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DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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SEANAD ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 11 Meitheamh 2026

Thursday, 11 June 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: Dáil Éireann passed the Media Regulation Bill 2026 on 10 June 2026, to which the agreement of Seanad Éireann is desired. Dáil Éireann passed the Air Pollution (Amendment) Bill 2025 on 10 June 2026 without amendment.

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad

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

Senator Victor Boyhan - The need for the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to make a statement on a draft national planning statement.

Senator Ollie Crowe - The need for the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade to make a statement on the introduction of an IT-based Garda verification system for first-time passport applicants and applications being treated as first-time applications.

Senator Eileen Lynch - The need for the Minister for Education and Youth to make a statement on the promotion of the Key to the EU programme for teachers.

Senator Dee Ryan - The need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on University Hospital Limerick, in particular the establishment of a hospital development board and the recruitment of consultants.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove - The need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the inclusion of osteoarthritis in the chronic disease management programme.

Senator Mike Kennelly - The need for the Minister for Transport to make a statement on driving test waiting lists in County Kerry, in particular the establishment of a driving test centre in Listowel to reduce waiting times.

Senator Martin Conway - The need for the Minister for Health to provide an update on the timeline for a dialysis service to be operational in Ennis, County Clare.

Senator Mark Duffy - The need for the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration to make a statement on the introduction of a scheme similar to the immigrant investor programme to allow access to overseas funding.

The matters raised by the Senators are suitable for discussion and I have selected Senators Victor Boyhan, Ollie Crowe, Eileen Lynch and Dee Ryan 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

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy John Cummins.

Planning Issues

Senator Victor Boyhan: This Commencement matter relates to the national planning statement and guidelines on designs for apartments. I welcome the Government's announcement last Tuesday that it would issue guidelines with a strategic environmental assessment, SEA, and the appropriate other issues attached to that in terms of the SEA report. I have looked at the submissions and am pleased to see that attached in the documents attached to the public consultation, we have the draft planning design standard amendments for the national planning scheme for 2026 statement; the strategic environmental assessment, SEA, environmental report with the SEA environmental report non-technical summary; the SEA determination under section 26(4) of the Planning and Development Act 2024; the screening for the appropriate assessment, AA, and determination under section 202 of the Planning and Development Act of 2024; and the stage 1 strategic flood assessment of flood risk identification. The privacy statements are also worth mentioning. I mentioned it to the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, yesterday but I am delighted to see that in this case, it is clearly stated that all submissions will be published online and all personal information will be redacted, which I think is a reasonable and fair request. That is important and I welcome it.

One has to ask when one looks in here today what the difference is between what was out there and what is happening in practice. I told the House the other day - I am not too sure if the Minister of State was here - that I had made contact with the national planning regulator, An Coimisiún Pleanála and a number of planning authorities to ascertain how they were applying the current situation. I received mixed responses so that was interesting in itself. I read the Government's press statement on these matters. It is important to see that we need clarity and consistency.

I recognise that viability is frequently cited as an issue and I understand the Government's position on that but I reiterate that we cannot compromise high standards for viability. We need greater clarity. People may choose to live in apartments and they do but we see restrictions with regard to three bedrooms. There are people living in four-bedroom apartments in all over Europe. There is not a lot of availability of three- and four-bedroom apartments. There is an inconsistency in the design and the application of design and standards between public and

private. I do not want any difference between public, private, social or affordable. Home are homes and it is about building quality homes.

I do not want to dwell too much on the litigation because it is before the courts but I acknowledge the input and courage of Independent councillor Pádraig McEvoy, Labour Party councillor Darragh Moriarty, Green Party councillors David Healy and Dan Boyle and former environmental editor with *The Irish Times*, Frank McDonald. They took risks and challenged things and they are entitled to do so. That is democracy and I do not sneer at or suggest that people who are democratically elected or journalists with a long track record and expertise do not have a right to do this so I am delighted that Mr. Justice Richard Humphreys referred this matter to the European courts. That is where it is. Parallel to the *status quo*, the Government is producing a new public consultation with appropriate measures that I welcome but I salute and admire the courageous politicians who took a stand at potentially great personal cost to themselves.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy John Cummins): As the Senator will appreciate, there is a lot in this response and it will be circulated. I will get through as much of it as I possibly can.

The delivery of housing is a top priority for this Government. The Government's new housing action plan supports the delivery of the revised national planning framework projections, which set out the need to plan for approximately 50,000 additional homes per annum out to 2040. Fulfilling these commitments will require a substantial increase in housing output of all types, in particular apartments at central and accessible urban locations. On Tuesday, 9 June, a public consultation was opened on the draft national planning statement design standards for apartments 2026 and the associated SEA environmental report and non-technical summary.

The draft national planning statement, NPS, represents an important opportunity to review how apartment development can contribute to addressing Ireland's housing needs while maintaining high standards of quality, sustainability and liveability. As housing demands continue to grow across our cities, towns and urban centres, apartments will play a significant role in delivering homes for a diverse range of households, and in particular at central and accessible urban locations.

The draft NPS sets out guidance, standards and policy requirements in relation to the design of apartment developments to take account of current Government policy and economic, social and environmental considerations. The draft NPS set out, for consistent application by all planning authorities and An Coimisiún Pleanála, the particular design parameters that will apply to apartment development, where the principle of the development of apartments at any particular site has been established in accordance with the statutory plan and consideration of the policies, objectives and requirements of the sustainable residential development and compact settlement guidelines, issued as ministerial guidelines in 2024.

The draft NPS includes national planning policies and measures related to unit mix, internal space standards for different types of apartments, dual aspect ratios, floor to ceiling heights, apartments to stair or lift core ratios, communal, community and cultural facilities, shared accommodation and certain standards relating to student accommodation. The draft NPS also include guidance related to amenity spaces including balconies or patios, storage, security

considerations, access and services, waste management facilities, children's play areas, bicycle parking or storage and car parking. It also sets out the need to practically and flexibly apply the general requirements of the draft NPS in relation to refurbishment schemes, particularly in historic buildings, some urban townscapes and over-the-shop type or other existing building conversions.

The draft NPS is being prepared for the approval by the Government under section 25 of the Planning and Development Act 2024 to replace the design standards for apartments, guidelines for planning authorities issued in 2025 as ministerial guidelines under section 28 of the Planning and Development Act 2000.

A strategic environmental assessment, SEA, is being undertaken on a precautionary basis and in accordance with Article 6 of Directive 2001/42/EC which is the strategic environmental assessment directive, and the European Union land use planning and strategic environmental assessment regulations 2025.

The draft NPS is accompanied by an SEA environmental report and non-technical summary, and a public consultation is being carried out in accordance with regulation 9 of the European Union land use planning and strategic environmental assessment regulations 2025 and section 26 of the Planning and Development Act 2024.

As the Senator will be aware, submissions or observations may be made in relation to the draft national planning statement and the associated precautionary SEA environmental report and non-technical summary until 5.30pm on 7 July 2026.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I thank the Minister of State. None of that is new to me because it is all on the website today in relation to the public consultation. However it is good to have it on the record.

The word I am taking away from the Minister of State's contribution today is "precautionary". We will see if it is precautionary when the courts make a final decision. I do not believe it is precautionary. I believe it was mandatory and required. I look forward to discussing it again when the decision is made but the line the Minister of State has chosen to take today is that it was only on a precautionary basis. I note that and it is important it is on the record.

Apartments are an important choice for people who want to buy or rent to live in one. I accept that every effort must be made to further reduce the costs of apartments, as for the construction of any homes, to achieve the delivery of the 300,000 homes the Government has set to be achieved by the end of 2030.

Deputy John Cummins: It is being conducted on a precautionary basis. The Senator has said viability is key in apartment development. The Government recognises that, which is why we are introducing this national planning statement and why we introduced the guidance we brought in last year. If the Senator has suggestions around viability measures in relation to apartment development, he knows I am an approachable Minister of State and I am more than happy to hear those because that is a critical element if we are to get to the targets. I do not think we can have a position where we cannot change apartment standards and have active viability. We know from reports, which both of us examined at the joint committee on housing

in the past, that there is a significant viability gap around apartment development. My job as Minister of State is to ensure we close that viability gap so we can get the homes that families and individuals need across the country. That is my job as a Minister of State and I hope I will have the support of the House in introducing these guidelines.

Passport Services

Senator Ollie Crowe: I thank the Minister of State for being here. I wish to raise the need for the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade to make a statement on the modernising of the Garda verification system for first-time passport applicants or applications being treated as first-time applications, specifically to introduce an IT-based system or element so the process is not solely reliant on phones being answered, which is not always possible in busy Garda stations.

I, like all Members of the Oireachtas, receive representations on passports quite a lot and especially at this time of year as people are heading away on their holidays. Part of the security arrangement for first-time passports, whether for a child or adult, or an application being treated as a first-time application, which happens when the last passport issued to someone was in excess of 15 years previously, is verification by a garda of the identity of the applicant. When processing the application, the passport service will ring the Garda station up to three times to confirm the details of the application. I have read that where the passport service cannot reach the Garda station after three attempts, the relevant superintendent's office can be contacted to verify the details, although in a lot of recent cases when I contacted the Passport Office's Oireachtas service on applications this option has not been mentioned. Rather, I was informed a new form would be requested from the applicant. It is not clear to me how often the option to phone the relevant superintendent is used.

Regardless, this procedure seems incredibly unfair, given that a family may miss their holiday because there is no one available to answer a call in a Garda station. I was made aware of one recent case of a man in his 80s having to be driven to Dublin to secure his passport for a family trip. It is not acceptable that in 2026 we do not have a digital system in place to ensure the timely verification of the details by gardaí. Remediating this should be a priority. It is an issue which can and should be solved in a relatively straightforward manner. If a digital system were to be implemented, it could be completed by qualified administrative staff. That would have the bonus of freeing up extra Garda resources to focus their attention on crimes.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Timmy Dooley): I am glad of the opportunity to address the House on the topic of passports which has been raised by my good friend Senator Crowe. I thank him for raising this issue. It is a really important issue of which I am very aware from a constituency perspective, as are most Members of this House.

The passport service is currently experiencing a high level of demand for passports as citizens prepare for upcoming summer travel. Thanks to the operational and staffing plans of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the passport service is successfully responding to this demand and has issued over 440,000 passports to date this year.

Internationally, the Irish passport has a strong reputation and the passport service takes seriously its responsibility to protect the integrity of the Irish passport and the issuing process. Our passport ranks fourth in the Henley global passport index as it provides citizens visa-free access to 186 countries.

Since the introduction of passport online in 2017, adults renewing their passports are not required to submit a witnessed identity form. Online child renewal applications can be witnessed by members of many professions, including schoolteachers, doctors, elected representatives and gardaí. Only first-time adult and child passport application forms for applicants resident in Ireland are required to be witnessed by a member of An Garda Síochána. There is a really good reason for that. We have seen efforts by others for nefarious reasons to attempt to gain an Irish passport illegally.

The witnessing of these application forms is a vital element of the identity verification process as it provides initial assurance to the passport service that the person in the photograph is the same person presenting to submit the form. With applications for a minor, the witnessing of this form provides evidence that guardians have given consent for a passport to be issued to the child. To protect the rights of guardians and children, it is important that forms are correctly completed.

In December 2025, the passport service launched a new passport assist service to support citizens who do not wish to use passport online channels and assist them to make a paper passport application. When developing passport assist, the passport service engaged extensively with An Garda Síochána and provided training resources on correctly witnessing forms. Since its launch, the proportion of applications requiring Garda witnessing has decreased from 17% to 13%. When a garda does witness an application, it is the responsibility of the witnessing garda to ensure that the signature is correctly recorded in the station logbook in order that, when the passport service calls, the signature can be verified. In these cases, the passport service calls the relevant station to confirm that the garda recorded the form in the logbook. The passport service is not required to directly speak to the witnessing garda. Passport service staff call the Garda station up to three times to verify the signature. Passport applications are checked by experienced entitlement officers who endeavour to maintain up-to-date records of the opening hours of Garda stations.

Where the passport service cannot reach the Garda station after three attempts, the relevant superintendent's office can be contacted to verify the details. If the passport service is unable to verify the witness after these steps have been taken, a new witnessed form will be requested from the applicant. The passport service is continuously looking at ways to make the application process easier for applicants, including the enhancement of digital services, and would welcome the digitisation of the records maintained by An Garda Síochána when witnessing applications. There is a general update of passport service policies under way in the context of the ongoing passport reform programme. This reform programme focuses on the future of service delivery by implementing projects that enhance the customer experience, while maintaining the integrity of the Irish passport.

I thank the Senator for his question. I am well aware of the issue. I encourage him and others in this House and elsewhere to encourage those seeking a passport and filling out the application to go to a main Garda station. There is a multiplicity of Garda stations in my constituency which only open for a number of hours of the day and there is no way in the wide

world that when the Passport Office is ringing at 4 o'clock, 5 o'clock or 6 o'clock, or maybe later or even at weekends, there will be somebody there to answer. I encourage people who find themselves with a requirement to witness the application, that is, a first-time application or one that has been expired for more than five years, to go to the main Garda station in the county. That is a way to resolve the problem. However, it does not take from the very important issue the Senator has raised, which is somebody who missed a holiday who at some point had a passport that had gone out of date. Between Covid and various other things, people quite frankly have not had use for a passport. Particularly within the common travel area where Aer Lingus prior to this did not require a passport to go to the UK, and many people who did not have a passport chose to travel there with a driving licence, there is now an even greater demand. The word has to go out that people should go to a main Garda station if they are outside the normal repeat situation.

Senator Ollie Crowe: I thank the Minister of State for his excellent response. It shows he is on the ground because he knows exactly the issue that has been raised. The point I raise is that what is happening is the Passport Office is contacting the Garda station on three occasions but does not follow up with the superintendent's office and consequently there is an issue after the three calls are made. That is the feedback I am getting in Galway.

I would like to send out the message that what the Minister of State has said here this morning is to go to your main Garda station with the full-time hours that a 24-hour Garda station, which we have throughout Galway city has, and which other leading localities, whether Ennis or Limerick as the case may be, have.

I appreciate this is a very important role. Ensuring identity verification is a key point in the passport process, and naturally we all go along with that. I note the digitalisation of Garda records is a matter for An Garda Síochána, as we know, but having said that, there is a close relationship between the Department and the Garda, and it would be of considerable benefit if the Department could engage with An Garda Síochána on this to give it a suitable path forward. As I have noted, a proper system is implemented. This would seem to be a task that could be largely carried out by administrative staff, freeing up Garda resources, which would surely be a win-win situation.

I fully take on board what the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley has said this morning on sending out the message to go to a main, 24-hour Garda station. That is the point that as public representatives we need to get across.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I thank the Senator. I know he is passionate about this area, because he and I have had numerous conversations. He is working extremely hard in his constituency to try to get people over the line.

I will raise the issue, as I have done previously, with the Minister for foreign affairs in relation to who can actually sign and do the verification. I am conscious that it can be done by peace commissioners, commissioners of oaths, schoolteachers and school principals, etc. I see no reason why somebody who is elected to the Oireachtas could not be in a position to sign. For whatever might be said about us as politicians, generally, those of us who are elected have the trust of our constituents. It would be an appropriate profession to be able to sign and verify because the Senators in the House know full well that unlike gardaí and school teachers, etc.,

our phones can never be off. We are always in a position to be available because that is our role. The Senators here today are hard-working, constituency people. That is something that should be looked at.

The Senator might bring forward a Private Member's Bill or perhaps another Commencement matter to broaden the kind of people who can be used because while a garda plays a very important role, the role generally is just to witness. Somebody presents him or herself with a photograph and that is the individual and the garda signs to that effect. There is no reason that could not be done by a Member of the Oireachtas. That would resolve a lot of the issues that we talk about, but that is a matter for the Department. It is something the Senator could raise here at a later stage.

EU Programmes

Senator Eileen Lynch: I thank the Minister of State for being here with us this morning. I want to speak about the Key to the EU programme, which is a fully-funded EU primary school programme. As the Minister of State knows, in the second half of this year, in just shy of a month, Ireland holds the Presidency of the Council of the European Union, a Presidency which will not only shape what we say in Brussels, but should shape what we do at home in our classrooms with the next generation of European citizens.

The hosting of the Presidency is a real opportunity to bring the European project closer to our citizens. The Key to the EU programme also offers just that. It was created by Dr. Emmanuelle Schön-Quinlivan from UCC and Trish Collier, who is a principal in Kilmurphy National School in Cork North-West, my own constituency. It is an engaging programme in active European citizenship education designed for primary level. It gives teachers free curriculum-linked classroom resources with differentiation built in and a Drumcondra-accredited CPD course to support them. This is not an untested programme, it is one of only 13 teacher training programmes competitively funded by the European Union, and it is the only one of those programmes that is based at primary school level. A programme led from Ireland is being praised across the Union as a model of good practice and yet it lacks visibility in the very schools here at home that it was meant to serve.

What I am seeking from the Minister of State is something practical, which is the promotion of this programme. Each August, before the school year begins, the Department communicates with primary schools. I am asking whether this programme could be included in that communication or for the Department to send a single dedicated email letting principals and teachers know that this fully-funded, freely available resource exists. There is no funding sought. It is fully funded from an EU level. No new scheme is proposed. No curriculum change is required because the new primary curriculum framework embeds at its core a wheel of competencies where active citizenship features.

This programme links in with many existing modules and subjects on the current curriculum. There are parts that link in with history, geography and English. We are seeking one act of communication at a moment of real national and European significance. The position stated by the Department of Education and Youth is that it does not endorse any outside programmes but this has suffered exceptions, such as the endorsement of incredibly worthy anti-bully and online safety programmes like FUSE.

This is a programme that is the result of a unique collaboration between primary and third level educators. Just last month, Dr. Emmanuelle Schön-Quinlivan was appointed by the European Commission to the advisory board of the project, enhancing democratic citizenship education and supporting member states with resources and tools. This highlights just how highly regarded Key To the EU and its creators are. To be getting this kind of accolade at a European level but not be getting it at a national level indicates that something is very wrong.

Active citizenship cannot and should not be an abstract idea. It begins with children in primary classrooms learning what it means to belong to something larger than themselves and discussing how to engage with it and shape it. This programme seeks to do that. It brings the European Union to kids in ways they can understand. This is a fully funded, ready-made way to do that and to open that conversation with children. I see many adults who do not have a full grasp of the European project. If we can start the proper education on this at a young age, it will be really beneficial to our citizens going forward. All I am asking is for the Department to highlight this programme and simply let schools know that it is there.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I thank Senator Lynch for raising this important issue and recognise her very considerable interest in broader European issues. I know she is a vice-president of the European People's Party, which is an important role, and she has a long history there. I think she was secretary general of YouthEPP at a stage in the past. It is really good that this House seeks to embrace all that is involved at European level. I thank the Senator for her continued interest in this area.

The Minister, Deputy Naughton, along with Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, recently met Dr. Schön-Quinlivan, Ms Trish Collier and Mr. Hugh Ahern, the team behind the Key to the EU programme. Dr. Schön-Quinlivan and Ms Collier presented on the Key to the EU programme at the meeting. The Minister acknowledged the work that went into developing such programmes and the positive intentions behind it. However, it was set out that the Department received many requests to support or promote the roll-out of projects, programmes and resources in schools. The Education Act 1998 sets out the key roles and functions in the running of schools. This recognises that school leaders and teachers are best placed to decide on the programmes that are most appropriate for the children in their classrooms and in their schools generally. As a result, apart from a small number of prescribed texts at post-primary level, determined by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA, decisions on textbooks, programmes and products to use in schools are therefore taken at school level. External companies and organisations that develop programmes can contact schools directly, but in terms of content, the Department does not have a role in approving, commissioning, sponsoring or endorsing any content in any publication or product. The only requirement from the Department, on any resource used in a school, is that it be relevant to the curriculum. Ultimately, the decision on which resources, if any, most appropriately cover the curriculum also rests with the school.

At the meeting with the Key to the EU team, it was noted that other programmes, such as the Blue Star Programme are available to schools. The Blue Star Programme is managed by European Movement Ireland for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The programme aligns to the primary curriculum and aims to foster a better understanding and knowledge of the EU through classroom projects and activities. This is an example of the issue facing the Department if asked to endorse particular programmes over others. It was suggested to the

Key to the EU team that they explore how the two initiatives might align and support each other.

Today is also an opportunity to highlight that the concept of citizenship is already embedded across the curriculum. Aistear, the curriculum for early years, promotes the concept of citizenship and social justice with children and respects them as young citizens. The redeveloped primary curriculum framework introduces being an active citizen as one of seven key competencies. It aims to empower children to understand their rights and responsibilities and to engage with local and global issues. Leaving certificate politics and society aims to develop students' capacity to engage in reflective and active citizenship, informed by the insights and skills of social and political sciences. The content of these specifications supports the development of an understanding of equality, inequality and diversity in a range of areas of human life, including gender, ethnicity and social class.

Senator Eileen Lynch: I thank the Minister of State for his kind words and for taking this matter today. I appreciate that it is not within his Ministry. Nonetheless, I am quite disappointed with that reply. I am aware of the meeting with Ms Collier and Dr. Schön-Quinlivan. However, we are not looking for sponsorship, as the Department has outlined in the second page of the reply. We are not looking for an endorsement. All we are looking for is that schools be made aware that this resource is available. It seems absurd to me that a primary school funded programme cannot secure a basic level of support from our Ministers during the year of the EU Presidency we are hosting. It is not about sponsorship, funding or endorsement. It is simply about letting schools know that this resource is available.

I take the point on the Blue Star programme. It is an excellent programme. These two programmes are actually quite complementary, yet the way the Department of foreign affairs is putting it is that it is either-or. It most certainly is not. The Key to the EU and the Blue Star programmes can work together, hand in hand.

We have to be very mindful and careful of our position within the European Union when we look at the way in which politics across the Union is fragmenting and the global change we are facing. According to the most recent European Movement Ireland poll, while 82% of Irish people are happy to retain our membership, 26% do not feel that the EU is moving in the right direction, 28% do not know, 37% feel their views are not represented at a European level, and 27% of people do not know whether they are. There is a lack of education there. I take the point about Aistear and the point about the leaving certificate project but we need to do more. This is a resource that is free and that has been widely accredited at a European level. It is shameful if we cannot accredit it and acknowledge it here at a national level when it came from Ireland.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I know of the Senator's commitment to the European Union and her desire to broaden the reach to the greatest extent possible, not in a lectural way, but an embracing way, to try to inform and educate. Of course, the best place to involve oneself in education generally is in an education setting. While Departments of state generally are rigorous about being associated with certain programmes, I cannot disagree with anything Senator Lynch has said, to be frank.

I encourage her to use her office as an outreach to schools in so far as she can. I do a little of that as well because I share some of her interests, although perhaps not to the same level she has been so successful in. I see Senator Lynch on social media. She is a very hard worker on the ground. Maybe we can use our respective political offices to engage and inform schools. I know that Senator Lynch and others regularly speak in school settings. Sometimes, Departments take time to get to where they need to be or should be. As politicians, maybe we should do some of that work ourselves in reaching out through our various constituency funding streams. For example, there is the capacity to get material printed and circulated to schools in our areas. Maybe that is something we need to push a little bit ourselves. However, I do take Senator Lynch's point.

I know the hesitancy and reticence at departmental level not to be seen to support any particular programme are for all the good reasons, and there are other programmes that will come along that may not have the same broader acceptance or whatever. However, there is a lack of information there and we should be filling the void because if we do not, it will be filled by various social media channels by those who seek to oppose or dismantle the effectiveness of the European Union generally.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Shane Curley): We recently had Dr. Schön-Quinlivan and Ms Collier before the education committee and its Leas-Chathaoirleach, Senator Scahill, and we got to hear from students about their insights into how successful the programme was. I just want to mention that Senator Scahill and the rest of the committee are fully supportive of the initiative.

Hospital Facilities

Acting Chairperson (Senator Shane Curley): Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit, an Teachta Butler.

Senator Dee Ryan: Tá fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit. I thank the Minister of State for coming to the House to answer this query. I have asked for an urgent update on the establishment of a hospital board, on the expansion of facilities at UHL and on what other measures can be taken, including recruitment of additional consultants to meet demand and population levels in the mid-west.

At the outset I acknowledge and thank the Government and the Minister of State for last December bringing clarity and direction to the healthcare and hospital crisis that has plagued the mid-west for far too long. The HIQA report last autumn laid bare for all to see that the brutal overcrowding in our emergency department is caused by the chronic shortage of acute inpatient beds in UHL. That point remains central to my query for an update today. As we move forward, it is important and welcome that there is a focus on additional beds in Nenagh, Ennis and St. John's hospitals. Nonetheless, it is the provision of further acute inpatient beds that will help to alleviate the accident and emergency overcrowding we are experiencing in the mid-west.

In March the Minister announced the purchase of a 43-acre site in Raheen as part of plans to expand hospital facilities for UHL at Dooradoyle. I am seeking an update from the Minister

of State on what steps have been taken since then to move the project forward. We understand that this is not something that will happen overnight. We appreciate that thought and consideration have to be put into establishing a project board, but the project board is the first critical step in developing and finalising the plans and monitoring the progress of the development of the new site at Raheen. While the Minister has accepted and authorised the maximising of the facilities on the existing UHL Dooradoyle site, that is a more complex project. This is the only acute hospital in the region. It is a busy hospital. It is managing all of the health requirements for 440,000 people across the area. It is a phased development. I give full credit to all of the hospital doctors, workers and staff who are going in and out every day. They are doing their absolute best in challenging facilities, and in what is effectively a construction site. The welcome second 96-bed block is under construction at the moment and there are plans for further development on that site. While we have to be more phased in the development and the maximising of facilities on the Dooradoyle site, once plans have been finalised and planning permission has been granted we can plough ahead and go hammer and tongs at the green site in Raheen. I would like the Minister of State to provide an update on those, and I will ask about the consultant numbers afterwards.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I thank the Senator for raising this important issue and for her constant advocacy for health services in Limerick and the mid-west region. She has worked closely with me on various projects for mental health and I acknowledge that, particularly with regard to CAST in Limerick, which is going from strength to strength. I am taking this on behalf of the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill. As the Senator has alluded to, the Government is working to address the challenges facing acute care in the mid-west. We have listened to the strong advocacy of the people of the region and their representatives. It is important that is acknowledged because the lived experience for many people in Limerick has fallen short. It is important that we keep listening.

I recognise the significant pressures at UHL and the impact on patients, families and staff. I commend the vital work of health service staff who continue to provide quality care when people need it most. The independent report by retired Chief Justice Mr. Frank Clarke into the tragic death of Aoife Johnston made 17 recommendations, all of which have been acted on and their implementation concluded in September 2025. Staffing at UHL increased significantly by 42% from December 2020 to April 2026, equating to 4,443 whole-time equivalents. This includes 237 additional doctors, 55 of whom are consultants. Across the mid-west, overall staffing increased by 37% over the same period to 6,179 whole-time equivalents. The subsequent HIQA review identified three potential options. Option A was to expand capacity at UHL Dooradoyle. Option B was to extend UHL to include a second campus nearby and option C was to develop a model 3 hospital in the mid-west, providing a second emergency department for the region.

The Minister has accepted this advice. We are not choosing one option over another. We are delivering all three together in a co-ordinated way. At UHL, work is moving quickly on option A. Two new 16-bed units are now in place. A new 96-bed block opened in October 2025. It is state of the art. I have visited it. A further 16-bed unit is due for completion by the end of this year. Contracts for a second 96-bed ward block are expected to be awarded shortly, and a design team has been appointed for a 66-bed block. Ennis, St. John's and Nenagh

hospitals will see an additional 114 beds by 2031. In total, 420 new beds will be delivered across the mid-west between 2024 and 2031.

We are also using innovative technology to provide care, with a new virtual ward at UHL now providing 40 virtual care beds. This has worked extremely well in the Dublin region and will hopefully be the same in this case. To progress option B, the Minister mandated the HSE in December to secure a suitable site near the UHL Dooradoyle campus. In March the HSE secured a 44-acre site in Raheen. The site provides a significant opportunity to provide meaningful additional care and health services for the people in the region. Work is under way to establish a mid-west region strategic board. The board will develop a comprehensive strategic plan for the organisation of services and investment across the mid-west to support a sustainable, region-wide model of care. This plan will determine which services must remain on the UHL Dooradoyle campus, which can move to the new Raheen site, and which can be transferred to Ennis, St. John's or Nenagh hospitals. The Minister for Health remains focused on ensuring that HIQA's recommendations are implemented in a timely and co-ordinated way, and that people in the mid-west have access to safe, high-quality and reliable care.

Senator Dee Ryan: I thank the Minister of State for mentioning CAST and I sincerely thank her for her leadership on that initiative. It was an initiative, as I understand it, that was proposed from within the ranks in Henry Street in Limerick. The Minister of State really supported it. It was in danger of getting stuck, but she unclogged it and allowed it to move forward with her personal support. That project is getting strong feedback across Limerick. I know the final report has been prepared and submitted.

Deputy Mary Butler: It is coming shortly.

Senator Dee Ryan: She will be making her deliberations based on that. I thank her for her support. I also thank her for listing out and reminding us of the progress that has been made. It is important to point out that all the recommendations from Mr. Justice Clarke's report into the death of Aoife Johnston have been implemented. It is also important for the people of the mid-west to hear that. The reality is that we have huge distance and ground to make up and I acknowledge her commitment to helping us to do that.

I turn to the issue of consultants. The clinical board at UHL has sought accelerated recruitment of consultants and supporting staff at UHL as an interim measure and as something important and meaningful that can be done while we are waiting for the bricks and mortar to be delivered. As the Minister of State knows, we unfortunately have 59 consultants per 100,000 in the mid-west versus the national average of 82 consultants per 100,000.

Deputy Mary Butler: The Senator mentioned CAST. Superintendent Andrew Lacey drove this from the start. I have had a lot of discussions with him. That is a sign of a positive initiative that should be replicated around the country. That is what we are hoping to do. It is really important that the staff are in place to deliver the vital services. I also compliment the regional executive officer, Sandra Broderick, who is open to discussions with all politicians and has made significant changes there.

I have some statistics. In December 2020 there were 141 consultants. In April 2026 there were 196, an increase of 55. That is a difference of 39% and is replicated across the region. I take on board what the Senator has said. I will bring back to the Minister the issue of accelerated recruitment because health has to be a top-down approach with the consultants leading. We are also hearing about Croom, Ennis, Nenagh and St. John's hospitals. I am embedded in the fact that healthcare is from the cradle to the grave but much of the healthcare is delivered in the community. When you have strong communities, it takes the pressure off the emergency department. The Senator's point is well made, and I will bring it back to the Minister for her attention.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 10.21 a.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 10.32 a.m.

Sitting suspended at 10.21 a.m. and resumed at 10.32 a.m.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: The Order of Business is No. 1, motion re proposed approval by Seanad Éireann of the Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks Act 2022 (Designation of Meath County Council) (Parts of Administrative Area) Order 2026, to be taken on the conclusion of the Order of Business without debate; No. 1a, Media Regulation Bill 2026 - Second Stage, to be taken at 12.15 p.m., with the time allocated to the opening remarks of the Minister not to exceed eight minutes, group spokespersons not to exceed six minutes and all other Senators not to exceed three minutes, with the Minister to be given no less than eight minutes to reply to the debate; No. 2, Údarás na Gaeltachta (Amendment) Bill 2024 - Second Stage, to be taken at 1.15 p.m. or on the conclusion of No. 1a, whichever is the later, with the time allocated to the opening remarks of the Minister not to exceed eight minutes, group spokespersons not to exceed six minutes, all other Senators not to exceed three minutes, with the Minister to be given no less than eight minutes to reply to the debate; and No. 3., Garda Síochána (Recording Devices) (Amendment) Bill 2025 - Committee Stage (Resumed), to be taken at 2.15 p.m. or on the conclusion of No. 2, whichever is the later, and the proceedings thereon shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 90 minutes by the putting of one question from the Chair which shall, in relation to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Government.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: Today I would like to draw the attention of the House to the latest report from the European Union Drugs Agency. The drug trends report for 2026 makes for very stark reading from a European perspective but also from an Irish perspective. Ultimately, what it tells us in very clear language is that our challenge with drugs is increasing every day. Drugs are more available, more powerful and more dangerous right across Europe but also here in Ireland and not just in Dublin, but right across the country. It is really important that we understand that message and accept it. We cannot continue to try to police our way out of what is a public health emergency.

The report is available online. It was released this week. There are some very key, stark findings in it. The lives of more than 7,600 people in Europe ended because of drug use. In Ireland, according to the latest statistics, there were 343 drug poisoning deaths and in eight out

of ten of those deaths, there was more than one drug used. What that tells us is that polydrug use is now more common.

We also need to accept that cocaine, and increasingly crack cocaine, and synthetics are dominating. Drug use and drug abuse is not something that is confined to marginalised, at-risk, hard-to-reach individuals, cohorts or communities. It is a universal, society-wide issue. Middle-class people holding down full-time jobs are engaging in regular drug use and abuse and our water testing in Dublin shows that. It shows spikes at weekends. It also shows, and we do not need "Prime Time" to tell us this but will see it if we go through any of our streets, that young people's lives are being robbed from a very young age. They are being groomed and used to courier cocaine and other substances. It is a real issue. The report gives us statistics but more importantly, what we have within this House is the Oireachtas drugs committee which is approaching the conclusion of its work. It is really important that the report of the committee and these Houses endorse a comprehensive, health-led to our drug problem. We must recognise that this is not just a criminal justice issue and we cannot police our way out of this public health crisis. We need to adequately resource both universal and targeted prevention measures. Our prevention measures must be properly resourced, evidence-based and both universal and targeted. We must do this as a child-protection measure, a public health initiative and a whole-of-community response. The community safety partnerships offer a huge opportunity for communities to bring together the health services, the gardaí, the teachers, parents and the wider community to deliver health-led responses in our communities. I ask that the House would debate the report.

Senator Mark Duffy: This weekend in Ballina there will be two very big 40th anniversary celebrations for two very special organisations that I would like to highlight on the floor of Seanad Éireann. The first is the Ballina Arch Club, a voluntary social group for adults with special needs. It has been a brilliant source of joy down through the years for parents, family members and adults with special needs, bringing them together in social settings. It provides brilliant opportunities for people to hang out together, go to events together and develop friendships throughout adulthood. It is also a great vehicle for parents to socialise and connect. The club is having its 40th anniversary celebrations tomorrow in the Great National Hotel in Ballina. I look forward to joining them in celebrating their incredible achievements down through the years. The club has brought so much joy to so many families.

On Saturday evening the Moy Singers are also celebrating their 40th anniversary, having been founded back in 1986. Recently they took part in a brilliant concert at Knock Airport to celebrate the airport's 40th anniversary. The group has brought so much joy to the town and the county of Mayo, singing at different events. They will have a big night of celebration on Saturday night, again in the Great National Hotel, and I look forward to joining them in their celebrations. The line up includes the Lions Male Choir, PJ Duffy, Martin Moser, Mark O'Donnell, Damian Evans, Keif Mullis and Iarla Dunford, all of whom are taking part to support the Moy Singers. I wish them well and thank them for all they do in contributing to community life. They raise funds for so many different organisations every time they host an event. They bring a lot of joy to the community as well as a lot of benefit to voluntary organisations across the town and the county. I thank them and acknowledge their 40 years and look forward to celebrating it with them on Saturday evening.

Senator Joe Conway: I raise the proposed Ireland-Israel fixture and call on the Deputy Leader to arrange for the Minister for justice to come before the House to address serious and growing safety concerns. This issue was highlighted on Tuesday last by Senator Clonan and many other Senators. The potential implications for public safety for supporters, players and staff are becoming impossible to ignore. There is clear and mounting public concern. Polling and representative voices within the game indicate a significant majority of Irish supporters do not believe this fixture should proceed. Alongside that, trade union representatives have already raised serious safety concerns for workers, players and officials, pointing to the duty of care that must be upheld. We have seen evidence of how strongly this issue is resonating in practice, including protests at recent matches and growing public mobilisation. That should serve as a warning sign. There is a risk of disorder, disruption and significant security challenges arising if this game proceeds as planned.

Even setting aside the wider political and humanitarian issues powerfully articulated by colleagues across the House, the safety dimension demands urgent and serious attention. While there has been some suggestion that fixtures may be moved to a neutral venue, that does not resolve the broader issue. It does not eliminate risk or address the strength of public feeling. It may simply shift the burden elsewhere while carrying significant logistical and financial implications.

Most concerning is the apparent absence of a clear and transparent Government response to escalating safety concerns. For that reason, I ask the Deputy Leader to request that the Minister for justice come to the House as a matter of urgency to outline what risk assessments have been conducted, what engagement has taken place with An Garda Síochána and what steps the Government intends to take to ensure the safety of all involved. We have the legacy of Amsterdam, Cyprus and Athens. We have the logo of eff the Arabs and the chant of no children left in Gaza. This is indicative of many supporters who are members or reserve members of the IDF and trained battle combatants, and who would not be welcomed by civilised football supporters.

In the few seconds I have left, I want to draw attention to the Seanad Independent Group's growing concern about guillotining legislation in the House. We had a meeting this morning. We are very exercised by it. For a revising legislative House to be repeatedly guillotining proposed legislation is not good enough. It is an interregnum at the moment but when the new Leader is finally confirmed, we will be asking for a meeting so we can iron out this unsatisfactory situation.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I welcome Rush National School. They are guests of Deputy O'Donoghue. I hope they enjoy their visit to Leinster House. As is customary here in the Seanad, no homework for the rest of the week.

Senator Conor Murphy: I raise again - it was raised yesterday and in the Dáil Chamber - the second night of rioting and disturbance in Belfast and some other areas of the North. All of us were shocked and appalled by the images of the attack on the man in Belfast on Monday. A man has been charged and will face judicial process in due course. The response to that has been absolutely outrageous. The North has the unenviable record of being the area with the highest level of violence against women, and has had it for many years. We have seen some horrific murders of women in recent years. The community response to all of that has been

dignified vigils and solidarity with families of victims, including the family of Natalie McNally from my county of Armagh, who have politically called out the racist pogroms we have seen in response to the attack in Belfast. People from ethnic minorities, many of whom provide vital services, particularly in the North's health service, have been attacked and had to flee burning homes with their children in loyalist areas of Belfast. It is reminiscent of anti-Catholic pogroms that happened in many decades over the last century.

We have to be clear and unequivocal in calling out racist thuggery for what it is. Political leaders have spoken collectively in response to this and that is to be welcomed but political leaders cannot stand shoulder to shoulder with masked loyalists who are shouting racist and sectarian abuse in Scarva on Saturday and decry the same elements as they go on a racist pogrom and rampage a few nights later. Leadership means stopping the poisonous narrative of fear and loss that has been fed to loyalist communities for a generation and which makes them easy prey for right-wing agitators in Ireland and abroad. It also means calling out the burning of religious effigies, our national flag, images of non-unionist politicians and mock-ups of refugees on boats on loyalist bonfires next month. It means promoting an honest dialogue based on respect and tolerance that equips communities to meet the many challenges that lie ahead.

I offer my support to the family of Pat Finucane who have finally, after 37 years, secured an inquiry into Pat's murder. I had the privilege of knowing Pat and I met him on a number of occasions. The family has fought tooth and nail for 37 years. This was the one inquiry and investigation the British Government tried its best to prevent happening. Now that they have finally got that inquiry, I hope we all wish that they get the truth behind his murder that has been hidden for many years and the family gets some degree of closure. That will make a significant contribution to ongoing challenges in dealing with the legacy of conflict in the North.

Senator Ollie Crowe: I raise the Galway city outer ring road. After a long process, planning permission was finally granted in April, which was welcomed by all, for this vital and much-needed infrastructure. The ring road is not a silver bullet that will magically solve all Galway's traffic woes but it is an essential piece in finally addressing the daily traffic nightmare across our city. Thankfully, the Government has recognised and supported the project and funding in excess of €800 million has been granted.

Unfortunately, a number of judicial reviews have been filed in recent weeks. It is important to note these reviews are being taken by directly impacted homeowners who are well entitled to fully use their legal options. The homeowners have said they would like to engage in talks with the decision-makers and I encourage the Department of Transport to do so. Mediation was used recently during legal proceedings involving the MetroLink project in Dublin and that could help here, too, to limit delays for a vital project. For businesses and communities across the region, further delays would be a significant blow. The ring road should have happened many years ago and the negative impact of its not being built has been considerable. Galway and its surrounds cannot afford for this uncertainty to continue. I ask the Deputy Leader to write to the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, requesting his Department examine the matter and agree to meet with affected homeowners.

Senator Evanne Ní Chuilinn: On 28 January, we at the Oireachtas joint committee on sport heard about safeguarding in sport. We heard from Sport Ireland, Rowing Ireland and the Federation of Irish Sport. There was one athlete manager in place, as we learned from the federation at the time. This one individual at the federation was the only person athletes could go to with concerns around training, balancing sport with commitments to education or anything else. It is a broad remit. The CEO of the federation, Mary O'Connor, told us that athlete support manager could be dealing with up to 250 high-performance athletes at one time across 25 national governing bodies. The CEO had been appealing to Sport Ireland for one more athlete support manager - or many more athlete support managers - for quite some time. She reiterated that call at the committee, as did I, when we heard evidence of what had transpired and could have been better dealt with - maybe even avoided - at the Rowing Ireland high-performance programme.

That was why I was encouraged to see news yesterday of a post boarded by the Federation of Irish Sport for an athlete support executive. It is 30 hour per week position and is certainly a step in the right direction for the safeguarding and welfare of our athletes. Gymnastics Ireland also advertised for an athlete framework service manager, so I really think we are going in the right direction. We need to go further long term. We need a sports integrity unit. Having said that, however, we are definitely moving towards understanding that we need to be a little bit more proactive instead of reactive in terms of safeguarding our athletes. I want to mention one other thing before I go because I did mention Gymnastics Ireland. I want to congratulate 13-year-old JJ Peters from Douglas Gymnastics Club who competed at her first international competition this week in Slovenia for Ireland. She is 13 years of age in a high-performance programme and she finished eleventh out of 86 gymnasts across Europe. I want to call that out and say well done. Gymnastics Ireland obviously has a pathway that is working very well at the moment. I congratulate JJ on her first time competing for Ireland at just 13 years of age.

Senator Sharon Keogan: Hear, hear.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I call Senator Keogan.

Senator Sharon Keogan: I rise today to echo the concerns raised by other members of both Houses on the recent Tickets.ie fiasco where the company in question went into liquidation with no warning. Even the festival organisers were unable to receive the ticket revenue that has already been paid by thousands of attendees. It is estimated that over €1 million collected on behalf of over five major music festivals has now vanished, leaving the organisers on the hook and unable to pay the staff, suppliers and musicians. Several major festivals have been affected by this, such as the Liberty Music Festival in Thurles, the Rory Gallagher festival in County Donegal, which was already highlighted by Senator Boyle, and Rockathon in County Meath. These are not small fringe or independent events. These festivals have become a cultural institution to attendees and artists and provide a huge annual windfall for the communities that host them, boosting local businesses.

With the future of these festivals in question, all of this is now in danger. There are, therefore, three major actions that I call on the Government to undertake. The first is to make emergency supports available to the festivals the question. This is not a matter of handouts. It is a matter of keeping alive a diverse and thriving range of festivals across the country in a

moment of crisis and preventing the potential ripple effect that their collapse will have on our rural communities and our cultural sector. I feel this is only fair because the Government bears some responsibility for this mess in its failure to regulate the ticket industry, which is my second proposed action. The fact that Tickets.ie has been mishandling millions of euro in revenue without submitting to the Companies Registration Office since 2022, without a tax clearance and with no obligation to ensure the money was underwritten is utterly baffling and must be fixed post haste. I have heard from Councillor Jim Ryan in Thurles that DEAG, the German owner of Tickets.ie, has not been responding to organisers. Finally, I call on our Government to immediately reach out to its German counterparts, whether it is the German Minister of Commerce and Industry or, indeed, our German ambassador to seek a rapid solution.

Senator Manus Boyle: Today, I want to start by wishing the Cully Coders from County Donegal a safe trip. They are travelling to Canada next week to represent Ireland in the First Lego League Canada Cup of robotics. The Cully Coders are aged from 11 to 14. They are Zoe McElhinney, Abby McElhinney, Rebecca McElhinney, Sienna Deane and Georgia Green. They are coached by Stephen and Adele McElhinney. I wish the girls the very best of luck in Canada. I know they will do Donegal and Ireland proud. It is a great achievement for these five girls.

I want to raise the ongoing shortage of taxis affecting people across the country. Last week, I spoke about the WAV grant and how it is not working properly. The grant is supposed to help people to buy wheelchair-accessible taxis, but the funding runs out almost immediately. Many drivers cannot access the support they need. The rules are that new taxis must be wheelchair accessible. It is now making the market too expensive for new drivers to join the industry. These vehicles can cost up to €60,000. Without proper financial support, many people simply cannot afford it. At the same time, taxi numbers continue to fall. We have fewer taxis now than in 2009. People are waiting long times for taxis. Workers, older people and people who are trying to get home safely at night from pubs are affected. Nobody is saying accessibility is not important; it really is, but the system is not working. We need a balanced approach to protect accessibility while increasing the number of taxis on our roads. The Government needs to increase the WAV grant significantly and review the current rules for new taxi licences. More importantly, we need a proper national taxi strategy to deal with the shortage and improve the services for people across our country.

Finally, I wish Donegal all the best against Cork in Ballybofey on Sunday.

Senator Chris Andrews: I agree with Senator Fitzpatrick's comments in relation to the RTÉ "Prime Time" report entitled Cocaine Kids. For anybody living in the inner city, it was nothing new and revealed nothing new to them. As she said, it is really important that we have a health-led approach to drug use. I agree with and acknowledge that.

Last week, I went to visit My Lovely Horse Animal Rescue. It was an incredible visit. There are horses, pigs, goats and donkeys - everything is there. It was incredible for two reasons. It was incredible because the number of horses there was shocking and depressing. I have never seen so many horses in one place. Maybe I am a city person, but I do not think----

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Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: The Senator should come to Kildare.

Senator Chris Andrews: Even in Kildare we would not see that number of horses in one small area. It was absolutely shocking to see so many horses, and they were all rescue horses. We hear a lot about how we are a horse-loving nation but, sadly, a visit to My Lovely Horse Animal Rescue would suggest that this is not true. When we see the horseracing industry getting €80 million per year and then we see the huge number of horses in rescues, we know something is not working. The cruelty of horses that is tolerated in this country is shameful, whether it is sulky racing, plain neglect of horses that do not run fast enough or just sad neglect. The Government allows this to happen. There are no laws, and there is no enforcement. Every one of those horses and donkeys represents a failure of the Government in animal welfare. My Lovely Horse Animal Rescue spends almost €2 million every year and gets less than €100,000 in Government support. My Lovely Horse Animal Rescue and rescues like it all around the country are picking up the tab for the failure by the Government in animal welfare. Everyone in the Dáil and Seanad should visit My Lovely Horse Animal Rescue. It should be almost compulsory. The other reason it was an incredible visit was because of the commitment, compassion and kindness the staff there show. It is a 24-7 operation. The work they do is so important and it has to be acknowledged more by the Government.

Senator Aubrey McCarthy: I want to speak about something I believe we are not taking seriously enough and that is the growing impact of cannabis addiction and cannabis-related psychosis, particularly among young people. As the Leader knows, I have been involved for many years in rehabilitation for people who have addictions. We have seen that there has been a perception that cannabis is harmless and that it is somehow different from other drugs and carries little risk. However, when we talk to addiction centres, such as Cuan Mhuire, Merchant's Quay Ireland, etc., and psychiatrists and youth workers, they tell a very different story. The reality is that more and more young people are presenting to services with issues linked to cannabis abuse, including psychosis. Young people are turning up at the centres and accident and emergency departments with psychosis and it is from cannabis.

Many years ago, there was a Minister called Pat Carey who was a very capable drugs Minister. He was from the Leader's own party. I remember we were talking about the people who were on the waiting lists. He said that cannabis is seen as harmless, but what is coming down the track is synthetic cannabis that will destroy people's minds. That was like a prophecy; it has come to pass. It is not about demonising young people or trying to criminalise young people. This is about being honest and seeing what cannabis can do. Often, people have the perception that they grow it in their back yard and it is harmless. I am telling them that the services are seeing people in their waiting lists who are in terrible trouble and their heads are being fried. Many of the young people who are arriving at the mental health services are not bad kids. They are vulnerable kids and young people who are struggling and, often, cannabis has become part of their everyday lives.

11 o'clock

We need a mature, evidence-based conversation about the risks associated with cannabis use. We need to listen to the front-line people who are saying that there is an issue. We need to make sure that the resources are properly funded. If the people who are working on the ground are saying that there is a problem, then there is a problem. Ignoring it will not make it go away.

Senator Dee Ryan: I rise to raise the issue of the proposed wastewater treatment on the Dunlicky Road in Kilkee, County Clare. Kilkee is a beautiful spot on the Clare coastline. It is beloved by both Clare residents and people from all around the country, but it is particularly beloved by Limerick people, as the Leas-Chathaoirleach will well know. I have been contacted by councillors in County Clare and the chair of the Dunlicky Road residents association to raise concerns. I am conscious that this matter is before the courts. Clare County Council had initially refused planning permission for the site that was chosen. That decision was appealed to An Coimisiún Pleanála and overturned. The residents group is now taking a judicial review of the appeal decision. What the chair of the residents group has raised with me and has been raised extensively in local media is what they feel was a lack of sufficient public consultation on the site selection. As I understand it, there were not enough consultations done with the residents in the area. I ask that this matter be raised with the Minister and that we ensure that when Uisce Éireann is doing its very valuable work in future - everyone in Kilkee acknowledges that there is a huge need for an upgrade in the wastewater treatment to end the discharge of raw sewage into the ocean nearby - sufficient public consultation on site selection is done so that everyone is satisfied with the end result.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I wish to indicate the concern of myself, my colleagues and, indeed, everyone in the Opposition about the growing practice of guillotining legislation. I do not want to make an issue of it today other than to flag it. We need to all sit down constructively. There is an Acting Leader in the Seanad currently. After that situation is resolved, there would be no harm every now and again in us all sitting down outside of this Chamber to share our concerns. I wish to flag a concern on behalf of my group's Members and all other members of the Opposition. The growing practice of guillotining is not followed by all Ministers, which is interesting. I engage and have a fairly decent working relationship with nearly every Minister. I have conversations with them about this. I am not 100% sure who is making the decisions. Do all the different facets of our organisation know what is happening? I will park that there and flag it, but I do not want to make an issue of it today.

Could we organise a meeting on forestry with our new Minister of State with responsibility for forestry, Deputy Collins? There are some key asks in terms of objectives to flag to keep it focused. I will circulate this information to the Deputy Leader later, but they are that we would discuss the allowances for the agroforestry premium rates for our afforestation schemes, the native tree area scheme, the allowances for the deer fencing scheme, a review of the climate resilience restoration pilot, the forestry roads scheme, and forestry training and education. We have to have younger people coming up with the necessary skills. There could be an apprenticeship. It would not necessarily be an academic forestry degree, but people who are involved in the physical labour of forestry management, planting, sawmills, etc. It may not be this side of the summer, but I ask that this matter be put on the list as a future possible area of discussion and for statements.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: I wish to speak about the events in Belfast recently. I am very concerned about the way events are being reported on after the attack in Belfast and in the context of the riots. Our role as politicians and legislators should be to talk about the difficult cases, the gaps in our legislation and how policy is shaping the state of our country. It cannot be the case that if we speak about violence in this country, such as an attempted beheading or

a woman being killed in Galway, there are claims that we are adding to the problem by shining a light on it. There are always thugs waiting for an opportunity or a moment to create chaos and violence in the aftermath of a tragic event. These events follow the same pattern every single time - an horrific act of violence happens, people condemn it, protests happen and then people who rightly condemn the violence are targeted as inciting hatred or stoking the flames. That can be a calculated attempt to create a chilling effect to stop people from speaking up. It is the sanitised way that some politicians and media are dealing with these events, which is creating greater suspicion and fear in communities. The Government is not adequately checking people who are claiming asylum. We do not have the capacity to assess or deal with complex medical issues and-or post-traumatic stress syndrome.

I feel so sorry for immigrants who are living here and working hard only to find themselves the subject of discrimination because of this kind of policy. We should be advocating for the voices of the victims who become lost in all the chaos of the riots. Speaking about violence and trying to improve public policy and safety should not be framed as inciting hatred. It is wrong. All it does is push people to the outer edges and the extremes.

Senator Martin Conway: I welcome the announcement yesterday of our priorities for the upcoming EU Presidency in the whole area of security and AI. I also welcome the county pairings that were announced by the Minister, Deputy McEntee, and Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, this morning. That is great because it creates buy-in with schools, community groups and sporting organisations into the whole Presidency. This is a huge opportunity for our country to showcase everything that is good about it. I am delighted that my own county of Clare is paired with Croatia. I certainly look forward to engaging with the Croatian ambassador here in Ireland. Hopefully, we will have some Croatian parliamentarians visit the county. That is good news. Every county is paired. I believe that the Leas-Chathaoirleach's county is paired with Germany. That is *sehr gut*. I am sure that there will be a lot of interesting things in the city of Limerick during that period.

I commend the Minister of State, Deputy Byrne. In recent weeks, he has been in here. He gave a fantastic overview of the preparations that had gone into the Presidency and, indeed, the programme of activities and work that will surround it. It is not all about business. There will be cultural and sporting initiatives and so on as part of the Presidency. It is such a wonderful opportunity. I hope the whole country buys into it, particularly schools, both primary and post-primary. I propose that we would have some specific debates around the Presidency. Ministers are going to be very busy, but hopefully we will have the Minister of State back here in the autumn to give us an update on quarter 1 of the Presidency. I ask for other Ministers as well to come in here and address us, particularly on the themes that are the priority of our six-month Presidency. I am looking forward to that. I hope that can be facilitated in the autumn.

Senator Paraic Brady: I rise to discuss the current problem that is in our beef sector. We have seen the price of beef fall again this week and last week. It is a sector that is in grave danger. We have farmers losing, on average, between €300 and in excess of €500 on animals that they have purchased and fed over the past six to eight months. The beef sector is really in crisis.

Since Bord Bia has been stood down, we have seen beef prices fall at a rapid rate. I would like Bord Bia to come out and give a statement about where our markets have gone. Is Bord

Bia still in operation? Who is looking after our markets at this moment in time? Since the review of Bord Bia, the Larry Murrin incident and whatever has happened, we have seen beef prices fall month on month. I hope Bord Bia will come out and give a statement about where our markets have gone because we have farmers who will actually go to the wall. They will not exist after this year. They made profits last year, invested in their farms and now, they are seeing huge losses this year. It is a sector that is really in trouble. I hope somebody out there can give me an answer about why the factories keep pulling beef at a time when the market for beef, with the World Cup in America taking place, will see the consumption of beef on the rise. There is something wrong. Some questions need to be answered here regarding why month on month, week on week, we see beef prices falling between 5 cent and 10 cent. It is a sector that is really in trouble and I do not think people here realise that farmers will actually go to the wall because of this one.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Before I call the Leader to respond, I welcome Ashbourne Women's Shed and their guest, Maura Farrell. They are guests of Deputy Darren O'Rourke. I hope they enjoy their visit today. They are very welcome.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I thank the Leas-Chathaoirleach and the 16 Senators who contributed to the Order of Business this morning. We started with Senator Fitzpatrick, who spoke about the EU report which was issued during the week about the challenges we face in Ireland and across Europe with increasing drug use. It is a concern. Senator Fitzpatrick is absolutely correct in saying that we have to view it as a public health crisis, not just a criminal justice issue. In Ireland alone last year, there were 343 people who passed away from drug poisoning. That is almost one person per day. Of course, there is an impact not just on those who have sadly passed away but also on the lives of the loved ones of those who are using and abusing drugs. Eight out of ten of those deaths showed more than two drugs used. It is very clear there is a cohort of people using a number of different drugs. It is very concerning, particularly when we see young children's lives robbed when they are used to peddle and deliver drugs. It has to be a huge concern for us. There has to be a universal, targeted approach. There has to be a whole-of-community approach. The solution cannot just be with the gardaí or indeed, with the Government. All sectors of society need to work together. Senator Fitzpatrick is right. We need an opportunity to debate this report. I know that the Joint Committee on Drugs Use will be finishing its work quite soon. The report will be laid before both Houses but I will ask, as a priority, that we have a debate in this House about the European report.

Senator McCarthy also spoke about drugs, cannabis and the strong connection with psychosis. It is very concerning. He spoke about all of the different agencies across the board that are talking about this. I visited Cuan Mhuire, which is one such agency, recently with the Minister of State, Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor, Nicola Kelly and the chair, Paul O'Donoghue. They do incredible work there and we spoke about exactly that issue. This weekend, Cuan Mhuire, which was set up by Sr. Consilio, is celebrating its 60-year anniversary. I congratulate Cuan Mhuire on all the work it is doing and continues to do, the lives that are saved and the lives it will continue to save in the future. Senator McCarthy asked for a mature debate and to look at resources across different Departments.

Senator Duffy will have a very busy weekend in Ballina with two really big celebrations happening this weekend. One is for the Arch Club, which is celebrating its 40-year anniversary. Arch Clubs do incredible work, along with the Special Olympics, and many of the same young people are involved in both. They provide a terrific place for social connection for young people with intellectual disabilities and also provide support and connection for parents. I congratulate the Arch Club in Ballina and also the Moy Singers, who are celebrating their 40-year anniversary on Saturday evening. They were also part of the celebrations to mark 40 years of Knock Airport over the past few weeks, which celebrated Monsignor Horan and his incredible vision, dream and reality at Knock Airport.

Senator Joe Conway, who spoke about the Ireland-Israel match, wants a debate with the Minister for justice on mounting concerns about security challenges. I absolutely understand where the Senator is coming from. There are very many reasons we are all concerned about the possibility of this match happening in Ireland. It is a difficult situation for the FAI and the Irish players. I gather from recent conversations and items we have heard on the news that there is a very strong possibility that this match will be moved from Ireland to a more neutral venue. I certainly ask for and echo the call for clarity. If that will happen, the announcement needs to be made about that so we know what we are dealing with.

Senator Murphy spoke about the second night of rioting in Belfast. It is shocking to witness. It brings back memories of long ago when we saw this type of horrific activity. People are going around to houses and checking who is there. Really, they are checking to see the colour of people's skin. We know that. I saw some anecdotal evidence of people living in Belfast who are not from Ireland, Belfast or Northern Ireland but are providing incredible supports, particularly in the health sector. They have had to flee their homes and try to find safe homes in other places. It is shocking to see. We all need to be very clear and unequivocal in calling this out for what it is. It is blatant racism. The Senator spoke eloquently about what leadership means. He is right in saying that leadership is about honest dialogue, based on respect and tolerance. As a community, we all would have hoped that in Northern Ireland, and particularly in Belfast, they would have learned so much over the last few years about that. We certainly hope that things will improve there. Senator Murphy also mentioned that finally, after 37 years, Pat Finucane's family has secured an inquiry. I know that is something we have always supported here. The Irish Government has always supported that so I certainly welcome that and wish the Finucane family well.

Senator Crowe said that the granting of planning for the Galway city ring-road is not a silver bullet. When the ring-road is established, it will play a really big part in addressing the huge traffic challenges that are there. Very significant funding has been given by the Government; a figure of €800 million. The point the Senator made about judicial reviews is correct. People have a right to do that. Homeowners who are impacted absolutely have a right to question the process but it is important that we have mediation at this point in time to avoid waiting and waiting. That was effective during the MetroLink process. We will certainly bring that to the attention of the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and ask him to look at it.

Senator Ní Chuilinn reminded us that the Oireachtas committee on arts, media and sport was told at its meeting on 28 January last that there is just one athlete support manager - one individual with a very broad remit - who is dealing with up to 250 athletes at any one time.

It is so important that we look after our athletes and support them in whatever way we can with the myriad different issues that can arise. Senator Ní Chuilinn spoke about two different organisations that have now advertised to have athlete board executives, and that is important, as is the need for a sports integrity unit. We support that and will bring that message back to the Minister.

The Senator also spoke about JJ Peters, who, at the incredible age of 13, came 11th out of 80 representing Ireland abroad. That is incredible, so go, JJ. I think that is a name we will see for a very long time in sports.

Senator Keogan spoke about Tickets.ie, which went into liquidation. It is awful to see as regards several major festivals and the smaller gigs as well because they are incredibly important to small venues and to the artistes and the singers who use them. In fact, within a separate Senators' group, we are doing a whole review of small venues around the country to support these types of artists. It is shocking. We need to ask the Government to look at emergency supports, and I agree with that, but it is not fair to blame the Government in any way for what has happened to Tickets.ie. The Senator said that no accounts had been filed since 2022. That is, I agree, an issue, but there are Departments there and the CRO is there and they absolutely should be chasing this. It is unfair to say that it is a fault of the Government. I do think we need to work with those who have been impacted to try to support them and to be able to try to follow the money and chase it and see what we can get back.

Senator Manus Boyle spoke about five young girls aged between 11 and 14. I think three of them were McElhinneys and two were from a Green family. We wish them well as they go to represent Ireland in Canada.

The Senator also spoke about the ongoing shortage of taxis and the grants for accessibility. The new ruling is important. Well, it is not new now, but all taxis have to be accessible. That is a really important standard that we need to support. Certainly, we will look to see if there can be any flexibility around the closing dates in relation to the grants to be able to support the taxi drivers to get those.

Senator Andrews spoke also about what Senator Fitzpatrick spoke about and about the "Prime Time" documentary about cocaine kids. I did not see it myself but I will go back and look at it. In a non-political way and a non-adversarial way, we all really need to work on this. I know that the Taoiseach's Department has a special unit on disability, and that is really important, but the next special unit that will sit in a Taoiseach's office has to be around drugs. It is impacting - I will not say every home but certainly every community, every street, every village and many of our homes.

Well done to Senator Andrews for going out to see My Lovely Horse Animal Rescue, which does incredible work. I know the Senator is passionate about animal welfare and he has spoken often about it. We certainly need to do more and, as he knows, we have asked the Minister to come here several times to discuss this. The Senator has spoken about the incredible volunteers we have, and we have to give a huge shout-out to all those who are involved in My Lovely Horse Animal Rescue, several of whom I have met, and in all our animal rescues, including the wildlife rescue centre. They are incredible people. However, it is not fair to collate the thoroughbred industry with the unfortunate abuse of horses. The Senator has questioned the supports that are going to the horse industry from the Government. The thoroughbred industry

is one of the best in the country. It brings billions of euro into the country. We are internationally recognised for it. I have been to the rescue centres but I have also been to our stud farms, as many of us have, and I have been to different areas where horses are bred and looked after and have seen the care and the supports that are given on the stud farms. There are sadly always exceptions but, generally speaking, it is second to none. I just want to draw a division between the two. Definitely, though, the centres should get more funding. I agree with that.

Senator Dee Ryan spoke about the wastewater treatment upgrade at Dunlicky Road, which impacts Limerick and parts of Kilkee, and about the lack of sufficient consultation with those who live in the area. That is an issue. There absolutely should be sufficient consultation. We see that on an ongoing basis there is insufficient consultation. It is not good enough. We certainly will ask the Minister to come in in relation to it. The Senator rightly says Uisce Éireann is doing valuable and important work, but its communications are so bad. I know from trying to deal with it on issues around Kildare myself that it gives the wrong communications or it does not give communications at all. It does not respond to concerns from residents in some areas. It does not respond to issues that public representatives raise. It is not good enough, and that is something I have written to the Minister about because when there are problems with water it causes all sorts of issues in communities. At least if there is a little bit of preparation in relation to it and people have clarity about when they will have water and when they will not have water, people can prepare, but the present system is just not working and it is really wrong.

Senator Boyhan spoke about the growing practice of guillotining legislation. Senator Joe Conway mentioned it too. Both have asked that when there is a Leader - I am only Deputy Leader - we have a meeting between the leaders of the different groups. I am certainly happy to support that request. When legislation comes before the House, it is important that we all have honest debate about it. It is important that everybody, including the Opposition, has the opportunity to put down and to debate amendments. However, when there is filibustering for the sake of it, and that does happen, we need to call it out too. There have been recent situations where we have seen that. To be fair, Ministers have given of their time. There are three particular Ministers who have sat here for debate after debate and given many hours, as they should. It is important that their time is respected as well, but we will certainly look for that meeting.

Senator Boyhan also spoke about the need for a meeting with the new Minister of State with responsibility for forestry, Niall Collins, in relation to allowances, native trees, climate restoration, training and education. We will certainly look for that. We will have a lot of legislation between now and the summer recess, so I genuinely do not know whether we will be able to fit it in, but we will look for it immediately after the summer recess if we do not have it by then.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly also spoke about the situation in Belfast. She is right in saying that we need to talk about the difficult challenges we have and we need to support victims, but we also have to call out blatant racism where we see it.

Senator Martin Conway spoke about the priorities for the EU Presidency, which is starting on 1 July. He talked about the county and country pairings. In his case, it is Clare and Croatia. Kildare is twinned with Austria. I have had the pleasure of meeting the Austrian ambassador

three times up to now to discuss our plans. I encourage all of the Senators to contact the ambassadors for the country their county is twinned with. The Irish ambassadors for each country will be coming over as well to do cultural and school activities over a three-day period at the end of September. It is a great opportunity to showcase Ireland and its culture. Senator Conway praised the Minister of State, Deputy Thomas Byrne, for the work he is doing and the Senator has asked for the Minister of State to come back to give us an update. We will look for that to happen after the summer recess.

Senator Paraic Brady spoke about farmers and the cost of beef going down. It is awful to see this. I have taken many phone calls over the last few days in relation to it. Bord Bia has not been stood down. I know that there is an ongoing issue in relation to the chair of the organisation but it has not been stood down. It is still doing its work and it does an excellent job. The market has shrunk and it is of concern. It shows too that there may be a number of different reasons for that. This came up a little bit in this House a few weeks ago. We all have a duty to talk about the absolute integrity of the Irish beef we have in this country. We all have a duty to not scaremonger in any way. It happened in this House, albeit not by any Member here, two weeks ago. We will look for the Minister for agriculture to come to the House to address the matter. It is very concerning and we need to take it very seriously and to put in any supports we can for the farmers who are impacted.

Order of Business agreed to.

Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks: Motion

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I move:

That Seanad Éireann approves the following Order in draft:

Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks Act 2022
(Designation of Meath County Council) (Parts of Administrative Area) Order 2026,

a copy of which has been laid in draft form before Seanad Éireann on 2nd April, 2026.

Question put and agreed to.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Before we suspend I would like to welcome guests of our Deputy Leader, Senator O'Loughlin, who are just arriving. You are very welcome. I hope you enjoy your visit to Leinster House and the Senate.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: They are from Newbridge Probus Club. It is a great honour for me to be able to welcome them as well.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 11.33 a.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 12.18 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 11.33 a.m. and resumed at 12.18 p.m.

Media Regulation Bill 2026: Second Stage

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

An Cathaoirleach: The debate will follow the normal pattern. I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, to the House. He will contribute for eight minutes; group spokespersons for six minutes; and all other Senators for three minutes. The Minister of State will then reply at the end of the debate.

Before I call on the Minister of State, I welcome guests of Deputy Edward Timmins, all the way from Blessington Active Retirement Group in Wicklow. You are most welcome to Seanad Éireann. It is great to see you here; thanks for coming. Anois, an tAire Stáit, más é do thoil é.

Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach. Tá mé sásta go léifear an Bille don Dara hUair anois.

Dlí tábhachtach is é an Bille um Rialáil na Meán agus tá áthas orm é a chur faoi bhráid an Tí. The main aim of the Bill is to implement the European Media Freedom Act, EMFA, into Irish law. The EMFA is an EU regulation which seeks to protect media freedom and pluralism across all member states.

A free, independent media is a key pillar of democracy and is essential for healthy public debate. In Ireland, freedom of the press is enshrined in our Constitution, and we have a robust legislative and policy framework in place to ensure an independent and diverse media sector. This has been recognised in the recently published world press freedom index for 2026, which ranked Ireland seventh in the world for media freedom. While this is something that we should be proud of, we must continue to maintain and improve this standard.

The EMFA is a regulation, which means it is directly applicable in Irish law. Ireland's regulatory framework is already largely in line with the EMFA. However, some elements require further implementation in order to have full effect. The Media Regulation Bill will further align our regulatory framework with the requirements of the EMFA. It will do so by focusing primarily on two areas, namely, the amendment on our existing media mergers regime and the introduction of new rules to increase transparency in advertising by public bodies.

With regard to media mergers, our existing media merger regime is set out in the Competition Act 2002, as amended. This Bill maintains the same overall approach when introducing targeted reforms to increase efficiency of the process and to ensure full alignment with the EMFA. Most notably, overall responsibility for the media mergers function will transfer from my Department to Coimisiún na Meán. The EMFA requires national media regulators to be responsible for or at least substantively involved in the assessment of media mergers. This transfer of responsibility will leverage an coimisiún's expertise. Its status as an independent regulator will address any potential perception of a political element to decisions regarding media mergers.

Another significant change is that mergers and acquisitions involving online platforms will now come into scope. It is an important amendment which takes into account the digital transformation of media and the ways in which we access and consume it. The Bill also introduces a turnover threshold whereby the media business being acquired must have sales of at least €2 million in the State to require notification to Coimisiún na Meán. This will ensure that the regulatory process is proportionate and focused on the most impactful of mergers. In

order to capture any exceptional cases which do not meet this threshold, an coimisiún will have the power to call in mergers where it is of the view that there is likely to be a significant impact on media plurality or editorial independence.

The Bill will also address the issue of advertising by public bodies. Public bodies spend a significant amount of money on advertising with media organisations each year and this is an important source of revenue for those businesses. It is important that there is a high standard of transparency regarding that expenditure. Under the EMFA, public bodies must ensure that expenditure on advertising with media services or online platforms is allocated in a transparent and non-discriminatory manner. Public bodies must also publish annual information on the total amount spent on advertising and amounts spent with individual media services and online platforms.

The Bill contains a number of implementing provisions to give full effect to these requirements, including a definition of public authority or entity, detailed timelines for the publication of expenditure information and an obligation to publish a plan for compliance with the EMFA's requirements. Coimisiún na Meán will be designated as the body responsible for monitoring State advertising in Ireland and will be required to produce an annual report based on the information published by public bodies. An coimisiún will develop guidelines to assist public bodies in fulfilling their obligations.

The Bill will also entrust Coimisiún na Meán with a number of other functions under the EMFA. Coimisiún na Meán will be responsible for developing a database containing information on the ownership of all media services in the State. An coimisiún already manages a similar database, *mediaownership.ie*, but the Bill will establish a statutory basis for the database and set out how it needs to be developed further in line with the EMFA's requirements.

The Bill also sets out a new role for Coimisiún na Meán regarding transparency of audience measurement. An coimisiún will be tasked with encouraging audience measurement providers operating outside of industry-agreed standards, particularly online, to draw up and adhere to jointly-agreed codes of conduct.

It is important to note that some provisions of the EMFA will be implemented separately to the Bill. Safeguards for the independence of public service media, such as RTÉ and TG4, are being implemented through the Broadcasting (Amendment) Bill, while adjustments to criminal justice legislation are being progressed by the Department of Justice to strengthen the protection of journalistic sources.

I note the urgency of the Bill. As most of the EMFA's provisions have applied since August last year, it is important that this Bill is progressed to enactment as quickly as possible to ensure that we are in compliance with EU law. Having said that, the Government is fully committed to debating the Bill as required through the Oireachtas process. I look forward to a constructive discussion on these issues with Senators in the Chamber today.

Senator Aidan Davitt: I am delighted to welcome the Minister of State back today. He has outlined important legislation. He touched on two parts that I think are of the utmost importance. First is the part pertaining to online issues. How matters are reported online and associated disinformation happens has to have some sort of filter or safeguard. That is an important part which the Minister of State has hinted at. He also mentioned the national media,

the priority, and the guarantees to our national media. It is something else that we have a grade A - we are lucky to have in this country - a guaranteed standard of verified information that people know they can go to and rely on.

As part of his briefing, the Minister of State might tease out one other matter further. The regional and provincial newspapers really need to be protected and nourished at present. I am sure there are safeguards pertaining to them, as the Minister of State has outlined, that will protect them in a certain way, but they need some sort of financial help. Many of these papers and entities are at a crossroads. If we do not do this, we risk the quality of news that has been produced over the years from the *Dundalk Democrat* to the *Westmeath Examiner* or *Westmeath Topic* in County Westmeath. These papers are extremely important. People know when they open the paper that what they are hearing is reality, not fiction or somebody's hard opinion on what they think reality should be. They are getting the hard facts. This source of information and news was never more needed than it is at present. Anything we can do to help assist and maintain these sources of news for the local communities is most important.

As part of his brief and as part of this overall review, while this regulation is welcome and much-needed, I ask the Minister of State in his position to do anything he can to influence and bolster these blocks of real information in our lives. I thank the Minister of State and appreciate the legislation. We look forward to seeing him with his sports hat on in St. Loman's in Mullingar very soon. He was instrumental in providing a great service to the club there recently. Robert and I will be delighted to have the Minister of State back in Mullingar to turn on our lights. We will be doing it literally this time, not just metaphorically.

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome the guests of Senator Rónan Mullen to the Gallery.

Senator Rónán Mullen: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit. I welcome this Bill and the essence of it, which, as the Minister of State has set out, focuses principally on media mergers and acquisitions, as well as on the important issue of advertising by public bodies.

I have a few points to make. In relation to media mergers and acquisitions, we had representatives of the Department, Coimisiún na Meán and, indeed, the independent radio sector before the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Arts, Media, Communications, Culture and Sport yesterday. As the Minister will know, there is considerable concern at the effect that the broadcast levy is having, particularly on smaller independent media organisations. Basing that levy on turnover seems to me to be very problematic in circumstances where organisations might have a large turnover but a very tight profit margin. There is ambivalence about whether it is entirely desirable that Coimisiún na Meán is becoming the regulatory behemoth that it is, with a very large inflow of staff and so on. It looks like we are entering into a highly regulated environment. While that is welcome in some ways and regulation is necessary, I sometimes wonder whether regulators can also become tyrants.

One of the issues I have warned about and raised with Coimisiún na Meán is the potential conflict between its role as a dispenser of funding to media on one hand and any perception that it might be seeking to curate the mood around certain issues on the other. For example, Coimisiún na Meán has a role in promoting diversity and various good things but that, in a sense, is a political goal. My concern is that we are not looking sufficiently at what diversity actually means. It is clear to me that when we talk about the important issue of media freedom

we think of jurisdictions like Hungary, for example, where a lot of very understandable criticism was made around excessive state control of media. There is also the danger of excessive monopolisation in media ownership and another concern that was raised yesterday is the fact that a number of our local radio stations are being bought up by, in some cases, international organisations. Whether there is anything in this legislation or elsewhere that addresses this, I think most people regret it when they hear that a long-established local newspaper or radio station has been bought up by a much larger body and sometimes an international body. People wonder how well they can continue to reflect local concerns and issues when that is happening.

In respect of the role of Coimisiún na Meán in scrutinising or being in charge of advertising by public bodies, it is important there is transparency and it is important there would not be discrimination. A point I have repeatedly put is that there is a danger of groupthink in the Irish media, though not necessarily because of State control or monopolisation. I have focused in particular in the past about a failure in RTÉ, for example, to cover a range of different points of view across a range of controversial social issues. Take migration, for example. Take debates about controversies about trans issues and so on. There is a perception that the establishment media looks over its shoulder at what the Government expects it to say to curate the national debate, so to speak.

Media freedom must be about more. It must certainly be about media freedom from excessive state influence. However, there is also a need for scrutiny of the media itself to make sure it has enough diversity within its own ranks so as to ensure the reflection of the full range of opinions on issues in society. Freedom of expression is vital to the functioning of a democracy. If one takes the very difficult area of migration, where important questions need to be asked about what is happening in our society and how we are going to manage it, there is a sense out there that the establishment media cannot be fully trusted to let the full range of points of view be heard. In the long term, that is not good for our democracy.

We have to deal with the paradoxical situation that social media and new digital media in some ways are the Wild West. On the one hand, there are very negative forces availing of the platform it gives them to amplify points of view that are not necessarily based in fact. However, on the other hand, the new digital space has brought a welcome democratisation whereby points of view that simply have not been permitted to be expressed in the mainstream are actually allowed to be heard. That is actually a very good thing.

To sum up my comments, I have absolutely no objection to any of the provisions in the legislation before us today. We have to bring forward this legislation. As was said, it is directly applicable, coming from our European Union obligations. However, it remains to be seen the extent to which the structures we have established for media regulation in Ireland actually do ensure the necessary facilitation of diverse opinions across our society being treated with equal respect and being fully facilitated in the media that are being regulated.

Senator Evanne Ní Chuilinn: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit. Tá sé iontach go bhfuil sé anseo chun an Bille seo a phlé. This Bill is an important step in ensuring Ireland continues to have a viable, dynamic and trusted media landscape. It gives legislative effect to the European Media Freedom Act and strengthens the protections that underpin media independence and public trust.

The Bill introduces several key reforms. First, it transfers responsibility for overseeing media mergers from the Minister to Coimisiún na Meán, with new criteria to prevent excessive concentration of ownership. That is something that Senator Mullen has just touched on. Second, it requires the Departments and State agencies to publish annual reports on their advertising expenditure, ensuring transparency and fairness in how public money is allocated. Third, it empowers Coimisiún na Meán to develop new standards for audience measurement and to maintain a public database of media ownership. These are common-sense measures that work together to protect plurality, prevent dominance by any one organisation and ensure that public spending on advertising is transparent and equitable.

Ireland has long benefited from a media environment that is trusted and broadly non-polarised. This Bill helps to safeguard that environment at a time where many other countries are grappling with deeply divided and partisan media ecosystems. Under the European Media Freedom Act, Ireland must strengthen protections for journalistic sources, safeguard the independence of public service media, ensure transparency of ownership and standardise procedures for media mergers and audience measurement. While Ireland has already strong safeguards in place, this Bill aligns us fully with EU standards, as the Minister of State has said, and updates our regulatory framework for the digital era.

A central provision is the shift of media merger oversight to Coimisiún na Meán. This will help ensure that no individual or conglomerate can accumulate disproportionate influence. For decades, people in Ireland have been able to rely on a wide variety of media sources - print, broadcast and digital. Protecting that diversity is essential for public discourse and for democracy itself. We cannot assume we are immune to the polarisation seen elsewhere. Our shared facts, our trusted institutions and our broad media plurality are strengths worth protecting.

In that context, I want to acknowledge the vital role of our public service broadcaster. In an age of algorithms and disinformation, the integrity of RTÉ's news and current affairs output is more important than ever. Journalists, editors, news programme co-ordinators, NCOs, reporters and programme makers in the RTÉ newsroom and RTÉ news and current affairs have continued to uphold high standards, even when reporting on difficult issues within their own organisation. Their professionalism strengthens our democracy and they deserve recognition. I want to put that on the record of the Seanad.

This Bill also introduces new transparency requirements for public advertising. With digital platforms capturing an increasing share of advertising revenue, public spending now plays a more significant role in sustaining media organisations. It is essential the public can see where this money goes and that smaller and local outlets have fair access to public advertising opportunities.

The Bill significantly expands the role of Coimisiún na Meán. It will maintain a national media ownership database and develop shared codes for audience measurement, including for online platforms where metrics are often opaque. These steps enhance transparency, support competition and strengthen public trust. The provisions in this Bill are proportionate, practical and necessary. They protect media plurality, ensure transparency in State advertising and guard against the over-concentration of media power. They do so without placing undue burdens on media organisations, instead focusing on safeguarding the public interest and maintaining trust in our media landscape.

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call the next speaker, I welcome Senator P.J. Murphy along with his friends from Minnesota. They are most welcome to Seanad Éireann.

Senator Maria McCormack: Sinn Féin will not be opposing this legislation, as it addresses many of the issues we have raised over the years in relation to media ownership and independence. Almost a decade ago, current Sinn Féin MEP Lynn Boylan commissioned the report on the concentration of media ownership in Ireland that highlighted Irish media ownership as being at high risk due to the influence of figures like Denis O'Brien. That report found that Ireland had one of the most concentrated media markets of any democracy and it stated that it was imperative that urgent action be taken, and seen to be taken, to reassure journalists, media organisations and the wider public. The top four print groups - Independent News and Media, now Mediahuis, The Irish Times Group, Reach plc and News Corp - were found to have collective control of 91% of the print media audience. The radio sector was flagged as having a high concentration of ownership, with television then noted as having a medium-high concentration of ownership, and online news noted as having a concentrated ownership.

There has been very little done by the Government since that time, and I welcome the fact that this step is finally being taken and that Coimisiún na Meán is being given powers in this area. This is welcome news.

It was noted at the time the report was published that having such a high concentration of media ownership in the Irish market threatened media news variety and undermined the media's ability to be a public watchdog to hold money and power to account, which is important. That it is why it is important that we move this Bill along quickly and that we also possibly look to strengthen it in places it may be lacking, such as breaking up existing media concentration. There should be an assessment of current media companies in terms of what may be considered as an existing monopoly, and we should examine how Coimisiún na Meán will deal with that.

With this legislation properly put into effect, we should hopefully prevent a Rupert Murdoch-type media dominance in this State, which unfortunately looks to be replicated again in the United States with the Ellisons looking set to gain control over CBS and CNN, and with them a huge chunk of the American news market. Control of the media by a smaller number of powerful media owners is highly dangerous for democracy and harmful for society as a whole.

We are already living in an era where trust in traditional media is alarmingly low and the State should be taking actions to counteract that. For that reason, the Bill's focus on audience measurement systems with a view to improving transparency and reliability is also welcome and worth scrutinising a bit more on Committee Stage. The requirement for Coimisiún na Meán to co-operate and encourage the adoption of codes of conduct by industry to promote transparency around audience measurement systems may not have the powers that are required to ensure accuracy and transparency.

I look forward to future debate on this legislation and having the opportunity to make constructive amendments. I thank the Minister of State for bringing this before the House.

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call the Minister of State to respond, I welcome the teachers and students from Lisnagry National School in Limerick. They are most welcome to Seanad Éireann, especially Tess Ryan. Tess's mother is Senator Dee Ryan. It is great to have Tess and all the class here. I believe they had elections last week and they elected a taoiseach. The students all had different political parties and the election of the taoiseach was followed by a motion of no confidence. It had something to do with chocolate and Tayto. The proper consumption of healthy food is an issue that we are struggling with in this House, and it is always a debate worth having.

We are delighted to have Tess and the rest of the school here, especially with Senator Ryan here as well. I thank the teachers for bringing them here. I suppose it is not much good to them, but I was talking to Senator Ryan earlier about how one of the rules of the Seanad was that when a school came to visit, there was no homework for the rest of the week. However, I get the sense that there is probably no homework for the rest of the month, so the students might get no homework for their first week back, if that is alright. If they need a letter or anything in writing, they can send it on to me and we will make sure that the teachers obey the rules of the Seanad when they go back to school.

I look forward to meeting the taoiseach. I believe the school has a ceann comhairle and leas-cheann comhairle as well. We could take lessons from the students in relation to running the school and the class, so I thank them for being here.

All the way from the Parliament of Tasmania is Jen Makin. I thank her for visiting the House as well. She might give the school some tips. Previously known as Van Diemen's Land, some famous Irish people went to Tasmania as guests of the Crown, which is another way of saying "prisoners". We used to have a statue of Queen Victoria at the front of Leinster House that we eventually sent to Sydney in Australia. If any of the students ever end up in Sydney on a visit, they should go and see the statue outside the Queen Victoria Building in the downtown area. There is a plaque that says the statue used to be outside the Parliament of the Irish people and was given through the generosity of the people of the Republic of Ireland.

What I love about the statue is that the arc of history and justice bends very slowly, but after Queen Victoria sent so many Irish people to Tasmania and Australia, the Irish people eventually sent her.

Does Senator Ryan wish to say anything while the school is here?

Senator Dee Ryan: I just want to wish them all well in their new secondary schools in September. This is a sixth class group, so they will be breaking up in a couple of weeks' time and moving on. We hope to see some of them back here in the future, either as staff members of the Oireachtas or some of them may choose to stand for election themselves.

An Cathaoirleach: Any one of them could become Taoiseach. I thank them for coming.

Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I welcome the school as guests of the Oireachtas, as well as our friend from Tasmania.

I thank the Members for the cross-party support for the Bill and for the various contributions. It is an important addition to our national media landscape and the regulatory system. It is important that it is being done at European level as well, given that we operate within a much wider international sphere, political system and political discourse.

I look forward to further engagement with the Members in relation to the remaining Stages of the Bill and to seeing it implemented. Go raibh míle maith agaibh to the Cathaoirleach and to everyone for their contributions so far.

Question put and agreed to.

An Cathaoirleach: When is it proposed to take Committee Stage?

Senator Aidan Davitt: Next Tuesday.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Committee Stage ordered for Tuesday, 16 June 2026.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 12.48 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 1.16 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 12.48 p.m. and resumed at 1.16 p.m.

Teachtaireacht ón Dáil - Message from Dáil

Acting Chairperson (Senator Nessa Cosgrove): Dáil Éireann passed the Criminal Law, Civil Law and Defence (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026, changed from the Criminal Law and Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026, on 10 June 2026, to which the agreement of Seanad Éireann is desired.

Údarás na Gaeltachta (Amendment) Bill 2024: An Dara Céim

Tairgeadh an cheist: "Go léifear an Bille an Dara hUair anois."

Acting Chairperson (Senator Nessa Cosgrove): Leanfar leis an díospóireacht de réir an ghnáthphatrúin. Beidh ocht nóiméad ag an Aire, seacht nóiméad ag na hurlabhraithe grúpa agus trí nóiméad ag gach Seanadóir eile.

Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Dara Calleary): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Seanad as an deis a thabhairt dom teacht os a chomhair inniu agus muid ag tabhairt faoin Dara Céim den Bhille um Údarás na Gaeltachta (Leasú), 2024 i Seanad Éireann. Tá go leor oibre déanta ar an mBille seo ó tionscnaíodh é ar dtús i mí Iúil 2024 agus go deimhin rinneadh neart plé fiúntach maidir leis an mBille i nDáil Éireann agus aontaíodh roinnt leasuithe air le linn an phróisis sin. Tá súil agam go mbeidh athbhunú toghchán Údarás na Gaeltachta in ann nasc an phobail Ghaeltachta le hÚdarás na Gaeltachta a neartú agus go gcabhróidh an Bille nua seo le hobair fhiúntach Údarás na Gaeltachta. Sílim go gcuirfidh na forálacha sa Bhille seo leis an ionadaíocht dhaonlathach ar bhord Údarás na

Gaeltachta. Creidim chomh maith go bhfuil aghaidh tugtha go leordhóthanach sa Bhille seo ar cheisteanna a ardaíodh maidir le scaipeadh tíreolaíoch, neamhláithreachta boird agus riachtanais teanga.

Ar thosach feidhme na bhforálacha nua seo, beidh deichniúr comhaltaí tofa, mar aon le seisear comhaltaí a cheapfaidh Aire an lae, ar an mbord. Tá sé i gceist go mbeidh comhaltaí nua ceaptha in áit chomhaltaí ar mian leo leas a bhaint as saoire óna ndualgais bhoird ar feadh ré na saoire sin. Ní bheidh comhaltaí a bhainfidh leas as saoire i dteideal táillí boird ar feadh ré a saoire. Is cinnte gur dul chun cinn an tsolúbthacht seo agus an leasú ó thaobh feidhmiú an bhoird a chinntiú. Beidh comhalta a cheapfar chun corrholúntas a líonadh i seilbh oifige go ceann a mbeidh fágtha de thréimhse oifige a réamhtheachtaí. Déantar foráil leis an mBille maidir le téarmaí boird a mhairfidh ar feadh uastréimhse de sé bliana.

Beidh ionadaíocht ag na ceantair Ghaeltachta uile ar an mbord agus ní bheidh uainíocht comhaltaí i bhfeidhm a thuilleadh i gcás cheantair Ghaeltachta níos lú mar atá sa reachtaíocht reatha. D'fhonn a chinntiú go mbeidh nasc níos láidre ann idir pobail agus obair an bhoird, déantar foráil leis an mBille freisin do bhunú trí choiste réigiúnach.

Beidh meascán de chomhaltaí boird agus ionadaithe áitiúla ar an trí choiste seo i réigiúin an tuaiscirt, an iarthair, an oirthir agus an deiscirt. Tá sé i gceist go mbuailfidh gach coiste réigiúnach le grúpaí pleanála teanga ina réigiúin Ghaeltachta faoi dhó sa bhliain ar a laghad, agus go dtabharfaidh coistí réigiúnacha tuarascáil don údarás tar éis gach cruinnithe a chuideoidh leis an údarás lena chuid oibre. Tá súil agam go gcinnteoidh an cur chuige nua maidir le ceapadh an bhoird, mar aon leis na bearta nua a bhaineann leis na coistí réigiúnacha, ionadaíocht iomlán dhaonlathach agus rannpháirtíocht iomlán na bpobal Gaeltachta i gcursaí a bhaineann leis an údarás. Tá sé seo mar aidhm tosaigh sa chlár Rialtas, agus is ar mhaithe leis an sprioc sin a bhaint amach atá mé ag tabhairt faoin leasú reachtaíochta seo.

Chomh maith leis na hathruithe seo, déanfar Alt 8 den Acht um Údarás na Gaeltachta, 1979 a leasú chun cead a thabhairt don údarás talamh a dhiúscairt chun críche tithíochta. Thug dréachtú na reachtaíochta seo mar a bhaineann le leasú ar phróiseas ceapacháin an bhoird deis uathúil cuid den phríomh-Acht a leasú ina leith seo. Cé nach é príomhaidhm na reachtaíochta é, is leasú tábhachtach é mar sin féin.

Tuigim cé chomh práinneach is atá ceist na tithíochta ar fud na tíre. Cloisim ó dhaoine nuair a thugaim cuairt ar cheantair Ghaeltachta cé chomh deacair is atá sé orthu tithe a fháil le ceannach nó a ghlacadh ar cíós. Ag glacadh leis go dteastaíonn daoine uainn chun pobail na Gaeltachta mar aon leis an teanga a choinneáil beo, forálann an Bille seo freisin do bheart tithíochta a thacóidh le tithíocht a sholáthar i gceantair Ghaeltachta.

Leis an mBille seo, féadfaidh an tAire, ag feachaint don chóras caighdeán ar a dtugtar an creat comhchoiteann tagartha Eorpach le haghaidh teangacha, CEFR, an leibhéal inniúlachta i nGaeilge is gá a bheith ag duine le suí ar an mbord a fhorordú. Is uirlis chaighdeánaithe é comhchreat tagartha na hEorpa le haghaidh teangacha a d'fhorbair Comhairle na hEorpa chun inniúlacht teanga a mheas. Tá obair dhúshlánach ar siúl agus bord an údaráis i mbun cinntí agus plé agus tá sé tábhachtach go bhfuil na riachtanais agus scileanna cuí ag gach comhalta bord.

Chun críche na dtoghchán chun Údarás na Gaeltachta, beidh sé riachtanach roinnt mionleasuithe teicniúla a dhéanamh ar an Acht um Údarás na Gaeltachta, 1979 mar a bhaineann

le féimheacht; ar an Acht Toghcháin, 1992; ar an Acht Toghcháin, 1997; ar an Acht um Chosaint Sonraí, 2018; agus ar an Acht um Thruailliú ó Bhruscar, 1997. Tuigim go maith an tábhacht a bhaineann leis an obair atá ar bun ag an údarás ar son na Gaeltachta ar bhonn leanúnach. De bharr na hoibre seo, tá deiseanna fostaíochta agus fiontraíochta cothaithe agus cruthaithe i gceantair nach bhfaigheadh na deiseanna sin murach gur ann don eagraíocht. Bliain i ndiaidh bliana, tugann an Rialtas tacaíocht shuntasach d'Údarás na Gaeltachta. Is ábhar sásaimh é go raibh 9,716 post i gcomhlachtaí a fuair tacaíocht ó Údarás na Gaeltachta ag deireadh 2025 agus gur chruthaíodh 681 post nua sa Ghaeltacht in 2025. Sílim go léiríonn sé seo cheana féin chomh tiomanta is atáimid tacú le hÚdarás na Gaeltachta agus go léiríonn an píosa reachtaíochta seo go bhfuil muid tiomanta do bhord láidir agus ionadaíoch ó thaobh na gceantar Gaeltachta de a bheith ag Údarás na Gaeltachta.

Ceann de na príomhchuspóirí a bhí ag Acht na Gaeltachta, 2012 ná bunús reachtúil a thabhairt don phróiseas pleanála teanga, ar mhaithe le tacú tuilleadh leis an nGaeilge mar theanga phobail agus teaghlach sa Ghaeltacht. Foráiltear in alt 9 den Acht sin go bhféadfaidh an tAire, le hordú, baile sonraithe a ainmniú mar bhaile seirbhíse Gaeltachta, ach an baile sin a bheith suite i limistéar pleanála teanga Gaeltachta nó tadhlaigh leis. Is léir, tar éis phróiseas comhairliúcháin phoiblí, go bhfuil deacracht le foclaíocht an ailt seo, sa mhéid is nach bhfuil gach baile a ainmníodh tadhlaigh don Ghaeltacht ná laistigh den Ghaeltacht. Chun an deacracht seo a sháru, tá sé beartaithe alt 9 a leasú ionas go bhféadfaí bailte laistigh de 30 km ó limistéar pleanála teanga Gaeltachta a chuimsiú.

Ní shonraíonn Acht na Gaeltachta, 2012 faoi láthair cén tréimhse ama a bhfuil pleananna teanga i bhfeidhm. Tá sé seo sonraithe sna treoirlínte pleanála teanga atá eisithe ag mo Roinn. Deir na treoirlínte seo faoi láthair go bhfanann pleananna i bhfeidhm ar feadh thréimhse seacht mbliana. Ceadaíonn an tAcht athbhreithnithe tréimhsiúla maidir le cur i bhfeidhm gach plean teanga. D'fhonn a dhóthain ama a thabhairt chun athbhreithnithe ar na pleananna teanga go léir a chur i gcrích agus pleananna a ullmhú don chéad timthriall pleanála eile, is mian liom an tAcht a leasú chun a shonrú go bhfanfaidh na pleananna teanga tosaigh go léir atá ceadaithe i bhfeidhm ar feadh seacht mbliana ar a laghad agus naoi mbliana ar a mhéid. Ina theannta sin, is mian liom a shonrú san Acht go mbeidh pleananna teanga ina dhiaidh sin ag feidhmiú ar feadh tréimhse seacht mbliana agus go bhféadfar síneadh a chuir leo má mheastar gur gá sin.

Tá roinnt leasuithe teicniúla agus tábhachtacha eile. Táim ag súil go mór leis an díospóireacht ar an bpíosa reachtaíochta seo.

Senator Shane Curley: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht teacht isteach inniu. Tá áthas orm an deis a bheith agam inniu labhairt ar an Dara Céim den Bhille um Údarás na Gaeltachta (Leasú), 2024. Ar an gcéad dul síos, ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh an mBille seo. Is reachtaíocht thábhachtach é a dhéanfaidh athnuachan ar struchtúir dhaonlathacha Údarás na Gaeltachta agus a neartóidh an nasc idir pobail Ghaeltachta agus an eagraíocht atá freagrach as a bhforbairt eacnamaíoch, shóisialta agus chultúrtha. Le breis agus 40 bliain anuas, tá ról fíorthábhachtach ag Údarás na Gaeltachta i saol na Gaeltachta. Cuireann an eagrais fostaíocht ar fáil, tacaíonn sé le fiontraíocht, cabhraíonn sé le forbairt pobail agus, thar aon ní eile, cabhraíonn sé leis na coinníollacha a chruthú a chuireann ar chumas daoine maireachtáil agus obair a dhéanamh ina bpobail féin trí mheán na Gaeilge. Ach, tá sé fíor freisin go bhfuil an Ghaeltacht athraithe go mór ó bunaíodh an t-údarás in 1980. Tá dúshlán nua os ár gcomhair anois: brú daonra i gceantair áirithe, easpa tithíochta, costais mhaireachtála níos airde, imirce

daoine óga, agus an brú leanúnach atá ar úsáid laethúil na Gaeilge mar theanga phobail. Dá bhrí sin, ní mór dúinn a chinntiú go bhfuil na struchtúir rialachais atá againn oiriúnach don lá inniu agus don todhchaí.

Ceann de na gnéithe is suntasaí den Bhille seo ná an cinneadh toghcháin dhíreacha chuig bord Údarás na Gaeltachta a athbhunú. Ba ghealltanas soiléir é seo sa chlár Rialtais agus creidim gur céim dhearfach é. Tá luach ar leith ag baint le daonlathas áitiúil agus le deis a thabhairt do phobail na Gaeltachta a gcuid ionadaithe féin a roghnú agus a gcuid tuairimí a chur in iúl go díreach trí phróiseas toghcháin. Leis an mBille seo, beidh deichniúr comhaltaí tofa ar bhord an údaráis agus seisear eile ceaptha ag an Aire. Cothromaíocht réasúnta í seo idir ionadaíocht dhaonlathach agus an gá atá ann scileanna agus saineolas ar leith a bheith ar fáil ar an mbord. Tá sé tábhachtach freisin go mbeidh ionadaíocht ag gach limistéar Gaeltachta ar an mbord nua. Is comhartha dearfach é sin do phobail bheaga Ghaeltachta a bhí buartha san am atá thart nach raibh a nguth le cloisteáil go láidir sa chóras. Fáiltím freisin roimh an bhforáil a bhaineann le bunú na gcoistí réigiúnacha. Tá sé tábhachtach go mbeidh na coistí sin ceangailte leis na grúpaí pleanála teanga atá ag obair ar an talamh cheana féin. Is iad na grúpaí sin a thuigeann na deiseanna agus na constaicí atá roimh phobail na Gaeltachta ó lá go lá.

Mar urlabhraí ar oideachas agus ar an nGaeilge, ba mhaith liom a rá go bhfuil nasc láidir idir an Bille seo agus todhchaí na Gaeilge freisin. Ní leor labhairt faoin teanga mar ábhar cultúrtha amháin. Má táimid dáiríre faoi thodhchaí na Gaeilge, ní mór dúinn pobail inmharthana a chruthú agus a chothú. Ní féidir teanga phobail a chosaint mura bhfuil daoine in ann cónaí sa phobal sin. Ar an gcúis sin, tá fáilte ar leith le cur roimh an bhforáil a thugann cumhachtaí soiléire don údarás talamh atá faoina úinéireacht a úsáid chun tithe a thógáil. Tá géarchéim tithíochta ag dul i bhfeidhm ar phobail Ghaeltachta. Tá daoine óga atá ag iarraidh fanacht ina gceantair dhúchais ag streachailt le teach a cheannach nó a fháil ar cíos. Má chaillimid an chéad ghlúin eile de chainteoirí Gaeilge mar gheall ar easpa tithíochta, beidh tionchar tromchúiseach aige sin ar inmharthanacht na Gaeltachta amach anseo.

Tá roinnt leasuithe sa Bhille seo freisin a bhaineann leis an bpróiseas pleanála teanga. Fáiltím roimh an gcinneadh a sholáthraíonn tréimhse níos soiléire do phleananna teanga agus a thugann solúbthacht níos fearr don chóras. Tá obair mhór déanta ag na heagraíochtaí pobail agus na grúpaí pleanála teanga le deich mbliana anuas. Tá saineolas luachmhar forbartha acu agus tá sé ciallmhar go mbeadh an cumas ann leanúnachas a choinneáil nuair atá dul chun cinn déanta.

Tá fáilte freisin roimh an bhforáil a leathnaíonn an sainmhíniú maidir le bailte seirbhíse Gaeltachta agus a chuireann san áireamh bailte laistigh de 30 km ó limistéar pleanála teanga Ghaeltachta. I go leor cásanna, bíonn daoine sa Ghaeltacht ag brath ar bhailte seirbhíse d'obair, don oideachas, do chúram sláinte agus do sheirbhísí eile. Tá sé tábhachtach go n-aithníonn an reachtaíocht an réaltacht sin.

Cuirim fáilte freisin roimh na leasuithe ar Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla. Tá sé suntasach go mbeidh ainmneacha comhlachtaí poiblí nuabhunaithe i nGaeilge amháin. Ní beart siombalach amháin é seo. Tá tábhacht ag baint leis an bhfeiceálacht atá ag an nGaeilge sa saol poiblí. Nuair a fheiceann saoránaigh an Ghaeilge á húsáid go nádúrtha agus go hiontaofa ag an Stát féin, cuireann sé sin le stádas na teanga agus le muinín inti.

Fáiltím freisin roimh na leasuithe a bhaineann leis an sprioc de 20% d'earcaigh nua sa tseirbhís phoiblí a bheith inniúil sa Ghaeilge. Má táimid chun seirbhísí Gaeilge ar ardchaighdeán a chur ar fáil, ní mór dúinn an fhoireann a bheith againn chun na seirbhísí sin a sholáthar.

Ar ndóigh, ní réiteoidh an Bille seo gach dúshlán atá roimh an nGaeltacht. Tá obair mhór fós le déanamh i réimsí na tithíochta, an oideachais, na seirbhíse poiblí, an iompair agus na forbartha eacnamaíochta. Tá sé rithábachtach go leanfaidh an Rialtas ag déanamh infheistíochta i mbonneagar agus i ndeiseanna fostaíochta sna ceantair Ghaeltachta, ach creidim go láidir gur céim chun cinn é an Bille seo. Tugann sé guth níos láidre do phobal na Gaeltachta. Neartaíonn sé an nasc idir an t-údarás agus na pobail a bhfreastalaíonn sé orthu. Cuireann sé struchtúr níos daonlathaí ar fáil. Go pearsanta, gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Aon uair a tháinig mé chuige le smaointe maidir leis an nGaeilge, léirigh sé fíorshuim sa Ghaeltacht agus sa Ghaeilge. Tá muinín agam go mbeimid in ann dul i ngleic leis na constaicí atá roimh an nGaeltacht sa todhchaí agus sna blianta atá romhainn.

Senator Joe Conway: Cuirim fáilte Uí Cheallaigh roimh an Aire as a bheith anseo inniu. Nuair a bhuail mé bleid ar an Aire i dTrá Mhór le déanaí, bhí fíor-dhea-ghiúmar air agus é ag spaisteoireacht timpeall gairdíní Lafcadio Hearn agus ag anáil na síochána a bhíonn thart timpeall na háite galánta sin. Leagfaidh mé béim air seo: beidh fáilte ar leith roimhe aon am gur mian leis teacht chuig an mbaile mór sin, Trá Mhór. In ainneoin an cháis nach bhfuil an baile mór sin faoi chúram an údaráis, tabharfaidh sé sásamh don Aire a chloisteáil go bhfuil borradh láidir i measc an daonra ansin agus neart oibre maith á déanamh i nGaelscoil Philib Barún idir daltaí, oidí agus tuismitheoirí.

Ag díriú anois ar an mBille atá idir lámha againn inniu, agus táim ag labhairt ar son chomhaltaí uile ár ngrúpa istigh anseo, ar an gcéad dul síos, déanfaidh mé tagairt do dhéanamh suas an bhoird nua atá molta. Táim cinnte go mbeidh nasc níos láidre ann idir pobail agus obair an bhoird. Leis an mBille, déantar foráil go mbunóidh an t-údarás trí choiste réigiúnach a bheidh comhchosúil leis na coistí a bhíodh ann roimh 2012 ach beidh sainchúraimí beagán éagsúla acu. Beidh comhaltaí a ainmneoidh údaráis áitiúla ar na coistí réigiúnacha mar aon le comhaltaí uile an údaráis. Ní foláir do na coistí réigiúnacha a bheith ábalta a léiriú go bhfuil an leibhéal inniúlachta i nGaeilge acu gur gá chun a bhfeidhmeanna a chomhlíonadh. Beidh comhaltaí boird agus ionadaithe áitiúla ar na coistí sin ó réigiún an tuaiscirt, réigiún an iarthair agus an oirthir, agus réigiún an deiscirt. I gcás nach mbeidh aon duine tofa chun údarás áitiúil i dtoghlimistéar ina bhfuil ceantar Ghaeltachta, d'fhéadfadh an t-údarás áitiúil duine a ainmniú nach comhalta den údarás áitiúil sin é nó í ach ar duine é nó í a mheasann an t-údarás áitiúil a bheith oiriúnach chun ionadaíocht a dhéanamh dó ar an gcoiste réigiúnach. Beidh an duine a ainmneofar ina chónaitheoir nó ina cónaitheoir i gceantar Gaeltachta atá laistigh de dhlínse an údaráis áitiúla lena mbaineann. Glacann ár ngrúpa leis na riachtanais seo ina n-iomláine.

Anois, labhróidh mé faoi chás na tithíochta. I nGaeltacht na Rinne sna nDéise, tá acraí talaimh i seilbh an údaráis. B'fhéidir go bhfaca an tAire iad sin ar a chuairt. Tá acraí talaimh i seilbh an údaráis atá oiriúnach don tithíocht ach ní mór na mionsonraí dlí a chomhlíonadh. B'fhéidir go bhfuil rudaí mar an gcéanna i ngach ceann de na Gaeltachtaí. Is léir go bhfuil an Bille seo ag díriú isteach ar na cásanna seo. Aontaím leis an obair seo. Is é ceann de na saincheistanna is práinní i bpobail Ghaeltachta agus ar bhonn náisiúnta an gá le tithíocht a sholáthar. Le linn mo thréimhse mar chomhalta an bhoird, d'aithin an t-údarás roinnt suímh

oiriúnacha ina phunann mhaoine féin a d'fhéadfaí a fhorbairt chun na críocha sin. Meastar go bhfuil sé caoi cumhachtaí sainráite a thabhairt don údarás chun talamh atá faoin úinéireacht aige a dhiúscairt nó a dhíol chuig údaráis tithíochta nó comhlachtaí tithíochta ceadaithe chun críche na tithíochta. De réir sin, déantar foráil leis an mBille chun cumhacht a thabhairt don údarás tailte atá ina sheilbh a dhiúscairt chuig comhlachtaí tithíochta ceadaithe. Tá sé sin innmholta go deo.

Maidir le pleanáil teanga, mar gheall ar an leibhéal saineolais atá léirithe ag na heagraíochtaí a bhfuil sé de chúram orthu pleananna teanga a ullmhú agus a chur i bhfeidhm ó cuireadh tús le hAcht 2012, tá sé beartaithe sa Bhille go mbeidh cumhacht ann na heagraíochtaí sin a athcheapadh seachas athfhilleadh ar an bpróiseas tosaigh le haghaidh eagraíochtaí a cheapadh sula dtéann sé isteach i dtimthriall nua den phróiseas pleanála teanga.

I ndeireadh na Dála, chun críoch a chur le mo phort, is mian lenár ngrúpa comhartha a thabhairt go bhfuil ár dtacaíocht leis an mBille seo agus lenár nGaeltachtaí go brách. Is aoibhinn liomsa a ligean amach anois go bhfuil mé ar tí éalú amach ón doras chun eitilt a fháil ó Bhaile Átha Cliath chuig Gaeltacht Chiarraí courtesy of Michael O'Leary.

Senator Garret Kelleher: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire agus gabhaim buíochas leis as teacht isteach. Gan amhras, fáiltím roimh an mBille atá os ár gcomhair inniu. Is tábhachtach an rud é guth níos láidre a thabhairt d'Údarás na Gaeltachta agus do mhuintir na nGaeltachtaí ar fud na tíre, go háirithe mar is iad na daoine atá lonnaithe sa Ghaeltacht agus na daoine atá ag déileáil leis na scoileanna sa Ghaeltacht, ag tacú leo, ag cruthú post agus ag forbairt gnóthaí sa Ghaeltacht. Is iad seo na daoine is tábhachtaí. Tá siad ag obair i measc phobal na Gaeltachta atá ag úsáid seirbhísí. Ó thaobh daonlathais de, níl aon amhras agam ach gur céim chun tosaigh í seo do mhuintir na Gaeltachta. Beidh guth níos láidre acu ar an mbord. Is é príomhfheidhm Údarás na Gaeltachta ná an Ghaelainn a chaomhnú agus na Gaeltachtaí ar fud na tíre a fhorbairt. Caithfimid gach rud gur féidir a dhéanamh chun cabhrú le bord Údarás na Gaeltachta agus le muintir na Gaeltachta ar fud na tíre. Tá sé luaite ag na Seanadóirí Curley agus Conway roimh ré, agus gan amhras, cuirim fáilte roimh an méid a bhí á rá ag an Aire féin ag tús na díospóireachta, faoi thithíocht sa Ghaeltacht. Is é sin an rud is deacra a bhfuilimid ag déileáil leis i láthair na huaire.

Tá sé sin fíor taobh amuigh de na Gaeltachtaí chomh maith, mar is eol dúinn. Tá sé níos tábhachtaí fós, mar a dúirt an Seanadóir Curley, déileáil le daonra agus tacaíocht a thabhairt do theaghlaigh sna Gaeltachtaí, go háirithe don chéad ghlúin eile atá le teacht, chun a bheith ag obair.

Chomh fada is a thuigim, tá deacrachtaí ag an údarás faoi láthair maidir le talamh a cheannach seachas talamh a dhíol. B'fhéidir go ndéarfadh an tAire cúpla rud mar gheall air sin agus an chaoi ar féidir linn déileáil leis an gceist sin chun an fhadhb sin a réiteach, más fadhb é.

Bhí mé i nGaillimh Thiar don fhothoghchán agus bhí mé ag canbhasáil i gConamara go háirithe. Labhair mé le daoine agus le teaghlaigh a bhí buartha mar gheall ar an todhchaí atá i ndán dá gcuid clann. Tá siad ag iarraidh todhchaí níos fearr a bheith acu, go háirithe ó thaobh tithíochta de. Caithfimid a bheith ag obair leis an údarás agus cumhacht a thabhairt d'Údarás na Gaeltachta le déileáil níos láidre le fadhb na tithíochta. Is é sin an príomhrud chun tithíocht a sholáthar. Ní mór dúinn oibriú le heagraíochtaí éagsúla ar fud na tíre, cosúil le BÁNÚ i

gConamara, Tinteán, a bhíonn ag obair sna Gaeltachtaí ar fad, agus leithéidí Chonradh na Gaeilge.

Bhíos sa seomra AV níos luaithe ag éisteacht le tuairisc atá á cur amach ag Jim Power Economics. De réir taighde atá déanta ag UNESCO, tá an teanga i mbaol don chéad bhliain atá díreach os ár gcomhair, nó “endangered” mar a deir lucht an Bhéarla. Caithfimid déileáil leis sin taobh amuigh agus taobh istigh de na Gaeltachtaí, go háirithe i gcomhthéacs an Ghaeloideachais taobh amuigh de na Gaeltachtaí. Ní mór tuilleadh Gaelscoileanna agus Gaelcholáistí a chur ar fáil chun seans a thabhairt do dhaoine oideachas a bheith acu trí mheán na Gaeilge. Is ar na Gaeltachtaí atá ár n-aird leis an mBille seo, áfach, ach tá an pointe sin chomh tábhachtach céanna sna Gaeltachtaí. Caithfimid an deis sin a thabhairt do pháistí na Gaeltachta todhchaí a bheith acu agus tithe a thógáil. Caithfimid a bheith ag obair leis an údarás chun dul chun cinn a dhéanamh leis sin chun tuilleadh tithíochta a sholáthar sna Gaeltachtaí ar fud na tíre. Tá sé sin riachtanach do thodhchaí na teanga taobh istigh agus taobh amuigh de na Gaeltachtaí.

Is mian liom, thar ceann Fhine Gael, fáilte a chur roimh an mBille agus an dul chun cinn atá déanta. Déanaim comhghairdeas leis an Aire as ucht na hoibre atá déanta aige ina thréimhse mar Aire. Tá mé ag súil go mór le bheith ag obair leis sa chuid eile den téarma atá le teacht chun rudaí den saghas seo a dhéanamh le tithíocht a sholáthar, go háirithe sna Gaeltachtaí, seans a thabhairt don teanga forbairt, agus tacú le hathbheochan na teanga ar fud na tíre. Gabhaim míle buíochas leis an Aire.

Senator Pauline Tully: Tacaím leis an bhunfháth a bhfuil an Bille seo á chur os comhair an tSeanaid chun go mbeidh toghchán ann arís do bhord Údarás na Gaeltachta. Bhí Sinn Féin i gcoinne an chinidh fáil réidh leis sa chéad dul síos. Táimid fós ag lorg go mbeadh bord iomlán an údaráis tofa agus go mbeadh cumhachtaí cuí ag Údarás na Gaeltachta chun an teanga náisiúnta agus na ceantair ina bhfuil sí fós beo a chosaint. Is léir go gceapann an tAire go bhfuil sé sin i gceist anseo, ach ní mar sin atá.

Is léir go bhfuil gá anois le gníomh chun cuidiú le muintir na háite fanacht ina gceantair féin. Caithfear cinntiú go bhfuil tithe ar díol nó ar cíos le nach leanfaidh leis an bhánú atá ag tarlú sa Ghaeltacht. Tá dainséar nach mbeidh go leor páistí ina lán ceantar chun na scoileanna, siopaí, na cumainn lúthchleas Gael agus araile a chóiméad oscailte.

Ó bunaíodh an Stát, bhí síor-imirce, easpa post agus bochtaineacht ag bánú na gceantar Gaeltachta. Anois, ligeadh don domhan mór tithe samhraidh a cheannach gan srian, rud atá ag bánú na nGaeltachtaí níos mó arís. Ní féidir le lánúin tithe a cheannach, a fháil ar cíos nó a thógáil. Níl tithe ar fáil ach amháin ar Airbnb, nó ní mór do mhuintir na Gaeltachta a bheith iontach saibhir chun teach a cheannach.

Tá an ghéarchéim seo ag cur na gcoláistí samhraidh i mbaol. Tá ról na mban tí lárnach sa Ghaeltacht ach, gan tithe, ní bheidh mná tí nua ann amach anseo. Tá an earnáil á cur i mbaol mar gheall ar pholasaí tithe an Rialtais.

In ainneoin an róil lárnaigh atá ag Údarás na Gaeltachta i bpleanáil teanga, ní léir dom go bhfuil an Bille seo ag dul fada go leor maidir leis sin. Chuir Sinn Féin leasuithe chun cinn ar an Bhille seo sa Dáil, ach dhiúltaigh an tAire leo. Bhíomar ag iarraidh a chinntiú go mbeadh ionadaíocht chinnte ag gach ceann de na ceantair Ghaeltachta. Ba cheart go mbeadh

toghcheantair ag Ráth Chairn agus An Rinn. Ba cheart go mbeadh ionadaíocht chothrom idir fhir agus mhná ag leibhéal bhord Údarás na Gaeltachta amach anseo. Bhí tacaíocht an choiste Gaeilge leis na moltaí sin, ach rinne an tAire neamhaird orthu.

Is é an fáth go bhfuilimid ag an phointe seo ná gur scrios bord snip - Fine Gael agus Labour - an daonlathas sa chéad dul síos in 2012. Agus na toghcháin ag teacht ar ais arís, is gá díriú arís go dian ar theaghlaigh agus lánúin óga a choimeád sna ceantair seo. Caithfimid a chinntiú go mbeidh poist agus tithíocht nua-aimseartha ar fáil dóibh, chomh maith leis na seirbhísí a ghabhann leo, lena n-áirítear scoileanna, siopaí, eaglaisí, tithe tábhairne, clubanna agus araile.

Tá talamh ag an údarás is féidir a úsáid anois chun déileáil leis an ghéarchéim, ach ní luíonn an jab seo leis an údarás amháin. Tá dualgaís ar an Stát agus ar na comhairlí contae chomh maith. Is gá don údarás iad a spreagadh chun gnímh. Tá ról ag Uisce Éireann, ESB Networks agus eagraíochtaí eile nach iad chun tús áite a thabhairt don Ghaeltacht le tógáil tithe sa Ghaeltacht a éascú agus a thapú.

Más gá le ciste ar leith chun sin a dhéanamh, is gá le ciste ar leith. Tá súil agam nach mbeidh aon mhoill ar an dul chun cinn seo agus muid ag fanacht ar an toghchán don bhord úr, ach a mhalairt. Tá sé thar am go mbeidh tús agus luas curtha le gníomh.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: Fáiltím roimh an obair atá déanta ag an Aire ó ceapadh ina Aire é. Labhróidh mé faoi bhealach amháin a gcuirfeadh feabhas ar chearta daoine a rugadh agus a tógadh sa Ghaeltacht. Tá sé tábhachtach do phobal agus todhchaí na Gaeltachta go mbeidh ról níos lárnaí ag Údarás na Gaeltachta i soláthar tithíochta sa Ghaeltacht do chainteoirí Gaeilge. Sa Bhille, beidh cead ag an údarás talamh a dhíol. Ba chóir go mbeadh cead ag an údarás talamh a cheannach chomh maith ar mhaithe le tithe a chur ar fáil. Tá 400 acra talún ag an údarás a bheadh foisteanach anois, dar leis féin. Tá saineolas agus scileanna in Údarás na Gaeltachta chun tograí agus scéimeanna mar seo a éascú.

Bheadh rannóg thithíochta san údarás in ann cabhrú le muintir na Gaeltachta agus cur leis na deiseanna chun maireachtáil sa Ghaeltacht ar bhonn lárnach. Ba ag cabhrú le hUisce Éireann, comhairlí contae agus comharchumainn áitiúla a bheadh an t-údarás mar sin. Cuirfidh mé na moltaí seo chun cinn ag an gcéad Chéim eile agus tá súil agam go nglacfaidh an tAire leo.

Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Dara Calleary): Gabhaim buíochas le gach Seanadóir a ghlac páirt sa díospóireacht seo. Ag seasamh taobh amuigh den Bhille, tá an gairdín sin i dTrá Mhór dochreidte. I will say it in English. The Lafcadio Hearn Gardens to which Senator Conway referred is a must-go. I recommend everyone to visit. It is a fantastic community project.

Tiontóidh mé ar ais chuig an mBille anois.

Is Bille tábhachtach é. Tá na dúshláin atá ag an nGaeltacht leagtha amach ag na Seanadóirí, mar aon leis na deiseanna atá aici ag an bpointe seo. Tá ról an údaráis thar a bheith tábhachtach i gcomhthéacs na ndúshlán agus na ndeiseanna sin.

Táimid dírithe ar fhadhb na tithíochta sa Ghaeltacht. Tá sé tábhachtach go mbeidh tuiscint ag daoine go bhfuil an fhreagracht as cúrsaí tithíochta ar an Aire tithíochta go príomha. Táim

ag obair go dlúth leis. Táimid ag obair ar ráiteas náisiúnta pleanála don Ghaeltacht, a leagfaidh amach na dúshláin agus na coinníollacha atá ann chun cabhrú le cúrsaí tithíochta sa Ghaeltacht a réiteach. Beidh ról tánaisteach ag an údarás i gcomhthéacs na ceiste sin. Tá sé sin tábhachtach. Is rud do na comhairleoirí áitiúla é an phleanáil. Tá sé tábhachtach go n-oibríonn siad linn. Táim tar éis an t-uafás cruinnithe faoi seo a bheith agam le príomhfheidhmeannaigh údaráis áitiúla a bhfuil limistéir Ghaeltachta faoina gcúram. Nuair atá an dréachtráiteas náisiúnta pleanála Gaeltachta againn, beimid in ann é a phlé leis na húdaráis áitiúla. Aontaím le gach Seanadóir gurb í an tithíocht ceann de na dúshláin is tábhachtaí. Baineann ról an údaráis le fiontar, fostaíocht agus pleanáil teanga. Gan fiontar ná fostaíocht, ní bheidh daoine in ann tithe a chruthú sa Ghaeltacht. Tá sé tábhachtach go ndíreoidimid obair an údaráis ar chúrsaí fiontair, fostaíochta, cultúrtha agus pleanála. Mar a dúirt mé, tá beagnach 10,000 daoine fostaithe i gcomhlachtaí sa Ghaeltacht a fhaigheann cabhair ón údarás. Bhí ardú san fhigiúr sin i rith 2025. Tá sé tábhachtach súil ghéar a choimeád ar chúrsaí fiontair agus fostaíochta sa Ghaeltacht. Níl sé rófhada ó bhí daoine dírithe ar fhadhb na fostaíochta sa Ghaeltacht. We cannot take employment and enterprise in the Gaeltacht for granted. Beimid dírithe ar chúrsaí tithíochta. Tuigim go maith an dúshlán atá ann ach tá sé tábhachtach freisin go leanfaimid leis an bpróiseas atá ann.

Luaigh an Seanadóir Curley cé chomh tábhachtach is atá sé infheistíocht bhreise a dhéanamh sa Ghaeltacht agus sa teanga. Luaigh an Seanadóir Kelleher an rud céanna. Ní mór dom a rá go bhfuair mé an méadú is mó riamh don earnáil i mbuiséad 2026. Beidh beagnach €160 milliún infheistithe san earnáil i mbliana dá bharr. Táimid ag tús an phróisis do cháinainéis 2027. Beimid dírithe air seo freisin.

Labhair an Seanadóir Conway faoi na coistí réigiúnacha. Tá na coistí sin thar a bheith tábhachtach. Tá sé tábhachtach go bhfuil guth na réigiún ann. Tá sé tábhachtach freisin go bhfuil tuiscint ann. Cuirfidh mé an tuiscint seo ar record an tSeanaid; is bord Stáit é an t-údarás freisin. Mar gheall gur bord Stáit é, tá sé freagrach don Dáil, do mo Roinn agus don Choiste um Chuntais Phoiblí. Tá sé tábhachtach go mbeidh scileanna ar an mbord chun é sin a chomhlíonadh. Beidh daoine tofa ach beidh Aire an lae in ann daoine leis na scileanna sin a chur ar bhord an údaráis. Is bord den Ghaeltacht é ach is bord Stáit é freisin. Mar gheall gur bord Stáit é, tá freagrachtaí air agus tá sé tábhachtach go bhfuil taithí ar an mbord chun na freagrachtaí sin a chomhlíonadh.

Mar a dúirt an Seanadóir Curley agus an Seanadóir Kelleher, tá sé tábhachtach go mbeidh na coistí réigiúnacha láidir. Tá sé tábhachtach freisin go mbeidh siad ceangailte leis an bpróiseas pleanála teanga, mar a luaigh an Seanadóir Curley. Tá sé thar a bheith tábhachtach go bhfuil an próiseas sin chomh láidir agus is féidir.

Chuir an Seanadóir Tully béim ar chúrsaí tithíochta.

Labhair an Seanadóir Kelleher faoi chúrsaí toghcháin sa Ghaeltacht. Bhí mé i gConamara. Táim tar éis a lán ama a chaitheamh sa Ghaeltacht in iarthar na Gaillimhe. Bhí na comhráite sin agam freisin. Táimid dírithe orthu sin. Is é sin an fáth go bhfuilimid ag déanamh infheistíocht bhreise. Táimid i mbun ceann de na tograí is mó i stair mo Roinne i nGaeltacht Chonamara, an togra ar shuíomh Choláiste Lurgan, agus an togra is mó i stair na Roinne, an togra ar Ché Inis Oírr. Táimid ag cur infheistíocht chaipitil isteach. Táimid ag cur infheistíocht airgeadais isteach freisin. Tá mo chomhghleacaí Rialtais, an tAire, an Teachta O'Donovan, tar

éis €5 milliún breise a thabhairt do TG4 chun go mbeidh sé in ann seirbhís nuachta neamhspleách a chur ar siúl. Is infheistíocht bhreise é sin freisin.

Tá an t-údarás dírithe ar chúrsaí digiteacha ag an bpointe seo. Maidir le hintleacht shaorga, tá dúshlán mhóra roimh an nGaeilge mar gheall ar AI ach tá deiseanna ann freisin. Má oibrímid i gceart ar chúrsaí AI sa Ghaeltacht, beimid in ann an Ghaeltacht a chur os comhair an domhain. Baineann deiseanna leis sin. Tá an t-údarás dírithe air sin freisin.

Creidim go mór go bhfuil todhchaí slán ag an nGaeltacht agus go bhfuil daoine muiníneach as an todhchaí sin. Gan dabht, tá dúshlán ann ach táimid dírithe orthu sin. Sa bhealach céanna, táimid ag díriú ar na deiseanna. Tá an Bille seo ann chun cuidiú leis na dúshlán agus na deiseanna sin.

Cuireadh agus aontaíodh an cheist.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Nessa Cosgrove): Cathain go dtógfar an chéad Chéim eile?

Senator Garret Kelleher: Dé Máirt seo chugainn.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Nessa Cosgrove): An bhfuil sé sin aontaithe? Aontaithe.

Céim an Choiste ordaithe don Mháirt, an 16 Meitheamh 2026.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 1.57 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.16 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.57 p.m. and resumed at 2.16 p.m.

Garda Síochána (Recording Devices) (Amendment) Bill 2025: Committee Stage (Resumed)

SECTION 8

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: The Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, and his officials are very welcome here this afternoon. Amendment No. 9 has already been discussed with amendment No. 8.

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

In page 8, between lines 21 and 22, to insert the following:

“(1A) A member of Garda personnel who contravenes section 43C(1) shall be guilty of an offence.”

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Question proposed: “That section 8, as amended, stand part of the Bill”.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I wish to speak very briefly to the section. The Minister did not accept the proposed introductions of offences in terms of the amendments but will he clarify

what consequences he sees playing out in relation to the inappropriate uses of these technologies and what examples have been given in relation to that?

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): As I said yesterday, I think it would have been inappropriate to have made it a criminal offence for someone to inadvertently and unintentionally breach the code of practice or the basis, in Part 6A, upon which on the use of recording devices is set out. Notwithstanding that, there will be a code of practice issued. When An Garda Síochána is complying with and performing something in accordance with the code of practice, there will be disciplinary and performance consequences in respect of any failure to do so. The Senator will know that I introduced and signed disciplinary regulations, conduct regulations as they are called, and performance regulations. If it is an inadvertent breach or if somebody fails to comply with the code to a minor extent, it will be a matter for the superiors of that garda to determine how that should be dealt with. We need to recognise that in all walks of life, politics included, people can make mistakes. There can be inadvertent errors made, and I have done many of them in my life. We have to ensure that the response to that is proportionate to the consequence of the mistake and, indeed, the level of intention behind it. To answer the Senator's question directly, the response to any breach of the code or failure to comply with Part 6A will be in the realm of performance and disciplinary matters or conduct matters, to be given effect by the Commissioner.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: The concern is that those tend to be internal processes and perhaps more opaque for the public, and it is the public who may be negatively impacted by the improper actions. This is part of the context. It is not solely around performance and managing a team. This is probably where the concern is coming from and why we look for---

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: If it is a particularly egregious and deliberate breach, there is the capacity to refer that to Fiosrú to investigate misconduct by a member of An Garda Síochána, if it is considered serious misconduct. It is not just exclusively an independent, internal process. There is the capacity to be investigated by Fiosrú.

Question put and agreed to.

Section 9 agreed to.

NEW SECTION

Senator Pauline Tully: I move amendment No. 10:

In page 9, after line 36, to insert the following:

“Pilot Programme for Biometric Categorisation Technologies

10.The Minister shall ensure that no national deployment of biometric categorisation technologies shall occur until a pilot programme has been completed and independently evaluated, including assessments of—

- (a) accuracy and error rates,

- (b) discriminatory impacts,
- (c) compliance with data protection law, and
- (d) impacts on privacy and fundamental rights,

and the evaluation shall be laid before both Houses of the Oireachtas.”.

As has been done with other technology, including body cams used by gardaí, it is crucial that prior to deployment across the State, there is a pilot programme that will evaluate the accuracy and effectiveness of the technology as well as identifying any issue that may need to be addressed prior to its wider roll-out.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Senator Tully is correct in identifying that when it comes to the roll-out of new technology, sometimes pilot programmes are used. For example, a pilot programme on the use of tasers is ongoing at present in certain sections of An Garda Síochána. Similarly, body cameras are being used on a pilot project basis in Waterford, Limerick and Dublin. The benefit of pilot projects is that they show the efficacy and usefulness of a new type of technology. I am pleased to say that in terms of the impact of the body cameras and indeed use of tasers, the pilot programme confirms the need for and the importance of having them.

I would be concerned, however, about including within legislation a specific statutory requirement that the pilot project take place. That did not happen in respect of body cameras or tasers. The reason it did not happen is because these are operational matters and it is really a matter for the Garda Commissioner to determine whether a pilot project is appropriate. In many instances, An Garda Síochána will look to its European counterparts during the procurement process as these types of tools are in use in other EU states. There is an awareness of this technology in terms of its use by other police forces, however, it is not being used directly in on-street policing of the public. As I spoke yesterday about biometric analysis, it is an investigative tool that can be used by An Garda Síochána. I cannot accept the amendment. I am not saying that there might not necessarily be a pilot programme but that is a matter for the Garda Commissioner as it is an operational matter and it would be inappropriate to have such a provision in statute.

Amendment put and declared lost.

SECTION 10

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Amendments Nos. 11 to 13, inclusive, are related and may be discussed together by agreement. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Pauline Tully: I move amendment No. 11:

11. In page 10, between lines 18 and 19, to insert the following:

“(ba) clear and specific limits on the circumstances in which biometric analysis or biometric categorisation may be used, including prohibitions on use for general surveillance, population-level monitoring, or speculative searches,

- (bb) objective thresholds and evidential standards that must be met before any biometric analysis may be initiated,
- (bc) safeguards to prevent disproportionate or discriminatory impacts, including mandatory risk assessment procedures,
- (bd) technical and operational parameters governing accuracy, reliability, and error rate thresholds,
- (be) mandatory documentation, authorisation procedures and audit trails to ensure accountability and prevent misuse.”.

On amendment No. 11, it is not satisfactory that so much of this legislation is left to a code of practice. It moves away from the sphere of democratic oversight. Because so much is left to the code of practice, there is lack of detail on safeguards, data limits, oversight and practical rules for device use. The section on the code of practice gives too much discretion to the Garda Commissioner, who drafts, amends and controls the consultation process for codes that regulate Garda powers. Safeguards are not fixed in legislation to leave crucial limits on biometric use retention and access. These additions strengthen the requirements in relation to the code of practice by requiring strict limits, objective evidential thresholds, anti-discrimination safeguards, technical accuracy standards and full authorisation ensuring biometric powers remain properly controlled, transparent and accountable.

Amendment No. 12 is a complementary amendment setting out what should be covered by the code of practice and stipulating that democratic oversight requires that the code of practice be laid before the Oireachtas covering safeguards that were outlined previously.

Regarding amendment No. 13, five years is too long to wait for the first review of the code of practice for the use of this new technology given concerns about potential overreach, discrimination and data protection. This amendment proposes that the first review of the code of practice should take place after two years rather than after five years.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: Amendment No. 11 seeks to include prohibitions on mass surveillance and indiscriminate searching utilising biometrics within the Data Protection Acts. As there exists at present a prohibition on mass surveillance and indiscriminate searching under the Data Protection Acts, I do not believe the proposed amendment is necessary. I also think it is probably not good legislative practice to duplicate what is already there in the Data Protection Acts. Section 4 of the principal Act - the recording devices Act - notes that the provisions of the recording devices Act are without prejudice to the provisions of the Data Protection Acts. This will also apply to Part 6A, which has been inserted by section 8 of the Bill. It is important to note that section 89(3) of the Data Protection Act provides that profiling that results in discrimination against an individual on the basis of a special category of personal data shall be prohibited. My response to amendment No. 11 is that there are very many significant prohibitions contained within the Data Protection Acts and it would be unnecessary to replicate them in this legislation. There are also clear limitations on searching already set out in section 43C. That information must be in the context of a specific investigation among other things. As I said, the code of practice provisions already set out what needs to be included in the code and these include provisions related to procedures, confidentiality, security, storage, access, retention and parameters for use. As the code can also set out different provisions in relation

to the types of biometric data or circumstances in which it can be carried out, for that reason I cannot accept amendment No. 11.

Amendment No. 12 is not necessary. Section 47A sets out what is to be included in the code of practice. This includes the parameters for which it can be carried out. The code of practice for the carrying out of biometric analysis will be laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas for private and positive resolutions. This means the Houses will have the opportunity to scrutinise the code alongside the provisions required by section 47A so, again, I cannot accept amendment No. 12.

Amendment No. 13 proposes to change the initial review period from five years to two years. As I stated previously, setting this at five years aligns with the principal Act. We can already see how involved the process of drafting code of practice is. The requirements for assessments and consultation make it a lengthy and detailed process and would further delay the roll-out of what I believe are the necessary digital tools for An Garda Síochána. I accept that a code may need to be reviewed earlier than five years but there is nothing preventing this from happening in the Bill so for that reason, I cannot accept the proposed amendment.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Senator Pauline Tully: I move amendment No. 12:

In page 11, between lines 27 and 28, to insert the following:

“(5A) When making an order under subsection (5), the Minister shall lay the code of practice, together with an explanatory memorandum outlining the safeguards, limitations and parameters governing the use of biometric analysis and biometric categorisation, before each House of the Oireachtas.”.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Senator Pauline Tully: I move amendment No. 13:

In page 11, line 36, to delete “5 years” and substitute “2 years”.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Section 10 agreed to.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Amendment No. 14 is in the names of Senators Harmon and Cosgrove. Neither Senator is present to move the amendment.

Amendment No. 14 not moved.

Section 11 agreed to.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Before I move on, I welcome Deputy Michael Murphy from Tipperary and members of the Patterson family Noel and Imelda, brother and sister to the late Frank Patterson. They are all very welcome and I hope they enjoy their visit to Leinster House.

Title agreed to.

Bill reported with amendment.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I welcome MEPs Billy Kelleher and Barry Andrews with their guests. They are welcome and I hope they enjoy their visit to Leinster House. Would the Minister like to say anything?

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I thank the Leas-Chathaoirleach and the other Senators for facilitating the conclusion of Committee Stage of the recording devices Bill. It is important legislation. It is about introducing biometric analysis on a retrospective basis in Irish law so that An Garda can have that necessary tool available to ensure it can investigate serious crimes. It is a useful tool for the purpose of investigating serious crimes. I also welcome the distinguished Members of the European Parliament this afternoon.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: When is it proposed to take the next Stage?

Senator Aidan Davitt: Next Tuesday.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Report Stage ordered for Tuesday, 16 June 2026.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I welcome Marcus Goodwin and Ricardo Souto who are guests of Senator Brady. I hope they also enjoy their visit to Leinster House this afternoon. When is it proposed to sit again?

Senator Aidan Davitt: Next Tuesday at 2.30 p.m.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar athló ar 2.32 p.m. go dtí 2.30 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 16 Meitheamh 2026.

The Seanad adjourned at 2.32 p.m. until 2.30 p.m. on Tuesday, 16 June 2026.