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DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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SEANAD ÉIREANN

Déardaoín, 30 Aibreán 2026

Thursday, 30 April 2026

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

Machnamh agus Paidir.

Prayer and Reflection.

Teachtaireachtaí ón Dáil - Messages from Dáil

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I have received the following messages from Dáil Éireann. Dáil Éireann has passed the International Co-operation (Omagh Bombing Inquiry) Bill 2026 on 29 April 2026, to which the agreement of Seanad Éireann is desired. Dáil Éireann has agreed, on 29 April 2026, to the amendments made by Seanad Éireann to the Mental Health Bill 2024.

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: The Cathaoirleach has received notice from the following Senators that they propose to raise the following matters:

Senator Maria Byrne - The need for the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration to make a statement on including Limerick as one of the locations as a phase 1 venue under the implementation plan for the Family Courts Act 2024.

Senator Gareth Scahill - The need for the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment to provide an update on the solar PV scheme for medically vulnerable customers, in particular on progress on engagement with eligible customers.

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.

Senator Mark Duffy - The need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on reducing the maximum payment under the drugs payment scheme.

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 Joe O'Reilly - The need for the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration to provide an update on the provision of a women's refuge for victims of domestic violence in County Cavan.

The matters raised by the Senators are suitable for discussion and the Cathaoirleach has selected Senators Maria Byrne, Gareth Scahill, Cathal Byrne and Mark Duffy 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

Courts Service

Senator Maria Byrne: I thank the Minister for coming to discuss this all-important issue. I am very conscious of the fact that Limerick is shovel-ready in terms of the family courts. I welcome the Minister's announcement of the scheme and that he is looking at rolling out phase 1. As the Minister is probably aware, there are two courthouses in Limerick. There is one on Merchant's Quay and one on Mulgrave Street. The courts are all running in parallel with one another. A number of courthouses are available. We are at a very advanced stage, although behind Dublin and Cork. There are about ten courtrooms altogether between the two buildings. Certainly, I know that a lot of the family courts are taking place there as it is. Tusla is just up the road, which deals with family cases.

There could be two separate entities where criminal issues could be dealt with in one courthouse and family issues dealt with in the other courthouse. In family courts, there are very sensitive issues. Sometimes, people do not want to meet others or they are in a stressed state and need the family supports. That is why I am asking the Minister to consider Limerick in phase 1.

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I thank Senator Byrne for raising this very important issue. I commend her on her observation of what was a very significant announcement made last week by me. The decision was made by Government last week as well. That decision concerned the implementation plan for the commencement of the Family Courts Act which, as the Senator knows, was passed by the Houses back in 2024. It proposes an extremely radical reform of the family law courts throughout the country.

Obviously, what cannot happen is that I just designate that on one day, all the family law courts will be transformed into the modern family law courts envisaged by the legislation. That is why I need a phased implementation plan. As the Senator is aware, last week, I announced an implementation plan for the Act. It will result in very significant reforms of the family justice system - probably the most significant reforms of the family justice system in the history of the State. The plan provides for a phased approach for the commencement and implementation of the Act. It is envisaged that implementation will proceed in three phases, allowing time and space to engage with stakeholders, evaluate progress and identify any issues as they arise. A phased approach that provides for both regional and procedural elements to

commence at relevant points during the entire implementation process has been deemed the most practical solution. It also allows for a region-by-region commencement, bringing new family courts into operation in selected locations over a series of stages before a full national roll-out.

The intention is that once we have the new family court system up and running we will, as the Senator very sensibly indicated, have family courts in one location. Around them will be all the necessary back-up services that are required by people who find themselves before the family courts, such as access to Tusla and, more importantly, access to mediation services. This is so people can try to mediate a solution as opposed to having a court-imposed solution. As the Senator indicated, it is not appropriate for people involved in family court proceedings to find themselves in public areas where there are criminal cases going on, for instance, or other disputes going on. We need to recognise that when it comes to family law disputes, they are highly sensitive disputes. We need to go out of way to ensure we can try to facilitate mediated resolution of the disputes. We want to make the environment as amenable as possible for people who find themselves before the courts.

As the Senator indicated, phase 1 will commence in January 2027. Three locations will be initially selected to commence operating as family courts in the new system. The locations will require a family District Court, a family Circuit Court and a family High Court. Judges with specific expertise in dealing with families and family law matters will be assigned to these first court locations on a full-time basis. That process is already ongoing. I am engaging with the presidents of the courts to try to identify the specialist judges. I hear what the Senator is saying about Limerick and its preparedness. I have not made a decision yet, but the Senator certainly has first-mover advantage in that she is the first representative who has come to me to indicate they have a preference for it.

To a large extent, it will be based on factors such as the preparedness of the buildings, whether buildings or Tusla services are available and what other facilities are available for the other court work to continue operating there. The Senator indicated to me there are two courthouses in Limerick and there could possibly be a mechanism of separating family law from the other types of work. I will certainly have a look at that and I thank her for raising the issue. I will have to announce the three locations in the next number of months. I will certainly take into account what the Senator has said in respect of Limerick.

Senator Maria Byrne: I thank the Minister for his positive response and the fact he will engage and think about it. I appreciate that he will consider Limerick when he is making his decision. I am not putting any words in his mouth but certainly I believe that Limerick is ready and has the capacity and availability. Obviously, we have Tusla right on our doorstep. The mid-west regional office is only up the road. Certainly we have all of the wraparound services. I look forward to working with the Minister in relation to it.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank Senator Byrne. Whether or not Limerick makes it into phase 1, the good news for the country is that an implementation plan is in place. It sets out three very important timelines. At present we are in the pre-phase 1 designation stage, in terms of preparing for the commencement of phase 1 in January 2027, when three locations will be identified. In phase 2, which will commence in January 2028, we will identify a much broader range of courts around the country. The following year it will operate nationally.

I know Senator Byrne is not saying this but sometimes people can ask why we cannot do it all in one go. It would create chaos if I did it in one go. It would mean that everybody would be told that on 1 January, every court in the country would change around. I am sure I would get some plaudits from people saying I have pushed this on but it would be a disaster. This is why it is important to phase it and to have an implementation plan. It is a very detailed plan and I would urge people to look at it. Certainly my officials will engage with stakeholders. I am pleased that people are looking to be part of phase 1, and certainly we will give careful consideration to Limerick. I cannot guarantee anything, as Senator Byrne knows-----

Senator Maria Byrne: That is okay.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: -----but it is important to know the process is ongoing.

Departmental Schemes

Senator Gareth Scahill: The Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, is very welcome back to the Chamber. Today I want to talk about vulnerable customers and the solar PV scheme for medically vulnerable customers. In January and February 2025 Storm Éowyn hit our country. I do not know whether too many people in the Chamber know that my area was very badly hit. My house was out of power for 13 nights. We have a very old demographic in our part of the country and a lot of these people were on a vulnerable user list. From engaging with these people, they do not feel they benefited any extra by being on this list. Vulnerable customers are defined as people who may be put at risk due to interruption of their electricity supply or gas supply, particularly those relying on electricity to operate life-supporting machines. Priority is given to people on life-protecting devices, assistive technology supporting independent living and medical devices. In trying to support these people, and ensure they are better prepared for future events, I came across the solar PV scheme for medically vulnerable customers. It is to include all homeowners who register with the energy suppliers under the life support category of the priority services register. These homes have dependence on electrically supplied equipment, including medical equipment, life-protecting devices and assistive technologies.

The solar PV scheme for medically vulnerable customers is a targeted initiative designed to support the installation of solar photovoltaic panels in households registered under the life support category of the priority services register. It was good to see that the scheme was extended last October. At the time, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, said 470 homes benefited from the scheme, and it was being extended to include eligible homeowners who are registered under the life support category of the priority services register. This is not a scheme that is very well known about. When we do a search we see that all the onus is on the electricity providers to engage with people on the register and find out about their eligibility, and then put them in contact with a solar provider to see whether the scheme will work for them. We have an opportunity to scale this up an awful lot further than this. We should be bringing it to the vulnerable users rather than putting the onus on them and the providers to do this.

One of the things I saw when I was looking up the scheme is that the majority of providers have online applications but, historically, vulnerable users are more limited in doing this particular job. I hope that through the Minister of State and the Department we can simplify

the scheme and roll it out to an awful lot more people. I believe there is an appetite out there and the time is right to do it. Since Storm Éowyn last year my area has had ten or 12 power outages. I have spoken to people with ventilators and oxygen at home, and this is a real worry and stress point for them. It is great to see that a scheme is in place but I want the opportunity to highlight it and try to push it forward.

Minister of State at the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Timmy Dooley): I thank Senator Scahill for raising what I believe it is a very important issue. As he has rightly identified, the solar PV for the medically vulnerable scheme is a targeted scheme for the installation, as he has identified, of solar photovoltaic panels for household customers who have registered on the life support category of the priority services register. These are homes that have a dependence on electrically powered equipment, including medical equipment, life-protecting devices and assistive technology. Examples include requiring dialysis machines, which we are all familiar with, or respirators. As such, these households may have a higher energy demand than the average user. The scheme is designed to go some way towards helping to reduce their energy costs but Senator Scahill has identified an equally important component, which is that it provides electricity when the grid in particular isolated areas is impacted through storms or other interruptions.

The scheme provides a fully funded 2 kW solar PV system for eligible households. This includes the survey, design, supply, installation and post works on the building energy rating. Senator Scahill is wondering about the progress to date. The scheme was launched in 2022, with an overall budget of approximately €20 million. The SEAI reports that 137 systems were installed in 2024 at a cost of almost €1.8 million. Last year about 473 systems were installed, with expenditure of about €2.4 million. We are ramping it up slowly. This year we will see a major expansion of delivery, with an allocation of €11.7 million. This is expected to deliver about 1,900 homes. To date in 2026 about €1.17 million has been spent, with 171 homes installed and a further 60 in the process of being completed. This shows that the pace of the deployment is ramping up.

Senator Scahill is raising the scheme and I hope that other Senators and Members of the Parliament will generally recognise the scheme. It is not necessarily widely known about. There are a lot of schemes that are oversubscribed but this one is not. We all know vulnerable users and we often use social media to promote certain schemes. This is one where all of us collectively could do a little bit more, considering specifically that the money is available.

Initially the scheme was limited to individuals who were on the life support category of the priority services register in 2022, when the scheme was launched, but due to the strong uptake and positive impact already observed the scheme is now in the process of being extended to include all homeowners who are registered on the life support category regardless of when they were registered. Customers are registered by their supplier and we are pushing the suppliers to do this.

Most energy suppliers have agreed to participate in the scheme, with some suppliers more advanced in their programmes than others. Each energy supplier will have their own arrangement with the SEAI on which they proceed with the installation of this, and it is dependent on the capacity of the suppliers' individual solar PV installers and, of course, the location because this adds to the burden. The scheme is wholly managed by the registered

energy suppliers, with each of the suppliers contacting their own eligible customers directly, in line with the work plans of their solar PV installers.

It is important to note that suppliers, who manage the administrative aspects of the scheme under the SEAI, issue offers to eligible homeowners in batches, based on operational capacity. As regards the batch, obviously, the installers get the benefit of the grouping effect. Each participating supplier received an allocated amount of funding under its memorandum of understanding with the SEAI. Once the initial allocation is used, additional funding will be provided to ensure that all eligible households are offered access to the scheme within the budget allocation. Given the importance of the scheme and the fact that the expected spend this year will bring the total close to the overarching financial allocation, it is intended to commence a review of the scheme in 2026, towards budget 2027, and see how we can better advance the good work being done.

I thank the Senator for raising the matter. His raising it here will give further ventilation and amplification to a scheme that is very worthwhile.

Senator Gareth Scahill: I welcome that 1,900 homes will be included this year. It would be interesting to see how many vulnerable users there are and what percentage we are covering there. One of the people who contacted me about this said it would be great and would reduce their anxiety if they were able to get onto this scheme. In contacting their energy provider to inquire about the scheme, they were told there was nobody internally they could speak to, that it was done on a lottery system and that if they were ever picked, the provider would get in contact with them then. I would like to see if there were some sort of contact that public representatives could make on this with providers because it is very vague and there does not seem to be anybody taking responsibility in any of the providers for engaging with public representatives. That would be a great way of trying to make sure that those 1,900 potential houses can be targeted at those who need this most.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Certainly, the Department could take that up with the SEAI to make sure there is a greater level of connection or communication between those potential beneficiaries. I think the Senator asked how many were on the register. My understanding is that there are about 18,000 in total. The 1,900 figure would represent about 10% of that, if my sums are close, so we still have a bit to go. Not everybody will want solar and not everybody will see it as beneficial, but the Senator has identified a need and has clearly identified the capacity for the scheme to deliver for some. We will make every effort to improve the communication to get as many people into the scheme as possible. As I said, the overall future of the scheme will be looked at in the context of budget 2027. Again, it is too early to establish that, but I think we have seen the benefits of the scheme. Let us hope it can be continued into the future. Even if we get them, we would probably be at 15% with the ones that were done back to 2022. That is a good start, and then we could ramp it up to get all those 18,000, or as many as wanted, onto the scheme.

Technological Universities

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

Senator Cathal Byrne: I thank the Minister of State for coming in for this very important Commencement matter. This is about requesting an update from the Department about the South East Technological University Wexford campus. Regrettably, Wexford has the lowest number of people with a third level education degree. We are at about 37% as of census 2022, while the national average is 46%. This shows just how important the Wexford SETU campus will be. I am aware of the CPO being completed. I am aware of the detailed design, and the layout for the campus is under way. I am here to request a very important update on where this project is at and what we can do to work together to move it on. This is a unique campus. It will be the first campus in Ireland which will co-educate from primary school education to secondary school education, apprenticeships and then on to university status, all co-located on the one site. This is a unique, flagship campus but we have to move it on. The people of Wexford have been waiting too long for their own designated third level campus. There is fantastic work going on in St. Peter's College and the campus it has there, but the reality is that it is just not suitable for the scale of ambition people have for third level education in Wexford.

I would be very grateful to get an update from the Minister of State. I visited the site with the Minister, Deputy James Lawless, on 5 December, when he came to Wexford. We are now several months on and we just want a clear update on where we are at.

Minister of State at the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Emer Higgins): I thank Senator Cathal Byrne for raising this important matter on behalf of his fellow constituents in Wexford and for requesting an update on the proposed new campus for South East Technological University in Wexford.

The Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Deputy Lawless, as the Senator noted, has previously acknowledged that the SETU campus infrastructure in Wexford is not suitable and that there is a need for a campus that will meet the needs of learners and teaching staff. On the recent visit to the SETU campus to which the Senator referred, where the Minister was welcomed, he announced that he had instructed SETU and Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board to work together to develop a new, innovative proposal which will deliver a new tertiary campus in Wexford town.

As the Senator said, this is an exciting educational opportunity. It will be transformative for learners in Wexford and marks an important step in a collaborative journey for SETU and Waterford and Wexford ETB. This tertiary campus will support learners to reach their full potential by creating pathways and removing barriers to access. It will give learners of all ages, as the Senator said when he spoke about a co-located facility, a place where they can progress, upskill, reskill and innovate without having to leave County Wexford.

I understand that a number of engagements have taken place between SETU and Waterford and Wexford ETB and work is ongoing on developing a business case proposal, which is expected to be submitted to the Higher Education Authority later this year for evaluation.

This project is being progressed under the Department's technological sector strategic projects programme. If the preliminary business case is successfully evaluated, it will then move on to the next stage of the process, which is pre-tender - project design, planning and procurement strategy stage. This is a key stage of development, where the proposal will be

further refined, the design will be further advanced, and the procurement strategy and project execution plan will be developed.

I acknowledge the work done by Wexford County Council over recent years to identify an appropriate site for a permanent home for this fantastic Wexford campus. As part of this engagement, a preferred site was identified. Following a lengthy negotiation process between Wexford County Council and the vendor, agreement could not be reached on price.

Wexford County Council is now progressing the acquisition of a site totalling 48.5 acres by way of compulsory purchase order. The intention is that a proportion of this site will be used to facilitate a new Wexford campus for SETU and the remainder of the site will then be developed by Wexford County Council. Work on the CPO process remains ongoing by the council.

Funding requirements for the proposal will be informed by the relevant evaluation processes and funding availability in the context of the Department's overall capital budget. Specific funding has been set aside within the Department's budget towards the cost of the site.

The Minister has always been fully supportive of the need to expand the tertiary education footprint in the south east and the need for the stakeholders - SETU, Waterford and Wexford ETB and the local authority - to continue to work collaboratively to advance this ambition.

The Senator stated that this will be a flagship campus and he would like us to work together. To reiterate, the Minister is very happy to work with him and other stakeholders in the area, whether that is SETU, the ETB or the local authority, to ensure this project can develop as quickly as possible. I thank the Senator for his efforts in leading this drive.

Senator Cathal Byrne: I thank the Minister of State for her response. The reason I am so passionate about this project is that I have seen so many people my age and older who did not have the opportunity to go to third level in their own county but went to Dublin, Waterford or Cork and, unfortunately, did not come back.

There is a real opportunity here to stop the brain drain from County Wexford into other areas and use this campus to drive jobs, economic growth and economic opportunity in our county. I thank the Minister of State for the update. I will work with her, the Minister and the Department to ensure that this project continues to be driven forward. If necessary, I will raise it again to ensure it is kept at the top of the agenda.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank the Senator for being such a passionate advocate for this. It is really important that our politicians are champions of key local issues. This is a key local issue for his area, not only for the people he represents in Wexford but also for the region as a whole. I fully accept the Senator's point in relation to the census figures he cited earlier. According to the 2022 census, 37% of people in Wexford have third level degrees, which is substantially below the 46% average across Ireland. The second point the Senator made, which is particularly interesting, was that many of those people then go on to live in Dublin or somewhere else. It is important that we are investing in our educational facilities in areas like Wexford. It is also important that we continue to invest in job creation and in job-growing innovations locally.

The tertiary education campus is just one component of an overall master plan for the area, which will include a range of other different uses, namely, housing, schools, sports facilities and transport links. Wexford County Council will lead out on the development of this overall master plan for the area. It is these kinds of innovative, visionary projects that we need to back, both financially and from a resource perspective, to ensure that we can deliver the balanced geographical growth we want in this country. I thank the Senator for championing this project, which the Minister supports.

Healthcare Policy

Senator Mark Duffy: I thank the Minister of State for being here. My Commencement matter arises from work I have done with Councillor Ben Ward in Tullow, County Carlow. I have also worked with Senators Garret Ahearn, Maria Byrne, Garret Kelleher and P. J. Murphy on this issue. We are making a clear request for a reduction in the maximum payment under the drugs payment scheme, DPS, from €80 to €60 in budget 2027. I know that budgets are finite, but there is a commitment in the programme for Government to explore a reduction in the maximum payment. The people affected are in difficult medical situations and perhaps have long-term illnesses. In a time when the cost of living is high, we need to try to take away some of the pain of essential costs, such as medical bills.

Councillor Ward has written to the Tánaiste and Taoiseach about this matter, on which he is a very passionate advocate on behalf of many constituents in his area who have felt the pressure of the cost of living. The proposal is budgeted to cost approximately €45 million out of a €27 billion budget for health. I would welcome it being given consideration. There are demands across all Departments but, as I said, this would help vulnerable people. Spending on essential life-saving medication is not discretionary. The proposed reduction would ease the burden on people who are under pressure and have a profound positive impact. I would welcome if the Minister gave it consideration.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank Senator Duffy for raising this important issue on behalf of the people he represents in County Mayo. I am answering on behalf of the Minister for Health, Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill. In line with the commitments set out in the programme for Government, this Government will continue to prioritise improving the affordability of healthcare and medicines. This work will continue over the lifetime of this Government.

As the Senator is aware, the drugs payment scheme ensures that expenditure on approved prescribed medicines or medical appliances does not exceed a named threshold in a particular calendar month. The DPS is not means tested and is available to anyone ordinarily resident in Ireland. Currently, the DPS threshold is €80, meaning that no individual or family pays more than €80 a month on approved prescribed medicines or medical appliances. The DPS significantly reduces the cost burden for people with ongoing expenditure on medicines, with the State covering the complete cost of medicines, which can cost many thousands of euro once the monthly household cost is above the €80 threshold. Consideration of further changes to the DPS threshold, including the proposal to reduce it to €60, will be made in the context of current healthcare priorities and the budget available.

It is important to note that any significant reduction in the DPS threshold, as proposed by the Senator, would have cost implications for the State and could, therefore, place additional pressures on other areas of the health service. The Senator estimated that the measure could cost around €45 million. In that context, any adjustment to the threshold will need to be carefully considered, taking account of the finite resources available.

As the Senator is aware, the DPS forms part of a wider range of measures to support affordable access to healthcare and medicines. These measures include community drug schemes, expanded access to free GP care and the abolishment of public inpatient hospital charges for children and adults, all of which continue to support affordable access to quality healthcare.

People who cannot, without undue hardship, arrange for the provision of medical services for themselves and their dependants may be eligible for a medical card under the General Medical Services scheme. In accordance with the Health Act 1970, as amended, eligibility for a medical card is determined by the HSE.

The Senator mentioned a number of families he is dealing with who have difficult medical situations and long-term illnesses. I assure them that, in certain circumstances, the HSE may exercise discretion to grant a medical card where an applicant exceeds the income guidelines but faces difficult financial circumstances, such as additional costs arising from illness. Where an applicant does not qualify for a medical card, they can also be assessed for a GP visit card, which entitles them to free GP services. Individuals may also be eligible to claim tax relief at 20% on qualifying medical expenses, including prescribed medicines. I hope the Senator will agree that the HSE, the Minister and the Department of Health are investing heavily in making medicines more affordable and accessible for our population across the country, including in Mayo.

Senator Mark Duffy: I thank the Minister of State for her reply. The improvements and advancements in health outcomes in Ireland have been incredible. I know we give the HSE and the health service a fair bashing at times, but the advancements and improvements, including improved access to healthcare for the whole population, have been incredibly pronounced. That being said, in a cost-of-living crisis, consideration should be given in the next budget to further reducing the maximum payment. I ask for further engagement with the Taoiseach and Tánaiste to try to relieve the burden of these costs, which are, as I said, non-discretionary. They are life-saving and critical to those who pay in and need them.

I acknowledge the work of Councillor Ben Ward in County Carlow. He is very passionate about this matter on behalf of members of his community who have approached him. I see this in my home county of Mayo where people who are under pressure come into my office every week. There are good supports available through community welfare officers and Intreo offices, but a broad relief like the one proposed would have a very positive impact. I thank the Minister of State for considering this matter this morning.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I pay tribute to Councillor Ben Ward who, as the Senator said, has been an advocate for this, not just in Carlow but at a national level. I will bring the Senator's feedback and his constructive idea to the attention of the Minister for Health and the Minister

for Finance. It is important that it is discussed in the context of upcoming budgetary negotiations.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank healthcare workers across the country who deliver exceptional care to the population when they need it the very most. The Minister fully appreciates the importance of improving both affordability and accessibility to healthcare and medicines by patients in Ireland. As noted earlier, we have a brand new suite of measures to support this approach, helping to ensure affordable to quality healthcare and social care services while operating within budgetary constraints. Any adjustment to these measures, including the lowering of the drugs payment scheme, as has been proposed, needs to be carefully considered taking into account the finite resources available and the potential impact on wider healthcare service provision.

The State has heavily invested in medicines. State expenditure on medicines has grown substantially since 2021. It now accounts for almost €1 in every €8 of public health spending. Budget 2026 allocated €217 million in additional funding for medicines, and €30 million of this is available for new drugs funding. It should be noted that the year 1 cost of a new drug comes from the allocation for new medicines but once these medicines are approved for reimbursement the full cost of providing them can reach multiples of this initial cost as their uptake increases. That is the budgetary constraints within which we operate

Ireland is among the highest spenders on health across the EU, according to the OECD and has the third highest rate of State coverage of pharmaceutical expenditure in Europe. That is down to a lot of our healthcare workers and, indeed, pharmacists who deliver a fantastic service to the population. I thank them and I thank the Senator for raising this issue.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 10.12 a.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 10.32 a.m.

Sitting suspended at 10.12 a.m. and resumed at 10.32 a.m.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

Senator Garret Ahearn: The Order of Business is No. 1, motion regarding the proposed approval of Seanad Éireann of a meeting of the Joint Committee on Climate, Environment and Energy in County Wexford, to be taken on conclusion of the Order of Business, without debate; and No. 2, statements regarding fuel supports to the fishing industry, to be taken at 11.45 a.m. and to conclude at 1 p.m., if not previously concluded, with the time allocated to the opening remarks by the Minister not to exceed eight minutes, group spokespersons not to exceed ten minutes, time may be shared, and the Minister to be given no less than seven minutes to reply to the debate.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: I would like to draw the House's attention to the call this week from the national lottery for an outright ban on betting on the national lottery. We are all familiar with the national lottery. It helps fund sports organisations, voluntary organisations, cultural organisations, youth clubs and all manner of activities and organisations within our communities. This week, however, the national lottery published an independent report completed by Indecon, on the socio-economic impact of the national lottery. Basically, the report has very stark findings and I encourage all Members to read it. It concludes that betting

on the lottery is draining vital funding from important community organisations and events right across Ireland. The national lottery is calling on the Government to act to ban outright betting on the national lottery. It is an issue I have raised previously in the Seanad. I have tabled Commencement matters on it. It is a matter for the Minister for public expenditure to address. However, the report this week raises the issue again. It highlights that in 2024 alone, more than €80 million was lost in funding to good causes in our communities. When we think of all the work those organisations put into making applications to Government, local authorities and other funding streams, to be losing more than €80 million in one year to good causes is a good enough reason. It is also just not fair; it truly is not. The national lottery is regulated and transparent, and it is designed to serve the public good. It also protects communities; 30 cent in every euro spent on the national lottery goes directly back into communities. It is also an economic issue. It is estimated in the Indecon report that almost 2,000 jobs have been lost and over €125 million in economic activity has been put at risk because of this practice of betting on the lottery. Betting on national lotteries has been banned in 25 of the 27 other European member states. We are far behind here and we are letting down our communities. It is an issue that should be addressed as a matter of urgency. The report highlights it in very objective independent terms. I would appreciate if the Acting Leader would arrange a debate, at the earliest opportunity, with the Minister for public expenditure to provide this House with a response on what action he is going to take to ban betting on the national lottery.

Senator Linda Nelson Murray: Over and over in this Chamber, many of the Senators bring up the safe routes to school programme. It is brought up a lot because we all recognise in our communities that we really want to get kids to school safely. Over the past few weeks, I have visited Killyon National School, Dunderry National School, Cannistown National School, Kilmessan National School, Kiltale National School and Kildalkey National School. They all have the same issue. The school authorities are asking how they get the kids more safely to school. There are more trucks and cars on the roads, and many of these schools were built many years ago when there were not nearly as many vehicles. There are narrow roads with no footpaths.

Just yesterday morning, I was out with the road safety officer from Meath County Council who did an amazing job in Dunderry National School talking about road safety. In that brilliant presentation, she was encouraging kids to cycle and walk to school. In my head, I was thinking that they will be dead outside if they do that because there is not even a footpath near where the bridge is there. We had a really good discussion with the road safety officer, however, and the council will put in interim traffic calming measures identifying that there is a school nearby, such as the pencils we see instead of bollards outside schools. They are going to put some red boxes and yellow markings near where the ramps are to let motorists know they are coming close to a school.

I had a little bit of a lightbulb moment. If we are not going to maintain the safe routes to school programme because of maybe financial pressure in the Department of Transport, would the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, consider maybe preliminary funding for every rural school in the country so they can act and so the councils can actually provide interim supports for the school to let kids go safely? I am definitely going to try to meet him to discuss this. If the Department cannot afford to do the safe routes to school programme for every school in the

country, could it provide bollard pencils, red boxes, yellow zig-zag lines, maybe the emoji camera with the happy face and sad face and the yellow diamond-shaped sign that lets people know they are approaching a school? Those measures do not cost the hundreds of thousands of euro that the safe routes to school programme costs. It might be a good way of doing something because it is better than doing nothing. I ask the Acting Leader to let the Minister know that all the Senators have mentioned it here in the Seanad over and over again. The Minister is doing a great job in the Department of Transport. The Acting Leader might let him know that I would like to meet him and go through that. I think everybody across the Chamber would like to see more safety outside our rural schools.

Senator Joe Conway: Yesterday, Family Carers Ireland's published its fourth scorecard in which it assesses the programme for Government and gives its response to 34 items that are priorities for the organisation. A quick résumé would be that out of the 34 sectors covering the programme for Government, two report good progress and 15 report limited progress. That is over 50% with good or limited progress but, alas, 13 of the areas report no progress at all and four of them actually report regression in the response to the programme. That is moderately encouraging, but it is probably something that deserves a more concentrated response.

That was the state of play as of the end of quarter 3 in 2025. I will quote another pertinent paragraph:

Based on Healthy Ireland estimates, 14% of people aged 15 and older provide regular unpaid personal help to a friend or family member with a long-term illness, health problem or disability. When extrapolated to the national population, this equates to 624,190 family carers.

Many of those are working *pro bono* or for very little pay.

In fairness to those 624,000 carers who do so much work on behalf of us all and on behalf of the State, we should have a debate with the Minister for Social Protection in this House addressing all of the issues and concerns, the undoubted successes that the Government has had, the many shortfalls, and what we can do to hasten our steps to get a more perfect picture for the people who are ultimately very vulnerable in society and the very caring and altruistic people who look after them.

Senator Pauline Tully: A 12-year-old boy's life was put at risk in Cavan General Hospital this week. At 2 p.m. on Monday, a 12-year-old boy, Aaron, was admitted to Cavan General Hospital in extreme pain. An ultrasound was carried out and appendicitis was diagnosed. His parents were told he would be kept overnight, keyhole surgery would be performed the next morning and he would be home in a few hours.

On Monday night-Tuesday morning, at approximately 3 a.m., he was in extreme pain and the nurse repeatedly called for a doctor to come to see him and examine him. No doctor came. He was left there. He was prepped for operation on Tuesday from, say, 10 a.m. on. He had been fasting all this time and had no food or water. He was not brought to theatre until 10.20 p.m. He was supposed to go in first thing in the morning but this was at 10.20 p.m., so he was the whole day without food, without water and in pain. Other children on the ward were getting

good and he was left; he could not eat. His mouth was all dry and sore because he could not drink. His parents were told that the operation went well.

At 4.30 p.m. yesterday, he could not breathe. His eyes were rolling in his head and he actually said to his mother, "I think I am going to die." Thankfully, they are very friendly with some of the organisers of the North-East Sepsis Awareness, NESA, campaign, and all the symptoms indicated he had sepsis. He is being treated now for sepsis and has responded well, thankfully, to that treatment.

The issue is clearly that the standard of care was atrocious. The calls by the nurse for a doctor to come to see him in the middle of the night were ignored. He was left for 27 hours without food and water, and now has sepsis. Hopefully, he will recover from sepsis. If sepsis gets into your body, it does not leave and can reoccur at any time. It is the biggest killer in the world, but for those who survive sepsis, it can have serious consequences. I know people who have lost limbs as a result of it. Senator McCarthy gave a very good briefing in the audiovisual room on this last week and I have raised the issue here previously.

All of those issues are very serious. I commend NESA on the work it is doing on creating awareness of this. We need to see our health professionals recognising the symptoms and responding immediately, but there is no excuse for what this child went through in Cavan General Hospital. We go in there expecting a standard of care. I presume most people get it, but I am very concerned now that any child would be left like this. A child, in particular, should get priority. I want this highlighted with the Minister for Health so that we can get a response on what happened in Cavan General Hospital this week.

Senator Patricia Stephenson: Daniel Tatlow-Devally is an Irish citizen who is currently on trial in Stuttgart. Part of the "The Ulm Five", he is being charged with allegedly damaging property in the offices of Elbit Systems in September 2025. The company, the group asserts, is complicit in genocide in Gaza. Daniel has been in pretrial detention for the past eight months, a particularly prolonged pretrial detention, which is highly unusual, and it violates Daniel's human rights.

While in detention, Daniel's direct access to his legal team and defence team has been restricted. Even in court, he is separated from his team behind glass, which is completely abnormal in the context of the German judicial system. In Germany, pretrial detention is supposed to be kept as short as possible. It is a last resort and generally only for a maximum of six months in complex cases, and already Daniel has been there for five months. Bail has been denied because Daniel is considered a threat to society, despite the fact he did not resist arrest, he did not harm anyone and he did not have any prior criminal convictions. The charge against Daniel is reserved for members of criminal organisations. We have to ask the question: is Daniel's act of civil disobedience worthy of such an extreme response?

His treatment within the criminal justice system has been utterly disproportionate to his actions and his family and defence team say his physical and psychological well-being and integrity have been violated and his right to a fair trial is under threat. He has been restricted access to his family and his defence team while in detention. He was allowed only one visitor for 30 minutes every two weeks. He has not been allowed to read books. He has been held up in a cell by himself for 23 hours per day. He has been behind a screen. His family have not been allowed to touch him.

Anti-genocide activists have been disproportionately punished. We have seen that held up as an example to others for highlighting corporate complicity when it comes to war crimes against Palestine. This could set a dangerous precedent for criminalising direct action. We should all be horrified that an Irish citizen is being treated with such structural violence and state violence against his well-being by another EU member state. I would like to see some intervention by the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade to ensure Daniel's right to a fair trial. All of us here would want to see integrity around the concept of a right to fair trial.

I also note the six or seven Irish citizens who were kidnapped this morning by the Israeli state while in international waters as part of the Global Sumud Flotilla, a peaceful humanitarian mission to bring much-needed aid to the people of Gaza. Kidnapping in international waters is an act that breaches international law and violates our international standards. We have come to expect this by the Israeli state but we cannot accept it as normal. We cannot accept it as normal when our citizens, who are there on a peaceful mission, are being kidnapped by the Israeli state. I would also like this House to seek a statement from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade on what it is doing and on what levels of diplomacy it is engaging in to ensure the protection of our citizens by a third state. In any other country, if our citizens were swept up off the streets by a third country, we would be up in arms and we should be in this case as well.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I welcome St. Patrick's National School from Greystones. They are guests of the Tánaiste. I hope they enjoy their visit here to Leinster House. As is customary, they have no homework for the rest of the week.

Senator Evanne Ní Chuilinn: On Tuesday, I spoke in this House about the lack of sporting facilities in Dublin 8. I was speaking particularly about a school, St. Audoen's National School, in Dublin 8, that I visited on Tuesday morning. While it is important to point out what is wrong and the lack of access to facilities, it is really important to also point out and celebrate what is good. I got word this morning that the St. Audoen's girls' football team that I spoke about on Tuesday won their final league match yesterday against John Scottus in the 8C league of the FAI and they have won the league. A school with no pitch or facilities but just passion for football, brilliant teachers and brilliant players has risen to the top of its FAI league. I congratulate their captain, Amaya, and their principal, Geoff, and all of their teachers who are really ag snámh in aghaidh easa. With no facilities, but absolute passion and joy for sport and for football, they are really swimming against the tide down there. What it is doing for those children is absolutely brilliant. As I said on Tuesday, we are failing them in that we have no sports facilities for those children in the south-west inner city. Senators will be sick of me talking about it, because I will be raising regularly in this House and in other fora as well. I congratulate St. Audoen's girls' football team for winning the league yesterday.

Senator Sharon Keogan: Last week, I attended the Association of Irish Local Government, AILG, and I want to commend the GAA on the presentation it gave on its recent report on democratic change, entitled, after John Healy's book, No One Shouted Stop - Until Now. I understand the association was hesitant about adopting that title but I commend it on being bold enough to do so because the warning it carries is timely and necessary. This is a serious, evidence-based document that does something many institutions shy away from. It speaks

plainly about rural depopulation and urban over-concentration and it asks uncomfortable questions about where Ireland is heading.

The GAA has been brave in raising the alarm to warn us - based on hard data - that the demographic shift we are living through is already reshaping our communities. Rural depopulation, falling birth rates and the concentration of people along the east coast are not abstract trends; they are realities being felt in parishes, towns and clubs across the country. What is striking is that this sporting organisation has been willing to speak so honestly about issues that properly belong in the realm of national planning and public policy. Indeed, they are issues that belong in these Houses. The GAA recognises that when rural communities decline the fabric of Irish life weakens.

At the same time, unbalanced growth is placing enormous pressures on Dublin and its commuter belt, with overcrowded housing, stretched infrastructure, lack of facilities and declining quality of life. Everyone moving east is not a sign of success. It is a sign of a failure to make rural Ireland viable for young families. It is also unfair on our towns and cities, which are being asked to absorb growth without the planning required. The GAA is right to say that demographic change cannot be wished away and it can be managed. However, this requires national leadership and meaningful rural investment. If institutions like the GAA are prepared to speak up, Government must be prepared to listen and act. Maybe we should ask the GAA to come here and present its report to us, because it makes stark reading for communities throughout the country.

Senator Chris Andrews: As the House will be aware, the Global Sumud Flotilla was seized at gunpoint last night by the Israeli occupying forces. Seven Irish citizens have been arrested. This was and is a peaceful mission. The flotilla has not been fully intercepted. It is important that there is engagement by the Department and the Government to ensure the safety of the Irish citizens. This seizure took place near Greece, over 1,000 miles from Gaza. Israel has extended its borders into Gaza, Lebanon and Iran and now it is extending them into the EU. It is disappointing that nobody has stood up to Israel. As I said, this mission is off the coast of Greece. At this stage, the Israelis will be coming for us, knocking on our doors soon. The Irish Government is looking the other way. We see the contrast between the Government's condemnation of what is happening and the actions to ensure there are consequences for Israel, it is pretty stark. On the one hand, the Government talks about passing the occupied territories Bill and suspending trade pacts with Israel, yet it welcomes the football team of genocidal Israel here to play football. That is simply wrong and it is something we can make a stand on. We can show Israel that we will not facilitate its sportswashing. Some 565 footballers, management staff and referees have been murdered by Israel. How can we justify allowing Israel to play here? It is important that the Minister makes a statement on this and comes in here to explain what the Government will do to support the Irish citizens who have been kidnapped, again, by Israel.

Senator Martin Conway: I call for a debate on the participation of people with disabilities in sport. Many governing bodies have what I would describe as tokenistic inclusion and disability officers. Some make a genuine effort. For example, the FAI has its Football for All programme and there are other governing bodies that make an effort. However, in my view, there is not enough being done at all to create a level playing pitch - pardon the pun - for people

with disabilities to meaningfully engage in active living and sport. I am a former board member of Active Disability Ireland, which did great work with governing bodies over the years, through Sport Ireland, to promote inclusion in a soft way through competitions, certificates and awards. Some organisations and sporting bodies did make a decent and genuine effort.

We are about to announce the bones of €100 million in sports capital grants. I would like to see this being proofed in such a way that clubs that get grants have to demonstrate that they are open and accessible to all people, including those with disabilities. I know that one of the criteria is that they have to demonstrate that their facilities are open to others, if needed. However, I think a lot of it is box ticking. I do not believe there is genuine openness in the case of some of them. We have a huge amount of work to do to make sport genuinely accessible to people with disabilities. I would very much welcome statements in the House with the Minister of State with responsibility for sport on this specific issue, preferably ahead of the announcement of the sports capital funding.

Senator Laura Harmon: I raise the issue of cancer care in Ireland. This morning, it was extremely alarming to hear that 80% of the radiation therapy machines in the country need to be replaced within the next few years. Cork is an outlier here. We heard from Professor Aisling Barry, chair of radiation oncology at University College Cork, that currently the only plans to replace these radiation therapy machines are for Dublin. We heard from one patient recently who said that during their 25 appointments for treatment, the machine broke down six times. Patients have had to book in to hotels while they are waiting for machines to be fixed. Some 50% of people diagnosed with cancer will need radiation therapy, which is life-saving. Oncologists have described this as a national disgrace. We need to act. There needs to be a fully funded national plan to replace all of these machines. They have been described as being akin to Windows 95, with the machines being among the oldest in Europe in terms of their quality. This is urgent.

I have just come from a briefing in the audiovisual room on sport for the LGBTQI+ community in Ireland and funding and support for that sector. As part of that community, I am a member of the Frontrunners group in Cork and I have also attended Frontrunners in Dublin. I sometimes attend the Phoenix Tigers soccer group in Dublin and I recently joined Na Laochra Aeracha, an LGBTQI+ GAA club in Cork. I am in my late 30s and going back to sport, having not played GAA for about 20 years, it has been lovely to be able to be part of that community and to have this outlet. We need to focus on funding for those sporting organisations. It is really important for Ireland.

Senator Paraic Brady: I want to discuss a problem I have tried to sort out over the last number of weeks. It is the issue of flying the Irish flag by an Irish team. Irish members of the International Sheepdog Society have been notified of a change in policy whereby the Irish team that represents the whole of Ireland at international events will not be allowed to fly the Irish flag when representing Ireland at world events. I have engaged with the new chairman and to say that he has been unco-operative would be an understatement. I would like this issue to be resolved because it will cause an ongoing row, North and South, in this country where we have seen peace in recent times.

11 o'clock

I do not have a problem if a member of the team from Northern Ireland wishes to carry a symbol representing Northern Ireland. However, if somebody who is representing Ireland wants to carry the Tricolour on his or her shoulder, he or she should be allowed to do so. I hope this can be resolved as a matter of urgency. We have seen the trials taking place in Northern Ireland this year. I would hope the Tricolour would be flown proudly, as it always has been, and would represent this country in the fashion it always has. I hope this can be resolved sooner rather than later. Perhaps my drawing attention to it might highlight the problem and get it resolved.

Senator Rónán Mullen: I wish to raise our need to ensure we have enough doctors into the future. A Parliamentary Budget Office report in 2024 on the cost of non-consultant hospital doctors and consultants in a consultant-delivered health service stated we would need more than 9,000 additional hospital doctors within 20 years to meet the demands of our growing and ageing population. Having that number of extra staff in place by 2042 would cost the Exchequer approximately €2.2 billion more per year. To that we can add an additional 1,000 GPs. We need to be adding 500 medics per year after allowing for retirements, etc. As there are several hundred retirements per year, it means approximately 800 doctors per year are needed. Let us work with that figure of 800. What is actually happening in our medical schools is that we have approximately 600 places for Irish or EU medical students and a similar number of places for non-EU students. A significant number of young Irish doctors go abroad, as we all know, and do not return. Statistics are hard to come by but it would seem that approximately 60% go abroad after internship and half of those do not return within ten years. We might expect that at the very best, approximately 400 new doctors per year from undergraduate medicine studies will stay here. That is half our need. We need more Irish people studying medicine and we need more Irish people staying in Ireland after their studies.

Two issues need to be considered. How about making working in Ireland a condition for approximately 50% of Irish or EU college places? If we can reserve places for overseas students, surely we can find ways to reserve places for students who will commit to staying in Ireland for six or eight years. The other issue is the prohibitive cost of entry into postgraduate medicine. Postgraduate entry medics would be less inclined to go abroad. They are the ones who have to face fees of €18,000 per year or €60,000 per year to be invested in their training. That is inequitable. We need to encourage graduate entry medicine. We need a debate about what we are going to do to address this urgent problem of ensuring we have an adequate number of doctors and medical personnel to provide healthcare to our people in the future.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I welcome a second group from St. Patrick's National School, Greystones. They are guests of An Tánaiste, Deputy Simon Harris. I hope they enjoy their visit. As is customary, they will have no homework for the rest of the week.

Senator Maria McCormack: I welcome the progress announced last week by Cuan, through the justice committee, on the long-awaited domestic violence refuge in Laois, something that has been needed for too long. We heard this week of another deeply disturbing case in Waterford. Another woman was harmed. Another family was devastated. It was a stark reminder that this crisis is not going away. The numbers speak for themselves. Over 65,000 calls relating to domestic violence were made last year to An Garda Síochána. In my county

of Laois and within the Laois-Offaly Garda division, over 1,600 domestic abuse incidents were recorded last year, with 393 cases already reported in the early part of this year. The statistics do not even tell the full story. Those are only the cases reported.

We are now living in a world where women are living in fear, children are witnessing trauma and lives are being destroyed behind closed doors. Some may never get the chance to report, and that is why I am asking this House how many more women must suffer before we act with urgency. We need to take action now. We need proper, consistent training for gardaí. We need education in our schools on respect and healthy relationships. We need far more investment in front-line and refuge services in a timely manner. Prevention is just as important now as the response. This is part of the wider crisis of gender-based and sexual violence in Ireland.

I welcome the free travel scheme for survivors, which was announced this week. We need clarity on how many are going to be covered and whether it will also include survivors of sexual abuse. I call for an urgent debate in this House on domestic violence. Silence is no longer acceptable. Delays are no longer acceptable. We need to ensure we do all we can across these Houses to prevent it.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I call the Acting Leader to respond.

Senator Chris Andrews: The Acting Leader can just respond to me.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Before the Acting Leader responds, I welcome Deputy Michael Murphy to the Distinguished Visitors' Gallery. He is accompanied by Áine, Niamh and Georgina Crean. I hope they enjoy their visit.

Senator Garret Ahearn: I thank the Senators who made contributions. Senator Fitzpatrick spoke about the national lottery and the loss in the revenue it is making because of betting on the national lottery through other betting avenues. She has asked for a debate with the Minister, Deputy Chambers. I will contact his office to see if that is possible. It is important to recognise that the national lottery contributes 30 cent of every euro spent back to communities. Right across the country, communities have had work or something beneficial done to their village or area because of support from the national lottery. That is important to recognise. If people are spending money on betting on the national lottery through other outlets, that money does not go back to local communities. Something should be done. When 25 of 27 countries across the EU have banned such activity, we should be having a debate to discuss it.

Senator Nelson Murray spoke about the safe routes to school programme, as she has done regularly. She made a very good suggestion. Every parent who has children going to school is always worried about their safety. I see it in my own school in Grange, County Tipperary. Cars travel at high speeds and all you need is one incident for something to happen. The safe routes to school programme costs a lot of money and cannot be applied to every school across the country. However, what can be done is that a smaller level of funding could be provided, as the Senator suggested, for highlighting to drivers that they are coming towards a school and need to be careful.

Senator Joe Conway spoke about Family Carers Ireland, representatives of which were in Buswells Hotel yesterday to share a report on work done by the Government since it took office

in the context of the programme for Government. Family Carers Ireland does a lot of good work. Ms Clare Duffy and others in the organisation do great work. There are 34 objects that the Government wants to deliver. That is to happen in the lifetime of this Government. Although 50% are progressing well, others are not. We are only 18 months into this Government and that programme for Government is a commitment for the lifetime of the Government. The Senator is right, however, about the need to have a debate with the Minister for Social Protection to outline where we are with the other 50% of issues that need to be dealt with and consider when they will be dealt with.

Senator Tully spoke about the very sad case of a 12-year-old boy who went for what was seemingly a simple operation to his appendix in Cavan hospital. It turned into a case of sepsis and a life-threatening situation. She outlined exactly what happened in the hospital to the child and parents, and the fact that no doctor came. She told us that the child then developed sepsis. I have personal experience of sepsis.

I was in hospital three years ago for an infection and I was in for two weeks. I was told I would be out in 24 hours but an hour after the consultant told me that I was in a terrible way. Only for an amazing nurse from the Philippines, who noticed and diagnosed very quickly that I had sepsis, it could have been an awful lot worse. I ended up in the ICU for two weeks after that. These things can come on very quickly and the case Senator Tully spoke about is a prime example of not having people there. To say a doctor was not available to see the child would suggest there is some mismanagement in Cavan hospital, if that is the case. I hope she has highlighted the case to the Minister and that the Minister can get some answers for her. To see anyone go through sepsis is awful but in this case there were parents witnessing it in their 12-year-old child. We do not have to be clinical experts to realise it. The only way sepsis can be dealt with is to have people spot it very quickly. If doctors are unwilling to see 12-year-old kids, there is a very serious problem. I will contact the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, about the case and I hope Senator Tully has done the same.

Senator Stephenson spoke about an Irish citizen who has been detained in Germany and has not had the access to his legal team that he should have, and his treatment over there. It sounds appalling. I had heard of the case but I do not have the full details of it. I know he has been there for five months and is being treated very poorly. As Senator Stephenson said, this is an EU country that really should not be doing this. I will contact the Minister for foreign affairs about the case but I hope the Department and the embassy in Germany are doing all they can to support Daniel. He has to go through a court case but it should be fair. It is our job to make sure it is fair. In terms of being arrested and following the guidelines imposed on him, he has done everything right in that respect. We will make sure the Department of foreign affairs is aware of the case. I am sure it is but we will make contact with it. Senator Stephenson also spoke about the flotilla and the Irish citizens on it. I will answer on that when I reach Senator Andrews.

Senator Ní Chuilinn spoke about the lack of sports facilities and gave the example of St. Audoen's school. This is a very good example of people who are going against the odds. She congratulated the school on winning its league. To do it with no pitch makes us think about how good the team could be if it did have a pitch. We have a sports capital grant that, hopefully, will be announced fairly soon. There will be two rounds of sports capital grants in the lifetime of the Government. I know Senator Ní Chuilinn has spoken numerous times about the large

number of locations across Dublin that do not have the same sort of sports facilities as there are in other countries.

Senator Keogan spoke about the AILG conference in Clonmel. I was at it as well. I hope Senator Keogan was looked after in Clonmel. I hope she spent some money in Tipperary and helped our local economy. It was a very good conference and I acknowledge Councillor Mary Hanna Hourigan, who is president of the AILG this year, hosting a really good conference. There was a wide range of discussions, particularly a debate on rural Ireland and the changing population, which is very important. There was a really good discussion on that. There are things that need to be done in that regard but a lot has been done already. There has been huge investment in rural Ireland. Less than ten years ago, we set up a Department for rural affairs, which is all about investing in rural Ireland and giving people options to be able to stay, live, raise a family and have a life in rural Ireland. There is certainly more we can do. Regardless of what side of the House we are on, we constantly put pressure on IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland to make sure, when they are creating jobs around the country, that they are not just in Dublin, Cork and Galway but also in rural communities so people can live and raise their families in rural areas. I acknowledge it was a very good debate but there is a lot that has been done and we certainly need to do more.

Senator Andrews spoke about the flotilla that has been taken over by the Israelis. He spoke about it two weeks ago and predicted this. Obviously, he has experience of it. It was not an amazing prediction because it was fairly obvious Israel was going to do it. It is another example of the kind of heavy-handed approach that Israel takes against law-abiding citizens who are not in Israeli waters. At the time, a number of weeks ago, Senator Andrews asked that the Department of foreign affairs be there to support Irish citizens. It will be. It has been before, as Senator Andrews knows. Obviously, the advice at the time was not to go but I can understand why people feel the need to go and help. The Department of foreign affairs will be there to support them. The Senator said that Ireland is looking the other way in terms of dealing with Israel. I disagree on that. I think we have done a lot more than other countries.

In terms of the football - the Senator and I are both big football people - it is not a matter for the Irish Government. It is for the FAI, UEFA and FIFA to deal with. I have spoken to the FAI about the game. A number of people also did so about two months ago regarding concerns about it. No one wanted Israel's name to come out of the hat when the draw was made for the Nations League but we have to deal with it. It is not for the Irish Government to decide what the FAI does in terms of playing.

Senator Chris Andrews: So the FAI has complete-----

Senator Garret Ahearn: It is UEFA really that makes the decision on it. It has happened already. I cannot remember who Israel played against but it has happened already. I know it is in discussions with other countries in terms of how to deal with it from a security perspective. If you talk to Israel, the country it is most frustrated with is Ireland in terms of what we have done against Israel and in support of Palestine. I support Deputy Andrews on the flotilla and I will make sure the Department of foreign affairs is aware of his concerns and worries for the Irish citizens. We have done a lot and we will do more. I am with him on the occupied territories Bill as well.

Senator Martin Conway called for a debate on disability in sport. He has always been very vocal on this. I will speak to the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan. The sports capital grants are due to be announced quite soon. With regard to the terms of reference of the sports capital grant, it is important that we make sure funding is available for people with disabilities in sport. There are so many examples right across the country of inspiring people who have disabilities and who can achieve great things in sport. The more funding they get, the better opportunities they have. Senator Conway and I know Peter Ryan in Tipperary who became visually impaired and had a great career in cycling afterwards. He is a real inspiration for a lot of people around the country. He is one example of many people.

Senator Harmon spoke about cancer care in Ireland and had very worrying information that 80% of the radiation machines in the country are due to be out of date in the next two years. She has called for a national plan to fund this. I will speak to the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, on this. Obviously we cannot have radiation machines that are not working or fit for purpose. We put so much money into the Department of Health, with funding more than doubling in the past ten or 15 years. At the very least, we need machines that actually work. As the Senator said, 50% of cancer patients have to use these radiation machines.

Senator Brady spoke about the Irish sheepdog team and the very strange situation whereby they are not allowed to fly the Irish flag. Listening to what the Senator said, and it is important that he has highlighted the issue in the Chamber, this is stopping someone from expressing their identity. At whatever level it is, people should be able to be proud of where they are from and have the flag they feel is for where they are from. Surely there has to be some sort of compromise in this. We do not really have this situation in rugby, which is a prime example of a sport where some players on the team identify differently from the majority of the team.

However, there is a compromise in that. Every game they play, the Irish flag is flying the whole time so I cannot see why the Irish national sheepdog team cannot find some sort of compromise.

Senator Ronan Mullen spoke about the 9,000 additional doctors that are going to be needed over the next 20 years. This is an obvious example of the need to invest in education to get more doctors to come through the system to meet that requirement. This is one of many issues that the Government and future governments will have to deal with when dealing with an ageing population. It is great that the average lifespan of a person in Ireland is 82 years. It is higher than most EU countries. However, that comes with other challenges for the Government to deal with. It is important that it does that. I suggest to Senator Mullen that he table a Commencement matter on the issue and I am sure the Minister would be happy to respond.

The final contribution was from Senator McCormack who spoke about domestic violence. It is shocking that 65,000 calls are made to the Garda. The Senator said there was just over 1,600 in her county of Laois. A lot of this stems from the Covid period four or five years ago. It has really come to the surface. In fairness to the previous Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee, she did a lot of work on domestic violence and abuse towards women in hidden environments and trying to support them. In County Tipperary we have a really good women's refuge called Cuan Saor. The numbers of people they are dealing with has gone to record levels in the past number of years. They have received good investment from Government, which is welcome, but it does not match what is needed to deal with this. In the long term there is an educational perspective on this in terms of how men need to treat women. We think this exists

in other countries and cultures but it is right on our doorstep, given there are 65,000 calls made. Some of those could be repeat calls but either way, it is a hell of a lot of calls against predominantly men committing this. It is not always but it is predominantly men committing this. To think that number of people across the country are affected means it needs to be highlighted more, funded more and supported more. As the Senator said, gardaí need to be more training to deal with this. That concludes the Order of Business.

Order of Business agreed to.

Joint Committee on Climate, Environment and Energy Meeting: Motion

Senator Garret Ahearn: I move:

That Seanad Éireann, in accordance with Article 15.1.3° of the Constitution, hereby determines that the Joint Committee on Climate, Environment and Energy may meet in Wexford Town, County Wexford, on a date in 2026 to be decided by the Committee, in order to hear from community groups, locals and stakeholders on the progress made at Lady's Island Lake; provided that, pursuant to Standing Order 91(3), Members may participate in such meeting from within the parliamentary precincts by means of the videoconferencing platform approved and provided by the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission.

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 11.23 a.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 11.47 a.m.

Sitting suspended at 11.23 a.m. and resumed at 11.47 a.m.

Fuel Supports for the Fishing Industry: Statements

Acting Chairperson (Senator Garret Kelleher): I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Timmy Dooley, to the Seanad. The Minister of State has eight minutes for his contribution after which group spokespersons will have ten minutes each. I will call on the Minister of State no later than 12.53 p.m. to reply to the debate.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Timmy Dooley): I welcome the opportunity to talk to Senators today about this really important issue. As Senators know, the Government recognises the exceptional pressure that rising fuel costs are placing on our farmers, contractors, and fishermen and fisherwomen around the coastline. I have heard it from fishermen and fisherwomen from all coastal areas of the country and in my ongoing engagements with all our seafood representative bodies in recent weeks. I have done my best to get around to as many of the areas as I can and meet widely with the main stakeholders.

Marine gas oil has risen dramatically in price over the past months and at points has been more than double the price of the same period last year. We all know the fuel-intensive nature of the activities we are talking about, particularly in the fishing sector and how impactful that

is on the lives and livelihoods in the pursuit of fishing and the impact it has on the coastal communities and the people who are employed in it.

Prior to the current situation fishermen were paying around 55 cent to 60 cent per litre net of VAT and duty for marine diesel. The prices being quoted in March ranged from €1.25 to €1.46, representing a doubling or more in price. We see again today crude oil prices being at their highest in a very long time. There is no obvious end in sight in the short term to the effective blockade in the Strait of Hormuz and the impact that is continuing to have. It is not as if this is about to resolve itself in the days ahead.

This is at a time of year where fishing effort increases due to the seasonal nature of our fisheries and the weather improvements have made it safer to fish.

With fuel prices at their peak, however, it was not viable for fishermen and fisherwomen to go to sea. When boat owners decide to tie up, there are the obvious direct impacts on the supply of fresh fish and, unfortunately, there are no payments to crew. There is also an impact on the processing sector and the people it employs.

Ireland's fishing fleet utilises approximately 75 million litres of fuel annually. The largest consumers in the fleet are the offshore vessels. However, fuel consumption per vessel varies widely depending on size, gear and type of fishing activity undertaken. A current example is an average 18 m to 24 m polyvalent vessel fishing for whitefish and prawns, which burns 25,000 to 30,000 litres of fuel per month. We can imagine the negative impact of the doubling of that price and the non-viable nature of the activity as a result.

The Irish fleet has two main groupings, the first of which is those that operate offshore and which travel further and spend longer at sea. Some of these process at sea and require energy to do so, which is fuelled by marine gas oil. Additionally, there are approximately 800 active inshore vessels. There are probably 1,800 in total, but we reckon about 800 vessels are active. These vessels operate near the shore, do not spend multiple days at sea and purchase their fuel predominantly at pump prices, similar to farmers. These smaller vessels also use a mix of petrol and diesel in their engines. This is referred to as the inshore sector and it is one I have a particular regard for. It is facing significant challenges and I want to assist and help the sector in every way I can. The Government will do so when it announces the scheme and all the characteristics and details of it.

This current crisis exposes the vulnerability of the fishing industry to fuel price volatility. In 2021, the Irish fleet consumed 76 million litres of fuel, representing 12% of input costs. In 2023, the fleet consumed 63 million litres of fuel, and this represented about 19% of input costs. At the current prices, however, fuel is now accounting for approximately 30% of input costs, which is unsustainable. It is a very challenging situation. Last week, I attended the Seafood Expo Global in Barcelona, which is one of the biggest seafood sales opportunities in the world and takes place annually. I met the 20 Irish processors there under the Bord Bia Origin Green label. They were reporting strong demand for Irish products. Obviously, there is a reduction in available stocks. Irish stock is very well regarded internationally and prices are up a little bit. That is some help but it in no way overcomes the massive increase in oil prices. This is why we have to intervene significantly to assist this important sector in the months ahead.

The measures introduced by the Government in March 2026, which provided for temporary reductions in the rates of mineral oil tax, MOT, applying to petrol, auto diesel and marked gas oil, MGO, until 31 May 2026, provided some relief for a small number of inshore fishers who purchase their fuel from the pumps. However, the majority of fuel used by the Irish fishing fleet is marine gas oil, which attracts commercial sea navigation relief. This is why the substantial package of support across a number of sectors, including fisheries and aquaculture, is most welcome and most necessary.

The Minister, Deputy Heydon, has already addressed the House on the full removal of all non-carbon excise on green diesel, of 7.4 cent per litre, and a further payment which will provide supports equivalent to 20 cent per litre through a €100-million fuel support scheme. These supports, when taken together, total 27.4 cent per litre and exceed by nearly 6 cent per litre the entirety of excise, carbon and non-carbon, charged on green diesel prior to the conflict in the Middle East. That would have represented almost 22 cent per litre. This means there has been a significant investment by the State above what it takes already from green diesel.

This will benefit both farmers and contractors, recognising their central role in sustaining essential agrifood production. It is equally important that we also support our sea fisheries and aquaculture sectors as primary producers. It is the same principle: when input costs rise, it puts pressure on the price and availability of food for all consumers. I know there has been some negative comments in other sectors that suggest this is a bailout for the agriculture, contracting, haulage and fishing sectors. This could not be further from the truth. What the Government is trying to do here is to relieve the pressure on primary food production and transportation to our stores. It is aimed at those who consume food. It is aimed at ensuring, insofar as we can, that the price of food does not escalate in line with the increasing costs of energy.

The Government has allocated €15 million of the €100 million to the fisheries and aquaculture sector in supports. The targeted support package for fisheries and aquaculture will be based on previous usage and will ensure that those most exposed to the increased fuel prices will receive meaningful assistance at this critical time of year. Our Department is finalising details of a scheme which will ensure funding is delivered as soon as possible and, where it is needed, to sustain essential food production and coastal economic activity. I will announce details of the scheme shortly.

As with all schemes, there will be eligibility criteria, including, but not limited to, being on the Irish fishing boat register, holding an up-to-date sea fishing boat licence, holding valid crew safety cards, etc. Receipts for relevant fuel and minimum verifiable fishing day activity or sales notes or both to a minimum set amount will also be required to support a claim. It will be based on the activity using oil purchased in 2025, during those critical months of March to July. The scheme will be operated on behalf of our Department by Bord Iascaigh Mhara, BIM, which handles most payments in this regard. Payments will be made through a single application process, with funding capped at €15 million for the five months that have been identified from March to July. Timelines will be carefully managed to ensure delivery of these supports as soon as possible.

Liquidity and cash flow may arise as issues in the coming months and the Minister, Deputy Heydon, informed the House last week that he has written to the main banking institutions asking them to show forbearance with the agrifood and fisheries sector where cash flow issues are emerging and to continue to support these sectors during periods of financial pressure with

access to the appropriate levels of short-term finance. I support this approach and, of course, I will meet the main banks to explain to them where things are at from the fisheries perspective.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Garret Kelleher): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit. Sula leanfaimid ar aghaidh, cuirfidh mé fáilte roimh ár gcuairteoirí ó Charraig Uí Leighin, Contae Chorcaí. I welcome the students from the Edmund Rice College, Carrigaline, to the Seanad. They are guests of Deputy Séamus McGrath. They are very welcome.

Senator Noel O'Donovan: I thank the Minister of State for being here. I also welcome the students from County Cork. It is always good to see Cork people in the Chamber.

I am substituting for my colleague, Senator Manus Boyle, today. They are big shoes to fill, but I will address some of his thoughts on this matter. At the outset, I commend the Minister of State and the Minister, Deputy Heydon, on their roles in bringing forward these fuel subsidies for fishing, commercial and inshore, and for all sectors, including farming, transport and forestry.

Undoubtedly, we are living in very challenging times. Economic structures have been shaken ever since the war in the Gulf, with threats of tariffs and the unpredictable behaviour of people in high office in our neighbouring countries. The war in the Gulf, of course, has created untold damage to businesses around the country, with the cost of oil and fuel reaching record highs.

Businesses in my county are struggling daily and, in some cases, parking machinery and vehicles when they can to save on costs. Most people who know the fishing industry will be aware that most pelagic trawlers are tied to the piers at this time of the year, due mainly to the lack of quota and fishing opportunities. However, I must also say that when the fishing season ends, the work and maintenance must start on these same vessels. Some of the larger vessels must travel to foreign ports, where dry-dock facilities and skilled engineers are available. It could take seven to eight days to reach ports like Bergen, in Norway, and Skagen, incurring the now even more substantial costs of fuel to get there and back. In Killybegs, we have world-class engineering facilities that are recognised globally. These companies are crying out for work due to the downturn in fishing activity, and, in most cases, have had to reduce their staffing numbers. All we need are suitable facilities to be able to dry-dock these larger vessels and keep the skills and substantial revenue generated in Ireland.

I know I am slightly off topic but I would like consideration to be given to this subject in future. We need to keep our skilled engineers and those businesses supported by any means, especially when we have a viable solution. Service industries around fishing communities were founded on necessity and without them, the industry could not remain functioning. This is why, once again, I call for consideration when it comes to support for these businesses in future.

12 o'clock

I welcome the fuel subsidies and the support for the fishing vessels along with the other sectors benefiting from the package. Like Senators Boyle and Duffy, I recently spoke in this House on the need to extend this support. We are especially grateful that the inshore fishermen and women, as well as the ferry companies which play a vital role in moving passengers and freight to and from our islands, have been included in these much-needed supports. I know the

last few weeks have been extremely difficult for the Government. I believe that in time, we will see that the correct choices have been made and that challenges and the unpredictability we face as a country have steered this package for what it is – the best outcome for an unpredictable forecast.

I will touch briefly on the inshore sector. I welcome the Minister of State's comments that his intention is to fully support the sector to be sustainable and viable going forward. There was mention long before this fuel crisis of a long-term stabilisation payment. I know the task force will look at that issue as part of its ongoing work. It is something on which our minds should be focused at the moment. It is not just about stability today and supporting today. They were in crisis long before the crisis we have seen in recent weeks. The Minister of State spoke about 800 boats actively fishing around our shores. These are people protecting our shores. This is their daily work. This support is not about giving money for no reason – there is also the protection of our habitats and there is other work these fishermen would like to do. I want to mention that today too.

The Minister of State mentioned the fuel that these inshore boats use. They have small, outboard petrol engines. Prior to today, they had an issue around claiming back VAT on petrol. That is an issue that needs to be taken into account as well. I would welcome the Minister of State's clarity on whether this fuel scheme will support those types of fishermen and whether it might be looked at in future outside the fuel crisis. They are buying it from pumps but cannot claim back VAT as bigger boats can.

As ever, I thank the Minister of State for his work and that of the Minister, Deputy Heydon and the leadership they are taking in supporting the fishermen. We saw the protests some weeks ago. Many sectors felt they were not being listened to as well as others. Fishermen and fisherwomen have been engaging with the Government in recent months and years and have seen the Government's care towards the industry. They stuck with the process and kept engaging. That is why we have the support here. For fishermen and all sectors of society, this is the Government listening to the primary producers of food. I welcome these supports and thank the Minister of State for his engagement as always.

Senator Diarmuid Wilson: I welcome the Minister of State back to the House on this very important issue. Like my colleague, Senator O'Donovan, I have to apologise on behalf of our spokesperson, Senator Niall Blaney, who is at another political event and cannot be here. He asked me to put a few points on the record, which I will do to the best of my ability.

First, he wants to welcome the fact that the Government has put in place a €100 million fuel support scheme to assist farmers, agriculture contractors and fishers who are facing unprecedented increases in fuel costs. The scheme, as the Minister of State outlined in his contribution, has been tailored to the specific needs of the fisheries and aquaculture sector and will be operated by Bord Iascaigh Mhara on behalf of the Minister of State and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

In a moment, I will put on the record a few points that Senator Blaney wanted to make about Deputy Dooley's work since he became Minister of State. Before doing so, it is important to note that I have been in contact with a number of individuals in relation to this particular difficulty within the fishing industry. They are happy so far with the negotiations even though a final announcement has not yet been made. I understand they are happy with the direction in

which the negotiations are going. I want to point out that this the first time there has been a targeted fuel rebate for fishermen and fisherwomen, something that should be acknowledged and appreciated by us here in this House. The Minister of State anticipates that the scheme will commence in May. He is talking about covering a period from now until September or October. I hope there will be no delay in the payments being made to these people who very much need them. I ask the Minister of State to say something about the paperwork involved, which can be off-putting sometimes. He mentioned it would be based on last year's consumption. How will that be proven by the applicant?

Senator Blaney is anxious to put on the record his thanks to the Minister of State for his work on the mackerel quota, which secured an additional 8,000 tonnes of mackerel for this country. It is a very important result for Ireland's fishing sector at a time when it is very much needed. It means a significant increase in fishing opportunities worth over €30 million that will directly support our pelagic fleet, our processing sector and the many coastal communities that depend on them. Senator Blaney went on to list many of Deputy Dooley's other achievements since becoming Minister of State but I know he is a modest man and we will have another day to acknowledge that. The other thing he is anxious to put on record is the importance of the inshore fisheries, as my colleague outlined. They are just as much a priority and that needs to be maintained.

I very much welcome the Minister of State to the House. I thank him for the work he has done to date for this particular sector but also the work he has done in relation to the €750 million overall package that has been put in place.

Senator Joanne Collins: I welcome the Minister of State. He seems to be spending as much time here this week as I do.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I have spent a lot of time here over the years.

Senator Joanne Collins: We saw the Government come out finally yesterday and announce the fuel support scheme for all sectors – agriculture, transport and fishing. While the support is welcome, we have to be honest: the fishing industry still feels it is too little too late. There is a scheme of €15 million for the fishers which will be administered by BIM but fishers are still contacting me saying they do not know how much they will receive and how it will be calculated. There is a lot of uncertainty around it. I am not sure if it is just late going out from the Department or if they have not been fed through yet but it would be nice for them to get the exact details.

The reality is that the fishing industry has not just been hit by a short-term fuel crisis; it has been systemically eroded over years. Communities across our coasts have seen quota after quota stripped away. We have seen devastating EU deals which have slashed catch limits, putting jobs and livelihoods at risk and hollowing out our coastal communities. Time and time again, when decisions are made in Europe or at home, the fishing industry and sector is treated like an afterthought.

To be clear, fuel is not an optional extra for fishing. It is one of the biggest operating costs that a vessel has. Without meaningful supports, boats simply cannot go out. When boats do not go out, incomes collapse, crews are lost and coastal communities suffer. What was

announced yesterday acknowledges the pressure but does it meet the actual crisis that is here today? If this Government is serious about backing the fishing industry, it must go further. That means clarity, immediacy and, above all, fairness because our fishing communities deserve more and not to be seen as an afterthought. They deserve to see the future that they are building across all our coastal communities.

I will not take a huge amount of time but I will say that when I was in Foynes for the week, every single protester I met - haulage drivers, contractors and building contractors - wanted a reduction for everyone. They were not just there for themselves. I know this is about fishing but I want to add this. Yes, they are happy the industry is getting the supports but I have received a lot of phone calls from crane drivers and lorry drivers. They said it is great that their business or the business they work for is getting a support, but how will their wife fill her tank when she has to take the kids to school?

They stood there for everyone. They wanted this reduction at the pumps. It was not just rebate schemes and schemes per sector; they wanted to see this across the board. Until I left Limerick county on Tuesday, I had not seen a price at a petrol pump below €2.10. I do not know if they think we are extremely rich in Limerick or something.

Senator Diarmuid Wilson: J. P.

Senator Joanne Collins: I do know prices have decreased a bit in Kerry. I may have to move county to get cheaper diesel. The prices at the pumps are not decreasing like we would have hoped.

Senator Mark Duffy: I thank the Minister of State for being here for this very important discussion about vital supports needed for the fisheries sector. Since taking over as Minister of State, he has inherited many challenges in the sector. I thank him and acknowledge the work he has done on behalf of the sector and the support he has given Senators right across the House and Oireachtas Members generally. It has been an incredibly difficult time for the fisheries sector. Recently, Senators O'Donovan and Boyle and I hosted a discussion on the future of fisheries in the audiovisual room. It was a very constructive meeting with contributions from every sector affected. There is great generational heritage in the coastal communities along our coastline. They have been threatened and are at risk of decline because of reductions in quotas, generational renewal, depopulation and different threats that have entered the market, whether because of Brexit or increased costs.

This most recent shock to the sector, the fuel crisis, urgently needs addressing. I welcome the proposals and the commitment to support those in need. There are about 1,400 vessels in the country. I know the Minister of State mentioned that 800 of them are active but I reiterate what has already been mentioned. First, fishermen and fisherwomen who have boats, because of the small outboard engines that they go to the local fuel station for, may not have as many receipts. Can we have a scheme that is flexible and empathetic to the practicalities of each fisherman or fisherwoman and make sure they are all catered for and we do not leave people behind? I know there needs to be rules and this needs to be black and white, but there needs to be a little bit of grey in between to make sure that everyone is covered. In 2025, some people may or may not have fished for whatever reason, so it may be in 2024 when they were more

active, and this year, in the summer, they may be planning to increase activity again, for whatever reason. Again, I ask that the scope of the scheme include a bit of flexibility and understanding. Whether the black and the white of the scheme is made clear, there should be an appeals mechanism and a little bit of discretion. Perhaps the Minister of State or BIM could have discretion to make sure in particular cases that people are not left behind and that there is accommodation.

We need to support the sector. Fishermen and women feel conscious of the ongoing decline against a backdrop of increasing costs. This is a great opportunity to let them know that we have their back, support them and want to make sure the livelihoods and traditions they have passed down from generation to generation in these coastal communities are supported and protected. In my county, Mayo, I work very closely with the inshore sector to make sure those within it are accommodated and supported. I have been fighting hard for them. I thank the Minister of State for his time in listening to these conversations and our advocacy on behalf of the sector. The more fishermen work together and unite around broad supports from the Government, the better the outcome it for themselves and for us, as their representatives. I thank the Minister of State again for being here and I look forward to his reply and perhaps clarification on some of the technicalities of the conversation this afternoon.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Garret Kelleher): Before we call the Minister of State to conclude this afternoon's debate, I acknowledge the visitors from Griffeen Community College in Dublin, who are guests of the Minister of State, Deputy Emer Higgins.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Timmy Dooley): I will try to go through some of the issues that were raised.

Senator O'Donovan welcomed the fuel subsidies and recognised that this had a particular impact on certain sectors. Obviously, a lot of the pelagic vessels carried out their fishing effort in January and February, with some in March. The scheme seeks to pick the point at which prices started to escalate, which is March to July. I will come back to Senator Wilson in that regard. The polyvalent and the whitefish sectors seem to have been most impacted as well as, obviously, the inshore sector. A lot of the latter's effort is on shellfish, and we are anxious to try to address that.

I know Senator O'Donovan spoke on behalf of Senator Boyle, and he made a valid point about the engineering companies and capabilities in Killybegs that have been impacted by the reduced fishing opportunities over recent years. That certainly is challenging. Not long after my appointment, I got permission, with the support of the Minister, Deputy Heydon, to take on consultant Kieran Mulvey to look at the entire sector to see how we can best address its concerns and if we can provide some State supports for the long-term viability of the fishing sector, recognising that fishing opportunities have reduced, quite frankly, due to climate change and overfishing, but also that stocks are depleted.

Senator Collins mentioned deals in Brussels and quota reductions. Quotas get reduced for a reason. It is not that somebody else gets the fish; it is that the fish are not there and, in an effort to conserve the biomass and regenerate the stocks, a conservation approach is taken. That has been challenging, particularly because of the way climate change is impacting fish in our waters, which are moving out of European waters and further north. There is good

conservation work going on as well, and I am sure I will be in the House again talking about marine protected areas on the other side of the work I do on the marine environment.

I thank Senator Wilson for his comments on behalf of Senator Blaney. They are noted and recognised. He talked about a couple of things, and I know others have mentioned one of them to me as well. It is important we do not have a delay in the payments. We are finalising a scheme. We want to simplify it as best we can. We will open it up, through BIM, to the fishing operators. We know that fishermen keep good records. They have to from the perspective of their tax and for the SFPA. The scheme will be based on receipts for fuel paid, and fishers will all have that because they keep these records. They put them together at the end of the year in terms of their tax affairs as well. I want to ensure that there is some flexibility, that if somebody was not able to operate last year, for whatever reason, we would look at the activity in 2024. However, there will need to be a recognition that you need to be fishing this year, so we will have to put in place some criteria whereby somebody who finished off fishing last year and is not fishing this year does not get money, because the more anyone in that position gets, the less there is for those who are actively out there fishing. We are trying to be fair. We want the scheme to be simplified insofar as we can, we want to get money out to people who are buying fuel at record prices and we want to find supports. However, in the flexibility we will also have to be conscious that it is taxpayers' money we are spending and it needs to go to those who are impacted and try to ensure they are covered.

I take the points Senators Wilson and Blaney have raised. I will see Senator Blaney soon because I will be in Greencastle tomorrow meeting the co-op up there and fishermen generally. We believe they have the paperwork, so that will be relatively straightforward.

Senator Collins raised the point - and I take her point that she understands the issue - that this is too little too late. It is as much as we can get. I think we have a good deal for the fishermen, actually. Is it too late? I do not accept that charge because we are backdating this to March, which is when the price shock came into place, and it is onwards to July.

It is certainly not too late now. I have to make sure that we get the money out quickly. It is a good deal. That is certainly the response I am getting from the fishermen.

I am also conscious that the sector is in trouble, as I think all speakers have indicated. We are challenged. That is why I wanted in the early stages to see whether we could put in some supports to protect the regional nature of the activity and the coastal communities that many of these operate in. For many of the smaller inshore fishermen, it is hand to mouth, but it is keeping a couple of processors going as well in the areas. It is keeping restaurants going and it is keeping life in these areas. It is critical to me that this trickle-down effect benefits so many.

I am also conscious of marine tourism. Marine tourism is driven by the fact that there is picturesque scenery in many of these harbours, but that picture comes at a price to the people who are fishing. They are providing the backdrop and the entertainment, if you want, and the beautiful vistas we see in many of these harbours. We are supporting those harbours as well through some funding, but those boats would not be there for the nice pictures that get taken when the marine tourism comes along without the hard work of these people who are on a viability threshold. That is certainly not encouraging the generational renewal we would want to see. I come from a small farm. I have seen how that has played out over the years and how

things have improved in the agricultural sector with prices. They are stretched again, but there has been a period of reasonable stability there. We certainly can get back to that.

Senator Duffy raised some the exact same points about the necessity for flexibility and how we can manage to get funding out to them. He talked about the necessity to simplify the scheme insofar as we can and get money out to ensure that people get back doing what they are doing and fishing because we certainly do not want boats tied up when there are fish to be caught. That does keep the processors going, and it keeps people coming to restaurants in the localities as well. I thank the Senators for their interest. I hope to be in a position to have greater detail in the very near future and that BIM will be in a position to open up the scheme and we get that money out as quickly as possible.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Garret Kelleher): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit agus leis na Seanadóirí ar fad a ghlac páirt sa díospóireacht. Sin deireadh leis na ráitis maidir le tacaíochtaí breosla do thionscal na hiascaireachta. Fiafróidh mé den Treoraí Gníomhach cathain a bheartaítear le suí arís.

Senator Diarmuid Wilson: Next Wednesday, 6 May at 2 p.m.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Garret Kelleher): An aontaítear leis sin? Aontaítear.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar athló ar 12.23 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 6 Bealtaine 2026.

The Seanad adjourned at 12.23 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Wednesday, 6 May 2026.