the advancement of the M20 motorway. I wish to use this opportunity to highlight the important work that has been undertaken so we can develop, as the Senator said, safe pedestrian access and egress on the road as well as cycle infrastructure across the country and more specifically at this place in Cork.

I confirm the Government's strong commitment to active travel. There will be €360 million a year until 2030 for a €1.8 billion investment between now and the end of the decade, which builds on over €1 billion invested since 2021. This means we have had almost 1,100 km of new walking and cycling infrastructure. That has been in many different guises, but in particular the safe routes to schools initiative. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, cannot be here and sends his apologies. He has responsibility for overall policy and Exchequer funding for active travel. The planning, design and construction of individual active travel projects is a matter for TII.

It is important, as the Senator said, that we all work together to ensure we make this road safer. On that safe pedestrian and cycle infrastructure to enable local people to safely cross the N20 road, he is right there is no big settlement pattern like a village in the place he spoke about. I have been advised the population settlement of Mourneabbey has been included within the preferred route option for the N20-M20 road upgrade project. This road upgrade project includes provision for a shared use active travel facility that is expected to primarily run alongside the road. The route will be separated from the road via a substantive verge or barrier to provide a safe and segregated corridor for pedestrians and cyclists. This walking and cycling infrastructure will provide communities, including those of Blarney, Rathduff, Mourneabbey, Mallow, Buttevant, Charleville, Banoge, Croom and Patrickswell, with a safe and accessible means of sustainable travel. However, a transport hub for Mourneabbey has been proposed and is welcomed. Mobility hubs are where people can change mode and integrate with public transport via park-and-ride car and bike parking facilities. The Senator is right that is a bit of time away so there is a need for urgent action on the point he has made here.

The N20-M20 road upgrade announced three years ago is at design and environmental evaluation phase. This is expected to conclude later this year with the submission of a business case to the Department of Transport. It will go for Government approval under the infrastructure guidelines and then An Coimisiún Pleanála. However, in the timeframe the Senator speaks about, it is important we see TII and Cork County Council look at short-term measures. I believe there has been engagement between the two bodies on available budgets so we can improve active mobility in the region and I am told that work is ongoing. I am very conscious this is an important and a well-used road where there have been fatalities and near misses and accidents involving pedestrians and motorists. I highlight to the House that Cork County Council has been allocated just under €20 million from the NTA and TII to support over 70 active travel and greenway schemes this year.

For me as a Minister of State in the Department, it is about ensuring we work with the Senator and Councillor Madden. What we have outlined here are prime examples of where intervention can join those dots in the interim and improve the lived experience of the residents and local people who use this road daily. I assure the Senator of my ongoing support. I will take his remarks back to the Minister and TII. We must continue to ensure we have not just connectivity and sustainable transport choices but safe roads. There is huge concern along the N20 at the moment and it is in all of our interests that we do what the Senator has asked and put in place a suite of measures to improve that point.

Senator Garret Kelleher: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit. Going back to the "Drivetime" section that included reference to the issue we were discussing, there was a lady on who was living on the Burnfort side who said some mornings it can take up to ten minutes for her to take the right hand turn towards her place of work in Mallow. That results in people taking risks, so I welcome everything the Minister of State said. The crux of the issue is what is being looked for is a short-term solution prior to the delivery of the M20. Nobody is looking for a commitment of funding to a prohibitively or excessively expensive project that would only be short term in nature. I reiterate there is ongoing communication between Cork County Council and TII about providing the funding to enable them to come up with a temporary solution that will allay concerns and make the road safer for users in the Mourneabbey area prior to the delivery of the M20.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The point the Senator made is that in the short term we have to intervene. He is right and I concur with him in a personal capacity. The timeframe for the delivery of the new Cork-Limerick motorway is long and the timeline is perhaps uncertain. In that sense, we have to work with the residents who are facing real and urgent issues on the road. I thank the Senator for his advocacy. It is not the first time he has raised this matter with me. I commend Councillor Madden, who has been very proactive on this. He is right to articulate travel issues and the risks and the Senator is 100% correct that people take risks on the road. As a consequence, we have had accidents and loss of life. In the overarching scheme of things, Government is committed to the delivery of an upgrade of the N20. It is a key priority with €3.5 million allocated to the project this year, but this is about more than connecting Cork and Limerick. In the short term, we cannot allow the people of Mourneabbey or Burnfort to continue to be afraid or to take a risk in crossing the road. I will sit with the Senator again. I will advocate for this to the Minister, National Transport Authority, TII and Cork County Council to ensure we prioritise it in the short term, because a short-term measure is needed. Anybody who does analysis of roads will recognise this road is critically important but also that it is very dangerous. I commend the Senator on raising it.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Alison Comyn): I thank the Minister of State very much for coming to the Chamber and addressing that. We will pause for a moment to allow the next Minister of State to enter the Chamber.

National Transport Authority

Acting Chairperson (Senator Alison Comyn): I wish the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, a good morning. The next matter is in the name of Senator Kyne.

Senator Seán Kyne: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach Gníomhach. I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan. I am not sure why the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, had to leave seeing as he works in the Department of Transport, but nonetheless the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, is very welcome. I thank the Cathaoirleach's office for choosing this matter. It concerns the National Transport Authority, NTA, with which the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, works, in the Department of Transport.

The NTA originally had a Dublin remit, which since then has fortunately been broadened to a national one. It has a very important role in projects like active travel and bus routes across city and county councils.

We need to move away from Dublin-based decisions to regional on-the-ground staffing where they can meet with county councillors, residents and council engineers in relation to projects that are important to local communities. For example, the 424 bus passes through Na Forbacha agus Bearna. It is a successful bus route. It is full on many occasions and it does not stop but passes by residents who are waiting. We need NTA officials who are able to see that, and able to come down to Bearna and to Na Forbacha to see full buses passing by, to realise that a solution is needed which is either additional capacity, higher frequency or a new bus route starting in An Spidéal and travelling through Na Forbacha and Bearna into the city. More regional structures in relation to the NTA would be beneficial to that relationship on the ground with councillors.

Having Dublin-centric decision-making, whereby there is liaison and maps and projects may be sent up from local engineers to the NTA in Dublin, is fine. However, nothing can beat the on-the-ground relationships that allow people to see what is happening on the ground and meet with councillors. Our councillors are at the coal face. They are meeting with residents and hearing about issues in relation to active travel or the need to extend a footpath further to meet up with new houses or to remove bad bends. Whatever role they may have in relation to active travel such as safe routes to school, the need for new pedestrian crossings or new bus stops or shelters where they may be warranted would be easier done by having people in regional areas - Galway city and county in my own case - so that the staff will get to know the engineers and the councillors on a personal basis. They will be able to discuss projects and bring forward projects knowing what is possible and what is not.

The NTA does a wonderful job but it could do even better by having regional structures, regional offices and staff on the ground engaging with local councillors in their own localities. While it has a national remit, are there any plans with the Department of Transport to provide such structures and staffing? Is there an issue with funding? Has this been discussed? There is great merit in this idea. Dhéanfadh sé an-chiall dá mbeadh oifigí réigiúnacha trasna na tíre ag tacú le comhairleoirí agus le hinnealtóirí, ag obair le pobal chathair na Gaillimhe, Chonamara, Chontae na Gaillimhe agus na n-oileán, ag freastal ar na ceantair seo, ag casadh le daoine, ag dul go dtí cruinnithe, agus ag breathnú ar rudaí ar an talamh. Dhéanfadh sé sin an-chiall. Tá mé ag lorg tacaíocht ón Roinn Iompair ar an ábhar seo. Tá súil agam go mbeidh sé sásta breathnú ar an gcás seo agus ar na deiseanna a bhaineann leis an moladh seo maidir leis an gcóras náisiúnta iompair, is go ndéanfar cinneadh airgead a chur ar fáil le foireann a chur i bhfeidhm ar an talamh go réigiúnach i nGaillimh agus sna contaetha eile trasna na tíre. Táim ag súil go mór le freagra an Aire Stáit.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth (Deputy Michael Moynihan): I thank Senator Kyne for the question. The official reply raises a number of issues in relation to regional representation and the money and work that has been done by the NTA in Galway and its hinterland. The Government and the Minister are responsible for the policy and the overall funding but it is the NTA that delivers, plans and develops it in line with the statutory responsibility for providing transport. There are a number of issues on which it is working with Galway city and county councils in terms of developing funding. The Senator's overall point relates to its national remit and the fact that its national office is in Dublin, in the context of the search for solutions and good transport initiatives throughout the country. In particular, Senator Kyne speaks about Galway, which is one of the fastest growing cities and communities in the country.

We look at the information that is provided at local level, both to Oireachtas Members and at local authority level. They need to have proper engagement with the local authority to address the challenges on the ground because Oireachtas Members and members of local authorities are constantly engaged with the resident communities and indeed with their own communities as well. They know the challenges. Clearly, there is a deficit in relation to delivery. Local knowledge is very much to the fore and solutions can be found very quickly. However, they are then engaging with an office that does not have the detailed information in relation to it. It is a sound suggestion in terms of having proper engagement with local authorities and the NTA. It is also important as Ireland is developing and has developed over the past while. The development of the regions will be a key, massive component of how we deliver. As Galway has seen huge development over the past while, which will continue into the future, it is important that we engage and use the expertise of members of the local authority and Members of the Oireachtas to ensure early engagement in relation to challenges being faced in the community right across Galway city and county.

I will certainly bring the proposal Senator Kyne put before me to both the Department of Transport and the NTA. If we are to have balanced regional development, we must make sure the information that is readily available locally is fed into national policy. As we have seen in many policies, if it comes from the ground up it is always better received locally and easier to implement. The challenges and the shortcomings are there. I take the point the Senator has raised in relation to Galway city and county. I will engage with the NTA and the Department of Transport to ensure we can look at what he is proposing in Seanad Éireann today. It is a sound and sensible suggestion. In the official response, we have a number of issues in relation to Galway and the development of infrastructure right across Galway, but the key point is that there is better engagement locally with Oireachtas Members, local authorities, local authority engineers and the communities so that we can deliver the best possible results in terms of transport infrastructure throughout Galway city and county.

Senator Seán Kyne: I thank the Minister of State for the comprehensive response. It is clear to me that this proposal makes sense to him. I thank him for coming in and for the response from the Department of Transport. I am sure he will agree that the NTA is delivering for regional Ireland, including County Galway. It has a very important remit but it could do even better. It could do things even quicker and have better decisions by having more local, on-the-ground representation in relation to the points I have raised. Further consideration will be needed on the wider legislative amendments required to extend the NTA's remit. These

amendments will be progressed in a separate, wider Bill, according to the script that has been provided. Something like regional offices would be a win-win for the NTA and for the local authorities throughout the country in terms of providing a better service, quicker decisions and a more on-the-ground view of what is required within both urban and rural communities.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: In regard to the Senator's points on further expansion and further change in legislation, that will come in due course. There is serious engagement by the NTA, the Department of Transport and indeed the whole of the Government in relation to funding for Galway for transport infrastructure as well as other issues. The wider point is that if there is a link from the local authorities and the communities right up to the national office, many times some of what can become big issues can be seen earlier on in the process and can be resolved locally. I certainly will bring the proposal back. I will ensure it is given huge consideration at both the NTA offices and in the Department of Transport.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Alison Comyn): Before we move to our next Commencement matter, we have a packed Public Gallery and I wish to welcome some of our guests. Students from Marino Institute of Education are most welcome to the Seanad. We also have visitors from Cairdeas Clubhouse, guests of Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí. They are welcome here today. They picked a beautiful day to come. Hopefully, they will enjoy the rest of their tour and visit. We also have Mr. P.J. Bohan and Mr. Des Dalton in the Public Gallery, guests of Senator Garret Kelleher. I hope they manage to catch him in action.

Road Projects

Senator Robbie Gallagher: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit chuig an Teach seo ar maidin. I thank the Minister of State for taking time out of his busy schedule to be here.

We can all agree that our roads have taken a severe battering from incessant rain over the past number of months. Roads are badly damaged everywhere, from country, local and national roads to our streets and motorways. In addition to funding from local authorities' coffers, a sum of €718 million in State road grants has been allocated to local authorities for the improvement and maintenance of both regional and local roads around the country. That was before the war in Iran erupted, however, which has caused the price of diesel, petrol and home heating oil to hit our pockets.

As the Minister of State will be aware, oil is a necessary component in bitumen and tar. It will no doubt have a severe impact on the cost of road maintenance and, by extension, the number of roads that can be repaired and maintained. Some local authorities have already reported price increases of approximately 25% for road maintenance materials. In many instances, they might not meet their targets this year as a result.

In my area of Cavan and Monaghan, roads are in a critically poor state. For example, Monaghan has the second highest rural road network density in the country. Monaghan County Council has stated that it has experienced an approximate 25% increase in costs that it believes is directly attributed to the conflict and war in the Middle East. Monaghan County Council received €17 million from the Department of Transport this year for local and regional works,

and it also contributed €5.8 million from its own coffers to repair those roads. More than a quarter of its total annual budget is dedicated to road maintenance.

Local authorities use data from the pavement, surface and condition index, PSCI, to monitor the condition of local and regional roads. Roads are surveyed and given ratings from 1 to 10, with 1 being very poor and 10 being excellent. Based on the most recent data, almost 400 km of Monaghan's local and regional roads are categorised as being in very poor condition. These are roads that are susceptible to the formation of potholes. This is almost double the national average. The cost of fixing the 190 km of road needed to bring it down to the national average was previously estimated to cost €33 million, based on 2024 construction figures. However, due to rising inflation in the cost of materials and contractors, this figure is now estimated at approximately €46 million. That is an increase of €13 million in two years, which is staggering. I think the Minister of State will agree with me in that regard. The council says current funding levels are not sufficient to eliminate the maintenance backlog.

County Cavan is in a similar situation. Funding of €234 million is needed to remediate the 1,140 km of road in this category. By contrast, the planned €55 million funding for road works on sections of the worst roads in the county seems like a drop in the ocean.

As the conflict in the Middle East continues, so too will the uncertainty as to how this will negatively affect our budgets and the number of roads it will be possible to address. Clearly, we have a serious problem. The funding we have received to date, although welcome, is totally inadequate compared to the needs of both counties. From talking to the Minister of State's colleagues in County Cork, I am sure the situation there is somewhat similar. It is an issue that needs to be addressed. I look forward to the Minister of State's response.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I thank Senator Gallagher for his question. I welcome the opportunity to speak to the House on behalf of the Minister for Transport, Deputy O'Brien. I understand the question relates to the provision of additional funding for road maintenance due to the rising cost of materials. The Government is strongly committed to protecting our existing road network. The improvement and maintenance of our regional and local roads are the responsibility of local authorities. Funding for such improvements and maintenance is provided through council resources and the State's road grants. The initial selection and prioritisation of work that is funded is a matter for the local authority concerned. The vast majority of grants provided are targeted at the maintenance and renewal of the existing road network, with the remainder invested in new roads, bridges and road realignment.

There has been a significant increase in Exchequer funding in recent years, with €718 million provided for our regional and local roads this year. This will facilitate an increase of €26 million for road protection and renewal work. Due to the level of use of our regional and local road network, the primary focus of investment is on protection and renewal because these roads play a critical role in supporting economic activity and community links throughout the country.

There are three main regional and local road grant programmes that account for most of the grant funding available to local authorities. First, there is the restoration maintenance grant for pavement sealing works to protect the road surface from water damage. Second, the restoration improvement grant supports road strengthening works to lengthen the life of the road. Third, the discretionary grant allows for a range of activities, including pothole repairs, edge

strengthening, renewal of signs and lines and winter maintenance. The level of funding allocated for each of these is based on the length of the road network within a local authority area.

It should also be noted that Exchequer funding for regional and local roads is intended to supplement realistic contributions from local authorities' own resources. As the statutory road authorities for their areas, it is open to local authorities to prioritise investment towards regional and local roads.

The Senator raised the issue of funding arrangements that have been put in place with Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII. Under the Roads Acts 1993 to 2015 and in line with our national development plan, the planning, design, improvement and upgrading of individual national roads is a matter for TII.

We have had many briefings in the past couple of weeks, particularly since the outbreak of war. A lot of local authorities have been looking at their budgets and the escalating cost of the contracts. They are concerned about the impact the rise in oil prices may have on contract prices and the outputs in that regard. When it comes to increasing funding, the Government and the Department are continuously looking at the effects increased oil prices are having on every aspect of our society. We have put in place over €750 million of funding to help people who are severely affected by oil prices, but the Senator's point about additional funding is one I will take back to the Department of Transport. It is one Monaghan County Council and every other local authority have been raising with us because they are seriously concerned that their programme for 2026 may not be reached as a result of the increased cost of some of the contracts. It is concerning. Obviously, the ongoing war in the Middle East is hugely concerning. It is affecting all of our lives and we have to make the best possible decisions in order to future-proof. We do not know how long the war will continue. I will respond further in my closing comments.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: I thank the Minister of State for his comprehensive response. I fully appreciate that this is not his area of responsibility and that he is taking this Commencement matter on behalf of the Minister of Transport. Coming from rural Ireland where we have no train network and a limited bus service, the only show in town to get from A to B for many families is the local and regional roads. The condition of the local roads in Monaghan and Cavan has reached a critical stage. School transport is being affected because some bus drivers are refusing to go up certain roads. Home help carers are struggling to tend to their clients in the morning and evening. We have a serious problem. We need additional funding. Even before the war in Iran started, we had a serious issue with regard to roads funding in both counties.

We need additional funding in order to address that and I am heartened by the fact that the Minister of State will take the message back very strongly to the Minister that Cavan and Monaghan are two areas in particular that need special attention because of the condition of the local road network in both counties, unfortunately.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I thank the Senator. He mentioned Cavan and Monaghan. I come from a very rural part of north-west Cork as well so I understand the importance of the local and regional roads. It is crucially important, as we look at the economies of the local

communities, cars and transport. We are a long way from public transport, as the Deputy alluded to in his statement. I take the point very seriously and we have to make sure that we have adequate funding in place, albeit that we have increased the funding again this year and over the past number of years for the local and regional roads. We are really trying to catch up and the Senator mentioned school buses, home helps and so forth, and the condition of the road. That is something I will reflect very carefully on because it is important that we can keep the wheels of the economy going in rural Ireland as well and that we protect it. We understand the challenges that are there and we protect it. There has been an increase in funding over the past number of years and again this year but the concerns are that the increase in funding is now going to be eroded by the effects of a war that we have no hand, act or part in. It is a serious concern as well. I will reflect on those and the Senator can rest assured that the Department of Transport, the Ministers and the whole of Government understand the challenges facing many and all communities across both urban and, in particular, rural Ireland, as the Senator alluded to in his statement.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Alison Comyn): Before we move to our final Commencement, we have a busy day in our Visitors' Galleries today. I welcome our distinguished guests to our Distinguished Visitors Gallery, and those in our Public Gallery as well. I see we are packed out with the St. Laurence's Boys' National School, Stillorgan. They are all very welcome guests of the Minister of State, Deputy Neale Richmond. Our Cathaoirleach always says that when you visit the Seanad, you have no homework for the rest of the day but I am mischievous as Acting Chair and I like to say no homework for the rest of the week. I hope that has not caused too much bother. I am getting a thumbs up from the teacher. Go raibh maith agaibh. Tá fáilte romhaibh go léir. I hope you enjoy the rest of your stay.

We will move to our final Commencement and An Seanadóir Chris Andrews.

Sports Events

Senator Chris Andrews: I thank the Minister of State for coming in. I suspect he is in to defend the indefensible because genocidal Israel will be coming to the Aviva Stadium to play Ireland. I find it absolutely staggering that the Government will welcome Israel here with open arms. It is beyond belief. The Government constantly expresses concern and condemnation over what apartheid Israel is doing in Gaza, Lebanon and Iran but never acts to ensure Israel faces consequences. Israel is committing genocide in Gaza and has starved Palestinians to death. It is a terror state and it has dismantled international law. It has faced no consequences for all the terror it has inflicted on the world.

What I cannot understand is why the Government, which regularly condemns Israel, never takes action. Words are meaningless to Israel. It needs to see action. The game with Israel is a prime example of the Government speaking out of both sides of its mouth. On one side of its mouth, we have the Government saying it is going to pass the occupied territories Bill and suspend the trade pact with Israel but, on the other side of its mouth, it will welcome Israel to come here and play football. In what word does that make sense? Israel flouts international law every hour, day, week, month and year. The Irish Government is spineless and does nothing

to hold Israel to account. In fact, it does not do nothing - it welcomes Israel here to play, which is worse than doing nothing.

Israel should not even be in UEFA and FIFA. We hear people saying that politics and sport should be separate and never mixed. The reality is that sport is political and there is no changing that fact. With genocidal Israel using football to sportswash their apartheid and genocide, sport and politics are intertwined whether people like it or not. The Palestinian Football Association has said that 565 Palestinian footballers, coaches and referees have been killed in Gaza by Israel's genocide, one of those being Muhammad Khalifa, who came here to play teams across Ireland. He is remembered fondly by his family and also by his Irish football family. The killers of Mr. Khalifa could be here in Ireland when Ireland plays Israel. That is just not acceptable.

Given this fact, how can UEFA and FIFA allow Israel to take part in world football? Poland refused to play Russia when Ukraine was invaded and there were no consequences for Poland, so why can Ireland not refuse to play Israel? The reason is that the Irish Government is spineless. That is what the evidence indicates. If the match goes ahead - and I sincerely hope it does not - what plans has the Government in place for screening of Israeli players, management and supporters? What security screening does it have in place for the team, management, players and supporters of Israel? Will players, management and supporters who have participated in genocide be allowed to come and go without any consequences? Will the killers of Mr. Khalifa, if they are here, be allowed to come and go without any consequences? Will the Government just turn a blind eye to those coming here to play and support genocidal Israel? If it does come to light that one of the team or supporters were involved in genocide, what proactive steps will the Government take to ensure they are held to face the consequences?

The Football Association of Ireland, FAI, president and CEO need to ensure that they do not facilitate sportswashing by genocidal apartheid Israel. Senior management in the FAI knows what is going in Gaza and that hundreds of footballers have been killed by Israeli forces, so they need to listen to their own members and stop the game. The FAI congress said no to Israel, and the CEO and president need to listen to their own members and not do the Government's bidding.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I thank Senator Andrews for raising the matter. The performance and integrity of our top athletes on the international stage has had a very positive impact for us, as Irish sport provides the world with a window into Ireland and the Irish people, both at home and abroad. International success for our top sportspeople enriches our country in a variety of ways. Many of our fondest memories are centred on Ireland's achievements on the global sporting stage. These achievements have been a cause of both celebration and inspiration for the public and will continue to do so into the future. This is why the Government is committed to supporting Irish athletes competing at the highest level of international competition.

There have been many calls for Irish sporting organisations to boycott or exclude Israel from international sporting competitions in the context of the genocide in Gaza. They include calls for the Football Association of Ireland not to fulfil its UEFA Nations League fixtures against Israel this autumn. All national governing bodies, NGBs, including the FAI, are independent, autonomous bodies responsible for the governance of their own sports, including the

organisation of sporting fixtures, whether in domestic or international competitions. The Government and Sport Ireland have no role in determining or supporting the organisation of such fixtures. In addition, neither the Government nor Sport Ireland have a role in determining who can participate in international competitions organised by international sporting federations. International sporting federations are responsible for determining the composition of their membership in line with their own internal rules. The international federations, in this regard UEFA, have a leadership role for their global games, and it is at this level that strategic decisions should be taken rather than by individual countries' NGBs.

The FAI has decided to fulfil its UEFA Nations League fixtures against Israel in September and October, in accordance with its obligations as a member of UEFA, and having consulted with An Garda Síochána and other key stakeholders. The Government respects and supports the FAI's decision to do so. The FAI has briefed both the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan and the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue on this matter, and I understand it will be engaging with the Norwegian Football Federation to learn from its hosting of a match against Israel last year.

I should also be clear in that Ireland continues to have grave concerns about the dire humanitarian situation in Gaza and the need to ensure that the people of the Gaza Strip have adequate supplies and services. The Government remains committed to working with key partners to end the conflict in Gaza and to advancing a sustainable peace plan. Ending the conflict and addressing the huge challenges facing the Palestinians in Gaza has implications for regional security and stability. We want all parties to adhere to their commitments in full, desist from any actions inconsistent with what has been agreed and to continue to negotiate in good faith to ensure implementation.

In relation to this match, however, the FAI has made its decision to honour its fixture commitment and has set out its reasons for doing so. We must acknowledge its independence and autonomy in arriving at this decision.

Senator Chris Andrews: I thank the Minister of State. The Government is trying to defend the indefensible. The Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, lost the plot a few weeks ago when a few idiots threw flares onto a pitch. He threatened every organisation and he was going to ban footballers and football teams, yet he has no issue playing Israel which is committing genocide and has killed 565 Palestinian footballers. He has no issue with that, but at the same time there have been no answers. When visiting team supporters, management and players come here, what security screening will be in place to ensure that if somebody has been active in genocide they are held to account? The Government are like spineless ostriches with their heads stuck in the ground, not willing to do anything to upset the Israelis or the US. There needs to be security screening. That is the very minimum the Government should do.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: The Irish Government, and the Irish people in particular, have been very much to the forefront in advocating for Gaza and the Palestinian people going back over many generations but particularly over the last number of years. We have been one of the leading countries within Europe in voicing the huge concerns we have and the huge humanitarian crisis that is continuing there. We have been very much to the forefront in relation to it. We were probably one of the first to raise it and have continued to raise it. The

Government is acutely aware of the challenges within Gaza and of the huge humanitarian crisis that continues to be there.

On security, we have a very robust security system at our ports and airports for people coming through. That will be upheld by the various authorities; I assure the Deputy of that. As a Government and as a people, we have been very strong in our concerns and challenges in relation to what has been happening in Gaza, not just over the past number of years but going right back over generations.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Alison Comyn): I will turn to our Distinguished Visitors Gallery once more now that I have the names of our visitors, who are the family of a very key member of our staff in the Houses of the Oireachtas, one of our ushers, Darren. I welcome his wife, Tina, and their nine-year-old daughter, Caoimhe. I understand poor six-year-old daughter Oonagh drew the short straw and she is in school today. I have no doubt we will welcome her again one day. All of us are so grateful for the wonderful work Darren and all the other ushers do in the Houses of the Oireachtas. Welcome and enjoy the rest of your day.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 11.24 a.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 11.32 a.m.

Sitting suspended at 11.24 a.m. and resumed at 11.32 a.m.

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call on the Leader to outline the Order of Business, I am sure Members will join me in welcoming the honorary consul of Ireland in Detroit, Mr. Joe Patrick McGill. He is most welcome to Seanad Éireann. I thank him for being here and I am delighted that he is over here for the Global Irish Civic Forum events in Croke Park. I thank Mr. McGill for all the work he does for Ireland in the great state of Michigan.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

Senator Seán Kyne: The Order of Business is No. 1, statements on energy security, to be taken at 12.45 p.m. and to conclude at 2.30 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 each, all other Senators not to exceed five minutes each, and the Minister to be given no less than ten minutes to reply to the debate; No. 2, statements on public procurement, to be taken at 2 p.m. and to conclude at 3.15 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 each, all other Senators not to exceed two minutes each and time can be shared, and the Minister to be given no less than seven minutes to reply to the debate; No. 56, motion 1, Private Members' business, a motion regarding a wildlife rehabilitation support scheme, to be taken at 3.30 p.m., with the time allocated to this debate not to exceed two hours; and No. 56, motion 2, Private Members' business, motion regarding the annual progress report and Government response to energy price pressures, to be taken at 5.30 p.m., with the time allocated to this debate not to exceed two hours.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I was at a very positive event last Friday in south Kildare that the Tánaiste, Deputy Harris, attended, and he was very welcome. Ballymore Eustace was proclaimed as the first age-friendly and climate-friendly town in the country at the event. Ballymore Eustace was chosen mainly because of its wonderful community spirit and because so many people are actively involved in the community. It was also chosen because among its 1,700 residents, it has the highest age range within the county. We had a wonderful event organised by Ms Carmel Cashin from Kildare County Council. Mr. Stephen Deegan, Ms Janet Deegan and Mr. Tommy Deegan from the Tidy Towns are all related and did a wonderful job getting the town ready for this. A beautiful sculpture by Beth Murphy was unveiled and the sun came out. It really was a heavenly day. Every day in Ballymore Eustace is really good.

However, it struck me as slightly ironic that the town was awarded this status and this celebration for being very age-friendly and yet it has a complete lack of GP services. I tabled a Commencement matter on this about six months ago. Essentially, there is a clinic but there is no GP service. There is a GP from Blessington, who is assigned to the clinic and is an excellent GP according to people who go to the clinic.

While clinics run from the Blessington clinic were meant to be held in Ballymore Eustace, these have ceased. People are now forced to go to Blessington for that service. We are talking about older people who may not have access to private transport and who may find it difficult to use an irregular bus service. These people need to be better served. There is another practice willing to take over the clinic in Ballymore Eustace to ensure that there are clinics up to three times a week in the town. I have brought this up several times but nothing has changed. It really needs to and that is why I have brought it up in this House again.

I also want to again bring up the issue of illegal encampments on the Curragh, which I have raised a number of times. The Curragh is an absolute jewel. It is a place that people in the area like to access, particularly in this nice weather. We have golf courses, horse racing, the Army and sheep farmers but, unfortunately, at the start of summer every year, we have illegal encampments. Millions of euro have been spent on gathering the waste afterwards. There has been antisocial behaviour. Greens in Cill Dara Golf Club have been damaged. This is not the first time I have raised this issue. A court order was given on 9 April 2026, and it is good to see that sort of action being taken but we need to have a permanent solution. I and other representatives from County Kildare do not need to be standing up and talking about this year after year. I seek a debate with the Minister for Defence, Deputy McEntee, in relation to the Curragh. A plan with very strong recommendations was put in place and nothing has happened or is happening at a snail's pace. I wrote to the Minister, Deputy McEntee, directly, but I want a debate in this House in relation to this issue.

Senator Mark Duffy: I want to first welcome Gavin Brennan Morrow to the House. He is an intern with me and is a student in St. Muredach's College, my former secondary school. He is also a great active musician and a member of the community in Ballina. I welcome him to Seanad Éireann this morning and thank him for his assistance throughout the day.

I also want to wish the best of luck to St. Joseph's Secondary School, Foxford. It is in the FAI schools national U15 B cup final against Coláiste na Sceilge, Cahersiveen, in Limerick this afternoon. I wish the team well.

Last week, I raised the levy on independent local radio stations that has been initiated by Coimisiún na Meán. It is totally outrageous, and something needs to be done about it. I totally respect that we must have independence in the media but Coimisiún na Meán cannot be a law unto itself. It was formed out of the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland, which had 40 staff in 2020. Coimisiún na Meán now has a staff of over 220 and it is the local radio stations that are having to pay to be regulated further by it. It is totally outrageous.

The Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport, Deputy O'Donovan, says that he cannot intervene, and we must respect the delineation of powers and the commission's independence. However, it cannot go off and be a law unto itself. Was this levy adequately and properly discussed by the Oireachtas media committee? There needs to be some sort of formal process in place. Coimisiún na Meán cannot continue to grow its staff by the hundredfold and then start levying independent broadcasters.

The reason they have increased their staff levels is to regulate further online media through social media platforms platforms, so why are independent broadcasters, which are the life and soul of local communities, which are there in times of emergencies such as storms, which are the beating heart of local sports and cultural events and which are under a lot of pressure because of challenges facing the sector ironically because of social media, being levied with 39% increases? This will be detrimental to some of these local media organisations.

I ask for support from right across the House on this because it is totally unfair that this has been levied upon broadcasters. We need a debate on this and I call for the Minister to come to the House to discuss it further because it is totally unfair. What will happen if the commission wants to increase the levy by 100% or 200%? Will we just wash our hands and say it has nothing to do with us because the commission is totally independent? Where will it stop if the commission wants to increase its staff? It began with 40%. What if it wants to increase it to 1,000%? Where does it stop? Where is the intervention from across the House? I would like to think that there is support from all sides on this. It is sensitive because it is important that there be separation but there needs to be intervention on it and I ask for the Leader's support on it

Senator Tom Clonan: I welcome all our guests. I want to talk about aluminium. According to West Point and the institute for advanced studies, aluminium is the foundational metal of war and we are exporting almost 1 million tonnes of it to Russia. A total of 826,000 tonnes of alumina are being exported to Russia and we are the largest exporter to Russia. Since the war started in Ukraine - Putin's criminal enterprise and his unparalleled savagery and brutality in Ukraine - the increase has grown from 23%. A total of 68% of all alumina exports from Limerick are now going to Russia and are being sent to the RUSAL smelter in Krasnoyarsk, where they are manufacturing high-quality aluminium bars for the production of Shahed drones and other munitions missiles such as hypersonic missiles. The aluminium being supplied by Ireland is providing the propulsion systems, the delivery systems and parts of the projectiles that are killing hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian men, women and now civilians. This week, the Government announced that Ukrainians in Ireland who want to maintain their refugee status will have to show evidence of being self-supporting. Well, maybe they could go and work in the Aughinish Alumina plant and help to produce the ingredients for the very weapons that are destroying their country.

There is an account on X called Dan the Shadow Tanker Bonker. He is a concerned citizen who sets out in forensic detail the number of vessels - the shadow fleet, if you like - coming from Latvia, Lithuania and elsewhere and supplying this vital ingredient, this foundational metal of war, to the Russians. Where are we on this? It is a completely contradictory position to say, on the one hand, that we support Ukraine and at the same time facilitate the export of almost 1 billion tonnes of of a vital component for Russia's weapon systems.

I also want to talk about cluster munitions. *The Guardian* has reported that cluster munitions are being used in south Lebanon by the Israelis in Wadi Zibqin, Wadi Baruz and Wadi Deir Siryan, which are very close to where Irish troops are. Speaking of Limerick, the 128th Battalion comprising 300 or more of our young men and women is heading out to Lebanon for the final deployment to UNIFIL and Ireland is facilitating the transit of those very cluster munitions through our airspace out to Lebanon, where they could potentially injure or kill our troops. What other country in the EU would facilitate the onward transmission of weapons systems through its air domain to harm its own troops? Both in the maritime domain, therefore, with the export of this vital component for Russia's weapons systems, and in the air domain, with the transiting of weapons that could be used against our own troops, a complete lack of situational awareness around military defence and security is being shown on the part of the Irish Government. The Oireachtas Committee on Defence and National Security is not allowed to ask these questions. I am blue in the face asking for a debate. Can we bring in the Minister for Defence to explain why we as a security committee cannot ask the questions that need to be asked? This country is completely at sea when it comes to defence and security and the Government wants to get rid of the triple lock in the middle of this mess. We really need to have that debate and I hope the Leader can facilitate it with the Minister for Defence.

Senator Joanne Collins: I want to raise the issue of car insurance. We have brought up lots of different insurance issues in this House and I know there was a briefing yesterday in the audiovisual room, which I missed, but I am well aware of the issues involving motor insurance. In many of our towns and villages in rural Ireland, having a car is not a luxury; it is essential. To take children to school, to get to appointments and to get to work, a person needs to have a car and has to drive. The fact that insurance costs are going up seems to be disproportionately unfair on people in rural Ireland.

My own car insurance was up for renewal this month. Luckily, I have a broker and got a letter last month saying my car insurance this year was going to be €550. I said "not a chance", considering that last year I paid €450, so I went online, shopped around and got it down to €420. However, the day and the month got away from me and I completely forgot to take it at the lower price. When I checked online again the day before the deadline, the lowest price I could get was €890. It just goes to show that there was an option to get it cheaper but when they knew I was desperate to get my car insurance by the following day, the price jumped. That is not fair. There is definitely something wrong with the system and it needs to be sorted. Luckily, I had the back-up of my broker, so I could ring up and say, "Oh yeah, I'll take that insurance premium", but I had to pay €100 more than I paid last year, with no claims on my insurance policy.

Claims have gone down, the laws are in place and the payouts are smaller, so why is the cost of insurance policies increasing every single year? My party colleague Deputy Doherty submitted a Bill last year that was shot down. We need reform of insurance companies. We

need to see exactly what their profits are and we need to see their rationale for what premium goes. My own broker told me that for someone living at one end of the village of Athea, it could be €400 while for someone living at the other end, which is only probably a quarter of a mile away, it could be €800. Where do they get the rationale for these premiums? It is quite unfair to see the costs going up by so much and the payouts going down when we are not seeing the benefit. We need to have a debate in the House to see whether we can get to the bottom of why these insurance companies are not being held to account.

Senator Patricia Stephenson: Some desperately needed medications are currently not available under the drugs repayment scheme. I have been contacted about two drugs in particular - Ryeqo, a medication used in the post-operative treatment of women with severe endometriosis, and Skyclarys, a drug to slow the debilitating effects of the progressive life-shortening disease Friedreich's ataxia. I have contacted the Minister for Health about funding for both these drugs and all I get is a vague response saying that it under advisement and that the Government is looking into it, which ultimately feels like a "No". The process for the HSE to review these drugs is so long.

Ryeqo has already been refused for women experiencing moderate to severe uterine fibroids because it is not considered cost-effective. The Government is basically saying that helping people to reduce painful symptoms, ease heavy bleeding or slow the loss of their physical functions - basic things that prevent people from having a normal quality of life - does not offer value for money. For women suffering from severe endometriosis, Ryeqo is crucial for reducing their pain and slowing the growth of lesions. There has also been significant historical underfunding of endometriosis treatment and women's health in general so I really think we need to focus on this and redress it. Women who need Ryeqo must pay around €140 a month out of pocket on top of what they are already paying in astronomical rents, soaring energy prices, grocery bills or childcare costs because treating them publicly is not considered cost-effective.

What is the true cost of this disease when it is left untreated? A 2024 report from the UK estimates that the cost to the UK economy from people being off sick from work due to pain or heavy bleeding is about £11 million per year. The report also stated that if one extra pound per woman in England were invested in women's healthcare, it would generate £319 million for the state.

It pays to invest in women's health.

Approximately 200 people in Ireland are living with the neurodegenerative disease Friedreich's ataxia. Skyclarys is the only known drug approved for treatment of this illness. One of those people is Emily, a 28-year-old woman from Kilkenny who has been living with Friedreich's ataxia since she was 16. She has gone from a life of running and dancing to now being wheelchair bound. Skyclarys has been shown to markedly improve neurological function in those with the illness. Based in Ireland, Biogen Idec is the manufacturer of Skyclarys. The HSE is weighing up whether it is worth it to fund this treatment, which could greatly improve the life of Emily and other people who are suffering from this condition. If they do not receive it, they will progressively experience vision impairment, hearing loss, slurred speech, aggressive scoliosis, diabetes and serious heart conditions. Without State help, Skyclarys can cost families around €300,000 a year.

The national rare disease strategy, which was published recently, made a recommendation on access to orphan drugs for rare diseases and the importance of improving access to those drugs. I accept that we simply cannot continue to pay never-ending amounts to drug companies that are making significant profit off people's illnesses, but we do need improvements to how drug repayments are made, the timelines around them and the different criteria that are included. It cannot just be about the economic benefit in the moment or the cost; it needs to be about the wider economic benefit. It needs to include things about people's quality of life and the criteria need to be broadened. I would like us to have a debate about that so we can ensure every person in Ireland receives the life-changing medical treatment they need without major financial obstacles.

Senator Linda Nelson Murray: Today, I wish to talk about Our Lady's Hospital, Navan, and its continued future as one of the most important healthcare facilities in County Meath and the wider north east. It is important to mention this because so many people ask me if the hospital is going to close and what will happen to it. Despite ongoing debates, we are going to see continued investment in the hospital, which will only benefit patients and staff alike. Future capital investment for Navan hospital includes a new minor injuries unit and an upgrade to the hospital's power infrastructure. Since 2020, the number of staff has increased by 17.5% and in the same period the budget has increased by 51%. Under the acute hospital bed expansion plan, a total of 46 new and replacement beds will be in by 2031, although most are in now. These figures clearly indicate a strengthening of the hospital's operational capacity, and it is good to know that the HSE has put in place a detailed compliance plan addressing the risks identified by HIQA in 2024 and 2025. Improvements have been made in governance, management and clinical environments following inspection.

Only a few weeks ago, I had a fall at home and had to attend the minor injuries unit in the hospital. I have nothing but admiration and respect for all the staff there, including Dr. Jamal, for their efficiency and professionalism in looking after me at the time. I also have to mention the phenomenal new rheumatology extension, which has had a positive impact on outpatient clinics.

Recently, a meeting was held between the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, and senior HSE management. Discussion focused on the rising demand for services across Louth and Meath and the pressures on hospitals in the region. A further meeting is planned, which I am delighted to hear, and I am looking forward to the review on that. Navan hospital still treats a large portion of patients locally, particularly through medical assessment and injury services, and plays a vital role in reducing the pressure on Drogheda.

Navan hospital remains a crucial local healthcare facility. It provides local access to care but also has a dedicated workforce, increases in funding and staffing, ongoing infrastructure upgrades and planned expansion of bed capacity. However, although all that sounds great, Meath has a current population of 220,000 people, a 13% increase since 2016, making it one of the fastest growing counties in Ireland. The population is expected to go up to 240,000 people in the next two years and possibly to 270,000 people by 2040. Meath is heading towards having a 250,000 people very soon, so a strong, reliable hospital is an absolute must. With Meath's current population now larger than some Irish counties that have far better hospital infrastructure, now is the time to make sure this happens. It has the population of a city but the healthcare infrastructure of a small county, and that gap is no longer acceptable. I welcome

everything the Minister is doing but I would also welcome a discussion on Navan hospital here in the Chamber when we can have one.

Senator Sharon Keogan: I was originally intending to talk today about rural communities but I now find myself compelled to respond to the comments made by An Taoiseach yesterday where he confirmed his belief that children could be transgender. His belief is one matter. I will not spend time here going into the long list of objections raised by many medical and psychological professionals to the unthinking acceptance of children self-identifying their gender and the huge potential dangers this causes when it leads to medical intervention such as puberty blockers. I have made that case many times before in this Chamber.

What was particularly galling was the Taoiseach's assertion that we should not get into culture wars such as those in the United Kingdom and elsewhere. First, I absolutely object to the hand-waving on this issue as a culture war issue. It is not. It is a medical issue. It is an issue of child welfare and even scientific truth. It is one thing if we have raging debates over political correctness and over people being cancelled for offensive jokes, or about what is and is not acceptable in public discourse or media. That is all culture, and debating it is culture war. However, there is nothing merely cultural about young people who are suffering from infertility or osteoporosis, or having to live with the irreversible reality of sex-change surgeries. That is real, life-ruining medical damage. Would the Taoiseach call the scoliosis crisis a culture war issue? Of course not.

Second, the Taoiseach acts as if we are just now being dragged into a culture war, yet his party has uncritically backed puberty blockers for children, men in women's prisons and women's sports, and erasing women from the Constitution despite, as we saw in the referendums, huge opposition to these things. Far from avoiding a culture war, Ireland has been deeply engaged in one for years. The Taoiseach's Government, his party and his coalition party Fine Gael have been driving it for years. I ask the Leader to invite the Taoiseach to come in here and deal with that issue.

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call the next speaker, I welcome members of the Garda Síochána Retired Members' Association from Kildare South. They are most welcome to Seanad Éireann. I thank them for all their work in keeping us safe down through the years and I hope they enjoy their time in Leinster House.

Senator Chris Andrews: Information released under a freedom of information request shows that Dublin City Council ran up a bill of €11,400 at a hotel on the French Riviera for its officials. On a separate trip to California, the accommodation cost was just under €11,000, with the Lord Mayor's flight costing almost €6,000 and that of Dublin City Council's chief executive costing over €4,000. That is indefensible. It is scandalous that top Dublin City Council figures are flying business class and staying in luxury hotels while at the same time Dublin City Council is imposing a rent increase on council tenants. That will have a huge impact on tenants across the city who are already struggling with the cost of living and have this massive rent increase coming down the road. It is a complete insult to working people that public money is being used in this way, particularly at a time when people are at the pin of their collar with the cost-of-living crisis. People will just not be able to afford to pay the increased rent. It will have a devastating impact on individuals and families.

Likewise, it has recently been announced that Dublin City Council plans to spend €10 million on renovations of its Wood Quay offices, the same offices it plans to demolish in a few years when it completes its new offices in Camden Yard at a cost of nearly €600 million. Dublin City Council seemingly has an endless supply of money for its own offices but when it comes to housing maintenance and community services, the purse seems to run out. The money is there; it is how it is spent. Government and Dublin City Council are choosing to spend it on extravagance and wasteful developments and are leaving tenants and residents in public housing to struggle with shockingly poor, substandard conditions to live in. Council tenants are being squeezed dry with rent increases on the basis that this revenue, raised from those who are struggling the most, is needed to fund the basic services, yet an unprecedented level of funding is available for its Civic Offices. To me, that points to a deeper issue around the prioritisation of funding by Dublin City Council. I urge the Minister, Deputy Browne, to come before the Seanad to debate the Department's approach to funding allocations at a local authority level.

Senator Aubrey McCarthy: I commend my colleague Senator Stephenson on her initiative to provide three months' free transport for victims of domestic abuse. I also commend the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Dara Calleary, on co-operating with her on that initiative.

12 o'clock

I will mention the matter of public concern, the health concern, that was raised over the weekend regarding synthetic cannabis. A number of psychiatrists from Cork, Dublin and Galway wrote to *The Irish Times* and they are calling on the Government to act on the continued availability of HHC products, or synthetic cannabinoids, that are designed to mimic the effects of cannabis. Despite HHC being classified as an illegal substance under the Misuse of Drugs Act, the ban definitely is not working. The report they presented shows that in psychiatric wards and in psychosis clinics there is a lot linked to HHC and HHC-like products. The reason is that suppliers have simply changed the man-made cannabinoids to ones with virtually identical properties, which fall outside the specific ban.

The human cost, as I know through people accessing Tiglin services etc., is real. A 2025 study in Galway found HHC was the second most commonly used drug among people presenting to hospital with psychosis over a 21-month period. Psychiatrists are not calling for new legislation; they are just saying we could use the present law in a smarter way.

I ask that the Minister for Health come into the House to address this at the earliest opportunity and outline what steps the Government is taking to tackle what is happening in our accident and emergency, and specifically how that applies to existing psychoactive substances and how the legislation applies to these products. I think it is causing very real harm to younger people.

Senator Gareth Scahill: I will raise the issue of water safety. We are coming to that time of year when we want the public using all our amenities, our coast and all our lakes, but there is an awareness issue in terms of water safety. There have been 16 drownings in Ireland already this year. Between 2018 and 2022 there was an average of 116 drownings per year. During the previous five-year period, between 2013 and 2017, there were 132 drownings per year.

There is a massive issue in terms of people's self-awareness and the awareness of the dangers of our waterways. We need a discussion in this House on water safety, on what more can potentially be done on the education side of things and what more we can do with students in schools, but also in terms of more opportunities for training people up in life-saving and lifeguarding skills.

I looked at figures. Last year, 316 rescues were recorded by lifeguards in this country. The year before that, in 2024, 2,002 rescues were recorded, so the instances are increasing year by year. Young people now are getting a little braver. They are taking potentially more chances and do not have a full awareness of some of the conditions they are experiencing out there. It would be very worthwhile and very timely to have that discussion in this House. I think it is the weekend of 22 May, which is Whit weekend, which the Leader will be familiar with. Traditionally, we were all encouraged not to swim in Ireland until after Whit weekend for safety reasons. I would welcome a discussion on this before then.

Senator Cathal Byrne: I again highlight the fact that at the moment if you live in south Wexford, be it in Rosslare, Wexford town or Enniscorthy, it is not possible to get an early morning train to Dublin that will have you in Dublin Connolly before 8.48 a.m., while if you live further north, such as in Gorey, you can arrive at 7.48 a.m. That hour difference is having a real and direct impact on the ability of commuters from south Wexford to access rail transport to Dublin and work and utilise the service in Dublin. I again call on the Minister for Transport to come into this Chamber for a proper, real discussion on the future infrastructure needs of rail lines, particularly, from my perspective, on the Wexford to Dublin line. The 5.45 a.m. train from Gorey puts you in Dublin Connolly at 7.48, while the earliest service from Wexford town is the 5.59 a.m. train and from Enniscorthy is the 6.20 a.m. train. There is an opportunity, with the investment the Government is putting into rail transport, to allow for an early morning commuter train from south Wexford to Dublin. We should have that debate in this Chamber.

Senator Seán Kyne: I thank all Senators for their contributions this morning, starting with Senator O'Loughlin, who commended all in Ballymore Eustace on it becoming the first age- and climate-friendly town in Ireland. A celebration there was attended by An Tánaiste, the Senator and others, including local dignitaries. The Senator talked of the high age range of the county and the lack of GP services. I know she has put down Commencement debates on that in the past. I will engage with the Minister directly to see if there is any update on that. The Senator also talked again about the illegal encampments on the Curragh, which she has taken a huge interest in, and on which she would like a debate with the Minister for Defence. I will request that, or she may wish to put down a Commencement debate on that if she has not put down one of late.

Senator Duffy spoke of the levy on independent and local radio stations by Coimisiún na Meán and stated that the commission is a law unto itself. Obviously, the Minister cannot intervene in terms of the independence of Coimisiún na Meán. It is part of the legislation and an intervention would possibly undermine the independence of the system. Certainly, however, the committee could bring Coimisiún na Meán in to discuss where this will end and what is proposed for next year. Is it another 39% increase? The Senator is right that that would be unsustainable into the future. Local radio stations have got assistance in one hand and are getting increases in their levies in the other hand, as are independent media. That is a real

concern, obviously. At the first juncture, the committee itself could bring in Coimisiún na Meán just to discuss this. The Senator might contact his own colleagues as well on that committee to see whether they have plans to bring in Coimisiún na Meán to discuss the increase in the levy and what plans it has for the future. He is certainly right that it is worrying to see increases like that.

Senator Clonan expressed concern about aluminium exports from Aughinish Alumina to Russia and called for the Minister, Deputy McEntee, to come in on the matter. The Minister will come in next week, I believe, on international developments, so the Senator may wish to raise it at that juncture and I will alert her to that. We will try to get a debate on defence matters as well after that, but there will be an opportunity next Wednesday, I think, with the Minister, Deputy McEntee.

Senator Collins raised the issue of car insurance and highlighted her own personal case, which is very clear in relation to the issues there can be around premiums and premium renewals and how a day or two can make a huge difference. I will request a debate on insurance with the Minister of State, Deputy Troy.

Senator Stephenson raised a number of conditions and rare diseases, such as Friedreich's ataxia, as well as endometriosis and fibrosis. I will request a debate on the matter. I raised Skylarys myself and its role in treating Friedreich's ataxia a number of weeks ago in a Commencement debate. There is a national rare disease strategy, an implementation oversight group and health technology assessments on these things. There is that balance between the absolute necessity to treat people and the overall costs and the buying power capabilities, in which the European Union could have a greater role. I know there were attempts to agree with some other countries, such as the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg, in terms of buying power because, as a small country, we cannot compete with the likes of Germany in terms of the ability to work with drugs providers in getting the best deal possible. It is a real issue and I will certainly raise it with the Minister for Health.

Senator Nelson Murray raised the issue of Navan hospital and the investment in that hospital. It is quite clear it has an important and bright future within County Meath and the region. She called for a discussion on this. We will request a discussion in general on capital projects and health services. She may wish to raise a Commencement debate on the direct issues in terms of Navan itself.

Senator Keogan invited the Taoiseach in to discuss transgender issues in children. I will certainly request that he come in to reply in regard to his comments, which the Senator raised. I will let her know what his or his office's response to that is.

Senator Andrews raised the issue of rents for tenants and the cost of flights for trips abroad. Trips abroad are hugely important for local authorities. I think every local authority is involved in a number of trips abroad with officials, cathaoirleigh and mayors. They have an important role in developing business or tourist links. I am sure the Senator recognises the importance of that as well. I have suggested in the past that he put down a Commencement debate in relation to increases in rents in Dublin.

Senator McCarthy called for a debate with the Minister of Health on synthetic cannabis and its possible impact on psychosis. I will also request a debate with the Minister, Deputy Jennifer

Carroll MacNeill, though the Senator may wish to put down a Commencement debate in regard to synthetic cannabis.

Senator Scahill raised the issue of water safety and the public using amenities. So many people drown every year, including 16 people who have unfortunately lost their lives in drownings so far this year. Our thoughts go out to their families and friends after these traumatic incidents. The Senator talked of the need for a debate on the importance of self-awareness, education in schools and additional life-saving or lifeguarding skills. I will certainly request a debate on water safety with the Minister in charge of that as well.

Senator Cathal Byrne raised the need for additional early morning rail services from south Wexford. I certainly agree in regard to connectivity and taking cars off the roads. It is certainly very important. I will request a debate on rail services but the Senator may wish to put down a Commencement debate to get a more direct response in relation to services between south Wexford and Dublin.

Order of Business agreed to.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 12.12 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis ar 12.47 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 12.12 p.m. and resumed at 12.47 p.m.

Energy Security: Statements

Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I welcome the opportunity to discuss the issue of energy security, a topic which has been brought into really sharp focus by the current crisis and conflict in the Middle East. Energy is obviously central to all social and economic activity in Ireland and, while Ireland is significantly increasing our production of renewable energy, we continue to rely on oil and gas as part of our energy and transport systems.

The closure of the Strait of Hormuz has greatly disrupted the global oil and gas markets. The International Energy Agency reports that around 20% of the world's oil and liquified natural gas has been blocked since the end of February. The prolonged and ongoing nature of the war and longer-term damage to infrastructure and established trade routes further compound the scale of the impact and the challenge. The Government has been carefully monitoring the situation in the Middle East and we are taking proactive measures to ensure there is no disruption to our essential fuel imports. It is important to underline that, in the short term, the main impact of the conflict is on fuel prices for Irish consumers. Our security of supply of oil and gas is robust and our energy system is secure.

The only way to enhance Ireland's energy resilience and insulate us from price and supply shocks is to reduce our reliance on fossil fuels. That is why the Government is determined to build out more clean Irish renewable energy and to deepen interconnection with our European peers. Just last week, I signed a memorandum of understanding with the Spanish minister for energy, Sara Aagesen Muñoz, in respect of an Irish interconnector with Spain. We currently have over 8 GW of renewable electricity generation capacity connected to the network. This is a remarkable achievement as it means we have added approximately 5 GW of new renewable electricity generation capacity in just ten years. That includes doubling our wind capacity and

establishing solar energy as a major pillar of our energy supply. We are among world leaders for installed onshore wind capacity *per capita* and we are the European leader in the integration of variable renewable electricity onto the grid.

We get a greater share of our electricity from onshore wind farms than from anywhere else in Europe. In a few short years, solar has become a major component of our electricity supply. Solar is now the third highest supplier of indigenously generated electricity to the electricity grid, behind natural gas and wind. Solar is not only reducing electricity bills for households and businesses but also is easing pressure on the grid by lowering peak demand and supporting a more resilient energy system.

I want to do more to make solar affordable and accessible for householders and businesses. We are prioritising the development of more renewable energy, both onshore and offshore, including through reforming the planning system and making it easier to build clean energy projects. This will protect Irish energy consumers from the volatility of the high cost of imported fossil fuels. We are also accelerating the development of Ireland's electricity grid to build resilience and to connect renewable energy with demand.

We have provided €3.5 billion in equity to Ireland's onshore and offshore grid. In addition, increasing quantities of batteries, long-duration storage, interconnection capacity and demand-side response have also been procured in recent capacity market auctions, which will lessen Ireland's dependence on fossil fuel imports in the coming years. Significant supports are available to homes and businesses to boost energy efficiency and to electrify. This will also reduce reliance on imported fossil fuels such as gas and home heating oil.

In the budget just gone, a record allocation of €640 million in Exchequer funding was secured, allowing us to target 73,000 home energy upgrades this year alone. This will build on over 250,000 households that have already benefited from home energy upgrades. A deep energy retrofit can save a household up to €1,100 per year in its bills. Our allocation for 2026 includes €340 million for the warmer homes scheme, which provides fully funded upgrades for those in energy poverty. To date, we have completed about 34,000 homes under the scheme, with grants of 100%.

The current oil situation in Ireland is stable, with no issue with supply expected in the next six weeks. In the case of jet fuel, alternative sourcing arrangements have been put in place. Jet fuel is sourced from the United States. My Department has been proactively managing the security of the supply situation in line with the oil emergency response plan. The plan and the underpinning legislation and structures have been substantially enhanced and updated following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, building on the strong foundations already in place. As a result, Ireland is better prepared to manage the current situation.

The response plan has been initiated and sets out a whole-of-government response covering the full duration of an oil emergency response, from initial hazard analysis through to response and recovery. The Government has legal powers and structures in place to manage the situation and to take further action should we need to do so. The National Oil Reserves Agency, NORA, provides a strategic buffer to protect Ireland in the event of a severe and prolonged escalation of this crisis. We currently hold about 85 days' worth of supply in our strategic reserve. This reserve encompasses refined petroleum products, including petrol, diesel, jet fuel and kerosene.

On 11 March, Ministers in member countries of the International Energy Agency agreed to initiate an action to release strategic reserves of oil to address the supply issues, and Ireland contributed 1.6 million barrels to alleviate supply pressures.

On natural gas, the current assessment is that there is no risk to security of supply in Ireland. The assessment is based on engagement with the International Energy Agency, the European Commission, Britain's Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, as well as with Gas Networks Ireland. Ireland imports about 80% of its natural gas from Britain via two subsea interconnectors, with the remaining gas being produced indigenously at the Corrib field. Britain has a diverse supply of natural gas and is not dependent on gas from the Middle East. Prior to the conflict, only 1% of UK gas supply was sourced from Qatar. Imports have been increasing from the United States and other regions, so there is currently limited risk to imports from Britain.

It is not currently anticipated that the Iran conflict will have a material impact on Ireland's security of electricity supply, and my Department has ongoing contact with EirGrid and the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, on any potential risk to security of supply through a number of channels and working groups. I engage with them personally. While the Government is committed to ambitious decarbonisation targets, the variable nature of some renewable technologies currently requires that dispatchable, typically fossil fuel generation remains crucial for ensuring security of supply.

In the longer term, the delivery of a strategic gas emergency reserve will play a vital role in ensuring Ireland's energy security. The strategic gas emergency reserve will protect Ireland's energy systems should any disruption occur to Ireland's gas infrastructure. It is not intended for commercial use. It will be State-owned, State-managed, State-led and State-operated and will be divested when no longer required to secure Ireland's energy systems.

Although Ireland's energy security situation is currently stable, it goes without saying that households and businesses are being exposed to higher fuel prices. We recognise this as a Government and we understand the real financial pressures that many across the country are facing because of the developments in the Middle East. As a small open economy with historical reliance on fossil fuels, Ireland is particularly vulnerable to such global energy price shocks. The major disruption to global energy supply because of the conflict in the Middle East has been reflected in extremely volatile commodity prices over the past number of weeks. For that reason, in recent days we introduced an additional package of measures on fuel costs and supports for the transport, farming and fisheries sectors. The practical measures introduced by the Government on 12 April include reductions in excise on diesel and petrol by a further 10 cent, to 32 cent and 27 cent, respectively; a reduction in excise on marked gas oil, or green diesel, by a further 2.4 cent to 7.4 cent; a deferral of the planned increase in the carbon tax; and a reduction in excise, including the NORA levy reduction, which took effect from midnight on 1 April and will run to the end of July this year.

The Government has announced a new road transport support scheme, as well as supports for coach operators providing Local Link services. The combined cost is €40 million per month for three months, backdated to 1 March. That scheme opens today, and it and the agrifood scheme will be open for applications in the next two weeks. The €100 million fuel subsidy support scheme will assist farmers, agricultural contractors and fishers. It was announced by my colleague Deputy Heydon, the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

The new package of supports is in addition to earlier measures announced in March, including the expansion of the diesel rebate scheme, backdated to January, and an extension of the fuel allowance by a further four weeks. Under the fuel allowance scheme, about one quarter of households in the country, or 470,000, receive direct payments.

No doubt, this is a very volatile situation. We have to manage it in a sustainable way on behalf of our people. I have every confidence that we will be able to do that. I appreciate the support of Government Senators and, indeed, Opposition Senators for some of the measures we have taken. However, we need to retain the ability to respond further should this situation deteriorate. We all hope for a de-escalation of the current conflict in the Middle East.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Shane Curley): Sula dtéim ar aghaidh, ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh na daoine sa Ghailearaí. I welcome the guests of Deputy Joe Neville, namely, Tara Carpenter, Lexie Doherty and Isabella Morone. Gabhaim buíochas leo as ucht teacht isteach inniu.

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: I thank the Minister for coming in to discuss this important topic. It is of such importance that it should be on the schedule regularly. Energy security is at the forefront of our minds currently but it should remain so. It is what will drive global geopolitical conflict in the future. It is the question of our time and we need to prepare adequately. We have had a couple of shocks with the invasion of Ukraine and the conflict in the Middle East. We know insecurity is coming and we know our vulnerabilities. As the Minister said, as a small open economy historically reliant on fossil fuels, Ireland is particularly vulnerable to global price shocks. We know that, and we have been well insulated by the measures that he and his colleagues in government have taken. However, now that we have some time to assess how we move forward, we should grasp the opportunity with both hands. I am sure the Minister will have the co-operation of all parties across this House and the Lower House to discuss our situation, our vulnerabilities and our opportunities, and to ascertain how we can move forward. We have the economic firepower to ensure our economic resilience, our energy resilience and the future of our country, as well as to maintain economic success.

We need to reduce our dependency on fossil fuels and that is widely acknowledged. We have done a lot and in this regard, the Minister has outlined specific instances of where we have increased our solar and wind energy output.

1 o'clock

Education is key. We are becoming more educated in relation to energy conservation and generation and the impacts of various energy sources. There should be a national conversation brought to people so we can see the difference that a deep retrofit of a house can make, the difference that solar panels by themselves can make and how each individual household can play its part in ensuring the country is resilient when it comes to our energy situation.

The interconnector with Spain brokered by the Minister is a positive development and is to be welcomed. It is a job well done. The doubling of wind capacity onshore has been significant. As the Minister pointed out, we are a world leader. However, we are falling down with offshore wind energy and we need to address that. As an island on the Atlantic, we have an abundance of good wind that can be harnessed and used. It could become the equivalent of

Ireland striking oil. We have wind and the money to invest in infrastructure. We need to be careful that we do not sell off our natural resources to private entities. We need to look at the Norway model and see the good that it put its oil strike to. That is what we can do. We have the capacity. I know the Minister is very conscious, as a Republican and a nationalist, of keeping our national resources within State ownership for the benefit of the people of this country.

The position as regards jet fuel is good to hear. Many of us have summer holidays planned and are hoping to be able to take them. As an island nation, all jokes aside, we are heavily reliant on our ability to fly in and out of this island. We also rely on it for business and world leaders to come here. Securing our jet fuel position is very welcome. I thank the Minister for the update.

We will have to touch on the blockades on oil refineries in the course of this debate. It was a very unpleasant situation. The Minister was dealing with the situation as it emerged and many Members of the Houses were dealing with people in our constituencies. Across the board, people were horrified by the blockades on our oil refineries. We need to ensure that does not happen again. We need to take steps to protect vital infrastructure such as oil refineries. The Minister might take the opportunity to address how we will move forward and protect oil refineries through dialogue and co-operation and by emphasising their importance.

The 85-day buffer the Minister referred to is positive but is 85 days enough? Is there capacity to increase that? That is information that I would like to have. The elephant in the room when we talk about energy security is the issue of nuclear energy. That conversation is starting quietly. Traditionally and legally we cannot have nuclear energy. However, the Minister needs to have conversations, if he is not already having them, in the Department and the Government, about how we can explore the issue. The issue is so taboo that it has been off the table. I do not know whether any of us have had a chance to form a position on it. We should be afforded that chance. Maybe nuclear energy is something we will never touch. Maybe this generation of politician will not be in favour of it. It is incumbent on the Government, however, to have a public conversation that politicians can take part in. It is important to consider all energy sources because we cannot afford, as a country, to be vulnerable. We are in a relatively vulnerable position. As we know, in France over 60% of energy is produced through nuclear power. France is our near neighbour and has been successfully using it. We have the technical expertise and scientific knowledge in this country to have a reasoned and measured debate. I would like to have that so that we can see what our position is and put all options on the table. Then we can exclude the options, if needs be. We are putting ourselves in a very vulnerable position if we are only looking at solar and wind energy, although I very much welcome those.

I welcome the increase in supports the Minister put in place for households to retrofit their homes and do the upgrades in a piecemeal fashion. That is something many of us have been calling for. I would like to see those supports increased. While they are welcome, they can still be out of reach for many ordinary families. If there was capacity in the budget to increase those supports, it would be welcome. However, this cannot be the only solution. We need at least to have a fully informed public debate on the possibility of adopting nuclear energy.

Senator Aubrey McCarthy: I thank the Minister for being here and for his statement. I would like to share my time with my colleague Senator Sharon Keogan.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Shane Curley): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Aubrey McCarthy: According to the Minister's statement, we are having this discussion at a time of uncertainty. The Minister mentioned the Strait of Hormuz. Global energy markets are certainly experiencing shockwaves. The ongoing war in Iran has sent shockwaves through international markets, as mentioned, and disrupted oil and gas supplies. It has exposed Ireland once again to the fragility of our energy systems. That is because they are largely based on imported fuels.

Throughout Europe, including in Ireland, we are feeling the consequences of rising prices, economic hardships and growing anxiety about the future. I have a haulage business and every week we are looking at the diesel prices and asking if we are able to absorb the increase or whether we should let our customers know we cannot absorb it and then increase the price of an already fixed price. We have changed even the way we are charging.

This is not just an ordinary energy crisis. It is a security crisis. That is why I am delighted to see in the Minister's statement that we energy is secure in Ireland. However, Ireland remains one of the most import-dependent countries in Europe. Nearly 80% of our energy comes from abroad, the vast majority in the form of fossil fuels. That means decisions that are made thousands of miles away affect us. Even the Strait of Hormuz, when we see it on the news, impacts everybody out there. That is why we had the recent protests.

Also, the Iran war has made the reality impossible to ignore. We saw that when the streets were blocked recently. Since the outbreak of the conflict earlier this year, global energy markets have experienced some of the most severe disruptions in modern history. Prices have surged. Some people have made a lot of money out of that. Roughly one fifth of the world's energy supplies pass through the Strait of Hormuz. That has become a geographical choke point.

Here in Ireland the effects have become immediate and fuel costs have risen sharply. That is why the ordinary, hard-working person was protesting recently. That is the price we are paying for our dependency on fossil fuels. When our energy system relies on imports we are definitely not in control. That is not the Government's fault but the Government can change it. Even in the Minister's statement, we see there is an opportunity here. Throughout Europe we are seeing a rapid shift in behaviour. I spoke to a gentleman in Naas yesterday who has a car garage. He said sales of electric and hybrid vehicles have shot up. Households are installing solar panels at a record rate. Demand for renewable technology - solar and wind, as has been mentioned - is accelerating. The Minister's statement outlines how we have made significant steps. I may have missed whether any steps have been made regarding storage. Recently, we were talking about €1.4 million of energy being wasted every day, which is about €400 million a year. If we could store that and work on that, Ireland would have a good starting point.

We have made real progress with renewable energy, as the Minister outlined. It supplies a significant amount of electricity. We have set ambitious targets, specifically achieving 80%

renewable energy by 2030 and net zero emissions by 2050. Electricity is only part of the picture. Transport, my own industry, still depends overwhelmingly on fossil fuel.

Oil alone accounts for nearly half of our total energy demand, and we import all of it. I know there are issues regarding Tarbet power station, the new facility on the Shannon, etc. We have promised it for years.

There is a huge challenge in our economy regarding energy security. We are just not producing clean electricity. We need to transform our entire energy system. That means accelerating the transition to renewable energy. There is untapped potential in this regard. The Minister's statement outlined that in the context of wind energy and emerging technologies like green hydrogen. These are not just climate solutions; they are security solutions. We must electrify our economy, even when it comes to the haulage industry. It must shift away from oil and gas and move towards electricity powered by renewables. That means investing in electric vehicles and modern infrastructure, but supports must be put in place for ordinary businesses.

We need to strengthen our energy resilience. The recent crisis has shown the importance of storage. Rather than binning some €400 million of energy per year, we should store it in batteries, etc. There is a need for such storage. The grid will benefit from it.

We must recognise that energy policy is part of national security policy. The lesson of the Iran war is absolutely clear. Our fossil fuel dependence has exposed us greatly. Ireland has a choice. Do we remain exposed and reliant on imports of fossil fuels or do we act decisively?

Senator Sharon Keogan: Last year, in this Chamber, I asked whether we could build Ardnacrusha power station today. It was a rhetorical question meant to highlight how restrictive our planning system has become and how little will this Government often shows. Today, however, it is a serious question because large-scale energy infrastructure is no longer a thoughtful idea but an urgent necessity. The problem is that this Government has adopted an approach that is nearly punitive towards ordinary citizens. Instead of fixing infrastructure first, it tries to force behaviour through price increases. Make energy cheaper through public projects and State-led investment and people will follow. Instead, however, we punish motorists who are only motorists because the State fails to give them viable public transport or properly planned towns. Raising prices is not leadership; it is abdication.

If we are serious about energy security, we must be serious about nuclear power. It provides reliable, round-the-clock electricity, independent of weather or season. Wind power can be cheap at the margin but when grid upgrades, back-up generation, storage and system stability are included, its real-systems cost converges with nuclear energy. Over a lifespan of 60 years or more, nuclear offers price stability and the security that an island nation badly needs.

We must also address the decision to end hydrocarbon exploration. Ireland still imports close to 80% of its energy. Ruling out domestic production outright makes us more, rather than less, exposed. Limited, well-regulated drilling could reduce imports and provide transitional revenues for infrastructure. That only works if the State captures proper value. Norway taxed profits, took public stakes and invested for the long term. Ireland did none of that, but we can change it.

Energy security will not be built through penalties and slogans. It will be built through courage, infrastructure and the will to build again.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Shane Curley): Sula leanaim ar aghaidh, I welcome our special guests in the Distinguished Visitors Gallery today. We have Senator Ollie Crowe's mother, Breda Crowe, as well as his sister-in-law, Caroline Crowe. I hope they are both very proud of Senator Crowe. He has been a great mentor to me since I became a Senator. He is a gentleman. Breda and Caroline are very welcome.

Senator Mark Duffy: I thank the Minister of State as well as the Minister who was present earlier, for being here for this incredibly important debate and for listening intently on the contributions that have been made. We are in a perilous situation where nothing is the same as it was previously. We have seen that with the weaponisation of fuel and energy following Putin's aggression in Ukraine. We have seen it more recently in the Middle East with the Strait of Hormuz. We see how quickly anarchy can be at risk of breaking out, whether in Ireland or anywhere around the world, when the supply and cost of energy are threatened and undermined.

We have many opportunities in Ireland to turn a corner to decarbonise and improve energy security and independence. Wind and solar are two elements on which we can do more. I welcome the supports for individual homeowners, such as the deep retrofit grants and the targeting of the most vulnerable and most affected by high energy prices. Those in receipt of the fuel allowance may benefit from a 100% retrofit grant. That is a good approach. Further interventions, such as supports on solar energy and battery storage on an individual residential basis, can play a significant role in supporting people and mitigating the worst challenges of the variation in energy prices.

We need clarity when it comes to wind and solar energy. Clarity is also needed for onshore and offshore wind farm proposals. They can and will play an important role but clear, defined strategies for all of our counties are needed. Previously, I was the chair of Mayo County Council's enterprise, marine and planning strategic policy committee. This is something that is regularly asked for at both a county and national level. I am also a member of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Climate, Environment and Energy. This is needed to realise the potential of onshore wind.

The same goes for solar. While solar is a positive measure on an individual basis, solar farms need to have defined limits. The Minister of State will have experienced this in his county. We all experience it in our areas. Clarity is needed as to what can be built and where and when it can happen. We cannot have a free-for-all process.

In respect of gas exploration, we import 80% of our gas. While we have long-term energy reserves of over 80 days for fuel, we do not have the same level of security for gas. Although the Minister outlined in his contribution that there is no risk to supply, we have an opportunity to increase our independence on gas use. A total of 20% of our gas comes from the Corrib field off the coast of Belmullet, County Mayo, but Inishkea gas field has enormous potential to supply more gas to the network in Ireland. I would welcome the Minister of State's thoughts on the Inishkea gas fields.

While we need to decarbonise, we must be pragmatic. We cannot be held ransom by rogue states and operators or have the whole cohesion of the country threatened based on external factors. If we can improve our energy security and independence, we need to do it. I welcome the Minister of State's contribution in that regard.

The energy cloud concept has been good in reducing bills and topping people up with hot water through their tanks when there is an oversupply of electricity on the grid. Rather than a dispatch down where turbines are turned off, energy is released back onto the grid free of charge, which helps vulnerable users to reduce bills. I welcome the leadership of Mayo County Council in piloting the concept. Hopefully, it will be rolled out further. The concept, which Senator McCarthy raised, of not wasting wind energy needs to be mobilised more. In a broader sense, an idea that I have thought about and perhaps raised previously in this Chamber – I welcome the contribution of both the Minister of State and the Minister in this regard – is to have battery storage in towns to benefit individual residents in the event of power outages.

We saw the vulnerability last January with Storm Éowyn. To support voluntary charity organisations with reduced costs for their energy on a strategic level, there should be State-built battery storage for a town, for example, which could benefit from the oversupply at certain times. We have some of the largest wind farms in the country in my locality, such as the Oweninny wind farm in Bellacorick just outside Crossmolina. When there is an oversupply, it should not be wasted. Can battery storage be mobilised in localities for communities to benefit from the oversupply that is being lost and wasted, whether that be sporting organisations with high bills, arts centres, charities and community groups? There is a great opportunity to realise that. I would welcome the Minister of State's contribution on that.

Private wires legislation is a good opportunity to encourage 80% renewable supply for larger industrial developments such as data centres. Having the ability to directly access renewable energy without interacting directly with the grid is a good opportunity. On an individual level, we need to continue to support homeowners who want to do a full retrofit of their house, or individual measures, and mobilise and use the opportunity battery and solar offer. We need to be really progressive and swiftly move forward on key strategic opportunities. Where there is discussion on nuclear, we need to have a full and open debate on all opportunities as well the Inishkea gas field. Clarity is needed on strategic projects such as wind and solar farms. I welcome the Minister of State's contributions and thoughts. I thank him for being here for the discussion.

Senator Joanne Collins: I welcome the Minister of State. Energy security goes to the heart of our economic stability, climate obligations and the basic fairness owed to our citizens. The recent warnings from EirGrid should set alarm bells ringing across this House. Its assessment was stark. Over the next decade, Ireland faces serious challenges in meeting overall electricity demand. A key driver of that risk is the unchecked expansion of data centres. This is not a new concern. Sinn Féin has consistently warned that the Government's approach in this area is unsustainable. Now, the State's own operator is confirming it. The figures speak for themselves. Since 2015, electricity demand from data centres has increased by over 500%. According to the CSO, these facilities accounted for 22% of all metered electricity consumption in 2024 up from 5% less than a decade ago. The projections suggest that could rise to at least one third of total electricity demand by the end of this decade.

To put that into context, data centres now consume more electricity than all of our rural households combined. At the same time, families struggling with the cost of living are paying twice as much for electricity as some of these large-scale users. That is not just unsustainable; it is fundamentally unfair on households. Workers, families and small businesses are effectively being asked to subsidise what is placing our electricity under so much strain. While

demand soars, the Government has failed to keep pace with investment and generation capacity. This is a point Sinn Féin has raised time and again. Once again, it has been ignored.

Where do we go from here? The first come, first-served basis must be ended when it comes to grid connections. It makes no sense for critical infrastructure like housing and public transport to be left waiting while energy-intensive data centres get a wave through. The framework that puts the public interest first needs to be prioritised, ensuring energy, affordability, housing delivery and essential services take precedence over corporate demand. The supply side must also be addressed. This is where Ireland has enormous untapped potential. Offshore wind is not just an opportunity; it is a necessity. Our Atlantic coastline offers some of the best wind resource in Europe. If properly harnessed, offshore wind can transform Ireland from a country worried about energy shortages to a net exporter of clean energy, but it requires urgency, co-ordination and investment.

In that context, the role of Shannon Foynes Port Company, with which I know the Minister of State is familiar, is critical. The Shannon Estuary has been identified as a key hub for offshore renewable energy, particularly for floating wind. With the right support, Shannon Foynes can become a strategic centre for the assembly, servicing and development of offshore wind infrastructure. It is not just about energy security. This is also about regional development, job creation and ensuring the benefits of the green transition are felt across the country, which includes the mid-west. This will not happen by accident. It requires a Government willing to plan, invest and prioritise long-term national interest over short-term gain. I know the designated marine area plans, DMAPs, are progressing at the moment. It would be nice to see them progress faster and if they had started on the west coast where Shannon Foynes Port has a plan in place, it would come in before the next stream of funding ends. Instead, we have seen a reactive approach that rolls out the red carpet to data centres while failing to build the infrastructure needed to support sustainable growth. The consequences are clear - pressure on the grid, rising costs for households and increasing risk to our energy security.

Ireland stands at a crossroads. We can continue down the current path, which is inequitable, unsustainable and increasingly risky, or we can choose a different approach that puts our citizens first, invests in renewable capacity and secures an energy future. Sinn Féin is clear - the public interest must come first. That means reining in the reckless expansion of data centres, prioritising grid access for essential needs and accelerating the development of offshore wind with strategic assessment and assets like Shannon Foynes Port at the heart of it. If we get this right, we can deliver affordable energy, meet our climate targets and build a resilient economy for the future. However, if we get it wrong, ordinary people will have to pay for it again.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Shane Curley): Sula dtéim ar aghaidh, ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh na daoine sa Ghailearaí. I think I missed the memo on bring your mam to work day today. We have Deputy Pádraig Rice with his mam, Teresa, and his aunt, Marie McCarthy, in the Gallery. They are all very welcome. Thanks for coming in today. He is the second Member to have his mother in the Gallery in the last few minutes.

Glaoidh ar an Seanadóir Cosgrove. An bhfuil sí ag iarraidh am a roinnt?

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: Labhróidh mise ar dtús. Tá trí nóiméad agam. Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire. It is no exaggeration to say that the global economy we have built around extractor consumerism is totally dependent on the availability of cheap and reliable fossil fuels, and that the reliance on oil and gas has led the world into countless conflicts in modern times. We do not need to tell anyone that. It is not called black gold for nothing. Control of their own fossil fuel resources has genuinely brought independence and sovereignty to many nations, including Arab nations. It has brought levels of prosperity and progress but has also brought misery, pollution and death. What it has not brought is security. Even nations that control their own fossil fuel resources have neither energy security nor physical security.

During our discussions on the national development plan and since, we have heard a lot of talk from Government about the need to invest in a floating storage and regasification unit, FSRU. This will be the first time substantial amounts of liquefied natural gas will be introduced into the Irish energy mix. It beggars belief that at exactly the time we are supposed to be transitioning from fossil fuels to sustainable energy, this Government has made a deliberate decision to jettison its climate commitments and encourage the importation of huge amounts of this damaging, dirty, filthy, methane-rich gas into our energy mix. Methane is 80 times more warming than CO₂. An FSRU will not be an emergency reserve. In order to remain safe, the gas needs to be vented, emptied and refilled at least six times every year.

I completely dispute any argument that LNG is a necessary step towards energy security. Even Paul Griffiths, the CEO of Predator Oil & Gas, has agreed that he would not live beside an LNG terminal for fear that it might blow up. The attacks on Qatar's LNG infrastructure have shown that these are not ill-founded fears, and that a floating tank of gas is a much easier target for enemies than undersea pipelines. The export of LNG from Qatar has now collapsed. The price of LNG has soared by a third since the war began, and supply is likely to be impacted for years. Those voices within the Government who see LNG as a step towards energy security will encourage us to frack for our own gas. I am particularly affected in my area where I live in Sligo and Leitrim. We will be encouraged to frack for our own gas in Sligo, Leitrim and across the Border counties, regardless of the consequences we know exist in the form of environmental and health impacts on animals and humans. It beggars belief that there are three Government Ministers in my own constituency and they are still touting this. In fairness, the former Deputy Tony McLoughlin of Fine Gael was the first person to bring in a ban on the extraction of LNG in Ireland, but this Government has reneged completely on it.

Continued reliance on fossil fuels will not bring energy security. We know it will only bring dependency on unstable regions and markets, and the continued ruination of our climate and environment. We need to drastically increase the speed at which we decarbonised. That has come up here over and over. We know we have abundant natural resources such as onshore and offshore wind and an increasingly viable solar sector. We also have huge tidal energy potential. I hope the Minister of State will listen to this. We know we need energy security. I think at this stage the penny has finally dropped with us all that we cannot rely on fossil fuels. This means smart investment in the regeneration of renewable energy and the smart electrification of our grid. We know at this stage that spending money on fossil fuel infrastructure is not an investment in energy security. It is a frittering away of our independence, our economy and our climate. If this Government does nothing else, I hope it will stop the building of this LNG infrastructure.

Senator Patricia Stephenson: Ireland has an urgent need to develop clean, resilient domestic energy infrastructure to protect communities and businesses from the ongoing global shocks we have seen recently. The shocks from recent times will continue on. This is not a once-off situation. Energy security is not just an economic concern. It is not a way to prevent future disruptions. Governments have a social obligation to ensure that everyone has access to clean, affordable and reliable energy. Relying on the importation of fossil fuels is no longer sustainable as we lurch from one energy crisis to the next.

The Government has contributed to this in some ways by allowing *carte blanche* to developers for the development of data centres. I think 22% of our energy needs are now being used by data centres, compared with our closest neighbours on the Continent, which I think may be the Netherlands, where they are using only 2%. This is pushing up prices for domestic consumers and undermining our energy security sovereignty. It is irresponsible and reckless and it is not sustainable to keep growing. I know the moratorium was recently lifted as well. This is a disaster of a policy decision. It beggars belief that we are here having a discussion about energy security while that is happening in tandem.

Earlier this year, EirGrid stated that up to 75% of our electricity generation could come from renewable energy sources but we are reaching just over half of our demand in this way. Of course, the biggest drain on this is from data centres. We are basically giving them dibs on our electricity rather than prioritising businesses and families who are in energy crisis. We have opportunities to develop energy security. Those opportunities have been wide open for years for the Government to take, but it has failed to seize them. We have untapped potential in solar but I feel the Government is blind to those opportunities and we are ignoring them. When we are exposed to so many of these external shocks, it is shocking that we are not leaning into the opportunities for solar in a more meaningful way.

The Social Democrats have put forward a five-point plan on this, Solar for All, which would provide for a doubling of grants for solar panel installation and cover up to 1 million homes in Ireland. One million homes in Ireland are suitable for solar panels but do not have them, so we need a nationwide installation programme that can be rolled out quickly. We would also reinstate the €1,000 grant that can be used for battery storage. Battery storage has improved. The quality of battery storage technology in the last five years is amazing compared with what it used to be. This is a crucial way forward. The Government cut that in 2022 for some reason; I am not sure why. We also have the warmer homes scheme. We need to be targeting vulnerable households for solar under this scheme and cut electricity costs for them. That would be something like €450 a year if we gave the houses that fall under that scheme free solar panels. We also need to roll it out for businesses.

The other glaring gap is the roll-out of plug-in solar. Two years ago, the Department said it would look into regulation around plug-in solar, yet we wait. In 2019, the Government said there was indeed a crisis when it came to climate, and it has taken two years to look at regulation around plug-in solar, a technology that is being used widely in other European countries. This could be plugged in to people's gardens and balconies tomorrow if we regulated for it, immediately reducing people's energy bills. It is a no-brainer. We have to speed up the response around plug-in solar.

Social Justice Ireland released a statement yesterday saying that as the number of renters increases in Ireland, non-homeowners are left out of the cost-saving retrofitting schemes. It

points out that many landlords are simply not motivated to retrofit properties they are renting out because they are not going to benefit directly from the energy cost savings. That is really frustrating for a lot of renters to hear. We need robust policies to ensure either that landlords are motivated to retrofit properties they are renting out or that renters can access effective renewable energy such as plug-in solar to allow them to benefit like the rest of the population.

The potential for renewable energy to reduce our reliance on imported fossil fuels in Ireland is huge. This kind of domestically generated energy would bring down the cost of bills for households and businesses. It would protect us and give us a barrier from so many of the external shocks we have seen and will continue to see as the world becomes more volatile. It is often said the best time to plant a tree was a hundred years ago but that the next best time to plant one is today. There has been a missed opportunity when it comes to solar and renewable energy in Ireland. We can all point fingers and appoint blame. Today is the day to fix that and really commit to rolling it out. It is the future. We need clean energy in Ireland. We need security. We also need to put measures and protections in place for data centres.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I sit on the climate and energy committee and we discuss energy security all the time, or rather we discuss energy policy all the time. It is interesting that energy security gets invoked at certain points, and then at other points in the conversation it is missing as a topic. We heard a lot about energy security when the Government was pushing to introduce the LNG reserves and the floating storage regasification unit, FSRU. That was being cited again and again. The committee looked at it and it was clear that there although there was one very specific risk, one very particular scenario, to which this arguably could be one of the responses, this new infrastructure does nothing for most of the other very likely and predictable energy security risks and scenarios we are looking to in the future. Of course, the first energy security review the State did came down against LNG infrastructure. It said we should not do it because it was not the right approach. They did another energy security review, therefore, and certain factors went into the new review. I should note that the committee has called for a further energy security review. They took NORA, the national oil reserve, out of the equation, even though that is fuel substitution. In the cost-benefit analysis, they did not give consideration to using wind and battery together. A number of very strange decisions in the new energy security review and cost-benefit analysis seemed to be designed, frankly, or certainly came to the effect that the State was justifying this new LNG terminal.

What do we know about the gas that goes in, the methane? It is 80% more impactful, as we have heard. Not only that, but this kind of gas, methane, hits faster. It is effectively an accelerant for climate change. If we look to the next ten to 20 years, the period in which we need to act, this is something that will have its most devastating impact in that period. Indeed, LNG will largely be bought from the United States, which has left the Paris Agreement. It is an extraordinary, wild idea that we are going to lean in and intensify one of the known security risks, including energy security risks, which is climate change, and contribute to that market and be part of it, in response to this one hypothetical case where cable might be cut prior to the arrival of the many new interconnectors.

I welcome the reference to the new interconnectors to Spain and France and the many planned new interconnectors. For a hypothetical scenario, which will cover a few years, we are contributing. There is no such thing as just storing LNG; we use it. Six times a year one uses it. Once one has that facility, they are burning LNG off every year and six times a year they

refill it. Even if it did exist, it would not actually be a reserve of energy that we could tap into because every two months it relies on new shipments. We see what happens to shipments of LNG in a time of crisis and energy crisis. It frankly does not deliver in terms of security. It is not a reserve that we have there. It intensifies what we know is the real risk.

When we talk about climate and its impacts, we can talk about the past decade as the warmest on record. It is just like the warmest year and the warmest year in a row. There has been intense loss of species. A total of 45.8 million displaced due to weather related disasters in 2024 alone and 75% of the world's poorest, who are reliant on agriculture, are being impacted by climate change. A total of 189 million people potentially pushed into hunger. That is the threat. If the hottest years do not move us, perhaps the reversal of the gulf stream, which is now being talked about as a very terrible threat and possibility, should focus our minds. These are real statistically probable threats that we are facing. Why would we contribute to intensifying those risks for everybody? It is frankly unjustifiable.

We heard a lot about energy security being quoted then. When private wires were discussed, we heard from everybody that 31% of our energy is now going to large energy users and 22% is just going to data centres. The 22% on data centres is what is driving the private wires legislation. One of the real problems with the legislation, which was identified when we examined it at the committee, if it does not include the usual obligations we would have in terms of if there was an energy crisis with transmission measures and demand side measures, then we see the increased demand from data centres and other energy users absorbing the renewables that have been coming on stream. Instead of that new renewable on stream contributing to decarbonising our economy, system and everything else, it is being absorbed by new uses. If we have private wires - those renewables that are going to particular clients - it looks like that they will not be given an obligation.

I asked the Department because there are step-in rights for the State in certain safety and other circumstances. I asked the officials if it they considered that energy security should be a situation where the State can say, "That wind farm powering Amazon or whoever else's giant data centre at this point if we do have interconnectors cut, we need to be able to access that for the grid." They said they had not considered energy security. There is a big lecture on energy security for LNG but not a consideration of how private wires are going to intersect with our energy security issues and threats, even though that we know that up to one third of the energy users in the State may be using them and may be absorbing a huge amount of our renewable capacity.

On energy security, there are so many more issues to focus on. I wish to focus on at the intimate level energy security of households. We still have an approach that tries to encourage the choice of retrofitting and trying to give it the plans and the loans. This is a point where if the State is serious, we need to be stepping in. There are 20,000 people on the warmer homes scheme waiting list. There should not be a waiting list of 20,000 people for the scheme. There should not be public buildings still piloting different Departments, making a business case and piloting this building and that building that they might upgrade. Any building that the State has the keys to, access to or can retrofit should be retrofitted. If that requires a State retrofitting agency, which is literally delivering, then that is the thing. This is where the public comes in. There was an appeal on public batteries. That was a good point in relation to that. If that is

something to be looked at, let us have State infrastructure that is going to deliver, be it retrofitting or around battery storage locally.

There was a reference to the 80% renewable supply. We do not have those figures. There is no guarantee at all of how much renewable versus electric will be happening with these new private wire developments. That is a real concern. They should be moving ahead and having no fossil fuels rather than having a further fossil fuel infrastructure in back-up generators existing across the country. It is something that we cannot afford from a climate perspective. It also creates a jeopardy.

Senator Gareth Scahill: I thank the Minister of State for coming in. Energy security is something we heard all the previous speakers talk about. We generated 33% of our electricity demand last year from wind energy, which is welcome. It shows that some of these schemes are working at the moment. We are familiar with travelling around the country and seeing a lot of windfarms with propellers not moving at any given time. The reason for that is the lack of capacity in our grid. This country spent a lot of money in the 1970s and 1980s investing in our grid. We had a very good grid infrastructure in the 1990s for the development of our country. However, the grid infrastructure is creaking at the moment. It was suggested earlier that approximately 13% to 15% of our electricity capacity is being lost annually through lack of capacity to take from wind energy at the moment. I welcome that the Minister said he has provided €3.5 billion in equity for offshore and onshore grid capacity. That is the priority. It is not going to be possible to do a whole lot with all these other schemes unless we fast track the grid capacity and that investment.

I welcome the Tonn Nua campaign down in the south-east. There is 900 MW of capacity going to be generated offshore there. There are four other sites off the south-east coast that will be contracted out at a later stage. If we are hell-bent on offshore and generating our offshore capacity, the only port in Ireland at the moment capable of dealing with that is Belfast. In the next couple of months, Cork Port will introduce additional infrastructure and capacity but it will only be able to deal with one project at a time. The ports cannot invest in any of the offshore projects or in their own expansion until planning is approved. I would love to hear the Minister of State's thoughts on the offshore and ports investment.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Nessa Cosgrove): I welcome Deputy Joe Neville and his guests to the Gallery. He is very welcome. Tá fáilte roimhe.

Senator Cathal Byrne: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate. I acknowledge the enormous concerns that ordinary people are having around the cost of energy, the price of fuel and the difficulties that they are having, including working people getting to work and making ends meet and the challenges that they are posing. The reality here is that as a country we have to make a concerted effort to make the transition away from fossil fuel use, particularly given the global instability that we have at the moment. My own county of Wexford is to the forefront in that regard. As previously mentioned, the Tonn Nua site off the coast of Wexford has enormous potential for offshore renewable energy. To facilitate that site and maximise its potential, there has to be continued investment in the port in Rosslare. We have to see the Rosslare to Oilgate motorway being finally delivered. These are key infrastructure projects that are going to have a direct impact on the ability of Wexford to be to

the forefront of that given our unique position with the Tonn Nua site and the opportunities that present there.

I recently met with residents and members of the Gusserane Community Action Group. It is a community-based group that has concerns about large-scale solar farms being developed in the area, particularly around Gusserane, Ballycullane, Newbawn and the Campile-Clongeen area, where there are plans for 300 acres of solar farm use. While I am in favour of solar farms, the group has asked me to voice some of its concerns around the fact this is some of the best agricultural land in County Wexford, as well as the lack of consultation between the developer and the local residents in the area and a general sense we are having now of industrial levels of solar farm use being rolled out in rural Ireland. The group has reiterated the call for the Minister and the Department to publish clear land use guidelines. I continue to advocate for that so we have a clear sense of direction as to where this is going. I hope this is something the Minister of State and the Department can do into the future.

Minister of State at the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Timmy Dooley): I thank all the Senators who contributed to this important debate. It is particularly timely because of the context in which we find this discussion. I have noticed a better understanding by our citizens when we talk about decarbonisation. For far too long, the conversation was just about the impact on the environment. It was not looked at more broadly in terms of the position that virtually all Senators reflected on, which is that this is about energy security and that we are not in control of our own at a time when we have other opportunities. It is important to look at that.

Senator Clifford-Lee raised some issues around assisting people in the retrofit programmes and that maybe we should do more there. The Department has done quite a lot, but of course it is important we always retain under review the supports that are there to move people away from the need for fossil fuels, or energy generally in their homes, and to reduce the dependence on that by making homes airtight. That is something the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, is looking at.

The Senator also raised the issue of not closing the door on nuclear. We have to have a general debate about all aspects of energy. However, I have reflected both here and in the other House my concerns about what I am seeing around the country in terms of the resistance to wind turbines in communities and the difficulty in getting social licence, or getting people to accept the principle of even the smaller units being talked about for nuclear energy. The Government does not have any immediate decisions to make in that regard. That would only come about after a period of much consultation, where it would become clear that the public were in a position to accept it. Frankly, I do not feel we are there but we should always retain the conversation and discuss it because over time, people's attitudes certainly change.

Senator Duffy raised the issue of the Inishkea West gas project. The Department will come back to the Senator directly on where that is at. Speaking more generally, our ambition is to get to net zero by 2050. I will talk in general terms about what Senator Collins and others talked about - the use of fossil fuels in the intervening period. It was always the desire of government, regardless of its hue, that we would recognise fossil fuels and gas in particular as a transition fuel. From that perspective, we also have to maintain economic growth and remain along the trajectory of other countries in being attractive. To the Acting Chair's point as well,

in attempting to get there we have got to increase our generation of clean renewables, which we are doing. I will speak to our efforts there.

A number of projects are already going through planning. They were referred to as the phase 1 projects, which the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, may have reflected on, together with the Tonn Nua site that was talked about. By 2031 or 2032, we hope to have those energised, which would deliver 5 GW offshore. We currently have 8 GW of renewable onshore. To bring an additional 5 GW onto the grid within the next six or seven years would be fantastic.

We are currently working on a national DMAP which will see completion by 2027. I take Senator Collins's point, which is close to my own heart in that regional aspect, that we could do it more quickly. However, we have been trying to do it in consultation with communities so that we do not run too far ahead and find ourselves in the courts. In fairness, the experience we have developed from the Tonn Nua site was to take the time, do the engagement and try to get to a situation where you do not get that judicial review situation, which delays everything. We expect that will identify an additional 15 GW of electricity generation by 2040.

The argument being made about data centres is well-meant from the perspective of Senator Cosgrove and others, but we have a responsibility to maintain economic growth and activity. To some extent, there is this notion that somehow data centres are not big employment opportunities, but they are in the construction phase. Maybe from an operational level, the number of employees by comparison to the size and scale of the buildings is relatively small, but what is critical about them is that we are moving into the technology sector and have made great advances. We are recognised globally as a centre of excellence for the tech, pharma and medical devices sectors. If we let other countries steal a march on us on data centres, we will lose the downstream investment that is integrated and integral to the future. It would be much easier for us to take a different approach, but it is the right approach.

There will be challenges in the intervening period and there are on the grid because there are some areas that are constrained. I do not accept, however, that data centres get ahead of housing. I know through my engagement with EirGrid that it is very conscious of proposed housing developments and other large energy usage requirements that are there. I would like to think we have moved ahead with the grid and that we are in a position to bring more data centres on. Ireland is now seen in a negative light internationally. Having had a strong base from the start, we are now fighting a rear-guard action to retain Ireland as a centre of excellence for data centres.

It is not just about the data centres. There is a misconception by some that somehow data centres only house photographs, videos and reels, which is a nuisance to all. However, in truth, it is about the maintenance of data in a cloud environment. Companies that would have always ordinarily had racks of computers in their offices do not have that now. By consolidating them under the one roof of a data centre, it actually reduces the demand on electricity; there are statistics on it that I can get. It is a positive story but it is a big challenge for us to manage it. That is why the Government and others have reflected on it. I think the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, talked about this, but we are putting in €3.5 billion of equity into EirGrid and ESB Networks which will allow them to borrow at relatively low interest rates and spend about €19 billion on grid infrastructure upgrades between now and 2030.

We are bringing forward new policies and announcements on where our 400 kV lines will go around the country. We will be identifying areas for development and growth, as well as where the electricity will come ashore. The new large energy user action plan, LEAP, project will identify areas suitable for large energy users to locate in green tech parks. We will be trying to identify those locations closer to where the energy comes ashore from those 20 GW I talked about. That is the kind of joined-up thinking we are doing now in planning ahead. I accept it is challenging to get through from here to 2030 in managing all the demand that is there.

Senator Byrne talked about the cost of fuel and Senator Collins talked about the port of Limerick. I spoke at an event yesterday with the Limerick Chamber of Commerce about the good work the port is doing. There is a port policy to be announced shortly which will play into that. Senator Byrne is right that Cork is now moving ahead. It has €130 million or €140 million in investment and Ann Doherty, the chief executive down there, is doing a great job in driving that. We expect to see that being able to meet the demand. For sure, Rosslare will follow. It has a project in place and many of the ports around there are looking at potential opportunities, if not in the major development side, then in the operation and maintenance work that will form part of it afterwards.

Senator Duffy talked about the battery storage piece. We have got to ensure the grid is resilient and when certain breaks come that energy can be supplied energy from other areas through that lattice approach it has. However, battery storage is very important, and we want to do more.

2 o'clock

On the negativity towards the use of gas in particular, Senator Higgins spoke about energy security in the Shannon Estuary, which is such an important part of the Government's agenda. We have to drive ahead with that. It is a short-term measure. We are not investing in hard-construction infrastructure. It is floating and it can be got rid of when we do not need it. I met earlier with a group comprising the ESB, Bord Gáis and a private developer, which have come together under the banner of Kestrel. It is looking at providing a storage facility in the old Kinsale Head gas field, or in one of the chambers there, that would give us resilience of about 90 days of gas storage. In the short term it would be natural gas but it would have the capacity to move towards hydrogen as hydrogen production comes on, which will be partly through electrolyzers and in using the unused wind when we have all of that coming on board. Our transition is using gas, which has the least negative impact in the short term, as we move towards more renewables. However, all the advice we are getting indicates we will still need some green molecules to power our economy to get to net zero by 2050. There will be a chunk that will be needed for storage, for electricity when the sun is not shining and when the wind is not blowing, and also to power some heavy-goods vehicles. We believe at this stage that that is most likely to be hydrogen. That is where we ultimately want to get to. Under the proposal for a project off Kinsale, that storage could then flip to storing hydrogen when we reach that point.

I am sorry I did not get to cover all the points but I am happy to come back at any stage, either through a Topical Issue or any other opportunity we have for statements or whatever else, to address this really important issue. I recognise that all the Senators here have been thoughtful in their presentations and comments. It is good to see that there is a collegiality in

raising the really important issues that are a challenge to Government, but really importantly, to citizens as well. I thank them for that.

Public Procurement: Statements

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Frankie Feighan): I thank the Cathaoirleach and Senators for the opportunity to attend and to discuss developments in the area of public procurement. The Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation operates at the centre of government to drive the delivery of improved public services, higher living standards, and sustainable infrastructure for the people of Ireland. As Minister of State responsible for public procurement, digitalisation and eGovernment, I work closely with the Minister, Deputy Chambers, towards these aims. Our Department's remit spans three broad and interconnected areas, namely, the governance and oversight of public expenditure, building capability and capacity across the civil and wider public service, and the effective delivery of key Government policies. These strategic priorities are set out in the Department's statement of strategy for the period 2025 to 2028. Central to this strategy is the need to deliver effectively by leveraging our responsibilities across public expenditure, infrastructure, reform and digitalisation in order to respond to the evolving needs of society.

The importance of public procurement to achieving these objectives is reflected in two key supporting actions. First, we are shaping a future for public procurement that embraces reform and is transparent and socially, environmentally and economically sustainable, and accessible by SMEs, through the national public procurement strategy. Second, we are focused on leveraging the benefits of the State's expenditure by delivering procurement solutions that provide value for money, meet the needs of the public service and benefit society. As Minister of State with special responsibility for public procurement, I have tasked my officials with advancing this important work. I am pleased to be here today to provide an update on progress to date and to outline our priorities and planned actions for the period ahead. Indeed, I am always pleased to come back here to this august assembly as I was a Member here from 2002 to 2007 and from 2016 to 2020 and have very happy memories.

My Department is developing Ireland's first national public procurement strategy, which will set out the strategic direction of public procurement in Ireland for the next five years. Programme for Government 2025: Securing Ireland's Future includes a commitment to review the public procurement process to make it more transparent and work to ensure greater participation from SMEs. This strategy progresses this commitment. Drawing on the feedback received as part of the review, and taking account of wider policy developments at national and EU levels, the strategy expands its focus beyond transparency and SME participation to provide an holistic blueprint for the future direction of public procurement over the next five years.

Reflecting the insights gathered through extensive consultation and considering wider programme for Government commitments, three critical outcomes for the strategy have been identified. First, the strategy will embed value for money as the linchpin underpinning every procurement but reframe it to include looking beyond the lowest price to take into account Ireland's strategic interests and wider societal economic and environmental outcomes and impacts. Second, it will facilitate a shift in mindset across the public sector to view

procurement as a key policy and expenditure management tool. Third, it will support simplification by making doing business with Government easier for SMEs, start-up innovators, microenterprises and social enterprises as well as larger companies.

Delivery of this simplification agenda is already under way. Last year, my Department published *Public Procurement in Ireland: A Roadmap for Digital Development 2025-2031*, which sets out a vision for user-focused digital solutions that enable users to seamlessly navigate the complexities of end-to-end procurement processes. Implementation of this vision is now progressing in practice, and my Department is focusing on the needs and experience of public buyers and suppliers, enabling greater simplification and harnessing digital and emerging technologies. For example, design groups have been established for both contracting authorities and suppliers to ensure user-centric co-design for all tactical projects. My Department is undertaking journey mapping with suppliers to identify pinch points and explore opportunities for simplification.

One of the key themes permeating the strategy will be transparency, and I recognise that public procurement can play a critical role in maintaining and building public trust. We will work to strengthen confidence in the procurement system through the provision of better data and increased visibility of how and what the State procures. The Department has recently launched a new initiative to resume the collection of procurement spend data from across the public service. This project marks a new step towards building a richer national dataset that supports advanced analytics and enables meaningful comparison between estimated contract values and actual spend. This initiative will provide deeper visibility into procurement performance, supplier behaviour and value for money across the public sector. In addition, we are developing dedicated data analytics web pages to further drive transparency. These portals will make eTenders publication and contract information far more accessible and intuitive than before. By turning raw data into clearer visual insights, we will ensure greater accessibility and accountability in public procurement.

As I stated earlier, my Department is also responsible for leveraging the benefits of the State's expenditure through the establishment of central procurement solutions.

The Office of Government Procurement, which operates as part of my Department, and its sector sourcing partners in education, health, defence and local government have established a range of centralised procurement arrangements for use by public bodies. Government policy is that, where possible, public bodies should use central procurement arrangements. By aggregating the State's buying power, these arrangements deliver greater value for money by generating administrative savings, reducing duplication of effort and improving process efficiencies. Central procurement solutions also support public bodies in meeting their obligations to consider more strategic outcomes, including green, social and SME-friendly considerations. The Office of Government Procurement is responsible for sourcing common products and services for the public service, from pens and paper to laptops and professional services.

We have established 83 central procurement arrangements, with over half of these allowing public sector bodies to award contracts without the need for further competition, which improves the overall administrative efficiency for public sector bodies and framework suppliers. In 2025, €2 billion flowed through central procurement arrangements established by the OGP.

These developments provide the context for the ambition I want to conclude with today. Our ambition is to build a more strategic, innovative, sustainable and transparent system of public procurement that supports SMEs and delivers better public services and the best value for money for the taxpayer. The programme of work I have outlined demonstrates that this ambition is realistic, measurable and already being advanced in practice, with firm foundations now in place for continued progress.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Nessa Cosgrove): Before I move on to our next speaker, I welcome Deputy Michael Cahill and his two guests, Seamus Farrell and Mary McKeever. Up an Cabhán and Cavan town. You are very welcome.

Glaoin anois ar an Seanadóir Cathal Byrne.

Senator Cathal Byrne: I very much welcome the Minister of State back to the Chamber and congratulate him on his recent appointment, which I have not had the opportunity to do in this Chamber until today.

This is a very important issue. I think it is often forgotten just how much money flows through these public procurement policies and through the Minister of State's Department. When I am out speaking to voters and residents in Wexford, one of the key things they say to me is that they are fed up with and tired of how much money they feel is being wasted on certain projects. The Minister of State's Department has a unique opportunity to restore trust among people that the money that is being spent is being spent wisely, that there are a series of procedures and processes there and that there is a firm grip on how hardworking taxpayers' money is being spent. With the new office that has been set up, the centralised Office of Government Procurement, the fact that data will be collected across all Government Departments and all agencies and put in one central place where things can be managed and that there is a clear set of eyes over how the money is being spent is really important.

The second key point I will make about this whole area is that in order to drive value for taxpayers, it is not just about the lowest costs but also about what is the best value. Too often we have seen contracts that have come in at the lowest price and then, when the work starts, things are more complicated than they originally seemed and inevitably the price goes up. Value for money means value at the end, when the job has actually been paid for, not just the cheapest price when the job is being tendered for. That came across very much in the Minister of State's contribution, that this is what he is driving.

Another key issue here is making these large Government contracts available to small businesses in order that they are able to come forward and tender for contracts. It should never be the case that taxpayers' money being spent on a large procurement contract is available exclusively to large companies while the small businessperson who set up their business and who is looking to make the jump from being a small business to being a medium-sized business does not have access to those contracts. I very much welcome the opportunity that will be available to small businesses through the new eTenders that the Department is rolling out in making information available. People running small businesses do not have hours and hours to be trawling through large tender documents. They are under enormous time constraints and time pressure. They need easy access to be able to say, "Yes, this is a contract we can do", "No, that is a contract we cannot do" or even "This is a contract we could do if we were to recruit a

few more people, grow our business and really put an effort into securing that contract". Unfortunately, however, those small businesses, sole traders and small companies do not have the time to trawl through tender documents that are complex and detailed and in respect of which they are not in a position to swiftly make a decision as to whether it is something they can apply for.

I also want to highlight a concern I have had in the seven years I have been a public representative for the people in Wexford, which is about the prevalence of consultants and consultants' reports and the large amounts of money being spent at local authority and national level commissioning external consultants' reports. If every project, particularly an infrastructure project, will require a set of environmental analyses and technical data, and given that this will be repeated again and again, is there an opportunity to bring that in house rather than externally tendering it and hiring different consultants on every project repeatedly? For example, if there is a road project, a bridge project or another infrastructure project that can be delivered by the local authority, is there not an opportunity to bring that in house?

Finally, I want to underscore the need for suppliers to these contracts and these tenders to have the opportunity to tender again rather than having to apply individually each time and put in the name of their business, the address of their business and their VAT number, that the portal that will be rolled out for eTenders is simplified, that it will store that data and that suppliers would effectively have a digital passport whereby they are able to log in and that detail is already captured by the website. That has been available in the past and it is very important that it is available again in the future. I encourage the Minister of State, as part of rolling out this roadmap for the digital development plan, to incorporate that in it. I wish him and his officials the best and thank him for coming into the Chamber to give us an update. We look forward to seeing how this will be rolled out over the months and year ahead. Perhaps the Minister of State will come back to us over the coming months again and give us a further update when that is necessary.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: The Minister of State is welcome to the House. Public procurement is one of the most powerful instruments of public policy in Ireland. Nowhere is it more evident than in the field of defence. The choices we make about where we source our equipment, technology and support systems shape not only our economic landscape but also our national security and our ability to act with confidence in an increasingly uncertain world. It will be no surprise to the Minister of State that I will focus mainly on defence today.

For a country like Ireland, militarily non-aligned yet carrying growing responsibility in maritime security, cybersecurity and EU mission defence procurement, it is not simply a matter of buying equipment but also about ensuring that what we buy remains reliable, sustainable and under Irish control throughout its entire life cycle. One of the greatest risks we face is over-reliance on a single supplier country. Such reliance can arise for understandable reasons, specifically efficiencies in training, maintenance and interoperability, long-standing diplomatic relationships and the convenience of dealing with a familiar partner. However, when too much of our capability comes from one external source, we expose ourselves to vulnerabilities that are strategic, political and economic.

The first vulnerability, the strategic dependency, is such that if our crucial capability depends on one country, our operational readiness becomes tied, whether we like it or not, to that

country's political decisions and priorities. That is not just a technical risk; it is a political one. Across Europe, governments have had to rethink their reliance on single suppliers because political change, even in friendly countries, has already altered export policies and delivery priorities. This is why so many European states are diversifying procurement and rebuilding sovereign production capacity.

The second vulnerability is the risk of political change within the supplier state. Governments change, policies shift and export controls tighten.

A country that is a reliable partner today may, after an election or a geopolitical realignment, impose restrictions, delay deliveries or prioritise its own domestic needs. Even without hostility, such changes can disrupt supply chains that we expected to remain stable for decades.

Third, concentrated sourcing exposes us to supply chain disruption. Defence systems rely on continuous access to parts, software and technical expertise. Any interruption, whether caused by politics, industrial action or global events, can have immediate consequences for our ability to operate. The evidence is clear. Deloitte has warned that after decades of optimisation, global defence supply chains have become fragile, opaque and vulnerable to shocks ranging from pandemics to global political pressure. PwC describes global defence supply chains as “in turmoil”, with nations now competing for limited industrial capacity. In Sweden, major manufacturers like Saab and BAE Systems report severe production bottlenecks and long lead times because supply chains cannot keep up with demand.

A well-known case in France involves shortages of strategic raw materials, especially titanium, aluminium and nickel, some of which historically came from Russia. After the invasion of Ukraine, sanctions and countersanctions disrupted these supplies. French manufacturers including Dassault Aviation and Safran reported that several SMEs in their supply chains were in serious difficulty because of these disruptions, threatening production rates for military equipment such as aircraft engines and airframe components. Two factors make the problem worse. The first is a heavy dependence on subcontractors. For example, Safran receives 65% of the parts for its LEAP engines from external suppliers, making any disruption critical. The second factor is longer lead times and industrial saturation. The surge in orders linked to the war in Ukraine has stretched French industrial capacity, so any supply chain shock becomes even more problematic. For an island nation with unique maritime and airspace responsibilities, these are not theoretical concerns; they are practical ones.

Fourth, there is the question of our own industrial and technological base. Ireland may not be a major defence manufacturer, but we have real strengths in engineering, technology and advanced services. If procurement is focused entirely abroad, we underuse those strengths, we miss opportunities for innovation and we fail to build the domestic capacity that strengthens national resilience. We already see examples of what Ireland can do. In Shannon, Irish companies are developing advanced drone technologies with global applications, which is proof that we have the talent and the industrial capability to contribute meaningfully to national security. The Irish Defence and Security Association, representing firms across cybersecurity, aerospace, engineering and advanced manufacturing, has repeatedly highlighted the potential for Irish industry to play a larger role in supporting national capability. These are assets we should be leveraging, not overlooking.

This is especially important now, as Ireland moves to double its defence budget to €3 billion, with plans for a 12-ship Naval Service fleet, new armoured vehicles, a military intelligence school, a 300-person cyber corps and even a future fighter aircraft capability. These investments demand secure and reliable supply chains.

We must be honest with ourselves. Ireland has seen the consequences of weak procurement governance in other sectors. The national children's hospital, which was originally costed at under €1 billion, has become the most expensive healthcare project in the world, with costs escalating far beyond initial estimates. The search and rescue aviation contract has also faced significant scrutiny, with legal challenges, delays and questions over process and oversight. These examples are not about defence, but they demonstrate the simple truth that when procurement goes wrong, it goes wrong for years and the State pays the price. Defence procurement cannot afford those mistakes. That is why it is essential that defence procurement supports Irish industry and Irish jobs. Suppliers should be required to maintain some level of manufacturing, assembly or high-value industrial activity within the State. This is not protectionism; it is prudent policy that ensures public spending contributes to our own economic resilience, anchors key capabilities at home and builds a sustainable industrial ecosystem that can support our defence needs over the long term.

Europe is moving in the same direction. Under the ReArm Europe and Readiness 2030 initiatives, more than €800 billion is being mobilised to rebuild Europe's defence industrial base and reduce reliance on external suppliers. Countries across the Continent are onshoring production, especially the production of ammunition and critical components, because they have learned the hard way that relying entirely on foreign production is no longer viable.

How do we respond to these challenges? First, we must make diversification a core strategic objective. We do not abandon key partners, but we avoid excessive concentration. Working with multiple suppliers reduces risk and increases flexibility. Second, we must structure procurement contracts to protect national autonomy. This means securing access to maintenance, ensuring we have the rights to adapt and upgrade systems, and embedding domestic industrial participation wherever feasible. Local manufacturing and long-term maintenance capacity are not luxuries; they are safeguards. Third, we must align our procurement strategy with broader European frameworks. EU collaboration offers opportunities to diversify supply, strengthen partnerships and operate within a stable political and regulatory environment. Fourth, we must maintain strong governance and oversight. Defence investments last decades. They must be evaluated rigorously with explicit consideration of geopolitical risk, including the risk of political change in supplier states. Finally, we must adopt a full life cycle approach. The real vulnerabilities often emerge not at the moment of purchase, but years later when systems need upgrades, parts or technical support. Domestic industrial capacity is one of the best tools we have to ensure continuity throughout that life cycle.

International partnerships will always be essential to Ireland's defence, but over-reliance on any single supplier introduces avoidable risks that are magnified in a world where political change can alter the terms of engagement overnight. A diversified and strategically governed procurement system that supports Irish industry, protects Irish jobs and strengthens Irish autonomy is not just good policy; it is an expression of our sovereignty and our responsibility to future generations.

Having said all of that, the Minister of State's Department has played a crucial role in Ireland since the financial crash. I know he was elected soon after that crash. The Department plays an important role but the oversight sometimes involves too much micromanagement. It should be more like macromanagement, particularly in the areas where we are about to spend massive amounts of funds. I thank the Minister of State for his time. This is my first time to address him since he got promoted. I am delighted to see him here as a former Member of this House.

Senator Aidan Davitt: I am also delighted to welcome the Minister of State here. We served shoulder to shoulder here in the Seanad for many years. It is quite fitting that he is here in the Upper House today. I met an old adversary of his, Terry Leyden, in the corridors today. I well remember those two colossuses of politics clashing here in the Upper House, usually on the topic of Roscommon hospital if my memory serves me right. They had several heated debates here. I was remembering them with a wry smile when the Minister of State came in.

On the overview the Minister of State has just given us, I certainly welcome his proposals. They make a lot of sense, as he has outlined. A lot of work has gone into them. I would like clarification on one particular facet of this. I believe there is a general shift in the parameters for the awarding of contracts in favour of EU countries. This has been coming down the tracks for quite a while. The EU is publishing a memo on this at present. Will the Minister of State bring us up to speed on this? What effect is it going to have? There is definitely going to be a policy shift because heretofore we had companies from Turkey and lots of different places being awarded large contracts but this will shift decisions on contracts in favour of EU countries. This ties in with a lot of what my good friend, Senator Craughwell, has said. Will the Minister of State enlighten us about that when he gets an opportunity? I am not going to delay the House any further.

Senator Chris Andrews: I welcome this debate and I thank the Minister of State for being in attendance to discuss this important issue. This debate is timely given that the Department of public expenditure and reform, through its Office of Government Procurement, is in the process of developing its first national procurement strategy. Transparency, openness and a level playing field are of paramount importance when it comes to spending public money. Members of the public as taxpayers are entitled to feel that the State is utilising and investing their money in an accountable and efficient manner.

Unfortunately, there are too many examples in recent memory of the State getting procurement badly wrong. Small projects like the famous bike shelter, security huts and little walls have garnered big headlines in recent years and rightly so. The public are right to inquire. If the Government cannot get the small things right, what are the chances of the big projects going awry? We can of course point to the children's hospital coming in now at more than €1 billion over budget, which is just staggering and made worse by the fact that its completion has been delayed time after time. The children it was meant to serve will be well into adulthood before it opens its doors. I recently heard there are other issues with making sure all the rooms are ready and fit for purpose.

This is from a Government that has tried to paint my party, Sinn Féin, as economically challenged. There is a certain irony when we hear that accusation being thrown at us. We did not crash the economy and we are not presiding over the worst housing crisis the State has known. We do not continue to give tax breaks to landlords, banks and insurance companies at

the expense of the working people who are put to the pin of their collars trying to put fuel in their cars and heat in their homes.

The Government itself has reported that State expenditure and public procurement stands at between 10% and 12% of GDP. This makes the Government a significant player in the economy of this State. For too long, reform of public procurement has been ignored. I acknowledge the work of others in this space. My party colleague, an Teachta Mairéad Farrell, introduced a policy report, *Towards a New Strategy for Progressive Procurement*, in 2021. She followed this with her *Transparency and Social Value in Public Procurement Bill 2024*, which the Government last year amended and delayed for two years. Similarly, Senator Alice-Mary Higgins, who is on cue behind me, has done tremendous work in this area. Her *Quality in Public Procurement (Contract Preparation and Award Criteria) Bill 2021* was passed by the Seanad but rejected by the Government earlier this year. While I welcome the Government's move to produce a national strategy on public procurement, I hope it has taken on board the content of both of these Bills and the debates that took place on them in these Houses.

I will also mention the North's public procurement policy which was first introduced by Senator Conor Murphy when he was finance minister in the Northern Assembly in 2022. That new policy introduced for the first time mandatory scoring of social value within public procurement contracts. This means that in the North, Executive procurement is used to meet policy objectives, for example, reducing poverty through the creation of jobs for people living in disadvantaged areas and delivering environmental benefits by requiring contracts to employ low- or zero-carbon policies. These are all measures that should be employed in this State. In addition, 23 councils, North and South, have passed ethical procurement policies. This means that procurement in these councils is guided by the UN guiding principles on business and human rights, OECD guidelines for multinational enterprises and the global Sullivan principles.

The State has many models that it can draw from in creating its own procurement strategy. At the heart of its considerations must be the integral role of social environmental and ethical considerations in procurement and the positive effects these can have on well-being and sustainability.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I find the Minister of State's opening statement surprising because some of the language used speaks to and seems to respond to an argument and discussion that I have been highlighting and moving forward for almost a decade in these Houses - the fact that under European procurement rules, value for money does not necessarily mean lowest price. Value for money can be lowest price, it can be the best balance of price and quality, and it can be life-cycle costing.

The Minister of State spoke about the extraordinary amount - billions and billions - that is spent in procurement. The State is the largest customer in the State. The policy of having an integrated approach in terms of green, social and other considerations is a conversation I have been having with the Office of Government Procurement and the Department for years. The Minister of State supported my Bill in the Seanad along with his Government colleagues many of whom spoke in favour of it. Let us be crystal clear on what it did. The Bill provided that quality should be the default when thinking about both price and quality with procurement rather than going with price only. People can go with price but if they do so, they need to tell

us why they have gone with price only. It required people to think about quality and give us an explanation on record as to why quality was not followed.

The Bill also included the idea that very large, once-in-a-generation projects and major works worth over the EU threshold of fives and tens of millions would have a 50% quality threshold. It was a very common-sense proposal which was backed by the Construction Industry Federation, the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland and pretty much everybody we spoke to in procurement over a long period of time. It was backed by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael previously. However, it was voted down and then we had the rhetoric.

I will go back to some of the reasons. When it was debated in the other House, having passed all Stages here in the Seanad and gone to the Dáil, the rationale we were given did not really add up. It was pointed out that we had moved only 12% to price only. That was a move from basically a quarter of all contracts going on price only that moved down during the period of time I engaged with the Minister of State's predecessor, Ossian Smyth. He issued circulars specifically asking for the approach specified in my Bill and asking that price-quality would be the preferred model. I am very aware that there was an improvement in practice. That was an improvement that I saw taking place in my regular meetings with the OGP and the Minister of State at that time. However, the problem was with the culture shift that the Minister of State referenced in his speech. For that to really happen, we needed to have something which specified an explanation was needed when going with price only. It is not that the Minister needs to explain - that was another thing suggested in the Minister of State's reply to the Chamber which is not accurate - it is that a senior officer would give an explanation.

We need to think about what these contracts mean. The current approach is entirely discretionary, and it would remain discretionary, but there is not an explanation mechanism. I will give examples of what it means when we are going with lowest price only. The cervical check contract was on price only and that had very real consequences for women in the State. On the children's hospital, price was given a 75% weighting and quality was given only a 25% weighting. Even though the Minister of State has said that now about 80% of projects are going on quality criteria, what is the weighting? If it is less than 50%, price will automatically trump it based on whoever puts in the lowest number.

We know the problems. That is why the Construction Industry Federation, the architects and all of these other groups backed the proposals in this Bill. When you have underbidding, you get subsequent claims, you get bad practices and you do not reward the companies that come in with realistic pricing, with quality they can deliver and with proper, decent treatment for their staff. They get penalised because of the advantage given to those who are willing to underbid, and who then deal with it in subsequent claims that drive up the cost indefinitely, as we have seen. When we look at the children's hospital, we see not just the costs but the errors that need to be corrected. We are now hearing about further corrective measures that need to be done in the children's hospital. Frankly, that is the approach the Minister of State has stuck with. He made the choice to stick with the model that can allow major projects in the fives, tens, 15s and 20s of millions to be given on a majority price-only basis rather than on a quality basis.

The other rationale that was given was a misquoting about increased costs of 3%. That was the cost of the tender process. That is the cost of advertising and of reading it. The actual figures from the Netherlands showed that while there was an increase of less than 1% in certain

costs with regard to contracts, there was a massive increase in benefits to the public - I think it was 7.5 or 17.5; I will look into the figures - when you put quality in it. That is because the Netherlands has been making quality the default. That is what my legislation was based on. I know officials from the Minister of State's Department travelled there. I wonder why we are not delivering on that.

Another rationale that was given was that a new directive is coming. We did not take full advantage of the 2014 directive, but now we are told that a new directive is coming. It will be negotiated during the Minister of State's watch. I am a little worried, because I was told that was why we could not go ahead and put quality into public procurement. May I ask what position Ireland will be taking in those negotiations on quality in public procurement? Is the Minister of State anticipating, expecting or hoping for a simplification that lessens the weighting and the focus on quality in public procurement? That is not what is in the narrative of his speech, but it is what is suggested by the unwillingness to commit to quality in advance of the new directive being negotiated. I would like to know what that position is.

I come now to a few specific questions. There is discussion of more data. Will that include reporting in relation to the public duty on equality and human rights? This is a public duty that applies to all public bodies. They currently report in the context of the public duty in general, but it applies to procurement. It applies to what you spend the public's money on. Right now, separate to reporting on the public duty, we do not have within procurement a reporting system that says how we delivered the public duty on equality and human rights when we did our procurement. That is even as we have heard that ethical considerations are immensely important to the public. I would like to know how the Minister of State plans for this to be reflected. How is he planning to monitor how the public duty in equality and human rights is being implemented in procurement, for example in terms of the ethics issues we have heard about with regard to those who are committing human rights violations or in areas that overlap with questions of security?

I will give an example. Across Europe, we are seeing a move away from procurement with regard to Microsoft. The Italian military has moved off it. There have also been moves in Denmark and France. A huge number of public service areas are moving away from a company that testified in the French Senate that it will share our data with America. Here in the Oireachtas and in many Departments, we have changed our entire telephone system to be subject to and part of a company that, as we heard in testimony in the AI committee, is vulnerable to hacking. These are significant issues. These are massive public procurement issues and major contract issues. Yes, there are massive human rights and equality issues, but there are also crucial security issues. I would like the Minister of State to address that specific and large area of public procurement in the context of public security and how it is being addressed.

I would like the Minister of State to answer those questions. I would like answers on his position going into these negotiations and explicitly on quality and on environmental factors. I would like to know where public duty, human rights and equality are going to be addressed in public procurement. I would like to know what he is going to do the next time there is a scandal. What is he going to do about weighting for major projects? Will it be 50% weighting? Is he going to bring in a measure to make that happen, or is he just going to hope it happens?

I would also like explicit answers with regard to the security risks and exposure that has been flagged as a concern by many equivalent democracies across Europe.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Frankie Feighan): I thank the Senators for their contributions, which underline the very strong interest in public procurement across this House. This kind of engagement is not only welcome, but also essential if we are to deliver on the ambition of a more strategic and innovative, sustainable and transparent public procurement system that supports SMEs and delivers better public services and the best possible value for money for the taxpayer. For that reason, consultation and collaboration are central to the approach the Department is taking. Meaningful reform depends on ensuring that suppliers, public bodies and the public, directly or through their political representatives, are actively involved in shaping how public procurement evolves. The Department is therefore continuing to expand the scope and depth of strategic engagement to ensure the voices of all those with an interest in the future direction of public procurement in Ireland are heard.

As Minister of State with responsibility for public procurement I chair two high-level stakeholder groups which provide structured and ongoing channels of engagement. I chair the public procurement advisory council, which was established in 2024 to advise on the development of public procurement across the public sector. The council meets quarterly and provides me with guidance and advice on procurement policy, digital transformation, data analytics and strategic centralised procurement issues. I also chair the SME advisory group, which includes industry and public sector stakeholder representatives and provides a direct forum for SMEs to share their experiences of tendering for public contracts, and to raise issues affecting their participation. Earlier this month, reflecting the growing role that social enterprises play in delivering social and community outcomes through public procurement, the group was expanded for the first time to include representation from the social enterprise sector.

Alongside these high-level structures we are placing a strong emphasis on engagement at an operational level. The forthcoming national procurement strategy has been subject to an extensive consultation process, which has been critical to understanding the primary challenges and opportunities for both public bodies and suppliers, including micro and social enterprises. This engagement included a public consultation that ensures all those with an interest in the future direction of public procurement have an opportunity to inform the new strategy. Regional workshops were held in Dublin, Cork and Athlone that included public buyers and policy makers from across the public sector and representation from across the broad spectrum of Irish business, including social enterprises, representatives from civic society, public representatives and members of the public.

We recognise the crucial role played by SMEs, including social enterprises, in driving economic and societal prosperity. As stated earlier, the programme for Government includes a commitment to review the public procurement process to work towards greater participation from SMEs in Ireland. This commitment is reflected in one of the critical outcomes of the strategy, which is to make participation in public procurement easier for suppliers, particularly micros, startups, SMEs and social enterprises. This focus has been put into practice through targeted and early engagement with suppliers during the development of the strategy. A dedicated webinar was provided to help our suppliers. We undertook direct engagement with SME and social enterprise representative bodies during application of the SME test.

Beyond engagement to inform the strategy, the Department has always focused on creating practical opportunities for direct engagement between Government buyers and suppliers. In November 2025 we reached an important milestone with the first Government supply expo organised by the Office of Government Procurement. This event was designed specifically for the supplier base on the island of Ireland and operated in a trade show format.

It allowed suppliers to engage directly with procurement teams from the State's largest spending bodies. The response was extremely strong, with over 2,900 attendees on the day. It demonstrated the real value of direct engagement between Government buyers and suppliers. Building on the success of this event, the Department is working towards holding a further event next year.

In parallel with this expanded engagement with the supplier community, my Department is also strengthening its support of and engagement with public buyers to help embed better and more consistent public procurement practices right across the system. In the past year this has included information sessions on central procurement arrangements, eTenders training, practical guidance on core procurement requirements and a series of procurement officer network meetings hosted by the Office of Government Procurement. In total, almost 7,000 participants took part in these initiatives, reflecting the strong demand among public buyers for practical support.

Building on this progress, my Department will continue to expand the scope of our service offering for public buyers, supporting effective and successful implementation of the strategy. In that context, to date, discussions have been both timely and valuable, as outlined in my opening statement. My Department operates at the centre of the Government to drive improved public services, higher living standards and sustainable infrastructure for the people of Ireland. Public procurement is one of the key mechanisms through which these objectives are delivered in practice.

The forthcoming national public procurement strategy will bring together the work I have outlined today into a single coherent framework. Shaped by extensive consultation and formed by the experiences of public buyers and suppliers, it will set out the strategic direction of public procurement in Ireland for the next five years. It will represent a further step towards realising our ambition to build a more strategic, innovative, sustainable and transparent system of public procurement that supports SMEs, delivers better public services and the best possible value for money for the taxpayer.

I want to respond to a few of today's contributions. Senator Cathal Byrne said that the cheapest price is not necessarily the best and that we need value for money. He talked about large government working with small business. I do not just talk about SMEs, family businesses have to come into it. That is what this public procurement strategy is doing.

Senator Craughwell talked about strategic dependency and defence. He referred to the need to rethink our over-reliance on a single supplier. He is right. Governments change and we must be careful about over-reliance on a single supplier. Across Europe we need to consider the ever-changing geopolitical events.

Senator Davitt talked about EU countries. They are beginning to look at evaluating public procurement directives and modernising and simplifying procurement rules. We must also have a sustainable, strategic autonomy for European countries. That is happening.

Senator Andrews talked about the social value. The Executive in Northern Ireland did learn lessons from the Republic of Ireland. It brought in a procurement strategy that has a social value. That is in line with what we want as well. It is great that the United Kingdom is working with Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and across Europe and sharing good ideas. These are really good ideas.

I thank the people who started the office of public procurement and the Department of public expenditure in 2011 and 2012. Over the years it has brought a lot of organisations, Departments and local authorities into the procurement strategy. Having such a system in place is better for transparency and value for money and, most of all, it is better for taxpayers. That is what it is all about.

Senator Higgins talked about European procurement rules. We are a member of the European Union and we are waiting for the document on European procurement to come out - hopefully in the next few weeks. Ireland is working very closely on the new procurement strategy, which will have less administration. It will restructure how public money flows within the European Union. Sometimes we have a difference of opinion, but there are some very good ideas that can be included in the procurement strategy. Ireland will be working with Europe to have a strategy that is negotiated as well as possible.

I thank Senators for their contributions. The issues raised today provide a valuable perspective and will help shape further consideration on how best to advance that ambition.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I welcome the GAA memorial group from Galway. They are guests of Deputy Pete Roche. I hope they all enjoy their visit here this afternoon. They are very welcome.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 2.55 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 3.34 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 2.55 p.m. and resumed at 3.34 p.m.

Wildlife Rehabilitation Support Scheme: Motion

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, to the House. I also welcome to the Visitor's Gallery guests of Senator Noonan, and the parents of Senator Harmon from Cork, Ted and Mary. They are most welcome to Seanad Éireann. Their daughter is doing great work here in Seanad Éireann. She is working very hard and does Cork proud and her parents proud. I thank them for being here.

The opening speakers for this debate will speak for 16 minutes. The proposer and seconder may share time, and all other Senators have six minutes, and the Minister of State will respond.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: I move:

“That Seanad Éireann:

recognises:

- the need for the Government to respond to the ‘Whole of Government, Whole of Society’ approach adopted in the fourth National Biodiversity Action Plan and upcoming National Nature Restoration Plan by ensuring that verifiable and proven measures to maintain healthy wildlife populations are given due support;
- the threats and pressures facing wildlife in Ireland due to development, loss of habitat, pollution and road collisions;
- the valuable work carried out by wildlife rescue centres across Ireland, both for wildlife on land and at sea;
- this work is critical to saving and rehabilitating many species of wild birds, bats, cetaceans and mammals and returning them appropriately to the wild following treatment;
- that Ireland’s wildlife rehabilitation centres are volunteer led, supported by professional veterinary staff, and use best practice when treating, handling and releasing wild species;
- that wildlife rescue centres are reliant largely on voluntary fundraising to fund their day-to-day activities and are experiencing increased levels of activity due to wider environmental pressures and increased public awareness;

calls on the Government to:

- establish a multi-annual fund to support the work of wildlife rehabilitation centres; the Wildlife Rescue Support Scheme (WRSS) would be established in the Budget using a revenue fund derived from fines imposed for wildlife crime in the courts and Exchequer funding;

notes that:

- funding would be split between a revenue (ongoing administration) fund and a capital fund to carry out works/improvements to facilities and for the purchase of equipment;
- such a fund would be only available to wildlife rescue centres that meet the following mandatory criteria:
 - Licensing and Regulatory Compliance:
 - hold a current licence issued by the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS);
 - have undergone an NPWS site inspection within the past 12 months;
 - maintain a strict policy of not keeping educational or ambassador wild animals;
 - commit to reporting any suspected wildlife crime to the appropriate authorities;
 - Experience, Capacity, and Scope of Care:
 - be an active wildlife rehabilitator or volunteer for a minimum of three years;
 - provide a detailed account of the species cared for and the maximum care capacity of the facility;
 - demonstrate availability of out-of-hours care for wildlife patients;

- Governance, Financial Accountability, and Planning:
 - submit recent financial accounts;
 - provide a current strategic plan;
 - supply at least two letters of support from relevant stakeholders;
- Record-Keeping, Data Sharing, and Veterinary Support:
 - maintain detailed electronic records of all wildlife admissions and treatments;
 - make rehabilitation data available for legitimate research and conservation purposes;
 - provide a letter of agreement from a registered veterinary practice confirming they provide clinical care and prescribed medication for wildlife patients;
 - have been visited by a Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine veterinarian, or be open to such a visit;
- Facilities, Biosecurity, and Site Management:
 - maintain clear separation between wildlife and domestic animals on site;
 - maintain a designated isolation area for new or sick wildlife;
 - implement and maintain strong biosecurity measures to prevent disease transmission;
- Policies, Procedures, and Professional Standards:
 - maintain written policies and procedures covering:
 - animal care protocols;
 - euthanasia procedures;
 - invasive species management;
 - clinical waste management;
 - demonstrate continuous professional development on an annual basis;
 - the following criteria is desirable for wildlife rescue centres:
- Education, Outreach, and Conservation Contribution:
 - provide education and outreach activities related to wildlife rehabilitation;
 - education and outreach may be delivered either online or in person;

requests the Government to:

- provide an update on the progression of the WRSS within six months of the motion being passed.”

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: I second the motion.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: I also welcome our Cork Minister of State. Táimid i ngéarchéim bhithéagsúlachta. Tá a fhios againn go bhfuil jab le déanamh againn uile chun cabhrú leis an dúlra agus leis an bhfiadhúlra nuair is féidir linn. Déanann ár n-ionaid tarrthála fiadhúlra ar fud na hÉireann obair iontach ag cabhrú leis an dúlra agus leis an bhfiadhúlra nuair is féidir linn.

Wildlife rehabilitators in Ireland play a vital role in biodiversity conservation and public service delivery. Last year, rehabilitation centres admitted approximately 10,000 birds and mammals to care, responding to injury, illness and human-induced threats. In the same period, they handled around 23,000 inquiries from the public relating to wildlife welfare and conflict situations, demonstrating a significant and growing demand for their services.

A substantial portion of animals admitted to our species of conservation concern, including those listed as amber or red under national conservation frameworks. These include the European hedgehog, barn owl, Eurasian curlew, northern lapwing or an pilibín, our national bird, common swifts, house sparrow, song thrush and many of our bat species. Many of these species are experiencing significant population decline and rehabilitation contributes directly to their survival and potential recovery in the wild.

Each individual animal successfully treated and released represents our measurable contribution to population stability, genetic diversity and ecosystem resilience. As such, wildlife rehabilitators operate on the front line of the biodiversity crisis, providing an essential service in species protection, welfare intervention and conservation outcomes. In addition, rehabilitators play an increasingly important role in the identification reporting of wildlife crime, including illegal persecution, poisoning, trapping and habitat destruction. This intelligence is shared with the NPWS and contributes to enforcement. Their work also extends to providing specialist guidance and support to public veterinary professionals, businesses, Government agencies and local authorities, strengthening cross-sector collaboration in wildlife protection.

Importantly, wildlife rehabilitators do not operate on a standard Monday to Friday nine-to-five schedule. Instead, they provide continuous around-the-clock emergency response services 365 days a year, ensuring injured and distressed wildlife can receive immediate care at any time, including nights, weekends and public holidays. We only have to look at Kildare Wildlife Rescue, KWR's, Pearse Stokes's exploits on Instagram to fully appreciate the risks they take to rescue wildlife.

Wildlife rehabilitation also generates wider socio-economic benefits. For example, KWR is expected to host over 60 international interns this year. These individuals reside with local host families to contribute economically through local spending and supporting businesses and services within the surrounding area. This demonstrates that investment in wildlife rehabilitation delivers not only environmental benefits, but also tangible community and economic value.

Our national network of wildlife rehabilitation centres can play an active role in head-starting. I have spoken with KWR about this. It would offer a regional centre for such activities once our national restoration plan is up and running. Overall, wildlife funding through wildlife rehabilitation services supports an integrated model of conservation, public engagement, law

enforcement and rural and economic development, making it a high impact investment in both biodiversity and community resilience.

I am delighted the Minister of State and the Government are not opposing our motion.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: As a species, humans have been remarkably successful in adapting to our own surroundings and we have given a great deal of thought to adapting our environment to suit our needs. Unfortunately, we have not been as successful or given enough thought to ensuring our adaptations do not impact on other living creatures who share our planet.

Human activity, whether thoughtless or deliberate, has had a catastrophic impact upon many other life forms living wild alongside us. Nature loves diversity, but through our pursuit of efficiency and our determination to mould nature to suit our immediate needs, we have often promoted agricultural practices that specialise in monocrops. The disposal of vast quantities of waste from intensive farming of pigs and chickens, the overstocking of land with sheep and cattle, the overplantation of Sitka spruce, intensive grass growing and repeated sowing of crops all play a part in exhausting our natural world.

Our land use practices often require the destruction of hedgerows in pursuit of bigger fields and the ever-increasing application of fertiliser, weed killer and pesticides.

As a result, we have much poorer levels of biodiversity than we once enjoyed. The health and resilience of remaining species is compromised also. These weakened species operate in a human-centric environment in which they have not evolved face daily dangers from road traffic, overhead cables, lawn-mowers, strimmers, pets such as dogs and cats, oil spills, poisoning and illegal hunting or snaring. It is in this challenging world that wildlife rehabilitation services such as Wildlife West in Sligo operate. Called to scenes of poisonings, incidents and accidents, services like Wildlife West observe, assess and do whatever they can to mitigate or remove the birds and animals from danger and, where necessary, bring them back to the centre for assessment and rehabilitation. Hedgehogs, barn owls, foxes, ducks and swans are among those helped this year by the team at Wildlife West. Long-term investment is also made through outreach programmes and educational visits to schools and colleges by wildlife rehabilitation services. Through the education of children, young people and their families, we all learn how best to protect nature. That means the reliance on organisations like wildlife rehabilitation services will be reduced. By establishing a fund to support licensed wildlife rehabilitation services, we will help to meet our obligations under the fourth national biodiversity action plan. Biodiversity and climate loss are interlinked. I am proud to be standing here with my comrades to support this.

Senator Laura Harmon: I welcome the guests in the Gallery including my parents, Mary and Ted. It is their first time sitting in the Seanad Gallery. It is very welcome that the Minister of State and the Government are not opposing our motion. I commend Senator Noonan in particular on leading on this cross-party motion. I was blown away recently when I visited Wildlife Rescue Cork - I told the Minister of State about this - to see the work it does in rehabilitation and the number of animals it treats and allows back into the wild. They ring all the birds of prey and waterbirds. They have had re-sightings of herons, swans and gulls that have migrated and come back. It goes to show that rehabilitation works and animals will behave in the same way when they are released back into the wild. Aside from the economic

benefits and social benefits in education, a real reason behind this is compassion and suffering. A lot of the injuries that happen to wildlife are because of human behaviour and how we have changed the world and the habitat. From that perspective, we have a duty of care to our wildlife. Wildlife Rescue Cork does not just treat wildlife from Cork, it takes in animals from Kerry, Tipperary, Waterford and Limerick. It is a real beacon in Munster for their work. Funding for the sector will allow it to professionalise further and to continue education programmes. It also takes on interns as they do in other centres such as in Kildare. It will allow them to have guaranteed funding to progress salaried positions to care for these animals around the clock, which they already do anyway. The resources they have are very much stretched. They should not be relying so heavily on public donations. They provide training programmes for vets and veterinary nurses on how to treat wildlife in practice. That training element is important as well. Wildlife centres are vital to enhancing biodiversity in Ireland. We lag behind many countries in preserving biodiversity as opposed to the environment itself. It is my understanding that we are among the lowest in the EU for land that is protected for birds, for example. Similarly, we are far behind the global target of 30% for protection of land and marine. We need to work better towards our general targets in this regard. This motion is a start. It would be transformative for the work already happening, which we need to recognise. A lot of the public are simply not aware that if you find an animal injured on the road or wherever or if it flies into your home, there is somewhere you can bring it and there is help to be found. I think the public want to be able to help when they see an animal in pain or in need. It is a much cheaper option long term because it is much more expensive to restore a population of animals in decline or ecosystems in decline. This is actually a preventative measure. It is really welcome that the Government is supporting this motion.

Senator Patricia Stephenson: We are living in a moment when protecting wildlife and biodiversity is not something we have to worry about in the distant future; we need to think about it now. We are living in an environmental, biodiversity and ecology emergency. A new report from the independent advisory committee on nature restoration shows that 90% of our habitats are now in unfavourable conditions for wildlife. It is an appalling figure. It will take a monumental effort from Government, NGOs, across civil society and a cross-party approach to row back on this horrendous figure. We need to seriously work collectively to reverse and restore nature and support biodiversity due to the loss of habitat and the pollution we have seen. A big question is also around the marine protected areas Bill. We have seen the designation of marine protected areas but we have not seen any action or protection with that. The Government is committed to protecting 30% of our seas by 2030 but we are lagging behind that substantially; only about 10% has been done to date.

It is in the context of how bad things are that I thank Senator Noonan for bringing this forward. We all know too well that biodiversity and nature are in serious deep decline but the report from the indecent advisory committee sharpens that greatly. The motion asks for a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach to take action. A core element of that is multi-annual funding to support the work of rehabilitation centres. Revenue from fines collected for wildlife crime would fund a lot of these support schemes. Adequate funding of wildlife services is a crucial investment for the island. We cannot continue to rely only on the organisations that do such great work, much of which is voluntary. We know about fundraising challenges for wildlife centres; they are struggling to keep their doors open despite how important the work they do is. The volunteer efforts of those caring for wildlife and their

fundraising efforts are heroic in the face of how much decline we have seen and the severe habitat destruction. There is often an over-reliance on the voluntary sector. When I say voluntary, a lot of these people are high professionalised and skilled and might have several layers of qualifications and degrees to do this work yet they are not fully supported. The professionalisation, experience and expertise they have in this area are not matched or recognised by the Government. Senator Noonan reminds us that staff in wildlife centres, paid or voluntary, work around the clock. Caring for wildlife is not a Monday to Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. job. It is 24 hours, seven days a week. People working in wildlife care see some of the most heartbreaking and distressing cases of animal cruelty as well. It is very much not for the faint-hearted. They also have the incredible privilege of releasing animals back to nature and their natural habitat and nursing them back to health.

It is important to acknowledge the work they do in restoration, advocacy and education. In Kilkenny we have Keep Kilkenny Beautiful, which does huge work on invasive species such as Japanese knotweed, Himalayan balsam and giant hogweed. These species are really problematic for local ecosystems. They damage the habitats of birds, bees, fish, sea life and river life. They are invasive and they are quietly choking our natural environment. They spread fast and crowd out native plants. This has an ongoing effect on birds, insects and the wider ecosystem. They also erode riverbanks and in some cases pose quite a serious risk to people. Without the dedication of these groups, our wildlife would be completely on its own trying to survive in a world that does not recognise its significance or right to share all spaces in communities and towns. There is hope - unprecedented levels of public awareness are helping to support these projects and their funding to undo some of the decline in the natural world. We all know the value of wild spaces whether it is because we walk our dogs in the countryside, go to the beach or love listening to birdsong early in the morning but we take it for granted. If we do not actively protect it, we will lose it. It is slightly trite but people give the example of the car being covered in insects after a long journey on the motorway ten or 20 years ago. We do not see that any more because the insects are not there because they are dying. That is a significant everyday marker of how our ecosystem is being damaged. We need to do so much more to protect it.

Protecting our wildlife and the environment in which we live is about safeguarding spaces, safeguarding moments that enrich our daily lives and safeguarding the future for future generations of young people who will come after us.

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call on the next speaker, I welcome guests of Senator O'Loughlin from Kildare Volunteer Centre.

Senator Joe Flaherty: I welcome the Minister of State to the House and I very much welcome the spirit of this motion. It would be remiss if at the outset, I did not acknowledge what Malcolm Noonan did in the lifetime of the last Dáil to raise awareness of this issue and to set in train a lot of the projects and initiatives we see under this current Government. It was with great foresight that the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, was appointed to this role. It is fair to say that he is probably one of the most passionate people in government when it comes to wildlife and the preservation of nature.

While supporting the spirit of the motion, I do take some exception to the statement that the Government is doing nothing about this. Since the last Government and in the lifetime of this

Government, we have never been as proactive in this area. We have to start somewhere. We have taken a stand on it, know what we have and, more importantly, know what we have lost. Anybody who comes from rural Ireland is very much aware of the challenges we face as a farming community. We are realistically looking at probably the first generation of people in Ireland who do not know where food came from and who do not know what life is like in rural Ireland. That brings its own set of problems.

I welcome the spirit of the proposal. I particularly acknowledge what Malcolm Noonan did in the lifetime of the last Government. I am happy to support this and I am sure the Minister of State can certainly find value in many aspects of the proposal as well. The Minister of State was with me in Longford a number of months ago and would have seen one of the projects undertaken by Longford County Council where it produced on its own initiative a wonderful guide to local wildlife and birds. It is a beautifully illustrated book distributed to every school child in primary school right across the county. It is a wonderful initiative. I found great value in the book. I keep it in the car now and every time I see a bird, I hope to see a hawk but I have not yet seen one. Maybe the Minister of State can send a few up to me. Every time I look up and think it is a hawk, it is a bloody crow. Bring me one for a day. It is wonderful.

I take the point on staff. Longford has great staff who really buy into this and see the value of it. They are very much into conservation and preservation. Probably some local authorities do not take it as seriously. This is very much a work in progress. We are not going to fix the ills and wrongs of the past 400 or 500 years overnight but we are very much a nation in transition when it comes to conservation and preservation. What was done in the last Government was hugely positive. I know the Minister of State is still relatively new in his role but I do not doubt his bona fides. I have seen him out on the ground and at conferences and I have seen him in action with regard to the Shannon Callows and all the work we need to do there. I see how enthused he is about that, about the wader project on the Shannon Callows and about bringing life back to the islands on Lough Ree, in particular restoring them as habitats and, ultimately and hopefully, as the first national inland island project. I have no doubt about his bona fides and I know he has great plans to really enhance this sector.

We we all have a responsibility in this area and we cannot just play pay lip service to it. Too many parties do pay lip service to it but there is an onus on us. We have a generation of young people now who really do not know where food comes from or what it is like on a farm. That is probably a failing on our part as a society and in the way we educate our young people. We need to educate and we need to really encourage local authorities. Local authorities are good if there is a good heritage officer, a good conservation officer and good OPW staff. We are extremely lucky in Longford. We have excellent OPW staff in Longford who work very well and work in tandem with the local authority. As far as they are concerned, it is very much a work in progress. Any time, we get the Minister of State down, he is hugely supportive of the local authority. He has great interest in the projects of the local authority and gives it that additional encouragement.

I know it is a slightly different issue but in terms of the building conservation works and projects, we really started to draw money down when Malcolm Noonan was there and now, thankfully, the council has really bought into it and the Minister of State is delivering on the work that Malcolm Noonan did as well.

One will not find anyone in government who will take issue with what is being proposed because we agree wholeheartedly with the spirit of what is being proposed but we would like some acknowledgement of the work that is being done. Considerable work is being done, particularly by this Minister of State. As a country, we are hugely enthused with the Minister of State. I do not think one could find a better or more knowledgeable minister in Europe when it comes to this sector so I am delighted that he is here. He is the right man for the right job. We agree with the spirit of what is being proposed. I am sure the Minister of State will find a use for some of the proposals and the actions and I am sure he will expand on them himself in due time.

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call on the next speaker, I welcome Terry Leyden, a man who served in the Seanad, Dáil and Cabinet, along with his guests. They are most welcome to Seanad Éireann. Is he making another comeback for the Shannon? Terry has managed to come back to the Seanad more than once.

Senator P. J. Murphy: I welcome the Minister of State to the Seanad and thank him joining us here for the debate on this motion. As Fine Gael spokesperson for biodiversity and as somebody who has been involved in the rehabilitation and release of injured birds and animals since I was a child, I fully understand the great satisfaction involved in taking in an injured animal; caring for it for days, weeks and sometimes months; and seeing that animal released back into the wild in a healthy state. Unfortunately, I also understand the disappointment whenever one has kept a poor, unfortunate injured creature alive for days and weeks in a box beside the range at home and eventually he goes the wrong way and does not make it back to rehabilitation. However, no more than farming and livestock farming, that is all part of the game when you are working with animals and living creatures.

I very much welcome the contents of what I would describe as a well-considered, well-put-together and detailed motion. I very much welcome the fact that the Government will not be opposing this motion. Human behaviour is continuously encroaching on the habitat of wildlife. Our housing, transport infrastructure, electricity and power generation and in particular, our food production all have massive impacts on the natural world around us. We have a responsibility and a duty of care to the other creatures that inhabit this island and the shores around this island to ensure that our behaviour does not impact too greatly on their lives and that when it does, we do all that we can to ensure that unfortunate injured animals are rehabilitated back to the wild whenever possible.

This motion calls on the Government to establish a multi-annual fund to support the work of wildlife rehabilitation centres and suggests that this funding would come in part from fines imposed for wildlife crime and in part from Exchequer funding. What better use could be made of fines imposed for wildlife crime? However, given the vast amount of work and money needed to run these services, those fines would only make up very small amount of the necessary funding and that Exchequer funding and funding from general taxation would have to make up the vast bulk of the funding required.

4 o'clock

Given the fact that Exchequer funding would be needed - and this is touched on in the motion, very importantly so, as are capacity and scope of care - and that if Exchequer funding is to be

used, and I wholeheartedly agree that it should be, the scope of care and the scope of responsibility would be very clearly laid out. That is allowed for within the wording of the motion. Species in serious decline must form the focus of any care that is paid for through State funding, not solely the desire to be humane with any creature found injured. We have a great number of species that are not in decline and that are in a healthy state. Spending a lot of Exchequer money on rehabilitating species that are not in decline and do not require that amount of money to be spent on them would not be a wise use of Exchequer funding. However, that can certainly be clarified within any policy document that will go further from this motion.

I am glad to see a paragraph in the motion about the importance of education. These centres of rehabilitation could and must form a very important part of the education of our young people as to how to care for wildlife. If anything we do today does not involve education and does not involve passing on the message of the necessity for us to care for wildlife to the next generation, then to a large extent we fail.

Again, I congratulate the proposers of this motion for a very well put together motion. I am delighted to support it.

Senator Joe Conway: Gabhaim buíochas leis an bhfoireann seo ar mo chúl, Senator Malcolm Noonan, and his comhghleacaithe ansin, a thóg an rún seo os ár gcomhair inniu. It is lovely to see the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, again. I am beginning to think he is one of the most clear-headed Ministers I have come across, and very progressive too. I think some of the soundings he made one of the times he was here formally brought music to Senator Flaherty's ears and mine when he mentioned the possibility of having a national park in the midlands. The mention of the islands project seems to be a continuation of that. I hope he is crowned with success in that.

Law 19 of 2022 in Spain would probably not be immediately familiar to many in the House. Indeed, it was not familiar to me until I started reading around this subject this morning. It is a peculiar facet of the legislature in Spain that if a proposal gains 500,000 signatures and is brought to parliament, it necessitates the enactment of a law on foot of those signatures. One was brought forward in 2022 which not alone achieved the 500,000 but got 638,000 signatures. Basically, this legislation gave an inherent voice in legislation to nature. It involved a section of land south-east of Murcia, which was a lagoon separated by a small isthmus from the Mediterranean, but in the 1970s, through the wisdom of man and woman, instead of leaving one entrance to the lagoon, they cut three extra artificial entries to it and, basically, within four decades, desecrated the whole area. Now they are left with the prospect of trying to retrieve it and regenerate the nature because it was covered with a type of algae. This work is ongoing now but it is a very expensive project. It shows, however, that if there is people power giving a voice to nature, it can be done and it becomes subservient to figures. We are, as we often say, legating the environment to the next generation and the generation after that. It is a precious gift that we throw away at our peril.

Senator Flaherty talked about Longford. One of the great joys of my Longford childhood was going to sleep of a summer night and listening to the sound of the corncrake. Of course, those Members who were privileged to live in the 1960s and 1970s will remember the corncrake. Not many people here fit into that bracket, I think, but it is a most distinctive sound. It sounds like a Caribbean bullfrog from a distance. It practically disappeared from Ireland

because of extensive farming, mainly silage cutting and forage harvesters cutting very close to the ground and ruining the ground nests.

Anyway, to reminisce even further, I was getting off the ferry in Inishbofin about four years ago and as I stepped outside the perimeter of the ferry area I could not believe my ears when I heard the sound, clear as day, of the corncrake. I was looking just this morning at the reports from Inishbofin and, lo and behold, the corncrake numbers are coming back. It is because of the way the island is curated and the inspired way the locals and the parklands and wildlife people are helping with it, including into the Shannon Callows. The corncrake is an example of the possibilities we have for species that are under threat and it is a success story. My Independent colleague in Galway West, Thomas Welby, who is contesting the by-election there, has assigned to me the lovely task of canvassing Inishbofin over the next week and a half. I am looking forward to that. Never will I do such a joyous piece of canvassing as going around that island serenaded by the corncrake on those summer evenings. I am just praying for the sort of weather we have outside today.

Incidentally, if time permits me, I will speak about getting close to nature and the privileges we have. In our house we have a very small, very modest balcony off our bedroom, and in the past couple of weeks we have noticed that undue attention was being paid to our balcony by a pair of collared doves. I had an old pair of runners out there drying after walking the beach in Tramore, and the other day we were absolutely blown away when we found what the birds had done. Architecturally, collared doves are not marvellous; they build a very haphazard nest. However, they built a nest on our balcony beside the pair of decrepit runners and there are two beautiful eggs there. They are sitting there dutifully and I love them. I love them being there, but my wife does not appreciate being wakened at 5 o'clock in the morning to their awful call. It comes as if they were shouting for Man United because it goes "United, hoo, hoo, hoo". It does not go down very well.

Anyway, in Ireland we are very privileged to have nature beside us. Two weeks ago we had the proceeds of crime Bill here and I was just wondering, to finance these rehabilitation measures that we have for wildlife, why could we not use some measure of the proceeds of crime or, indeed, the proceeds from those who are fined for the abuse of animals, or even the hundreds of thousands of livestock we send abroad? Could there not be a headage payment put on each one of them to put money back into this very reasonable fund?

Sin mo cheannsa don lá inniu.

Senator Joe Flaherty: An bhfuil an traonach ar an gclár?

Senator Joe Conway: An traonach?

Senator Joe Flaherty: Is it on the register, before the Senator leaves?

Senator Joe Conway: *Crex crex*, I believe.

An Cathaoirleach: Go raibh maith agaibh, a chairde. I welcome the mum of another Senator, Senator Stephenson. Marga Foley is in the Gallery, I think. I think Ollie Crowe's

mother is in the House as well today. It looks like it is parents' day or "bring your parents to work day" in Leinster House. Thanks to everybody for that. We have another group coming in that we would like to welcome as well, guests of Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee. They are about to land. Our next speaker will be Senator Collins.

The group is from the Ursuline Convent in Waterford. Ms Hoban and Ms O'Brien are the class teachers. I give a special mention to Emily Butler, a cousin, who is in the class. They are all welcome to Seanad Éireann.

Senator Joanne Collins: I commend and thank the Cross-Party Group on bringing this motion forward. It is a very important one. The rehabilitation of our wildlife is very important. It hits the heart of rural Ireland and what it is. We are able to drive down the road and see all these amazing animals. I leave my house and I see deer. Unfortunately, one of my daughters does not know much about animals and she told me one of them was a teenager. I do not know how she figured that one out, but they have decided to put labels on them. In County Limerick alone we have Bat Rehabilitation Ireland, based in Bruree. It has captured, rehabilitated and released over 2,000 bats since the centre opened in 2019. It looks after all of Ireland. It does such great work but, again, it has to fundraise for everything. A lot of work goes into it, including veterinary costs, capture and release.

Animal Magic is based in Kilmallock in County Limerick. It has stated that its costs are escalating every year. It is not just freeing or housing animals; it has veterinary costs and the cost of going out to collect animals, but also sourcing safe areas where it can release the animals. It is not a charity so it cannot fundraise or ask for donations. A scheme like this would be very helpful to it. I am delighted to see it is multi-annual funding because stability is needed when running what is not a business but a vocation. It is definitely key that the funding would be multi-annual.

I will not take up much time. I just wanted to say "Well done". This is an absolutely fantastic motion. I knew it was Senator Noonan's motion. We always know when he is behind something. It is a nice motion. It is not contentious but it is very important. We have organisations that look after dogs and cats, the nice animals that we can rehome, but you cannot exactly rehome a bat. You cannot go on a website and ask if there is anybody who can take this lovely bat home. There is a lot more involved in it. The motion is fantastic.

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call the next speaker, I welcome Ms Gabrielle Maher from Oregon. She is originally from Ireland but is here as the Oregon trade commissioner. She is town for the global forum which is being held in Croke Park this week.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I am very glad to support the motion. There are a few different words in Irish for the environment but one of the nicest is comhshaol, the idea of coexistence and living together. We share this space. Wildlife in its essence is the idea of life that is not utilitarian. It is not a product. It is not farming. It exists simply as a fellow traveller on our planet and in our country. At the same time, its magic is in its existence that is separate from us. It is also part of healthy biodiversity, which is crucial to all our survival in the big picture. The climate crisis gets a central focus but the biodiversity crisis we are facing is as acute, if not more acute. We are in one of the great eras of extinction with 15,000 species on red lists. We

are talking about an extraordinary loss of the many threads that make up the amazing web of biodiversity on our planet. Here in Ireland we have such beautiful biodiversity. We see the reports from birdwatchers who go out to listen to birds and there are fewer of them. The same birds are not there. The many sightings have become the very occasional sighting in terms of wildlife. There are success stories of species that have come back from the brink, like the corncrake and others.

I want to credit a separate strand of funding which has been really important in that regard, namely, European LIFE funding, for some of the species that are in critical decline. We know that LIFE funding is itself under threat at the moment. Vital funding for nature and biodiversity could get absorbed into a competitive fund, where it is competing against drones, military funding and all the rest. One of the challenges during our EU Presidency will be to make sure that LIFE funding is maintained as a separate strand of funding.

That is one issue, but then there is this issue of wildlife rescue. The other part of the bigger picture is habitat work. I urge the Minister of State to ensure we move to designate more spaces. We talked about releases and where they would happen. We must have more special areas of conservation and back up the nature restoration plans we will have with real resources. We must look to continuously expand our national parks, as I know the Minister of State will. Wicklow was in the news recently for potential there, as were other places.

Incredible care and work are done. As Senators said, it is done on a 24-hour basis. We often cannot bring these animals to us. We have to be with them. It requires an extraordinarily generous form of love and care. It is so often on the fringes. We hear a lot about farmers being the stewards of nature. That is very valid, but what we are talking about here is people who are literally the stewards of nature, who are purely devoting themselves to nature, not as a side point of what they are doing but as a core, who are dedicating their time to our fellow species and to life. They should be rewarded. It should be something that people can plan and build. I see that career development and professional development is built into it. I like that the picture that is painted of what we should be having in terms of a properly resourced wildlife rescue network of centres and spaces throughout the country where people can provide the care in a way that is ideal. That is wonderful. I hope the Minister of State will say this is something we are going to make happen, and this fund is going to happen and here is how we are going to report on it.

I have a small suggestion. Because this area has been so under-resourced for so long, some of the projects that exist will struggle to reach the high standard that is set out. A one-off grant may be needed to allow wildlife rehabilitation centres to reach the proper standards and provide the separation between domestic animals and wildlife that is so important. We want to move to a situation whereby they build in properly designated isolation areas. We need something that gives these centres a shot at getting this funding and multi-annual security, which is where we have to move to. Perhaps that could be looked at. Anything that moves us away from a situation where the generosity of individuals is, in many cases, all that is supporting hedgehogs, cetaceans or the many other examples that we could give of extraordinary projects throughout the country. This route towards recognition and resources is very welcome. I am happy to support the motion.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank everybody, including the Minister of State, for their contributions to the debate. One of the issues we discussed in the Seanad was having Mary Robinson come in and address us on climate. We worked with the climate and energy committee and it has agreed that we have that discussion in the Chamber.

The former President set us a challenge in the Seanad to be a voice on the issue around climate change and biodiversity. That challenge, set down on the 100th anniversary of the Seanad, is one that we are continuing because as was said during some of those debates when we had that previous committee in here on climate, the global economy is committing terrorism on the world. The way we have designed our system is, as we see, causing climate change more so and we have seen reports coming out of the European Union this week in relation to the rising temperature in Europe. We are all aware from the reports written by the United Nations and everyone that the cheapest form of protection from the worst effects of climate change is to stop a lot of what we are doing at this moment in time. We look forward to having the former President in the Chamber as part of that debate on the issue around climate change.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan): I welcome the crew from Waterford who are guests of Senator Clifford-Lee. It is not every day we talk about biodiversity and animals, so they have picked a good day to come in. I welcome Ted and Mary, all the way from Cork. Every time I am in this Chamber, their daughter is in here so either she loves giving me a hard time or she is one of the hardest-working Senators in the Seanad. The second one is probably true - maybe both. Senator Joe Conway gave a fantastic impression of a collared dove. It is not every day I see someone try to mimic a collared dove in Seanad Éireann, so we are making progress.

Let me begin by thanking Senators Noonan, Stephenson, Harmon and Cosgrove for tabling this Private Members' motion in the Seanad for debate today, which will not be opposed by the Government. As I understand it, the principle underpinning the motion is to provide sustainable, long-term support for the work of wildlife rehabilitation centres, using both revenue derived from fines imposed for wildlife crime and additional Exchequer funding.

I and my colleagues in government are keenly aware that Ireland is home to incredibly dedicated individuals whose tireless care for injured animals is commendable. I thank them for that. These wildlife rehabilitation centres complement our conservation efforts, providing meaningful support to the National Parks and Wildlife Service of my Department in protecting our native species. I am grateful for the work they do to heal injured wildlife. In that spirit, the Government will not be opposing the motion. It should be noted, however, that there are some practical difficulties with it.

The proposal that a wildlife rescue support scheme would be established partly from fines imposed for wildlife crime in the courts would need further consideration as currently, fines on convictions are paid directly to the Courts Service of Ireland which, ultimately, go to the State. Furthermore, in such wildlife crime cases, moneys in the form of donations are also, on occasion, made to wildlife charities but this appears to be at the discretion of the particular judge at that particular time. There would also be ramifications from a budget perspective, which would have to be examined by the Government with regard to approval and allocation of Exchequer moneys.

Animal welfare is a key priority for the Government. Neglect of or causing unnecessary suffering to animals is not acceptable in our society. To this end, the programme for Government provides a commitment to the continued robust enforcement of the Animal Health and Welfare Act 2013, which provides a modern framework for regulating and applying standards in the area of animal health and welfare. This Act applies to domesticated animals and livestock as well as wildlife in specific scenarios, such as preventing unnecessary suffering or controlling diseases. It obliges anyone who has an animal in their possession or control to safeguard the animal's health and welfare.

The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has lead policy responsibility within government for animal welfare and that Department already provides support to eligible animal welfare charities to assist them in their vital work in rescuing and rehoming domestic and farm animals through its animal welfare grants programme. Through this programme, funding of almost €6 million was awarded in 2023 and 2024 to over 100 animal welfare charities throughout the country. In 2025, this was increased to almost €6.5 million awarded to such charities, which includes those specifically involved in the care of wildlife. Last year, for example, Galway and Claddagh Swan Rescue received grant funding of €14,800; Wildlife Rescue Cork received €12,000; the Irish Whale and Dolphin Group received €10,000; and Seal Rescue Ireland received €36,000. Separately, the work of rehabilitation centres can be supported through other grant means too. For example, the heritage organisation support fund is a grant scheme administered by the Heritage Council, which aims to build the capacity of non-governmental organisations working in the heritage sector by providing grants of up to €50,000 towards their core costs. Interest in the scheme continues to grow year on year and funding for the scheme has also continued to increase. In 2026, the Heritage Council has allocated €1.8 million to the programme and this has included organisations like Kildare Wildlife Rescue, which received €50,000 this year and the same amount last year. The funding will support core staffing across wildlife care, volunteer co-ordination and training and engagement. The approved work plan will strengthen organisational capacity, support the rescue and rehabilitation of an estimated 5,000 to 6,000 animals nationwide, expand professional training programmes and further develop public engagement through seminars, workshops and a national biodiversity conference, thereby contributing to biodiversity protection and community stewardship of natural heritage.

At its core, the National Parks and Wildlife Service safeguards nature through a robust combination of regulatory oversight, compliance monitoring and enforcement activity. It is the primary body ensuring that all interventions in our natural world, including independent wildlife rehabilitation, are conducted legally and safely. It is important to clarify the remit of the NPWS. As a conservation body, the regulatory focus is primarily on the survival of species in the wild rather than individual animal welfare cases unless a crime has been committed.

While wildlife rehabilitation centres focus on the recovery of individual animals, their work fits into the larger picture managed by the NPWS, which oversees the protection of our entire natural heritage. I note the motion recognises the need for those involved in wildlife rehabilitation to be licensed, experienced and accountable. Any increased professionalism in the wildlife sector is to be commended due to the importance of acting in the best interests of our wildlife population. Under its remit, the NPWS has a regulatory role in relation to wildlife rescue centres as it oversees mandatory licensing requirements for individuals seeking to possess protected wild birds and animals for the purposes of rehabilitation and release under

the Wildlife Act 1976. Conditions are attached to such licences to ensure the protection of wildlife and inspections of facilities occur on an annual basis, where resources allow. It also supports wildlife rehabilitation through a structured framework of specialised species projects. By ensuring these standards are met, the biological integrity of our wild populations is protected.

With Ireland's 4th National Biodiversity Action Plan 2023-2030, NBAP, and the Wildlife (Amendment) Act, the work of NPWS now has a statutory backbone. This is reinforced by the EU nature restoration regulation, which challenges us to restore 20% of our land and sea by 2030. Today, I will demonstrate how the NPWS is meeting this ambition through a combination of rigorous regulation, innovative species projects and strategic community partnerships.

In our coastal strongholds for corncrake, the NPWS has spearheaded a recovery of corncrake populations through the corncrake or traonach conservation programme, a continuation of the corncrake grant scheme, and this is led by the Corncrake LIFE project. Population targets set by the Corncrake LIFE project back in 2021 have been surpassed, with a population increase of 50% by 2025, far exceeding the original project ambitions of a 20% increase for that period. Looking to securing the future of the corncrake in the west and north west, the NPWS is now contracting support under the Natura communities for birds initiative to ensure continuity after Corncrake LIFE, using existing frameworks of support and community-led programmes of delivery for corncrakes and other farmland birds, with an annual budget of €1.45 million per year. The NPWS has played an important role, along with the Irish Grey Partridge Conservation Trust, in the conservation of the grey partridge in Ireland. Our work at Lough Boora involves restoring habitats for grey partridge by providing suitable habitats like beetle banks and nesting strips, not just saving a game bird, but using it as an umbrella species to lift the biodiversity of the entire landscape.

Similarly, LIFE on Machair is protecting the globally rare coastal habitats systems of the west of Ireland, supporting 259 pairs of breeding waders and rare pollinators like the great yellow bumblebee. We are proving that traditional agriculture and high-level conservation are not just compatible - they are co-dependent. In Wexford, to ensure the protection of breeding seabirds on the Great Saltee Island, part of the Saltee Islands special protection area and a world-class seabird colony holding an impressive ten seabird species of conservation interest, the NPWS has appointed wardens to engage with and educate visitors on the importance of the island and help reduce disturbance from visitor numbers.

Through the local biodiversity action fund and in conjunction with Fingal County Council, the NPWS provides the vital funding for NGO-led wardening of Ireland's Eye in Dublin. Protection also means rolling out conservation measures to improve the physical security of vulnerable populations, such as predator exclusion fencing, from the breeding wader sites of County Donegal to protect lapwing and curlew, to the little tern colonies in Portrane. These fences are often the thin line between a successful breeding season and total colony failure.

Our Hen Harrier Threat Response Plan 2024-2028 co-ordinates 60-plus actions with the aim of supporting a population recovery of hen harriers in Ireland. We are tackling pressures across the forestry, agriculture and energy sectors to help to move the species toward favourable status.

Earlier today, I launched the independent advisory committee report, Recommendations to inform the development and implementation of Ireland's national Nature Restoration Plan. The report, which includes 46 policy recommendations and 48 article-specific recommendations, represents the culmination of 15 months of work by the committee, which was established in late 2024 to advise me on the preparation of Ireland's national nature restoration plan, a requirement under the EU nature restoration law. It comprises seven general recommendations aimed at ensuring a successful implementation of the forthcoming plan, including three priority recommendations, which are funding nature restoration, prioritising action on public lands, and supporting farmers, fishermen and foresters. In addition, the report provides an analysis of Articles 4 to 13 of the EU nature restoration law, which sets out legally binding targets to restore a wide range of ecosystems and species in EU member states. Ireland is by far the most advanced EU nation in putting together our nature restoration plan, demonstrating the priority that we hold for nature restoration.

The independent advisory committee's work was informed by parallel public and stakeholder engagement processes that heard from more than 1,000 people across the country through deliberative democracy-style leaders forums and local, participatory community conversations. I reiterate that together with my colleagues across government, I am committed to ensuring that the committee's recommendations are delivered on through Ireland's national nature restoration plan and that the people of Ireland, no matter where they come from, can see and feel the benefits of restored and thriving nature for themselves. The NPWS provides the science, the regulation and the funding, but the success of the national restoration plan depends on the farmers, the wardens and the local communities who share our vision. We are no longer just documenting decline; we are leading the recovery. We are ensuring that Ireland's unique species remain a permanent, thriving part of our natural heritage.

I welcome the motion. There is absolutely no dispute. The role that wildlife rescue centres play across Ireland is vital. They protect wild species which, as we have already outlined, are under severe threat, so we want to support that. We need wildlife rescue centres in existence. We need the dedicated personnel who work and volunteer there. Without them, wildlife in Ireland would be in a much poorer place. I will and have given a commitment to visit Kildare Wildlife Rescue in the coming months to see first-hand the extraordinary work it is doing. I welcome many of the comments around nature restoration, habitat protection and species in general, because even though we have to support our wildlife rescue centres, I really fundamentally believe, especially after today, when we launch the recommendations from the new independent advisory committee on nature restoration, that our focus has to be on bringing Ireland, the species within Ireland, and our habitats back from the brink. It is really bleak out there. The habitats are in a bad condition. Our species are declining at a rapid rate. We can do more and better. The nature restoration plan provides us with the opportunity to do that. I would love to see as much focus and funding as possible going to nature restoration, restoring those habitats, creating healthy ecosystems, and getting rid of the invasive species that are an absolute blight on our countryside and impacting our native species. That is where we need to put our focus and funding, because those measures, above all else, will see those beautiful species that we all hold so dear come back from the brink.

I am glad to see education mentioned in this as well, because that is another area of focus that we have not spent enough effort, time or resources highlighting. We need people to become ecologically literate. Young kids in particular are obsessed with wildlife. They could tell you

the nerdiest facts on whales, dolphins, polar bears and exotic chameleons that live in Papua New Guinea, but do they know what a healthy ecosystem in Ireland looks like? That is where I would like to see the focus and funding going, instead of Sitka spruce going out to schools, as Senators will be well aware. It also helps the work of those wildlife rescue centres. We are in the middle of breeding season now. There are ground-nesting birds and an issue where people are letting their dogs off leashes. I guarantee that many of the referrals to wildlife rescue centres are because of damage that has been done by dogs in sensitive areas where they have been let off leashes. On a lighting policy, I also imagine that wildlife rescue centres will get things like Manx shearwater, seabirds and gannets brought into their care, because there is a ridiculous lighting policy along our coast where these birds are attracted in and become injured and vulnerable.

I commend the Senator on the motion. There is no doubt about that. I would love to see a lot more time in the Seanad dedicated to a Private Member's motion on habitat restoration and how we can protect the most vulnerable species, which are threatened with extinction and in decline. That is not to take away from the work that wildlife rescue centres do. They are extraordinary. I really feel that cross-party, cross-Government and cross-Opposition, we need a whole Oireachtas approach to support the upcoming nature restoration plan, to ensure it is funded and to ensure we use it as the best opportunity that we have ever had in the State to turn the tide on nature loss in Ireland.

Senator Laura Harmon: I thank the Minister of State for supporting this important motion. I acknowledge Wildlife Rescue Cork, who are in the Gallery, and Julie Cronin, who is here with Cathy and the whole team. I encourage the Minister of State to meet them and view the work they are doing. Patricia Stephenson's mother, Marga, is here too. There are a number of parents in the Gallery. It is clear that the Minister of State is committed to his role and to nature restoration. He is genuine and hard-working. It is appreciated. I know he took up the baton from my colleague, Senator Malcolm Noonan, who was a pioneer in this area and the first Minister of State who was recognised nationally as having such a focus on nature. It is fitting that Malcolm is bringing forward this motion today. We call him Malcolm in the Middle, but he is certainly putting Green policies in the middle of our Cross-Party Group. I just wanted to say that.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: I thank my Cross-Party Group colleagues. I welcome the Minister of State's response. It behoves all of us, going by what the Cathaoirleach said, to make changes in all our lives to help to minimise our impact on the natural world and become active participants in restoration, because in restoring nature, we are restoring ourselves, our wellbeing, our food security, and our resilience against climate chaos. There remains a deep disconnect between our understanding of what we need to do and our behaviour as consumers, which is really driving species and habitats loss. We might think that wildlife rescues could only ever play only a small part in our efforts to turn the tide of biodiversity loss, but in a country where some species are present in precariously low numbers, every bird rescued, rehabilitated and released where it came from could make all the difference in a breeding season. The Minister of State could be formalising roles for our network of wildlife rehabilitation centres in expanding headstarting programmes for curlew, corncrake and other vulnerable species. In County Monaghan this year, we have seen some success with headstarted curlew now forming breeding pairs. Ramping up such programmes in tandem with

landscape-scale nature restoration could give us the critical mass we need to move some species towards viable populations.

Indeed, we see the success of programmes at Cooldross and Boora, where, as the Minister of State mentioned, there is strength in numbers. Where there are more lapwing on a site, that allows them to mob predators and increase survival rates. For now, there is the day to day. The Minister of State has mentioned some of the one-off grants. What I have seen from my few visits to Kildare Wildlife Rescue, as I am sure Laura will bear this out from her visit to Cork, is a service that goes beyond meeting basic requirements of licensing, but excelling at best practice wildlife care. Kildare Wildlife Rescue runs an annual conference on behalf of the network. I attended last year and was hugely impressed at the level of information-sharing, the range of specialist speakers and the collective drive towards excellence in the field of wildlife rehabilitation. It is this level of professionalism that sparked this motion and initiative from our Cross-Party Group here today. It needs to be recognised and valued by the State and the most tangible way of doing this is by putting in place a dedicated multi-annual stream of funding. It will drive excellence over time, improve the handling and treatment of wildlife in the veterinary profession, train more and more people and provide valuable outreach to communities who want to be part of this great collective and collaborative project of restoring nature on land and at sea.

Yesterday, I attended the UCD earth institute seminar on Ireland's nature restoration plan. I know that the Minister of State is just back from the National Botanic Gardens, where the recommendations for Ireland's plan were formally received by the Government.

I commend Dr. Aoibhinn Ní Shúilleabháin, the independent advisory committee and everyone who has contributed thus far.

One of the key challenges identified among the recommendations is that of bringing everybody with us. The outreach work provided by rescues across the country provides an invaluable asset to these efforts, educating, informing and advising.

Most of all, it will give the sector the confidence to provide a professional service and allow such services to grow over time. If the Minister of State gets to visit one of the rescue centres during his tenure, he will find people dedicated and passionate about wildlife and caring for wild mammals and birds.

I must also reference the comprehensive review of wildlife legislation that I initiated during my time in the Department. Such a review should, I hope, trigger new and more up-to-date legislation across all facets of wildlife and nature governance. It would be really helpful if we could formalise the role of wildlife rehabilitation through enabling legislation. There is a narrow scope in legislation towards licensing for the handling of wildlife but limited recognition of how the needs of the sector have changed and grown over recent years.

The year 2026 is the 800th anniversary of the death of St. Francis of Assisi, a man who cared deeply for nature and wildlife. He said that we are all sisters and brothers to animals and plants, water and soil, earth and sky. What a great statement from the State it would be if, on St. Francis's anniversary, we were to put resources into the care of our vulnerable wildlife and begin to turn around a terrible legacy of destruction of nature towards a restorative one.

I thank the Minister of State for his contribution. I recognise that he is not opposing the motion, but I also ask that he actively support it and find the means to put in place a permanent scheme, however that is done, whether in budget 2027 or, as has been suggested by Senator Stephenson, through money ring-fenced from wildlife crime.

I again thank my Cross-Party Group for bringing forward this motion. We have a good track record in this House for the initiatives we bring forward. They are always very positive, be they motions or Bills. It goes to show what a progressive left alliance can do in the Seanad Chamber.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I welcome our colleague, Senator Kelleher, and his guest to the Distinguished Visitors Gallery. They are very welcome and I hope they enjoy their visit.

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 4.42 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 5.33 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 4.42 p.m. and resumed at 5.33 p.m.

Annual Progress Report and Government Response to Energy Price Pressures: Motion

An Cathaoirleach: The proposer and seconder of the motion will speak for a combined total of 16 minutes. All other Senators will speak for six minutes, the Minister of State will speak for 15 minutes and the proposer will respond at the end for five minutes.

Senator Pat Casey: I move:

"That Seanad Éireann:

notes:

- the publication of the Annual Progress Report (April 2026), incorporating the Department of Finance's Spring Forecasts, in accordance with Ireland's obligations under the revised EU fiscal framework;
- that the Report highlights the resilience of the Irish economy in the face of significant global volatility, while identifying increased risks arising from geopolitical conflict and disruption to global energy markets;
- the Report's assessment that Ireland remains close to full employment, with continued growth in employment and a declining general government debt ratio;
- the evidence within the Report that rising energy prices are placing upward pressure on inflation, reducing household purchasing power and increasing cost pressures for businesses;
- that Ireland, as a net importer of energy, is particularly exposed to external energy shocks transmitted through global price movements;
- the identification in the Report of continued risks to the economic and fiscal outlook, including energy price volatility, geopolitical instability and global trade fragmentation;

recognises:

- that prudent fiscal management in recent years has placed Ireland in a strong position to respond to external shocks;
- that the Government's economic strategy is based on maintaining fiscal sustainability while protecting households, employment and competitiveness during periods of exceptional disruption;
- the importance of continuing to build fiscal buffers while avoiding procyclical policy responses;
- the need to balance short-term economic supports with longer-term objectives on climate action, energy security and intergenerational equity;

welcomes:

- the clear, decisive and proactive leadership shown by Government in responding to the sharp escalation in global energy prices, as recognised in the Annual Progress Report, through the deployment of targeted and temporary support measures;
- the new and comprehensive package of fuel supports agreed by Government in April 2026 valued at over €750m, including:
 - further temporary reductions in excise duty on petrol, diesel and marked gas oil;
 - the deferral of the planned increase in carbon tax to protect households and businesses during a period of acute energy price pressure;
 - the establishment of the Road Transporters Support Scheme, providing direct and meaningful support for the haulage and coach sectors;
 - targeted fuel subsidy measures for the agriculture and fisheries sectors, recognising their particular exposure to energy costs;
- the focus of these measures on providing immediate relief to households and businesses facing exceptional cost pressures;
- the continued prioritisation of strategic capital investment, infrastructure delivery and structural reform, as set out in the Annual Progress Report;
- the strong emphasis placed on enhancing Ireland's energy security and resilience, including through accelerated investment in renewable energy and reduced reliance on imported fossil fuels;

calls on the Government to:

- continue to closely monitor economic and energy market developments and respond, where necessary, in a timely and targeted manner;
- ensure the effective implementation and oversight of the fuel support measures announced in April 2026;
- progress the mediumterm reform and investment priorities set out in the Annual Progress Report and the MediumTerm Fiscal and Structural Plan;

- accelerate measures to enhance energy security and resilience, including investment in renewable energy and critical infrastructure;
- and report, as appropriate, to the Houses of the Oireachtas on economic developments and the effectiveness of measures introduced in response to energy price shocks."

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: I second the motion.

Senator Pat Casey: I welcome the Minister of State to the Chamber. In this motion I will address the Government's response to the recent escalation in energy prices in a clear, measured and practical manner, grounded in the economic evidence and in the lived experience of families and businesses across the country. While reports and statistics matter, what really matters to people is how decisions taken here affect their daily lives, whether families can manage bills and small businesses can stay viable, and whether people feel that the system understands the pressure they are under. Let me be clear: no one is denying that the pressure exists. People know it every time they fill their car with fuel, open an electricity bill or stand at a supermarket checkout. The question is whether Government responds in a way that actually helps, without creating bigger problems down the line.

The starting point is that Ireland is in a strong position to respond. We now have over 2.8 million people at work, which is the highest level of employment in the history of the State. Unemployment has been below 5% for four years. This means that more households have incomes and more people have security in their jobs. The public finances are also strong. Last year, the State ran a surplus, and debt levels have continued to fall. This matters because it gives us the room to act when something goes wrong, which is exactly what responsible budgeting and governing is meant to do. However, economic strength at a national level does not lessen the day-to-day pressures families are facing. Ireland imports most of its energy. When oil and gas prices rise globally because of a conflict or instability abroad, those increases hit here quickly and directly. There is no buffer and whether someone lives in the city or the countryside, energy costs go up for everyone. For families, that pressure shows up immediately in higher home heating bills, higher electricity bills, higher costs to get to work and school and higher childcare costs. In rural areas especially, where people rely on cars, rising fuel prices hit hard and fast. People feel it in the weekly shop where prices remain high. They feel it in insurance costs, mortgages and everyday expenses that have steadily crept up over recent years. Even when inflation has eased prices have not fallen back and households are still carrying that load.

Middle-income families are often the most squeezed. They may be working full time and paying their way but they do not qualify for many supports and they do not have the spare money to absorb sudden increases. For lower income households, energy costs take up a much bigger share of income, leaving no room at all when prices increase. That is the reality people are living with and to which the Government has to respond. That is why the €750 million package to address rising fuel prices is the right response. Temporary reductions in excise duty on petrol, diesel and marked gas oil are not abstract measures; they provide immediate, visible relief at the pumps. People see the difference straight away when they fill up and that matters for families, commuters and workers who depend on their cars. In practical terms, these measures have reduced the price of petrol by 27 cent a litre, diesel by 32 cent a litre and marked gas oil or green diesel by 7.4 cent a litre, delivering real savings for households, rural drivers,

farmers and small businesses. At the same time, to protect those most at risk of fuel poverty, the Government has extended the fuel allowance season by four weeks. This will provide an additional €152 to each of nearly 470,000 recipients, supporting over a quarter of households and helping ease pressure on home energy costs.

I also strongly support the decision to temporarily defer the planned increase in the carbon tax. Climate action remains essential and nothing in this decision changes that, but climate policy has to be workable and fair. Adding extra costs to households and small businesses in the middle of an international energy shock would not be sensible. It would have pushed people too far, too fast.

Support for the road transport sector is also essential. That is why the Government has committed €150 million in targeted assistance, with the detailed operation of the scheme announced today. HGV drivers, hauliers and coach operators are not some separate group. They carry our food, deliver our fuel and keep our economy running. Fuel is one of their largest and most volatile costs. If those costs rise sharply and Government does nothing, they do not disappear. They feed straight through into higher prices across the economy. Supporting the transport sector is not about picking favourites; it is about preventing inflationary measures from cascading into household costs.

The same approach applies to agriculture and fisheries. The Government has provided €100 million in targeted supports for farmers and fishers, with full details also confirmed today. It is important to recognise these sectors, which cannot easily pass on rising costs yet are fundamental to local employment, our food security and our rural communities.

It is important to be clear about what these measures are intended to do and what they are not. They are not permanent giveaways. They are not reckless spending sprees. They are temporary, targeted interventions designed to deal with a specific shock. They are affordable because public finances have been managed carefully. Even after these measures, debt levels remain on a downward path and long-term savings for future needs are still being accumulated through the Future Ireland Fund and the Infrastructure, Climate and Nature Fund. That means we can support families today in a responsible way without passing on a burden of debt or instability to our children in the years ahead.

Of course, short-term supports are only part of the solution. The real and lasting way of protecting families from future energy shocks is to reduce our dependency on imported fossil fuels. That is why the Government is continuing to invest heavily in energy security, renewable regeneration and the electrical network. It is so that Ireland is less exposed when international prices spike for reasons entirely outside of the Government's control.

In my own county of Wicklow, that transition is not abstract policy ambition. It is already taking practical shape. Projects such as SSE Renewables and Codling offshore wind developments off Wicklow's coast show what energy security looks like in real terms. These are long-term investments that can deliver clean domestically generated electricity at scale, strengthening the national grid and reducing the vulnerability of households and businesses to unsustainable global fuel markets. This is how we move from reacting to energy shocks to building resilience against them through sustained planned investment that lowers costs over time and gives families greater security about their future.

The position is clear. Ireland continues to benefit from a strong economy and well-managed sustainable public finances. At the same time, families and businesses are under real pressure from rising costs driven by global events entirely outside of our control. The Government has responded in a timely and responsible way, providing targeted relief where it is needed, easing immediate pressure on household budgets, and doing so without undermining fiscal discipline our long-term economic and climate goals. This is not about a headline-grabbing measure or short-term gestures. It is about steady considered governing, recognising the strain that families are under, particularly in meeting everyday costs such as fuel, heating and transport, and acting to ensure that a temporary shock does not become a lasting hardship. For families trying to balance the weekly household budget, that approach matters. It reflects an effort that responds carefully, fairly and in the best interests of all those we represent.

For those reasons, I commend the motion.

Senator Dee Ryan: I welcome the Minister of State to the Chamber. I echo the sentiments that were so eloquently delivered by my colleague Senator Casey recognising the significant suite of measures the Government has brought forward in response to the unforeseen and outside-of-our-control war instigated by America and Israel on Iran and the knock-on impact that is having around the world, and particularly here in Ireland, on the cost of energy and, in the first instance, fuel.

If the fuel protests and the blockades were instructive in anything, it is that the Irish public is triggered. We are recalling the reverberations of the illegal war in Ukraine that the Russians instigated in 2022 and the knock-on cost inflation, the knock-on impact in all of our pockets and the stress that it brought to all of our lives.

While it is important to acknowledge the suite of measures that Senator Casey has outlined and to acknowledge the particular struggles of those on lower incomes and pensions that the Government strove to address in budget 2026, including improvements to the working family payment, extension of the fuel allowance season, increase in the pension, and the expansion of the free school books scheme and school meals programme, I will use the my time implore of the Minister of State in advance of budget negotiations this year, and in the ongoing monitoring that his Department and our senior colleague are doing of the situation as it unfolds, to put working families to the forefront of their minds. These are families who may not qualify for social welfare supports but are under intense pressure raising children and trying to keep the lights on and food on the table.

The impact on parents is exponential and it is felt across everyday costs such as school shoes, uniforms, jackets, schoolbooks, hair cuts, sports gear, activities fees, voluntary school contributions, transition year school fees, the cost of taking children to school where parents cannot get them on a school bus or there is not a school bus route in their area, school-mandated digital devices, third-level costs including the now-reduced but still substantial fees, transport, accommodation and student living expenses, teenage clothing and lifestyle expectations. Thank God for Vinted. All of those pressures exist for the average family in Ireland today alongside the rise in the basic cost of living such as grocery bills, electricity bills, fuel and transport costs. Parents are racing from pillar to post working very hard to bring in the income to cover what feel like everyday bills and everyday bills are growing. We have to deliver further supports for working families in our upcoming budget.

I will use my time to propose five targeted interventions that we could look at, and I would ask the Minister of State to look at, to support ordinary families with school children and those with third-level students that they are supporting. We have to look at the reintroduction of energy credits if we face into another winter with soaring energy costs.

We must consider double child benefit payments. The two peak costly times for any working family are pre-back-to-school in August and the November-December period around the Christmas season. We should broaden eligibility for the back-to-school allowance for those in receipt of social welfare and just outside of the social welfare eligibility category.

While there is no Department of Education and Youth mandated school device policy, I am hearing from constituents right across Limerick that more and more schools are bringing in a one-to-one device policy. It is up to each individual secondary school to do that but they are trying to follow the Department's guidance on keeping pace with technology and ensuring children are digital ready, and to access resources that are available for secondary school students online and for uniformity, schools are bringing in a one-to-one policy where the parents are asked to get Chromebooks or a particular type of device, usually at lower cost or as low as possible. For some parents, if they have two children in their household with that required in September, they are facing an additional bill of nearly €1,000 before the put a shirt on the child's back going to school. In light of the increased popularity of these devices in secondary schools and the fact that we want our children to be digitally enabled, we need to introduce some sort of scheme to cover the cost of those devices for families.

We need to consider reform of the Student Universal Support Ireland, SUSI, means-testing to exclude the earnings of the student. While I welcome that we broadened the threshold for eligibility for a SUSI grant and, in fact, a household can be earning up to €120,000 now and be eligible for a SUSI grant, the catch is that the student's earnings are taken into consideration. We should free up the students altogether, exclude them from the determination of the means test for the household, and allow them to juggle their school requirements with some part-time work. It would mean that we would not have to increase the expenditure on the SUSI grant but that more people are allowed to support themselves, as they are able to, through their third-level experience.

Those are my suggestions. I look forward to talking to the Minister of State and our party colleagues further as we approach the budget for 2027.

We have to keep families with small mouths to feed at the forefront of our minds when we are developing that budget.

Senator Joe Conway: I am delighted to see my fellow midlander, the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, here again. He is welcome back.

Senator Casey said that the measures taken recently were evidence of "steady considered governing." I accept an awful lot of that because, when taken into the panoply of interventions that are used across Europe, the interventions the Government has made amounts to €750 million and *per capita* they are as generous as anywhere in the OECD countries. That is to be welcomed. However, there are 300,000 people in arrears with their energy bills. According to data from the charity, ALONE, approximately 40% of older people have reported that they

tolerate the cold to save on heating. If that is the case, it is a poor story to be telling in a country that is alleged to be one of the wealthiest in the world.

The first thing that we should do is look at the campus here in Leinster House. Today, I welcomed a couple of visitors and they came into the hall. While I waited for them to get their badges, I happened to lean casually on the radiator perch in the hall to find that it was glowing hot. It is late afternoon and the temperature outside is 16°C. This morning, the temperature was easily that and was probably more. Why on earth have we got central heating on in this campus at this time of year? It defies description. I would not think there is a sensible household in the country that is burning oil, or whatever is burned here, to have the place heated. We should start looking at our own campus and our own backyard.

The greatest practical measure we could introduce nationally to save on expensive imports of oil would be, for the next few months until, heaven help us, this géarchéim sa Mheánoirthear or emergency in the Middle East, is to ask the Government to impose a temporary restriction of an 80 km/h speed limit nationally. We would save a fortune on imported oil and gas that way.

Sometimes we exaggerate the poverty and penury that exist in this State. Back in the 1980s and 1990s I was the sole earner as a lowly-paid primary schoolteacher and we had three kids. We got no State handouts other than the children's allowance, which was meagre enough at the time. We got no SUSI grants. We did that because we made the conscious decision that one of the parents would stay at home and bring up the kids. That decision took all this business of childcare out of it. Essentially, what we were doing was sentencing ourselves to a life of penury then but I rejoice that the investment paid off so well in the fact that we have brought up kids who are contributing hugely to the economy and are a credit to themselves and, I hope, are a credit to their parents. That was done with remarkable effort. There was no such thing as entertainment for a lot of families then. People lived inside. The television was the only entertainment. As for getting grants for laptops, laptops were unheard of and if they were, we would not be getting them. That sort of stuff did not exist at all. Even the most minuscule level of income, if people were working in the public service, rendered them ineligible for a SUSI or as it was then, a county council grant.

When we talk about measures that we can take to battle these outrageous happenings in the Middle East and Ukraine, we have to be prudent and look at our own finances because, as a country, we cannot continue to have a knee-jerk response with bailouts and dole outs. They are very necessary at the moment but sooner or later, the pot of money will run dry and nobody will thank us, as two Legislatures here, if we responded in a populist way slinging money at the problems that occur. We have to take practical measures. They do not cost money in the first place but generate a big saving. My suggestion of a reduced national speed limit, as they say nowadays in that awful cliché, has to be a no-brainer.

I applaud the level of response by the Government. It has been generous. I applaud it with a very strongly flashing amber light because I am very worried about a constant repetition of intervention and paying off interest groups. There was a trade unionist in the 1980s called Sid Weighell who was the head of the National Union of Railwaymen and he used to say that people got money because of the “philosophy of the pig trough - those with the biggest snouts get the biggest share”. We have to watch the interest groups who cry the loudest and look after the purse that belongs to the average Joe.

An Cathaoirleach: On that note, the Senator is no average Joe. Anois, an Seanadóir Duffy.

Senator Mark Duffy: I thank the Minister of State for being in the House this afternoon for this important motion. I also thank Fianna Fáil for tabling the motion.

There is no doubt that people across the country are feeling the pinch and are under pronounced pressure. That situation came to boil over the past number of weeks. It is worth reiterating that like the illegal invasion of Ukraine by Russia, another external factor in Iran has caused huge upheaval in fuel prices and other energy costs, which has affected agricultural contractors, hauliers, anyone who works in the transport industry and, indeed, individual households. People are feeling the pressure but the Government has responded substantially with the intervention that was made either side of Easter. As has been outlined, the intervention was made in a reactionary way to respond to a real and existential crisis that many operators faced because of the pressures of price hikes. There must be an immediate response, which there has been with a further detail announced today across the agriculture and transport sectors. We also need to make sure that we take the long-term view to be more energy independent ourselves through the harnessing of our natural resources, be that wind, more gas reserves off the coast of County Mayo, where I am from, where there is untapped potential in the Inishkea fields or be it supporting homeowners individually, like has been done, by targeting the most vulnerable who are in receipt of a fuel allowance to a 100% retrofit of their homes. It is a substantial scheme that is helping the most vulnerable.

We are all in politics and we all knock on doors. We often see different types of living standards. Some people are really under a lot of pressure and are in need of support. The full retrofit of homes is an incredibly positive scheme. It has led to a marked improvement in reducing costs for people and improving air quality in homes. That scheme needs to be broadened as much as possible.

The deregulation of solar energy over the past number of years has led to very positive improvements along with measures like the EnergyCloud, which gives people a tank of hot water overnight. When there is an oversupply of electricity that the grid cannot take, EnergyCloud can kick in. This is a good example. A total of €450 million a year is wasted on unused energy because the grid cannot handle it.

6 o'clock

It is something that we need to consider strategically, to make sure that we have storage capture ability for our towns and villages in order that we can benefit from that wasted energy. The State should consider this and ensure that we have reduced costs and more independence at times of crisis. Just last year during Storm Éowyn we saw our vulnerabilities, with power outages going on for weeks in some cases. We need to think in the short term about immediate supports to keep the economy moving and the supply chains undisrupted and unaffected as much as possible. We also need to allow these moments to reiterate the critical need for improvement in our grid infrastructure and the critical importance of having strong renewable energy projects that benefit local communities and the country, backed up by gas reserves. In Ireland we import 80% of our gas and have limited storage beyond a couple of days. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, discussed this in the House earlier today. They spoke about broadening that up to around 90 days of storage, which would

be very important because we are importing 80% of our gas, with only 20% coming from the Corrib gas field off the coast of Mayo. There is huge potential there to do more and to give us more of the independence that we need. We need to mitigate the vulnerabilities that are there at the moment. When we see dictators and aggressors weaponising energy and using it to threaten and undermine other states, it reiterates the importance of us as an island nation making sure that we can stand on our own two feet as much as possible. Finally, in terms of supports for individual homeowners who are feeling the pressure, we need to do everything we can, whether that is extending the fuel allowance or supporting full energy retrofits and upgrades. The latter can make a marked difference in decarbonising the economy and reducing bills for those most affected.

Senator Conor Murphy: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit. The motion tonight is a brave attempt by the Government parties to put a bit of a sticking plaster over the discontent that spilled onto our roads over the past number of weeks. The offering by the Government in response gives only basic supports to those in the haulage and farming industries and little else for the majority of the public. There is nothing for home heating oil, only delayed increases in the carbon tax and only temporary reductions in excise duties on petrol, diesel and marked gas oil.

In a time of abundance the Government's largesse has been very selective. Last week we learned of a predicted general Government surplus of over €9 billion for this year, with another predicted €9 billion for the following year. That makes the introduction of an emergency budget an option that is open to the Government. The reality of life for the majority of citizens across this State is that they are counting every euro like they never have before. The cost of food and basic groceries has skyrocketed and the cost of fuel and home heating oil is soaring. These are the necessities of life; not luxuries. The energy regulator, as Senator Joe Conway said, published figures yesterday confirming that almost 317,000 households were behind on their electricity bill in February. More than half of these households are in debt for over 90 days and the number is growing every day. The average amount now owed stands at almost €500, which is an increase of almost €65 on last year.

The motion congratulates the Government for its prudent fiscal management but it seems to have forgotten already that ordinary workers, lorry drivers, and farmers were left with no option but to take to the roads to make their voices heard. This is an example of how out of touch the Government has become. Its fiscal management brought the State to a standstill.

Sinn Féin has brought a sensible proposal to the Government to introduce an emergency budget that cuts the cost of electricity by delivering energy credits to families and reduces the tax on fuel, thereby bringing it to affordable levels. We also need a social welfare package that supports people who are struggling, including carers, older people and disabled people and a permanent cut to the universal social charge that will put money back in workers' pockets. If the Government wants to talk up its annual progress report that is fine but for citizens across this State, the key takeaway is that at a time of unprecedented wealth the Government does not recognise their struggles in the here and now. According to the Taoiseach, they can wait until October's budget for any help that may come, if at all.

I am pleased about the predictions of a budget surplus and that the economy is resilient but there is so much more that could be done to help people who are struggling. The motion

congratulates the Government but the measures have fallen far short. That has been the clear message from the people who protested, and since then, in terms of the real experience of struggling families on the ground. I do not see how my party could support a motion that gives credit to measures that have fallen far short of what is required to give genuine relief to people at this time.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Robert Troy): I thank Senators Casey and Ryan for bringing this motion before the House this evening. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the recently published annual progress report and the Government's response to recent energy price pressures.

The annual progress report is a key part of both the annual budgetary cycle and the European fiscal framework. It sets out the Department of Finance's latest assessment in respect of the economic and fiscal outlook, as well as the risks we face in the years ahead. Before turning to the economic outlook, it is important to contextualise the forecasts. This year's report was, once again, prepared against the backdrop of heightened global uncertainty. In recent weeks we have seen a major shock to global energy markets with disruption affecting more than 20 million barrels of oil per day. While recent steps towards de-escalation are welcome, volatility remains and even if the current ceasefire holds, the economic effects are likely to take time to fully unwind. We have seen significant damage to oil and gas infrastructure which, even if hostilities were to permanently end today, will take years to repair and return to their full capacity.

As a small, highly open economy and, importantly, a net energy importer, Ireland is exposed to movements in international energy prices. Indeed, recent price increases are already placing real pressures on households and businesses across the country. That is why the Government has acted decisively with a €750 million package to reduce costs at the petrol pump, support those most at risk of energy poverty and assist key sectors including haulage, construction, agriculture, fisheries and quarries that are critical to keeping our economy moving.

Before going into further details on the measures we have introduced, I would like to give Members an update on the assessment of the Irish economy as set out in the annual progress report. Despite external pressures facing the Irish economy, domestic activity has shown considerable resilience. Nowhere is that more evident than in the labour market. Employment stands at 2.83 million, a record high, and is expected to exceed 3 million within the next five years. Likewise, the unemployment rate remains low, having stayed below 5%, a level consistent with full employment, for 16 consecutive quarters. This robust labour market has supported consumer spending and domestic demand. Modified domestic demand, a proxy for underlying domestic activity, grew by 4.9% in 2025. This performance reflects the strength of our enterprise base and the policy choices this Government has made in recent years. However, this resilience must not give rise to complacency. In the current environment, risks remain clearly tilted to the downside.

I will now turn to the economic outlook. Given fast-moving geopolitical developments, the endorsed projections in the annual progress report should be viewed as a reference or baseline scenario, providing a useful benchmark against which new developments will be assessed. Indeed, in recognition of the turbulent backdrop, the report also includes two alternative scenarios examining how the outlook could vary under different energy-price developments.

Importantly however, despite the varying levels of economic effects, under each scenario the economy is expected to continue to grow. In the near term, the outlook is largely shaped by external developments beyond our control. Under the baseline scenario, inflation is projected at 3.3% this year, based on relatively benign assumptions regarding developments in the Middle East. Under a severe scenario, however, inflation could rise to around 4.5%, with adverse effects on both growth and employment. While I would very much stress that this is a severe scenario, it is something that the Government must be prepared for.

Indeed, the Government has consistently argued for running budgetary surpluses precisely so that we have the fiscal capacity to respond when shocks arise.

Looking beyond the short term, the outlook is shaped by more structural factors. Demographic change will significantly affect the economy, influencing labour supply while increasing pressures on public services. At the same time, advances in artificial intelligence are reshaping how we work, the nature of the jobs we work in and the skills required for those jobs. Many of these factors are assessed in the report via scenario analysis. While these transformational changes come along with challenges, they also present major opportunities and we must prepare accordingly. That is why the Government continues to invest in critical infrastructure, including energy, water, housing and transport, and in people, making Ireland an attractive location in which to invest, to work and to live into the future.

I now want to say a few words about the public finances. For this year, the Department of Finance is projecting a general Government surplus of €9.2 billion, equivalent to 2% per cent of modified national income. This surplus has been underpinned by the economic resilience I have been referring to. However, we must also be realistic about the risks ahead. Our revenue base remains heavily reliant on volatile windfall corporate tax receipts, leaving us exposed to any downturn in the multinational sector. To give Senators a sense of what that looks like in practice, income tax, corporation tax, VAT and excise duties account for over 90% of all tax revenue. Last year, corporation tax generated around one third of our tax revenue. That is a significant portion of the funding model for this country and while we are projecting to run a surplus this year, we must be honest that interventions and once-off measures reduce our ability to prioritise day-to-day services and spending. That is why we continue to build long-term resilience through the Future Ireland Fund and the Infrastructure, Climate and Nature Fund. I am happy to say that close to €23 billion will have been transferred into these funds by the end of this year.

More broadly, we are committed to making the critical investments needed consistent with sound public finances, as outlined in our medium-term fiscal structural plan. Indeed, this approach will continue to give us the flexibility to respond quickly and effectively to challenges that may arise. We must also focus on diversification of our tax base where possible to continue to future-proof our economy. This is an area I am focused on through Ireland for Finance, the Government strategy for the international financial services sector. This is a sector which can continue to develop, while also generating opportunities for indigenous firms to scale. We have a competitive edge here. From research and development tax credits to the national enterprise hub and local enterprise offices, we are implementing policy which supports diversification and innovation. Last week, I had the opportunity to highlight this on the international stage in south-east Asia, and it is regrettable that a recent multi-ministerial visit to Canada had to be

postponed. These are new markets we need to exploit and tap into to ensure we continue to run budgetary surpluses.

Today we announced a package of fuel supports that will help those who are at the forefront of the global energy crisis, which has been instigated far from our borders. Under the fuel support scheme, approximately 120,000 farmers and 1,500 full-time agricultural contractors will receive Government support. This package, along with previously announced supports, will deliver an effective reduction of €274 in the purchase of 1,000 litres of green diesel. We have reduced the rates of excise duty applying to petrol, auto diesel and marked gas oil, commonly known as "green diesel". Additionally, the National Oil Reserve Agency levy has been reduced by 2 cent per litre of fuel. These reductions will remain in effect until 31 July 2026. The total reductions will reduce the cost of petrol by 27 cent per litre, diesel by 32 cent per litre and green diesel by 7.4 cent per litre. In addition, the Government also deferred the planned increase in carbon tax scheduled for 1 May until October. This will provide additional support for consumers of green diesel and other affected fuels, such as kerosene heating oil, natural gas and solid fuels.

To protect those at risk of fuel poverty, the Government has extended the fuel allowance season, which would have normally run for 28 weeks, by a further four weeks. This will result in additional payments of €152 to each of the nearly 470,000 fuel allowance recipients who comprise over one quarter of households in Ireland. This means that a typical household receiving fuel allowance will have received €1,216 over the course of the fuel allowance season. In budget 2026, the Government previously announced that VAT on electricity and gas will remain at the lowest possible level of 9% until the end of 2030 to help to mitigate costs and address energy poverty.

Further to this, we have increased the maximum repayment allowable under the diesel rebate scheme from 7.5 cent up to 12 cent per litre of diesel. This is a scheme which is available to qualifying licensed haulage and passenger transport operators and has been backdated to January and will apply until 30 June 2026. These changes will keep the economy moving.

Ultimately, it is clear that we need to decouple from our reliance on fossil fuels to ensure energy independence. As an example of recent progress, Ireland has recently achieved 8 GW of installed onshore renewable electricity capacity, marking a significant step forward in the transition to securing our future with homegrown renewable energy.

Senator Duffy made the point that we need to be concentrated and moving towards renewable energy. The old saying is that we should never waste a crisis. This should focus the Government's efforts. We must redouble our efforts in the transition to renewable energy. We need, in particular, to exploit the vast amounts of renewable energy on the western seaboard.

I am conscious, despite what some may project, that no Government across the world can fully shield all households and businesses from rising fuel and energy costs. Any fair-minded person would say that the suite of measures announced by the Government and costed at over €750 million is a significant response to real pressures being felt across Ireland, and globally, and is one of the most comprehensive support packages *per capita* in the European Union.

This year's annual progress report highlights that the global environment has become more uncertain and unpredictable. At the same time, Ireland is entering this period from a position of strength. Employment is at record levels, the public finances are in surplus and the economy

has repeatedly demonstrated its capacity to adapt and recover from shocks. This resilience has not happened by chance. It reflects deliberate choices to strengthen the foundations of the economy and to manage the public finances in a prudent and sustainable way. That prudence and the position it has put us in does not give us licence to spend unsustainably, but does allow us to act in a responsible and targeted manner. That is the approach this Government will continue to take.

I will address a number of the specific points raised in the course of the debate. Senator Ryan made a number of suggestions. The Government has been clear that as we frame budget 2027, it is very much our intention to ensure that working families get a break. The most recent budget took the decision to invest heavily in housing and infrastructure and supporting jobs, but it is acknowledged that we need to ensure that working families get the support they deserve and need in the upcoming budget.

Senator Conway spoke about hearing anecdotally that some people are staying longer in bed because of the cost of fuel. The point I would make is that we are all constituency operators. Nobody should be doing that. If there is somebody who is unintentionally falling through the net, the community welfare officer is there to ensure that people can get that extra benefit on top of their fuel allowance and old age pension. Exceptional needs payments are available. I ask everybody to use their good offices in their respective constituencies to ensure that people are aware of that additional support and do not feel ashamed or embarrassed to come forward to avail of it.

It is there to be used and I encourage people to use it. I thank all Senators for their contributions this evening. I look forward to engaging with them in the months ahead.

Senator Pat Casey: I thank the Minister of State for his contribution. I welcome the acknowledgement that budget 2027 will be focused on the family income and the people who are most pressurised in society now. We must ensure that going to work pays a better dividend than not working. I am delighted to see the change in focus for budget 2027.

Ireland's success is incomparable if we think of our resilience and what we have gone through even in the last seven years, with Brexit, the Covid pandemic, the war in Ukraine and now the Iran war. On every one of those occasions, we have been in a position to intervene to provide temporary measures because of the fiscal management of the economy. While we might have differences, spending windfall taxes on day-to-day expenditure is not the policy anyone should follow. We should learn from the past. We have done that before and we have seen the trouble it got us into where we spent all the taxes that were coming in. We have to appreciate that we are putting money away to protect our pensions into the future in relation to the deficit in the National Pensions Reserve Fund. The €23 billion we have put into those funds is welcome.

I do not know if I felt the same heater Senator Conway felt in the lobby, but having it on was a bit of a contradiction. Sometimes I wonder if we can not just install thermostats that shut the heaters off when a certain temperature is reached. Senator Conway and I are probably of a different generation from a lot of people here and sometimes we forget what we have come through. Anybody who came out of college in the late 1970s or 1980s came into a completely different Ireland from the one we see today. Sometimes we forget that and take it for granted. When I came out of college, we had high inflation, the highest levels of unemployment and

huge industrial disputes where we were losing hundreds of thousands of workdays every year. The thing that put us on the pathway to success was the social partnership that was agreed in the late eighties. We need to revisit social partnership and re-engage with all the sectors in it in order that we have a stable economy and do not have the issues that arose recently. We do not want the outside world and companies considering FDI looking in and saying Ireland has an unstable economy. We cannot go back there again. We witnessed it, we experienced it and we know what it was like. Many people today have never witnessed that. Social partnership laid the foundation for the success of this State and we must revisit it.

The Government has done what is right and has introduced targeted measures. We cannot spend windfall taxes on reducing excise and VAT. We just cannot keep doing that. We must learn from the past. My colleague Senator Dee Ryan spoke about what we are doing to deal with costs for school-going children. That is helping working families again and I welcome it. I am delighted to hear that budget 2027 will focus on working families and make it worthwhile for people to go to work, which is of key importance. I also thank the Government for the interventions for two specific sectors. Those interventions in haulage and agriculture work their way down to supermarket prices. If we had not intervened, all those prices would be going up in the next day or two.

Question put:

The Seanad divided: Tá, 21; Níl, 9.	
Tá	Níl
Ahearn, Garret.	Andrews, Chris.
Blaney, Niall.	Clonan, Tom.
Byrne, Cathal.	Collins, Joanne.
Casey, Pat.	Cosgrove, Nessa.
Clifford-Lee, Lorraine.	Harmon, Laura.
Comyn, Alison.	McCormack, Maria.
Costello, Teresa.	Murphy, Conor.
Crowe, Ollie.	Noonan, Malcolm.
Curley, Shane.	Tully, Pauline.
Daly, Paul.	
Duffy, Mark.	
Fitzpatrick, Mary.	
Gallagher, Robbie.	
McCarthy, Aubrey.	
Murphy O'Mahony, Margaret.	
Nelson Murray, Linda.	
O'Loughlin, Fiona.	
O'Reilly, Joe.	
Rabbitte, Anne.	
Ryan, Dee.	
Scahill, Gareth.	

Tellers: Tá, Senators Paul Daly and Garret Ahearn; Níl, Senators Conor Murphy and Joanne Collins.

Question declared carried.

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome to the Distinguished Visitors Gallery Senator Devlin Robinson from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Allegheny County to be precise, who, along with Mary Jo Daley passed the legislation creating the Pennsylvania-Ireland Trade Commission. He is here to attend the Global Irish Civic Forum. I think he claimed he single-handedly got Aer Lingus to establish direct flights from Pittsburgh to Ireland. Let anyone else dispute it. I thank him for being here.

When is it proposed to sit again?

Senator Garret Ahearn: Tomorrow at 9.30 a.m.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar athló ar 6.38 p.m. go dtí 9.30 a.m., Déardaoin, an 30 Aibreán 2026.

The Seanad adjourned at 6.38 p.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Thursday, 30 Aibreán 2026.