



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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SEANAD ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 7 Iúil 2026

Tuesday, 7 July 2026

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach i gceannas ar 12.30 p.m.

Machnamh agus Paidir.

Prayer and Reflection.

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad

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

Senator Maria McCormack - The need for the Minister for Health to provide an update on endometriosis care.

Senator Eileen Lynch - The need for the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality to make a statement on housing provision and on support to deal with the growing number of people with intellectual disabilities who can no longer be cared for by their parents in their own homes.

Senator Dee Ryan - The need for the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration to provide an update on the introduction of electronic monitoring for appropriate categories of offender.

Senator Robbie Gallagher - The need for the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport to make a statement on the future of St. Tiernach's Park, Clones, County Monaghan.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove - The need for the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport to make a statement on the future expansion of the basic income for the arts scheme.

The matters raised by the Senators are suitable for discussion and I have selected Senators Maria McCormack, Eileen Lynch, Dee Ryan and Robbie Gallagher and they will be taken now. Senator Nessa Cosgrove may give notice on another day of the matter that she wishes to raise.

Nithe i dtosach suíonna - Commencement Matters

Women's Health

Senator Maria McCormack: I welcome the Minister and thank her for coming here to take this matter regarding the important issue of endometriosis. It has been almost a year now since the publication of the national endometriosis framework. I acknowledge that publishing the framework was an important step forward. I really appreciate the constructive engagement I have had with the Minister on endometriosis care over the last year.

Today is about taking stock. Patients want to know what has actually changed since the framework was published. As we know, endometriosis affects one in ten women in Ireland. If we had proper data, it would probably show that one in six or one in seven is affected. It is not just a painful period. It is a chronic inflammatory whole-body disease that can affect the bowel, bladder, diaphragm and other vital organs, including the lungs. It impacts every aspect of a woman's life, including her education, employment, fertility, relationships and mental health. For many years, women living with endometriosis have told us the same story. They wait years for a diagnosis. They are often told their pain is normal. They struggle to get access to specialist care. In many cases, they are forced to travel abroad for treatment because we simply do not have the proper treatment here.

When we met earlier this year, the Minister outlined a number of important commitments. I would appreciate an update on these today. With regard to education and training, the Minister advised that additional training would be provided for GPs and consultants to improve awareness, diagnosis and referral pathways. Will the Minister provide an update on the progress that has been achieved? Has this training commenced?

How many healthcare professionals have participated?

We discussed the importance of improving specialist imaging. Too many patients continue to tell us they have had MRIs or ultrasounds reported as normal here only for extensive endometriosis to be discovered during surgery. The Minister committed to improving specialist training for radiographers in identifying endometriosis on imaging. Will the Minister outline what progress has been made in implementing this commitment and how the Department intends to measure whether diagnostic accuracy is improving?

We also discussed the endometriosis interim surgery abroad scheme. While I welcome the establishment of the scheme, patients continue to raise concerns regarding access. Gatekeeping from consultants has been commonly described to me, whereby consultants refuse to refer people abroad. A question I am constantly asked is about the exploration of adding additional countries to the scheme, in particular Romania and Greece. Is there an update on these countries being considered, particularly given the significant number of Irish women who travel to seek treatment there?

I also welcome the fact that endometriosis now has its own HSE clinical code. This is an important step in understanding the true scale of the disease. Will the Minister provide an update on how this data is being collected and how it will be used to improve future planning and service provision? While progress has been made, patients need to see the progress reflected in their own experiences. They need shorter waiting times, earlier diagnostics, access to specialist imaging, multidisciplinary teams, on which I hope the Minister will elaborate more, and timely treatment. The framework gave hope to thousands of women living with endometriosis in Ireland. I hope that today the Minister will outline how these commitments

are being translated into tangible improvements in services. Ultimately, this is how the success will be managed for the women out there.

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): I thank the Senator and I am glad to have the opportunity to discuss our ongoing work in improving endometriosis services for patients. So much has happened, as she is aware, since October but so much more is needed. As I look around the Seanad today I see so many women here of so many different ages and experiences. I am well aware that women here may have endometriosis or may have family members who have endometriosis but it has not been a conversation that has been had as loudly as we are all trying to amplify, to drive awareness about endometriosis. It is a significant health issue affecting as many as one in seven women, as the Senator has said.

As the Senator is aware, in October I launched the national framework for the management of endometriosis. It sets out for the first time a defined clinical care pathway for women and girls with endometriosis. It reflects better many of the voices of patient advocates and aims to transform how endometriosis is recognised and treated across the country. We made as many changes as we could and as were appropriate after our first patient voice forum in September, on which we followed up in March 2026. We have had quite good engagement with many more patients than we ever would have before. Although it is not perfect, it is so much more than has ever been the case before. We have an endometriosis priority action advisory group that meets regularly to support the ongoing development and implementation of priority actions.

The HSE at my request has allocated additional funding to increase services and I have mandated an action plan to raise awareness and improve services for women in the longer term. In quarter 4 of 2025, I allocated funding for the provision of 100 extra surgeries to be done in that quarter and I am pleased that 142 were done in that period. This required considerable effort but it had to be done. These surgeries were carried out over those three months.

Our work on recruitment has resulted in the successful recruitment of an additional colorectal surgeon in Cork University Maternity Hospital and in Tallaght. This is so important because they need to work alongside other surgeons to be able to do work on the bowel. These are complex cases requiring more than one surgeon.

As the Senator is aware, I prioritised the recruitment of an additional 65 whole-time equivalent positions in the 2026 service plan. These are being recruited and include consultants, nurse specialists, psychologists, physiotherapists, radiographers, occupational therapists, medical scientists; a whole team. Recruitment is ongoing across the regions. For example, in our supra-regional centre in Tallaght, five additional consultants will be in place by September. It takes a while to recruit a consultant because not only do we have to find and recruit them but they have to give notice elsewhere. It takes time but they are in place. These specialist posts will enhance services for the most complex patients.

The Senator mentioned, however, that services have not been what they have needed to be and that women have had to look abroad. As the Senator is aware, we try to fund that for them proactively through the endometriosis surgery abroad interim scheme. This is a specific two-year scheme established by us to support patients waiting for surgery for endometriosis who do not have a date in Ireland or whose cases are too complex. Since the launch of that scheme in October, it has engaged with over 150 patients and received 50 applications. We are working

to approve additional centres, including in Greece, which has been a request for some time. That is in development. I fear, however, that Romania is not possible for very specific clinical reasons that I think we discussed.

The clinical community has leaned into this in a big way. The Institute of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists held its annual conference on 6 March, focused on endometriosis, with participation from experts across Europe and advocates from Ireland. Endometriosis is now included in GP training, with additional education resources being developed. I can get the Senator more details. Our clinicians are working with specialist services across Europe. They have attended endometriosis intensive courses across Europe. Several HSE clinicians are now undertaking fellowship training in complex gynaecology in Europe. Two fellowship posts are also funded across our two supra-regional services to train professionals for future service delivery. The first two candidates will complete their fellowships this month and recruitment for the next cycle is ongoing. We are also supporting trying to get British Society for Gynaecological Endoscopy accreditation, which is an important step. This is a big and significant body of work undertaken by our clinical community.

We are also trying to promote awareness of endometriosis. It is wonderful to have the opportunity to discuss it here today. A national menstrual awareness campaign is being developed, to which, of course, endometriosis is not limited, but it must be understood in that context. It will have a particular focus on endometriosis and improving public understanding of symptoms and available supports. Just last week, I spoke with a girl whose position in a bar in Cork was not advanced because she had taken so many sick days when she was in the accident and emergency department in desperate pain, and it was not well understood. This is why we now have two education officers recruited to deliver the menstrual information specialising in endometriosis, MISE, programme that promotes mental health, education and awareness of endometriosis in schools, workplaces and sports clubs. I ask everybody to ask their local community to bring MISE in to try to tell the story better.

Finally, as the House will be aware, Ireland took up the Presidency of the Council of the European Union. I get four ministerial conferences on everything to do with health, and I have prioritised one of them specifically for endometriosis. It will be on 3 December. We are inviting specialists from all over Europe and patient advocates to discuss this issue in Ireland. I am sorry, I realise I have gone way over time.

An Cathaoirleach: No, the Minister is grand. She can continue if she wishes. No. I call Senator McCormack.

Senator Maria McCormack: Go raibh maith agat. This is fantastic. So much good work has gone on here. The two education officers recruited, Kathleen King and Cate O'Connor, are absolutely fantastic. The MISE programme is outstanding. Ms King is a medical scientist who has 30 years' experience researching endometriosis. MISE is a fantastic initiative. There are so many positives here. Education and awareness is massive, and it is great that one of the ministerial conferences is being used for endometriosis. We have come so far on this journey.

I have one other question. Does the Minister have a date or some sort of a timeline for when we might know about the addition of Greece? I understand the situation with Romania. A lot of people ask about the timeline for Greece, however. With everything else rolling out, it would

be good if we could get an update again when we are back in September. It seems, though, that the progress the Minister has been promising is really under way. The extra colorectal surgeon and all the additional surgeries mean we are on the right track. Hopefully, we can keep making progress.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I am so grateful to the Senator and to everybody who has raised awareness of endometriosis. I thank Senator McCormack as well for highlighting Kathleen King and Cate O'Connor.

We are now better and more profoundly aware of the impact of endometriosis on women's lives and we really are trying to expand the specialist services. I might come back to the Senator with information on Greece, because it is the subject of particular work at the moment. I hope, though, that the Senator can see the authenticity and sincerity with which we are trying to approach this work.

As part of my St. Patrick's Day visit to Germany, I made a special effort concerning endometriosis, along with my counterpart, the German health minister, who is the minister for health for 80 million people, an enormous position. I was there to meet her as part of the St. Patrick's Day programme. Instead of our meeting happening in a government office, she and I went to an endometriosis clinic in the Charité hospital in Berlin, which is a specialist service. We had our bilateral meeting there, with our two flags on the table. We had our meeting in a women's health clinic, in an endometriosis clinic, at the Virchow clinic, which is a part of Berlin's Charité hospital.

Then we had a meeting with the wonderful Professor Sylvia Mechsner, together with advocates and patients. Professor Mechsner, who I hope is coming in December, has developed an endometriosis treatment pathway that is a real multimodal approach. Despite this technical capacity the Germans are, like us, struggling with costs and capacity. We are not on our own in terms of the needs to improve services. The Minister, Ms Warken, and I were determined to try to use our platforms as women ministers for health in Europe and the platform of St. Patrick's Day to amplify the experience of endometriosis not just in Ireland and Germany but on a pan-European basis. I have of course invited the Minister, Ms Warken, to the endometriosis ministerial conference in December.

I do not have time to speak further but this is a body of work the Oireachtas has leaned into in a huge way, as advocates have done many times. I really want to acknowledge and apologise again that before now, the services were not the way they should have been and the reaction was not always what it should have been. Many women were cared for and cared for enough but there are so many who were not. I really acknowledge that in everything we do. I hope the Senator can see every effort is being made to try to genuinely turn the tide on that and turn it forever.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank the Minister for being with us to take that important Commencement matter.

Disability Issues

An Cathaoirleach: The Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, is most welcome to Seanad Éireann.

Senator Eileen Lynch: I thank the Minister of State so much for being with us to discuss this important issue. It is one that affects many families countrywide, namely, the lack of a clear plan for provision of accommodation for those with intellectual disabilities. Many families, parents, siblings and guardians provide care at home for loved ones with intellectual disabilities. This is saving the State millions in service costs every year, but the question that has been asked for quite some time is what happens when the carer can no longer care. These people have been failed by successive governments due to lack of planning for something that is entirely foreseeable. I appreciate we cannot come up with a solution overnight but recently I met a group called Before We Die. The Minister of State has met them, as have an Tánaiste and an Taoiseach, and the Minister of State is aware of their recent survey, their report and their eight demands. This group represents concerned parents and caregivers all over the country who do not know how or where their children will be cared for when they can no longer care for them.

There are currently over 110,000 people with intellectual disabilities. Almost 30,000 of them are aged 15 and over and live in the family home. Based on CSO figures, 2,314 carers are over 70 and at least 500 of them are over 80. Almost 300 of those are based in my county of Cork. According to a survey carried out by Before We Die dealing with the families they represent and the members of their organisation, 78% of families have no formal housing plan, 20% are progressing informal conversations about housing and only 2% have a formal written housing plan in place. We need a cross-departmental approach to ensure a functioning housing plan is in place for those with disabilities. A record of those seeking accommodation provision needs to be created and I am aware that is something the Minister of State is working on but the vast majority of families are unaware they need to ensure their child is on the housing list in order that they can be provided for and that those in the Department are fully aware of the need and the level of need they are dealing with.

Simple issues like how long it can take to get a HMD form 1 filled out can delay applications.

I acknowledge that we have seen progress recently in the joined-up approach and initiative that has been taken by Cork County Council and Cork City Council in relation to providing social housing for those with intellectual disabilities. One fairly basic thing they have done is appoint a dedicated liaison officer for social housing in each council for those with intellectual disabilities. This is something that needs to be rolled out in local authorities across the country.

This is not an easy problem to solve and we need a multifaceted approach. In the very short term and in the upcoming budget, we need to introduce an emergency funded plan for carers aged over 70. These families simply cannot wait. If we do not deal with it now, we will be dealing with it in a crisis situation where we have no choice but to provide. Ireland's residential provisions for adults with intellectual disabilities, IDs, cost significantly more per person than comparable systems across the EU because our current model is inefficient. The cost of a new residential placement rose from 284,000 in 2019 to 332,000 in 2022, and 63% of placements were done through for-profit businesses. I accept that the Government is putting money into this but I question whether it is being put into the right places. I am not sure it is economically efficient, but it is certainly not working for caregivers and service users. It is also vital that we

listen to carers and those who have the lived experience. They have to be involved in this process. We need to look at the needs of the individual. We previously had a policy of decongregation but that does not necessarily work for everyone. There are certain people with high-volume care needs who will work better on their own whereas those with a lower care need will work better in housing where they are not isolated and they have shared services, and where integration is a better option. We need to take all of those things into account. Fundamentally, though, we need a place right now.

Minister of State at the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Emer Higgins): I thank Senator Lynch for raising this important issue and offering me the opportunity to respond. Supporting people with disabilities and their families is a key priority for the Government. My Department, together with the HSE, is committed to improving disability services so that people can access the supports they need when they need them. This commitment is reflected in both the programme for Government and the new National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030, which was co-designed with disabled people and their representative organisations. It was done that way to ensure that their voices and priorities were the heart of policy and service development. The Senator referred to how the lived experience must be taken on board, and that is exactly what has happened in terms of our strategy.

It is also reflected in the significant investment being made in disability services. The overall budget for specialist disability services has increased from €1.7 billion in 2017 to almost €3.9 billion this year, with specialist disability residential services accounting for almost 60% of the HSE's total disability budget spend. This year, €65 million has been allocated to support new developments in disability residential services. This includes €14 million to deliver approximately 199 residential responses and 152 new residential placements. Funding will also support new residents in existing placements that have become vacant and require enhancements or, in limited circumstances, placements in nursing home settings. The remaining €25 million will support residential packages for children with complex needs, enhanced supports for existing residents in decongregation transitions and the under-65s programme, which is important. These investments are helping to expand residential capacity and improve outcomes for people with disabilities across the country. As of April of this year, 9,031 specialist disability residential places were being delivered by approximately 90 service providers nationwide. Since 2020, additional funding has supported the creation of more than 1,000 new residential places for people with disabilities.

More broadly, the programme for Government commits to investing in residential and independent living options for both adults and children while reducing waiting times for specialist disability services. In support of these commitments, the Ministers, Deputies Browne and Foley, and I have been working with the HSE, local authorities and other partners to improve access to independent living supports and take a more planned approach to the delivery of residential services. There will be an update of this work shortly.

A key objective of this is ensuring people with disabilities can access suitable housing and the supports they need to live independently in their communities, as the Senator has asked.

While housing policy is led by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, my Department funds the disability supports that enable people to live in their communities,

including community living and specialist residential services. Working together through the national housing strategy for disabled people, we will strengthen co-ordination between local authorities, the HSE and service providers to better understand the need and to be able to put together better plans for future housing and residential supports.

The Senator referenced Cork County and City Council and the appointment of a new dedicated liaison officer. I met two of the women involved in that campaign only last week and I commend them. I want to let the Senator know that this is something we and the HSE are also doing. New housing co-ordination and residential placement planning and review teams are being established and new housing co-ordinators are being recruited within the HSE. These new roles will be filled by people whose jobs will be helping to support families in this situation and to help increase delivery of appropriate homes.

This work is informing the housing delivery action plans and local disability housing targets. It is also helping to ensure future investment reflects identified need. Alongside increasing capacity, we are focused on ensuring residential services are planned and delivered in a more strategic and sustainable way. That is where many of these new roles will also come in, because they will help us put that more strategic focus on ensuring we are planning ahead for the families the Senator has mentioned.

Looking ahead, my Department is updating the disability capacity review and developing a new policy framework for specialist residential services to help ensure future supports continue to meet the changing needs of people with disabilities. These initiatives will support a more planned approach to service development, thereby ensuring people can access the right supports in the right place and at the right time.

Senator Eileen Lynch: I thank the Minister of State for such a comprehensive reply. I welcome that there is a lot of positive news as regards investment, and I am delighted to see there is progress being made. As I said, it is maybe not as fast as we would like. I commend the Minister of State; I know the volume of work she has been doing on this, particularly when she has been in this particular ministerial role for such a short period. I know she is doing a lot of work on this issue.

I am concerned about the €40 million to deliver 199 residential responses, and 152 new residential placements. This year, there were 250 residential placements but 72 of those only went to planned placements; the rest went to emergency crisis situations whereby a carer became incapacitated or passed away. When that forward planning is not there, somebody who has been on a list is going to be superseded by somebody who is in dire need because their carer is no longer with them or no longer has any form of capacity. That is something that should be highlighted.

I very much welcome the Minister of State's news regarding co-ordination with local authorities and the HSE. Does she have an update relating to the recruitment of the HSE housing co-ordinators and the residential placement planning and review teams? This is very good news, and hopefully it is something that will have a big impact on this area.

Deputy Emer Higgins: To be clear, we are absolutely focused on making sure there is progress in this area, but we know there are huge challenges. We need to work through those

challenges to improve access to disability services but also in being able to expand residential capacity and strengthen the supports that enable people to live independent and fulfilling lives.

The Senator mentioned the figure regarding planned placements, and she is correct. However, she might not be aware that this is the first time ever we have had planned placements as a target. This is something we have introduced this year that we want to build on next year. It is a figure we want to see moving in the right direction, because it is absolutely needed. As I mentioned, we had a significant increase in the disability budget for this year, which shows Government's commitment to making a real difference to the lives of people with disabilities and to the lives of their families as well.

My Department will continue to work across Government, which was one of the Senator's asks in her opening remarks. We will work cross-government with the Department of housing and local government, the HSE and other partners, including local authorities, to respond to what we know is growing demand and to ensure that residential services are planned and are delivered in a way that will become a way that best meets the needs of people with disabilities.

The Minister, Deputy Foley, the Taoiseach, Tánaiste and I have all met the Before We Die group that the Senator mentioned. There is commitment at the highest political level on this issue. The group has done amazing work. I met its members only last week with the Tánaiste to go through the results of its surveys and its requests. I will continue to work with it to deliver improvements in this area.

We need to get to a point where there is a more planned and sustainable approach to this issue. I am determined to do that. I will continue to work with the Senator, her colleagues and advocacy groups.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank the Minister of State for being here.

Electronic Tagging

Senator Dee Ryan: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Ardagh, to the Chamber. I believe this is my first time addressing her since she got her new role. I congratulate her. We look forward to working with her over her term. I have no doubt she will do great things in her new role.

I thank the Minister of State for the opportunity to raise this important Commencement matter and for coming in to take it. I seek an update on electronic monitoring. What progress had been made? We have a commitment to it in the programme for Government. The Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, is personally very committed to delivering it.

Public safety and security in people's homes is a live issue for us in Limerick. I am on the doors every week in different parts of the constituency. The issue of personal safety, the safety of people's property in their homes and safety in their cars comes up repeatedly throughout the constituency. Likewise when I meet the business community, as I do regularly, the issue of shoplifting and the crippling cost to retailers already much challenged in our city centre comes up again and again. The Garda works very well with private individuals and businesses in trying to tackle these issues but I see the potential for a great role for electronic monitoring in

supporting the work the Garda does in those areas. I am eager to get an update from the Minister of State because of its potential for enhancing public safety.

Limerick and, indeed, all communities across the country deserve every available tool that can help to protect people, strengthen their confidence in the justice system and ensure court-imposed bail conditions can be properly enforced. Electronic minoring will be a tool for the Judiciary when considering who among those before it may be suitable for bail and will also give us reassurance of greater safeguards for the public. The tragic death occurred in Limerick in 2023 of University of Limerick student Joe Drennan, originally from Laois, who was standing at a bus stop in Castletroy after finishing his shift working in a nearby restaurant. He was mowed down and killed by a driver who was out on bail. While I understand and appreciate that electronic monitoring or no other single measure can prevent a tragedy such as this, the public is entitled to expect that every reasonable safeguard is in place to monitor compliance and reduce risk.

There are also many cases where a prison sentence is neither necessary nor appropriate. However, where individuals might be granted bail or offered temporary release, protecting the public has to remain the overriding priority. Electronic monitoring can help us to strike that balance while allowing suitable individuals to remain in the community but providing greater confidence that they are complying with the conditions imposed by the courts.

Limerick is particularly well placed to host any pilot or trial of electronic monitoring. I call for that to be done. We have a strong track record in our city not only in tackling crime, supporting victims and improving community safety but also within the Garda in rolling out trials. We recently finished a community access support team, CAST, partnership pilot between the Garda and the HSE mental health unit. We finished a trial on body-worn cameras and are due to start one on tasers.

Limerick would be particularly well placed to put in place an effective trial and to do the monitoring and reporting that would be necessary to help inform any future decisions on where electronic monitoring may be suitable. I look forward to hearing the Minister of State's response.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Catherine Ardagh): I thank the Senator very much for her kind words. I also thank her for volunteering Limerick for the trial. The Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, is pursuing a dual approach to address the issue of prison overcrowding by increasing prison capacity and pursuing further measures to support increasing the use of non-custodial sanctions like the Senator mentioned. The Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration is leading a cross-agency project to introduce electronic monitoring of specific categories of individuals, as committed to in the programme for Government and in line with existing legal provisions. A number of scenarios are covered by the legislation currently which allow for electronic monitoring, in particular provisions which allow for the tagging of people on temporary release and in some circumstances people on bail, as the Senator outlined. My thoughts are with the victim of the crime that was committed while the assailant was on bail. Electronic monitoring has the potential to act as another avenue to tackle overcrowding in our prison system.

Existing legislation, including the Bail Act 1997, as amended, and the Criminal Justice Act 2006, as amended, provides for electronic monitoring in certain circumstances. A steering

group is in place made up of sectoral representatives who are driving the delivery of this project to operationalise electronic monitoring. This includes consideration of technology, data protection, procurement, implementation and an operating model design. The electronic monitoring pilot will focus on individuals on temporary release nationally and those admitted to bail in the pilot area. It is proposed to utilise up to 50 electronic tags during this phase. This is expected to provide capacity to monitor between 90 and 150 people in a year, but exact numbers monitored will depend on a range of factors including the individual's length of time on bail or on temporary release, and an individual's personal circumstances, including ongoing suitability and compliance with conditions.

The pilot approach will allow for processes and procedures to be tested for a wider scale national roll-out, while also supporting the agencies involved to build capability and knowledge of the electronic monitoring system. Insights from the pilot will inform any future national roll-out procurement. Under budget 2026, funding of €2.1 million was allocated for the project to allow for staffing, procurement and other set-up costs. The electronic monitoring project is progressing and is expected to be operational in 2026. The request for tender closed on 14 April and I am advised that a number of tenders were received by the deadline. As this is a live competition, I am precluded from making further comments on the process. All updates regarding this competition will be made through the national tendering portal - eTenders.

I note that, as of March, 12 probationary gardaí were assigned to the Limerick division. They are having a huge impact. People have commented to me as a public representative that they are feeling safer. They have been quite successful. Operation Thor has been ongoing for quite some time. It combats burglaries and organised crime in more rural areas, especially where the national road network is being used.

As Senator Ryan is aware, a lot of progress is being made by the Department when it comes to retail crime. When combined, all of these will hopefully have a huge effect on businesses and individuals in Limerick. Obviously I cannot commit to saying where the pilot will be, but I thank Senator Ryan for her suggestion.

Senator Dee Ryan: I thank the Minister of State for that excellent update. It is great to hear that the Department envisages that the pilot will be live before the end of this year. That is a testimony to the commitment of the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, and the Minister of State to modernising our justice system, and all of the other measures that she mentioned, including the high-visibility policing in Limerick, which has been hugely successful. We are very pleased with it. It gets commented on by people when I call to their door. That is why I am really eager for this to be trialled in Limerick. I have confidence in our gardaí. They have the capacity to manage it very well. They will give back great information. I am also keen for the benefits of electronic monitoring to be rolled out in Limerick as soon as possible. I acknowledge the important impact it will have on overcrowding in prisons and, as the Minister of State outlined, also supporting the Judiciary in making a decision, where suitable, to have someone on bail or temporary release, as opposed to being on remand. We look forward to trialling it for the Minister in Limerick if possible.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: I thank Deputy Ryan. She makes a great case for the pilot. The Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, is committed to implementing electronic monitoring in line with the commitments set out in the programme for Government.

The electronic monitoring project is progressing and is expected to be operational this year. We are quite far down the road with it.

The Minister is also committed to progressing other commitments in the programme for Government relating to the expanded use of community sanctions that will contribute to reducing prison overcrowding and improving efforts to rehabilitate offenders. Non-custodial penalties, particularly supervised community sanctions, can play a significant role in addressing criminality, reducing reoffending and protecting the public. They also help with the management of prison numbers, providing a more cost-effective criminal justice response to minor offences.

The Criminal Law, Civil Law and Defence (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026, which completed Report and Final Stages in the Seanad on 2 July, includes amendments to the Criminal Justice (Community Service) Act 1983, aimed at encouraging greater use of community service orders, CSOs. The amendments will allow a court to order up to 480 hours of community service, the current statutory maximum being 240 hours. They will also oblige the courts to consider a CSO in lieu of a prison sentence of up to 24 months' duration, the current statutory threshold being 12 months, and to give reasons where they consider that a CSO should not be imposed in such a case. It should be noted that, at present, the Judiciary is already permitted to consider a CSO in lieu of a custodial sentence of more than 12 months. The amendment will create a statutory obligation on judges to demonstrate that they have considered a CSO as an alternative to sentences of up to 24 months.

In June 2026, the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, published a policy review of the Criminal Justice (Community Sanctions) Bill 2014. The purpose of the proposed Bill is to update the Probation of Offenders Act 1907 with modern provisions dealing with community sanctions and the role of the Probation Service in the criminal justice system. The policy review proposes changes to the 2014 Bill's general scheme to reflect more recent developments in Irish penal policy. The Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration will now progress work on the revision of the general scheme of the Criminal Justice (Community Sanctions) Bill 2014.

I thank the Senator again for giving me an opportunity to explain the progress on electronic monitoring.

Sports Facilities

Senator Robbie Gallagher: The Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, is very welcome. I am going to discuss a topic that he and I have discussed on many occasions, namely the development of St. Tiernach's Park, Clones. As he knows, it is much more than a stadium; it is the spiritual home of Ulster football. For generations, supporters from every corner of the province have travelled to this unique Border town to witness some of the greatest days ever in Gaelic football. The atmosphere in Clones is unlike anywhere else. The narrow streets, the packed terraces and the sense of history surrounding the grounds create an occasion that simply cannot be replicated.

As the proud home of Ulster finals, St. Tiernach's Park has repeatedly shown its ability to stage major sporting events, drawing huge crowds and generating a special intensity and atmosphere that players and supporters alike speak about with such affection.

With Casement Park now rumoured to be downscaled to a capacity of approximately 15,000, a significant opportunity has emerged for Clones. This is the moment for everyone to come together and make the case for the redevelopment of St. Tiernach's Park to modern-day standards. Today is a fitting occasion to highlight the exciting plans for the continued regeneration of Clones and the areas surrounding St. Tiernach's Park. Monaghan County Council was delighted to secure €664,668 under category 2 of the rural regeneration and development fund, RRDF, for the Clones Community Hub and Public Realm-St. Tiernach's Quarter Regeneration Project.

I was delighted the Minister, Deputy Calleary, provided that funding. This investment recognises the unique importance of Clones, not just as a thriving local community, but also as one of the GAA's most iconic venues. The council is currently preparing to appoint a specialist design team to develop an ambitious regeneration project for the area. The project will include the design of a new multi-purpose community hub adjacent to the Gerry Arthurs stand, together with significant public realm improvements that will strengthen the links between St. Tiernach's Park, the town centre and the Peace Link campus.

Projects like this are about much more than buildings and landscape. They are about ensuring Clones continues to thrive as a place to live, work and visit and enhancing the experiences of thousands of supporters who travel there each year for major occasions such as the Ulster final. By investing in the town and its surroundings, we are safeguarding the future of one of Gaelic games' most historic venues and ensuring Clones remains at the heart of Ulster football for many years to come. Investment in the ground means Clones can strengthen its position, not only as a natural home for the Ulster final, but also as a venue capable of hosting other major inter-county games, provincial events, concerts, community occasions and large-scale gatherings for decades to come. St. Tiernach's Park has served Ulster football with distinction for generations and with vision, ambition and unity it can continue to do so for many years to come.

Clones is a unique venue. The Minister of State has been there on many occasions and with the rumoured downscaling of Casement Park, this provides a unique opportunity for us to develop Clones to its full capacity, which remains to be achieved. I am looking forward to the Minister of State's contribution this afternoon. He is committed to the redevelopment of Clones.

Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I thank the Senator for raising and the Cathaoirleach for selecting this Commencement matter. Senator Gallagher and I have discussed it on many occasions. I am thankfully a Donegal man. The Senator has had two bites of the cherry in recent years representing Monaghan so well. We have discussed the place of Clones in Ulster and Monaghan football, as the sporting heart of Monaghan and of Ulster and the need for what has been a great facility over the years to continue to evolve and be redeveloped. This is a good opportunity to be able to discuss it. I plan to outline the potential different funding options so the work Monaghan is putting plans together for can be stepped out.

As the Senator will be aware, the programme for Government commits to maintaining sports funding so that, collectively, we can get more people participating in all levels of sport. The Department operates two capital funding programmes for sport, namely the community sport

facilities fund, CSFF, and the large-scale sport infrastructure fund, LSSIF. The CSFF provides grants to assist in the development or refurbishment of sports facilities and the provision of sports equipment. More than €250 million was allocated in the most recent round announced in 2024 to more than 3,000 clubs.

Priorities around the development of individual facilities are primarily a matter for individual sporting organisations applying for funding. The Senator mentioned the redevelopment of Casement Park, which is a strong commitment of the Government and has been supported with funding under the shared island fund. The Government, the Northern Ireland Executive, the GAA and the UK Government have made significant funding commitments to support the delivery of a redeveloped Casement Park. Officials from my Department, the Department for Communities in Northern Ireland and the GAA met recently to discuss how best to move forward the project. I understand the GAA has stated it is currently reviewing options for a phased delivery of the new stadium following the recent completion of pre-enabling works.

St. Tiernach's Park in Clones has been allocated €870,154 over the last three rounds of the CSFF. In addition, the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht recently provided grant funding of more than €660,000 towards the development of a major regeneration project centred around St. Tiernach's Park.

In line with previous rounds of the community sports facilities fund, I have asked my Department to prepare for a further round. We will be opening that shortly, and it will be open over the summer. There will be an opportunity there for all clubs, including St. Tiernach's, to consider how the fund might support any works it has planned. The scale of the community sports facilities fund is small compared with the wider plans of Monaghan GAA and the county council for St. Tiernach's Park. In that light, the large scale sports infrastructure fund would be more in line with the type and scale of plans that would be necessary for the redevelopment of St. Tiernach's Park.

We have so far had two rounds of the large scale infrastructure fund since its establishment. There were announcements in 2020 and again in 2024. We will have one round of the large-scale infrastructure fund during the course of the lifetime of this Government, as provided for in the national development plan. The outline expectation is for the large-scale infrastructure fund to open in early 2028, with announcements to follow later that year. That is what we are expecting for the next round, which I know will be of significant interest for funding the plans that are there and their being considered during a round of that funding pot. We can all agree on the importance of keeping St. Tiernach's and Clones at the heart of football and sport in Ulster and the country, and making sure that the ground is of a standard that is suitable for the future in the same way as it has served the needs of the GAA and sport so well in the years and decades until now.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: I thank the Minister of State for his comprehensive response. I also thank him for his commitment to the development of sporting infrastructure in Monaghan and Cavan. I have seen that commitment at first hand. I thank his colleague the Minister, Deputy Calleary, for his commitment to the development of St. Tiernach's Park.

The Ulster final is hugely important to Clones town. A study from 2024 estimated that the match day was worth approximately €1.5 million to the local economy and €2.1 million to the

economy of the county. It is important. Clones is a unique and special place. It has so much to offer. Many people would be familiar with St. Tiernach's Park, but the Government has invested huge money in the development of the Ulster Canal. Some €127 million has been committed by the Government for its development, much of it through the shared island initiative which the Taoiseach developed and a lot through the Minister for the environment, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, and the previous incumbent in the Department of the environment, who provided significant funding. It is an exciting development. The most recent announcement of €30 million is welcome and we look forward to that development. We also have the Peace Link, which is another important piece of infrastructure. Clones is a special place. We are now looking for the development of St. Tiernach's Park not just to host large football matches but to host other community events.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I look forward to continuing to work closely with the Senator on our shared objective of seeing St. Tiernach's Park continue to evolve and be renewed. There has been significant funding towards the GAA from the two rounds so far of the large scale infrastructure fund. The 2020 round saw funding for 14 projects to a value of €30 million. Those included projects backed by the GAA or which incorporated GAA elements of significant projects, including those at Walsh Park, Páirc Tailteann and St. Conleth's Park. In the 2024 round, 11 GAA-backed projects were awarded funding, including, for example, the Clare GAA centre of excellence and the Wexford GAA centre of excellence, as well as €1 million to Killeevan Sarsfield GAA Club in Monaghan.

There will be significant demand now that the large-scale infrastructure fund is an established part of our sports funding infrastructure. Sporting organisations are looking towards projects of scale to see how they can avail of the fund. St. Tiernach's Park would meet the criteria. It is the type of project that would be suitable to be funded through that fund. There will obviously be a competitive element to the applications that are received. I look forward to working with the Senator to support Monaghan County Council to make an application that will be considered in the context of that next round. I suggest the council should look at the community sports facilities fund to see if such funding could help St. Tiernach's to do smaller scale work in the meantime.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 1.25 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 1.32 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.25 p.m. and resumed at 1.32 p.m.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

Senator Garret Ahearn: The Order of Business is No. *a1*, report of the Committee of Selection, to be taken on conclusion of the Order of Business without debate; No. 1, motion regarding the proposed approval by Seanad Éireann of the EirGrid Electricity and Turf (Amendment) Act 2022 (Section 10) Order 2026, to be taken on the conclusion of item *a1*, without debate; No. 2, Development (Strategic Gas Reserve) Bill 2026 – Second Stage, to be taken at 2.45 p.m. and to conclude at 4 p.m. with the time allocated to opening remarks by the Minister not to exceed eight minutes, group spokespersons not to exceed eight minutes, all other Senators not to exceed four minutes, time can be shared and the Minister to be given no less than five minutes to reply to the debate; No. 3, Finance Bill 2026 – Committee and

Remaining Stages, to be taken at 4 p.m. and the proceedings thereon shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion at 5.30 p.m. by putting one question from the Chair which shall, in relation to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Government; No. 4 Criminal Justice (International Cooperation on Electronic Evidence and Other Matters) Bill 2026 – Committee and Remaining Stages, to be taken at 5.30 p.m. or on conclusion of No. 3, whichever is the later, and the proceedings thereon shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion at 7.15 p.m. by putting one question from the Chair which shall, in relation to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Government; and No. 5., Public Health (Single-Use Vapes) Bill 2025 – Committee and Remaining Stages, to be taken at 6.30 p.m. or on conclusion of No. 4, whichever is the later.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: First I want to speak about an event that happened last week on the other side of the Atlantic in a town called Freehold in New Jersey. Freehold, of course, is the home town of Bruce Springsteen. I am sure many Senators will remember me recalling here how Bruce Springsteen's great-great grandmother on his father's side, Ann Garrity, came from my home town of Rathangan in County Kildare and travelled to America in 1852. When she went, she brought a seedling of a copper beech with her which was planted and became a tree that is synonymous with Bruce Springsteen's music. Sadly that tree was cut down a number of years ago but last year a delegation from Freehold, including the mayor, Kevin Kane, and including Bruce's first cousin, Kevin, came to Rathangan and they planted a copper beech.

Last week, a delegation headed by the deputy mayor for the Kildare-Newbridge area, Councillor Brian O'Loughlin, went over and planted another copper beach tree in the same spot as the original tree. The event was fabulous and I look forward to hearing all about it. As part of what the community of Rathangan is doing will be the hosting of Féile Springsteen on 22 August, which will have a Springsteen tribute band called The Human Touch as well as a lot of other activities. Obviously, we hope to get the main man one of these years, which I have no doubt we will. The féile will be fantastic and well done to everyone involved.

Leader, I want to mention another issue. All of us will have been shocked to read a harrowing article this weekend on what clinicians at Temple Street have described as an epidemic. Professor Darach Crimmins, consultant neurosurgeon at Temple Street, said that e-scooters were now "the single biggest cause" of head trauma in children. In the last fortnight, six children have been admitted with traumatic brain injuries from e-scooters and four children remain on life support. That is shocking. This morning, I listened to Fr. Tom Little from Carlow who talked about officiating at a funeral of a 17-year-old in Carlow who died in an accident on an e-scooter.

There is no doubt about this. We have a law in place but we must support the Garda in enforcing this law. Garda representative bodies have called for greater enforcement powers and additional resources. We need a debate on this.

The last matter I want to mention is that of food waste. We are only at the halfway point of the year but the figures are already alarming. The anti-food waste platform Too Good To Go has revealed that Irish households have already wasted more than €645 million worth of food since January, with Kildare accounting for €28 million of that bill. Nationally, €3 million worth of food is wasted every single day and one third of all food we buy ends up in the bin. When we consider that food waste accounts for 10% of global greenhouse gas emissions, it is not just

a household issue. It is an environmental crisis. We have to ask everybody to think about what they buy, particularly in this warm weather. We also need to have a debate in this House on what practical steps we can take both collectively and individually to turn the tide.

Senator Manus Boyle: I want to talk about Uisce Éireann on behalf of Councillor Michael Boyle in south-west Donegal and of myself. This is an issue for the people of Clogher, Leghawnny, Copany, Laghey and the surrounding areas and townlands. I have raised this issue in the House before but nothing has changed. A public meeting was held a few weeks ago and the hall was full. The problem is that the reservoir was built in 1970 to serve around 80 houses, but now it supplies hundreds of houses and is not fit for purpose. A new reservoir, pump station and pipeline need to be installed. Residents have endless trouble the whole year round with low water pressure and burst pipes and often go days without water. A new reservoir must be built as a matter of urgency and a whole new infrastructure and pipeline must be put in place. Residents have called for this for years. I recall that this was an issue when my father was a member on the council. Our pleas seem to have fallen on deaf ears.

I would like to thank the staff of Uisce Éireann on the ground who have put in a tremendous effort trying to keep water flowing. Anybody can ring them and they do their best to help.

The householders are frustrated by the lack of action. They are angry, and have a right to be angry, as this has been an issue for so long. The area is not serviced at all. The water supply is *ad hoc*, as one day householders can have water but not the next day.

While I am on my feet, I want to talk about the Teelin area towards Sliabh Liag, which is a beautiful part of Donegal. The pipeline there is ancient. We have nothing only bursts. In fairness, I credit the Uisce Éireann team for keeping it going.

Over the weekend, my phone never stopped ringing with calls from people from the Burnfoot area. They had no water for three or four days. We were first told that it was due to a burst pipe. Next, it was a problem with a pump. What is going on? The Government needs to prioritise and put pressure on Uisce Éireann to look after Donegal.

Every day, the phone is ringing and there are problems with Irish Water. Will the Leader feed it up the line that Donegal needs to be prioritised?

Senator Tom Clonan: I want to raise the case of Ruby Daly, a six-year-old girl in Galway who is non-verbal and in a wheelchair. In this fine weather we are all enjoying and that we hope to enjoy for the next couple of weeks, we would all like to go down to the water's edge. Being able to go to the beach or the seafront is something everyone in Ireland takes for granted. If you are a wheelchair user, however, that is not possible. I am told that Galway County Council bought €9,000 worth of beach mats in 2021 that are lying in storage and not in use. I also understand it purchased a number of Mobi-mats at a cost of €2,000 each that have not been deployed. As a result, people like Ruby cannot get down to the beach like everyone else. I would just ask that the correct action be taken. Perhaps our colleagues who are based in the relevant areas might apply the proper pressure just to vindicate the right of little boys and girls who happen to be wheelchair users to go down to the sea.

I want to raise an issue of grave and compelling concern. On 28 November 2010, a day that will go down in infamy, the troika of the European Commission, the European Central Bank

and the International Monetary Fund arrived in Dublin and travelled to the Merrion Hotel, which is just across the road. Ireland yielded its fiscal sovereignty to its European partners for a period of three years. This was a disgraceful episode in Irish history when we handed over our fiscal and budgetary autonomy to European partners. Today, we have handed over our defence and security sovereignty to a troika of the Royal Air Force, the French navy and the Portuguese military, but at least the arrival of the troika in 2010 was announced. Its arrival was initially denied by the Government of the day, but eventually we were told. The Irish public is completely in the dark about the role of this troika of military actors, all of which are NATO members, that are operating off our coast, in our airspace and, perhaps, even on the roof of this very building. It was confirmed to us by the Cypriots at the defence and national security committee when they told of how, during their Presidency, when their country was attacked by missiles and drones in March, they were not consulted nor were they informed about the retaliatory action that was taken by the Hellenic Air Force in the form of air strikes with the British and French in their jurisdiction. We need to know what the rules of engagement of these NATO countries in our sovereign airspace and maritime domain are and whether they have permission to open fire or intercept while we have civil aircraft in our skies and people on our streets. We need to have an urgent debate or statements on this matter in order that we might find out what is happening.

Senator Conor Murphy: I would like to speak about a Bill that is due to be debated in the Dáil later. The Bill in question relates to preparations for reunification and follows on from a report of the Good Friday Agreement committee in October 2024, less than two years ago, in which all parties agreed that the Government should take the necessary steps to begin the preparatory work that would obviously be required before a referendum is held. It is in all of our interests to make sure that the process towards reunification is democratic, stable and smooth, with the maximum amount of information for those who will be voting. The Bill also follows on from motions which were debated in this Chamber and the Dáil and which, again, were supported by parties supported.

The practical next step is the legislation to which I refer, which essentially calls for two things. The first is for the Government to prepare a Green Paper on reunification. The process for doing so should take about 18 months. This would allow the Government to put together the resources to do all of the work necessary and set out its ideas about how reunification would happen and how various compelling questions in the debate on this matter, which is already happening all over Ireland, would be answered by the Government. The second thing the Bill would do would be to provide for the Government to establish a citizens assembly that would give the citizens of Ireland, members of the diaspora and, in particular, those in Ireland who are of a Protestant-unionist identity or a British identity the opportunity to engage formally with this process in order to ensure that their voices are heard.

In the almost 30 years since the Good Friday Agreement happened, the political landscape changed and changed utterly. We in the North now have a nationalist, republican First Minister in a state where it was determined that that would never happen. In Britain there are pro-independence First Ministers in Scotland and Wales. We have had the Brexit chaos and we are now heading for a seventh Prime Minister in ten years. There really is a desire north of the Border to get ourselves out of this situation to form something which is completely new in a

stable situation where we can actually determine our own future and not have it determined as a consequence of other people's interests and actions.

This is really all about preparation, dialogue and engagement. A necessary part of this will also be engagement with the British Government because that dialogue needs to begin now. The still unfolding chaos from Brexit in Britain could lead to even more erratic governments in the future, so that engagement needs to happen now. We have engaged with all parties across the Oireachtas in the last number of weeks. We have had some very positive feedback from people. Obviously, all of the parties represented here subscribe to the idea of Irish unity. We might have different views on how that might come about or decided; that is a matter for Committee Stage of this Bill. I have been very heartened by the fact that there is a very strong desire to see this necessary work begin in the here and now. I sincerely hope that that is reflected in the approach to the debate tonight and that we get this legislation through its Second Stage. Let us then go into Committee and determine how we would bring this work forward.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: I wish to raise a number of issues, the first being that of 28-year-old Kilkenny native Emily Felix, who was diagnosed with Friedreich's ataxia at the age of 12. The National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics has determined that Skyclarys, a drug which could be life-changing for her and the other 200 sufferers of this disease, not be recommended for consideration for reimbursement by the HSE. Again, I ask for reconsideration on that and I call on the Minister to make a statement on it because of the extremely debilitating nature of the condition that Emily and the other 200 sufferers in Ireland have.

I think we have heard some rock and roll reference here and I will mention "Montage of Heck", a documentary and compilation album of Nirvana's. We have a bit of a montage of heck in terms of Government policy. The rural housing policy was launched last week. We have had the closure of the public consultation on the nature restoration plan. Lo and behold, the long-awaited phase 2 of the land-use review was published two days after both of those policies. This document has huge implications for land use in Ireland. It was launched very quietly and published on the Department's website.

There is no time now because it is at the end of the Dáil and Seanad term. I call on the Minister for agriculture, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, and the Minister for the environment or whoever is responsible for this document to be present with us here for a debate on this document in the autumn schedule. It is critical because we are launching policy documents left, right and centre all of which are contingent on this. They have been sitting on the Minister's desk for well over a year and now with two weeks to go before the end of the Dáil and Seanad schedule, this document has been launched.

Uisce Éireann has been mentioned. Yesterday, An Coimisiún Pleanála put back by one year to 2 July 2027 a determination on the Shannon pipeline project. Dublin's water is on a knife edge, particularly at this time of year. A potentially hugely wasteful project that will put the children's hospital in the shade in terms of its cost will now overrun further because of the delays in deliberation. The head of the infrastructure task force has blamed the Green Party for the slow pace of infrastructure delivery and yet Jack Chambers is holding back on giving An Coimisiún Pleanála the resources it needs to make decisions in a timely manner. I again call for a discussion on that. This specific project is in the planning process, which is fair enough. Separately, the Minister needs to come in here and talk about the real holdups and the

real reasons behind infrastructure delays, owing to An Coimisiún Pleanála, the National Parks and Wildlife Service and other resources required to get the State to build the infrastructure needed.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: I note the sale of electric vehicles continues to grow. I looked at the figures for last year and some 23,601 electric vehicles were registered. That is approximately 18% of total registrations. This year, to date, that figure is growing. Up to the end of June, 20,164 electric vehicles had been registered. In my own neck of the woods of Cavan-Monaghan, up to the end of May there were 155 in Cavan and 99 in Monaghan.

However, the debate and frustration continues to grow in relation to the number of charging stations available to road users who have electric vehicles. I was contacted recently by a number of constituents regarding the charging of the vehicle itself. The point they were making is that there are up to 25 registered charger companies located throughout the country and the provider available depends on the part of the country you are in. Potentially, a person might need to download 25 different apps in order to be sure to be able to charge one's vehicle when required.

I have come across a few people who have experienced issues in this regard. One gentleman had his phone stolen. He was totally marooned because he had a long journey to get home but had no way of charging his vehicle as he was not able to download the app. Another person had an issue when their phone was broken. Another person had an issue because the mobile phone coverage at the station was very poor or non-existent and, therefore, they could not access the charger. It begs the question as to why we do not have a simple card facility whereby a person could scan their bank card to issue payment to whichever provider is there. That would let them get on with their journey and take away the stress of having to download an app or whatever.

I would, at the Leader's convenience, welcome a debate with the Minister on the infrastructure and making that infrastructure more user-friendly for everybody that wants to use it.

Senator Victor Boyhan: Much has been said about the swimming coach, George Gibney, in the past 24 hours. It would not be appropriate for me to go into too much comment. Suffice to say, and to share with the House, that I went to school in Newpark, where George Gibney operated from. It is hard to believe that I am here today 50 years on, having shared my time in that school with boys and girls who were the subject of many of the allegations against George Gibney.

There are many questions to be asked about Gibney and how he stayed outside this State and evaded justice for so long, and how it took so long for any bilateral negotiations or agreements in relation to his extradition from the US. I have discussed this privately with many senior people in various Governments as long as I have been in politics, and that is many a year.

What I can say today, however, is that swimming coach George Gibney will be sentenced in the Criminal Courts of Justice on 29 July 2026. I want to, first, acknowledge the very significant and brave people who went forward - it is never an easy thing to do - both privately

and publicly, and gave agency and strength to make the events of yesterday eventually happen. It was a very emotional day for all involved.

I want to say "Thank you" to a few people before I conclude. There will be another opportunity at a more appropriate place and time for me to give voice to some of these issues. I want to single out the remarkable Justine McCarthy of *The Irish Times*. Many Senators may have read her book, *Deep Deception*. If they have not, I suggest they do so. The relentless investigation that Ms McCarthy conducted in her book to bring George Gibney, Derry O'Rourke, Ger Doyle and other abusers to justice played a very significant part in many coming forward to speak. To Justine McCarthy, we are truly indebted.

I thank Gary O'Toole, a friend of mine, a doctor and a very successful person, who was also involved in swimming and subject to involvement on the periphery of many of these issues.

I will finish in two seconds but I want to thank him for giving courage, voice, strength and support to so many people in their journeys. I thank Johnny Watterson of *The Irish Times*, whom many will know. He has been a constant champion for years, even when that was not easy. I thank him for his involvement in these issues. I also thank the production company, Second Captains, which produced a ten-part podcast in conjunction with the BBC titled "Where is George Gibney?" We know where he is now but it has taken many years for him to get there. These individuals and organisations, including RTÉ, which I do not want to forget because it did remarkable work over all of those years, acted as a catalyst for people to come forward, share their stories and assist in bringing George Gibney to justice. I will conclude but, as I said before, there are many outstanding questions. There are many more issues to come to light. Much of that will now happen because of the justice process but we must allow that process to go forward.

Everyone here in our Parliament brings their unique life experiences to their work. That is what motivates us. That is what politicises us. I will finish on this. Before I journeyed in here this morning, I went to that very school. Little did I think going from that gate to my own home and back again that I would travel from that gate this morning to here, 50 years on, and tell the story. I am glad I have been able to do so. I am glad to have had this opportunity to be an advocate, as I have been every day I have been here, because a key function of ours is to be advocates, voices, encouragers and supporters for people who wish to tell their stories and share their journeys.

Senator Joanne Collins: I know we only have another week before recess. I ask that, when we come back in the autumn, we add to the agenda something about Garda numbers, particularly in rural areas. I refer especially to roads policing and community gardaí. Last Thursday, I received a phone call from a constituent in County Limerick who had been in a car accident. She was okay. There was not a huge amount of damage done. Like myself, she had always been told to stay at the scene of the accident and not to leave. When she rang An Garda Síochána, she was told it would be four or five hours before somebody could come out to her. The person on the phone recommended that she leave the scene and present at her nearest Garda station, which was the station in Newcastle West. When she arrived at the Garda station, she was told that she was the third person that day to have been told to leave the scene of an accident and report it to the Garda station. I imagine there could be implications as regards liability when gardaí do not come out to see the scene and give their own report. You are relying on

somebody who goes in to say that the other person was responsible for the accident and on their account of what happened. There are going to be some issues down the line when these people are trying to get money back to repair their cars.

It comes down to Garda numbers. We have an amazing Garda station being built in Newcastle West at the moment, but local people tell me that they fear that there will not actually be any gardaí in it. They wonder whether it will just be a building or whether services will be provided in it. It cements these fears when people are told to leave the scene of an accident and present at a Garda station because there are not enough gardaí to get out on the roads to attend the scene. We can be thankful it was not a serious accident but I can only imagine what she would have done if the car was not driveable. Would she have had to sit there for five hours? I would like a debate in the House on Garda numbers.

In my last second, I will ask another question. I know extra Garda resources are needed for the EU Presidency. Are Garda resources being taken from rural Ireland for these meetings? I would like to be sure rural Ireland is not being given a lower priority when it comes to Garda numbers.

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call Senator Tully, I welcome her intern for the week and thank her for being here.

Senator Pauline Tully: Lucy is on work experience.

I wish to raise the issue of cuts to allowances for Reserve Defence Force members. Cuts were introduced in 2011 as part of austerity measures after the economic crash. The public sector was badly hit by quite severe cuts at the time.

2 o'clock

The Reserve Defence Force allowance was cut by 25% and it was taxed for the first time after that as well. This was severely felt by the members of the Reserve Defence Force. Many of the cuts implemented at that time have been reversed but the cut to the Reserve Defence Force allowance has not been and it should be. It has also impacted on those who have retired since then because military pensions and retirement gratuities are calculated directly as a percentage of a member's final salary and pensionable allowances at the date of retirement. The 5% FEMPI cuts to allowances permanently suppressed the retirement baseline for anyone who left the service during the austerity era. I ask that the Minister for Defence addresses this issue without delay.

Senator Aubrey McCarthy: I want to raise a report released by Barnardos in the last week of June, which found that one in five families are cutting back on food because they simply cannot afford it. This means 20% of our population. Parents are skipping meals so their children can eat. Others are reducing portion sizes or going without essentials just to get through the week. I find this really worrying. As the Leader knows, for 20 years I have been working with families across Ireland through Tiglin and I have seen what poverty is like. It is often invisible; it is the mother who says she has eaten but perhaps has not so her kids can eat.

Recently I was on "The Late Debate" on RTÉ and a woman, whose name is Lucia, texted in. She said she was at home and had turned off all the lights and the heating when the kids

had gone to bed. She said was listening to the radio because it is the only comfort she has. With the permission of the researcher, I asked whether I could ring her on the way home and they allowed me to do so. It was a fascinating story about how she is trying to make ends meet. People like Lucia lie awake wondering how they are going to get to the next pay day. We often sit in this House discussing GDP, budget surpluses and economic growth, and these are really important, but think about the Lucia standing at the supermarket checkout and putting food back on the shelf because she has run out of money.

The Barnardos report tells us there is a huge concern. Children do not choose the circumstances they are born into but they are experiencing food poverty. I know good initiatives are in place but clearly for too many families it is not enough. I ask the Government to have a debate on food poverty and on the rising cost of living and see whether anything can be done to support families who are doing everything right but are still getting left behind. I have said before that the measure of a compassionate society is how we treat those people who are not doing so well and who cannot afford to put food on the table. Surely in 2026 we can do better than this.

Senator Chris Andrews: Pico Lopes returned with his wife Leah and baby Diego yesterday and it is amazing story. It is a fantastic uplifting story. I know the Leader loves his football. Pico is a real advert for Irish football and League of Ireland football. He has spent all of his career in the League of Ireland, playing with a couple of different clubs, including Shamrock Rovers for the past nine or ten years and achieving great success I am glad to say. It highlights that we need to invest in the League of Ireland, which has massive potential. When we see what Pico has done, there are so many players like him, who just need to be given the chance and invested in, and they will deliver for Irish football and League of Ireland football.

We need more investment in facilities and academies. I know the Government has made an investment but I strongly believe it is not enough. It is a long way off enough. I believe €3.5 million has been allocated to the academy structures but compare this to the greyhound industry, which gets €19 million every year and it has a shocking dog welfare record. It is absolutely shocking and there is no transparency or accountability. League of Ireland football needs to be backed. We need to invest in players like Pico, we need to ensure the resources and facilities are there and we need to back Irish men's and women's football and back ourselves. The goodwill is there and Pico has shown that it can be done.

If the belief and investment are there, we need to just get on and do it and back Irish football.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: I want to raise the issue of the deposit return scheme. Anyone who uses the scheme knows the reality of what is involved. When you go to a machine, it can be out of order, it can be full or it can reject perfectly good cans, particularly miniature cans, including Coca-Cola cans, for some reason. This is inconvenient, frustrating and an unnecessary torture. It must be remembered that this is not a tax that can be used for disability services or schools. It is money collected by a private company, which means there are CEO salaries, CFO salaries and secretaries' salaries and budgets for advertising and marketing and everything that goes with that. If you do not get your deposit back, the private company keeps your money. Essentially, this is a tax. In total, unredeemed deposits last year amounted to €66 million.

There has been a flurry of articles in the past few weeks praising the scheme. Tucked away in a few of those articles was information on a proposal which suggests that the deposit fee should be increased. I can see that the way is slowly being paved for people to pay even more just to buy a can of something. Is there such a lack of innovation in this country that the answer to everything seems to be to hike up prices for consumers? The Irish Waste Management Association, IWMA, has made it clear that bottles placed in household bins are recycled to the same standard as those returned through the scheme. If recycling is already effected through our household bins, then let us stop pretending that increasing charges is the only way forward.

The problem is not with the bottles or cans. The problem is that across the country most of our public bins are just for general waste. Unlike many European cities, we simply do not have the proper recycling infrastructure in place. Who does this scheme benefit? When I heard David McCullough interviewing Ciaran Foley, the CEO of the company involved, I just kept wondering why he did not ask what his salary is. Mr. Foley was asked about everything, with the exception of details of what salary he is on. This information is still not publicly available. As far as I can see, the only winners here are Re-turn and its successful money-making business, which operates under the pretence of concern for the environment and recycling targets.

Our recycling targets for single-use containers at the time of the scheme's conception were pretty similar to what our recycling achievements are now. The real environmental impact comes from reducing the number of single-use drinks containers in the use. The scheme does not do that. If we were concerned and serious about the environment, we would target manufacturers instead of consumers. It is consumers who are always the ones to lose out.

An Cathaoirleach: I remind Senators that when they are making comments in relation to entities or people, they must be mindful of balancing the common good and the public interest with the rights of those entities or people their good name and reputation.

Senator Laura Harmon: In relation to the site of the Bessborough mother and baby home in Cork, this week is critical because we will be hearing the decision in terms of planning for the building of 140 apartments there. I want to call out the Taoiseach, Micheál Martin, in relation to this issue. The site is located in his constituency. Just last year, on 29 June 2025, he spoke at the commemorative event held there. The Taoiseach has spoken out of both sides of his mouth in respect of this issue. He has been weak on it. He needs to stand by the survivors. He stated that there was "unfinished work here" in respect of this site and that he "will work with Cork City Council". He said that there was significant work to be done for this specific site because the land not being in State possession is an issue and that he will work with all, including the council, to see what can be done to deal with this.

I do not know what the Taoiseach has done in relation to the site. On Leaders' Questions last week, he threw the city council under the bus. He said he believed that the site should have been compulsorily purchased by the council years ago. Again, we await the decision that is due to be made this week. Regardless of what that decision is, however, the State needs to step up to the mark here. Surveys were done at the site which did not involve the use of all the modern technology that is available. There are families and survivors who do not know where babies are buried. A total of 923 babies died at the site, and only 64 have been accounted for.

Women died on this site. I was there on Friday with the leader of the Labour Party, Deputy Bacik, and Councillors Peter Horgan and Ciara O'Connor. We paid our respects at the folly, which is being used because there is no headstone and no marked graves. This is a huge issue for Ireland. It is a site of conscience, historical importance and education and we need to preserve it. We need to press our Taoiseach to do more on this. It is in his constituency of Cork South-Central and he needs to stop prevaricating on this issue.

Senator Gareth Scahill: Last Friday morning, I was in Scramoge outside Strokestown at the opening of a new car park at the church. Scramoge Tidy Towns fundraised and applied for the car park and got support from the community support fund of the local Sliabh Bawn wind farm. Quite often, we miss out on those community support funds and the value of them. What the funding was able to deliver in Scramoge is testament to such funds and I acknowledge former councillor Joe Murphy and all this team there.

After that, I went up to Arigna for the homecoming for Fergal Guihen. He was the "Rossie to Aussie" who cycled 30,000 km last year to raise money for Mayo Roscommon Hospice Foundation and North West STOP, a suicide awareness organisation. He raised €210,000 for those charities. He cycled across 28 different countries on three different continents. The background to the homecoming was the Arigna Community Park, which was opened last year. I remember it being waste ground and it was good to see all the young kids out there using the space. Funding for that facility was provided by the former Minister, Heather Humphreys, as was funding for many amenities around the country. I want to double down on what all of these community groups are saying about how it is not capital that is the problem, but operating costs. These groups need money to provide insurance and lighting. I would like to have the Minister for rural and community development in the House in the near future to have a discussion and see how he foresees these community groups being supported with their running costs.

An Cathaoirleach: I call the Leader to respond to the Order of Business.

Senator Garret Ahearn: I thank all of the Senators for their contributions. Senator O'Loughlin spoke about Freehold, New Jersey, which is the hometown of Bruce Springsteen and its connection to the constituency she lives in. A delegation visited there last week and there is a festival happening, which is very good for the area.

She also spoke about Temple Street and the article written last week stating that e-scooters were the greatest cause of life-threatening injuries to children. Legislation has been put in place but if gardaí need more enforcement powers, then that is very important. That there are six people in ICU, with four of them on life support machines, and all of them young children is just not acceptable. Any parent would have a fear of a child being on an e-scooter because of what could happen. We will try to have a debate after the summer on that.

Senator Boyle spoke about Irish Water and the work that Councillor Michael Boyle was doing in the area. It is incredibly frustrating. Uisce Éireann has got a significant amount of funding. That has been increased over the last number of months to increase the speed of project delivery. There has always been a communication issue. We had Uisce Éireann in the building only a week or two ago to talk about things that needed to be done. Donegal obviously

needs to be prioritised for investment, but it is no good when the Senator cannot tell the community when something will be done and what the timeline is for when they will see improvements. What causes the real frustration and anger the Senator talked about is the lack of knowing, so I accept that we need to do more on that.

Senator Clonan spoke about Ruby Daly. Everyone is looking at the weather and saying it is beautiful and that it is great to be outside, but there are always challenges for people with accessibility and disability issues. As the Senator said, if Galway County Council and Galway City Council have invested in trying to support people so that they are able to spend some time on the beach, it seems strange to me that the councils are not using that equipment.

I will follow up with my colleagues from that constituency, particularly the Minister for education, Deputy Naughton, to see what the situation is because access to a beach should not be denied to anyone in this country. We only get a couple of days a year to enjoy it and, certainly, everyone should be able to enjoy it and do so safely.

In relation to the defence troika, as the Senator called them, I understand where he is coming from and, obviously, we will have debates over the next couple of months in this House in relation to defence and possible changes in defence. I do not think there is any European country at the moment that is able to defend itself unilaterally. Every country in the world brings in support. I remember only a couple of months ago, one of the questions in this Chamber, although not by Senator Clonan, was about how we are going to defend ourselves during the EU Presidency because we cannot do it ourselves. That all being said, the Senator has legitimate concerns and legitimate questions that we need to know. I will talk to the Minister for foreign affairs and for Defence and we will see what can be done but, obviously, it is an important time for Ireland during this Presidency and we need to make sure people are safe during that. I will talk to the Minister about it.

Senator Murphy spoke in terms of the reunification Bill. There was a briefing this morning as well. I think most people from all political parties were there. Deputy Currie was there on behalf of Fine Gael. I know there was good engagement on that. There is a Bill before the Dáil tomorrow on it and I suspect there will be a vote on that. We are all coming from the same perspective that we want reunification and we want a pathway. We want all groups and organisations and people from different backgrounds to see a future for them in that reunification. Whether this legislation or having a citizens' assembly is the way to go is a very complex question. Reunification is not asking whether people want reunification or not. Everyone can answer that easily. It is about how we get there and how we support all communities in that reunification. It is quite complex. Citizens' assemblies have been successful in other parts but this is quite different. I am not sure if that would work but, certainly, there will be a good debate on it.

Senator Noonan spoke about the Ireland land use review. It is important that the Minister for agriculture comes in and has a debate on that in the autumn. As the Senator said, that is a timely time to do it. There are a lot of changes happening. We will have the planning Bill coming through next week, which obviously has an impact on rural Ireland. It is part of the commitment made in the programme for Government that we would change the planning laws. Obviously, not everyone will agree with it but it is important that we bring that forward next week. In terms of the land use review, however, it is important that we have a debate with the Minister. The Senator also spoke in relation to Irish Water. That delay for

a year is obviously going to have an impact on Dublin. Dublin is almost at a crisis point and decisions need to be made quite quickly on that. As the Senator knows from when he worked in the Department of housing, if we are investing and trying to build as many houses as we need to build, obviously, we need the infrastructure there. Water is a key part of that.

Senator Gallagher spoke about EV growth. As he knows, I am well aware of that being an EV driver. A huge number have been registered this year and the charging points are in issue. It has been brought up in this Chamber a number of times. We will have a debate on it in autumn. In relation to the number of different companies and the fact that people have to register with those companies, the one they do not have to register with is ESB. People just have to tap and go. They do not have to register to an app or anything like that. It is a very fair request that all systems should be like that where people do not have to register every time depending on what EV charger they are using. They should just be allowed to tap and go. I will ask the Minister for a for a debate on the wider scheme of it.

Senator Boyhan was at the Clonmel Show on Sunday and we were delighted to welcome him to County Tipperary. I hope he had a great time. He obviously got home safe and sound. He spoke about the case of George Gibney, which has been reported on in the media for a long number of years. I am not sure it is appropriate to speak on it yet since sentencing has not happened but as he said himself, it is important to acknowledge people who went above and beyond in terms trying to find the truth and trying to encourage people to speak out because that is a not an easy thing to do. I acknowledge all the work they did.

Senator Collins asked for debate in terms of Garda numbers. Absolutely, I am more than happy to do that. It is important to do, particularly for rural areas like Limerick and Tipperary.

Obviously, we have increased Garda numbers almost every year since we reopened Temple Street in 2014. The only year it reduced was during Covid, when it was closed. We are looking to get to over 15,000 gardaí, which is a lot; it would be the highest level ever in the State, but it is not enough and we need to do more. While we are investing in new Garda stations like those in Newcastle West and Clonmel, which is very important, we need to ensure we have enough gardaí on the street to protect people. That is an important debate we can have here. Most gardaí working on the EU Presidency are doing so through overtime. It will be the same when the Ryder Cup comes to the Senator's county next year; it will be overtime. Unless there are emergency situations this will not, for the most part, take away from the day-to-day work gardaí do on the ground, which is important for people in the Senator's community to know.

Senator Tully spoke on the cuts to allowances for the Reserve Defence Force members, which obviously has an impact on them and those who retire. There are going to be public sector negotiations and that could be brought in as part of it for discussion. I suggest the Senator put down a commencement matter with the Minister on that. We have committed to reinstating all those cuts that were made during the crash and that is another that should be done.

Senator McCarthy spoke on the number of people who are cutting back on food because of the cost of living and the challenges at present. The 20% referred to in the Barnardos report is a very high percentage, particularly with the impact that has on children as regards food poverty. This is why the Minister for education started a pilot programme last year that is

continuing into this year with the summer food programme for children, and more needs to be done in that case. That is why Government has always said this budget in October is a critically important one for targeting financial support to those who are really suffering and challenged by higher prices, whether that is in energy or food costs.

Senator Andrews always asks me the best questions. Pico Lopes - what a legend. He has been phenomenal. I have been supporting Argentina the whole way through because of Messi, whom I am in awe of, but that night I had to support Lopes. He is an inspiration to people right across the country and shows that if you keep working hard, do the right things and keep being professional, your time will come. He is 34 now but, as his manager said during the week, if he was 20, they would be making €10 million out of him after his performances in the World Cup. However, this goes to Senator Andrews's wider point that Pico is an example of what can be achieved if we invest in football. In fairness to the FAI, it has a long-term eight- or ten-year plan for investment in the League of Ireland, setting up 26 centre of excellence clubs where we can invest. As the Senator knows, we have an issue with Brexit in that young kids cannot go to the UK now until they are 18, so they need top quality coaching right up until then. We, alongside the FAI, need to invest in that. I know it is about reaching out to groups across the world with regard to investing in Irish soccer. However, the Government also needs to play its role. That €3.5 million is the first of hopefully eight investments over the next eight budgets and I am sure the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, because of the Senator and I pressuring him as much as we can, will ensure that investment goes into it. No matter what sport it is, investment in sport is always money well spent.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly spoke on the return scheme. One of the biggest problems people find with the scheme is that it does not work sometimes. There are also issues regarding only being able to use the deposit in the shop where you returning the cans or bottles. There are also some antisocial behaviour issues. In Cashel, a bin was damaged significantly because people were trying to get cans and bottles out of it to return. The intention of it is right. It is important that people are recycling, for obvious reasons, and we cannot rely on people just doing it at home, even though the process is the exact same. We need to ensure it is done right and properly. It is there for the very good reason of our environment. In my view, it is certainly not there to line the pockets of CEOs or supplement the wages of people working in that area. In fairness, I do not think that is the intention at all.

Senator Harmon spoke on the Bessborough mother and baby home and the planning application for 140 apartments in the area.

I am not sure how to respond to her views on the Taoiseach but obviously all planning decisions are made by the council. Even a Taoiseach or Minister for planning cannot get involved in planning decisions. That being said, he did say it is a matter for the city council. It could have made a CPO on it. It is a very sensitive topic. I do not think it is appropriate for me as I would not have the same information as the Senator or people from that constituency to speak on it but it seems appropriate that the council would have played a more leading role in something that has a long-lasting impact on people in that community.

Senator Scahill spoke in relation to the new church car park built just outside Strokestown - I missed the name of the village.

Senator Gareth Scahill: Scramoge.

Senator Garret Ahearn: He mentioned a really good point in terms of financial support and the role Tidy Towns played in fundraising but a lot of renewable energy companies invest in local communities where they have wind farms to support them. This is a prime example. More should be highlighted. The companies do it themselves but I am not sure they highlight it enough. I know of a Cork company that has wind farms in Tipperary. It invests in local communities but does not highlight it too much. It is a significant amount of money for the likes of the communities the Senator spoke about. As he requested, we will have a debate on it after the summer. It is important. We set up the Department of rural affairs which has been a real success in terms capital funding. It is all well and good having capital funding but when you cannot maintain it afterwards, that is a real issue. We now need to look at how we can make sure operational costs can be supported whether through the council or the Department. There is no point in putting capital funding into something that will then have to close five or ten years later because operational costs are too high. We will try to have a debate on that when we come back.

Order of Business agreed to.

Report of Committee of Selection: Motion

Senator Garret Ahearn: I move:

That the Fifth Report of the Committee of Selection be laid before the Seanad.

Question put and agreed to.

EirGrid, Electricity and Turf (Amendment) Act 2022 (Section 10) Order 2026: Motion

Senator Garret Ahearn: I move:

That Seanad Éireann approves the following Order in draft:

EirGrid, Electricity and Turf (Amendment) Act 2022 (Section 10) Order 2026,
a copy of which has been laid in draft form before Seanad Éireann on 2nd July, 2026.

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 2.27 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.49 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 2.27 p.m. and resumed at 2.49 p.m.

Development (Strategic Gas Reserve) Bill 2026: Second Stage

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

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, and his officials to the House.

Minister of State at the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Alan Dillon): I am pleased to address the House on Second Stage of the Development (Strategic Gas Reserve) Bill 2026. As Senators are aware, the main purpose of this Bill is to provide for a project-specific, bespoke consenting pathway for the strategic gas emergency reserve facility to be located at Cahiracon in County Clare. This will enable a development consent application to be submitted later this year, which will be critical in achieving the accelerated delivery of this project.

Before outlining the provisions of the Bill, I will speak on a number of key points relating to the development of the legislation. Back in March 2025, the Government approved a State-led strategic gas emergency reserve. This is critical to securing Ireland's energy system as we continue to transition to indigenous, clean renewable energy. Crucially, this strategic gas energy reserve will also ensure Ireland's compliance with EU standards and regulations.

The strategic gas emergency reserve will be a State-owned gas storage facility that will provide the resilience required to support our energy transition. This State-led strategic reserve will store liquefied natural gas, LNG, for use only in the event of a disruption to gas supplies to protect Ireland's citizens, economy and reputation from the possibility of energy curtailment. It is not intended for commercial use and will not act as a new entry point for gas into the system. The final design will be scoped to provide sufficient supply to protect households and businesses consumers in the event of major disruption to subsea gas pipelines. Gas Networks Ireland will ensure that appropriate contractual arrangements are in place to refill floating storage and regasification units throughout an emergency situation, providing consistent gas supply for the duration required.

The introduction of bespoke legislation was agreed following advice from the Office of the Attorney General to reduce the uncertainty of the timelines regarding planning decisions and to facilitate the request from the Government to expedite delivery of this project. The ongoing phased commencement of the Planning and Development Act 2024 at this time prevents the project benefiting from the required expedited decision timeframe to deliver this project. The conventional planning route under the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, has been fully considered and it is proposed to disapply it, given the need for an expedited decision timeframe to deliver this project.

The legislation will allow for the next stage of development of the strategic gas emergency reserve. It is intended to submit the development consent application by the end of 2026 in order to achieve an accelerated project delivery timeline. It is intended to bring forward a memorandum for Government later this year to request permission to draft the strategic gas emergency reserve (operational) Bill to provide for the operation of the strategic gas emergency reserve. This will be a substantive Bill that will address provisions relating to the operation, use and cost of the reserve, as well as a number of policy matters previously raised by Oireachtas Members.

The Bill before the House contains seven Parts and 38 sections. I will provide a brief overview. Part 1 comprises four sections that contain standard legislative provisions that cover the Short Title to the Bill, the commencement procedures, the definitions of terms used in the Bill and a regulation-making power, as well as enabling the expenses of the Minister to be paid out of moneys provided by the Oireachtas.

Part 2 contains three sections relating to what comes within the scope of designated development. Section 5 provides for what constitutes designated development for the purposes of the development and use of a strategic gas emergency reserve to be located at Cahiracon in County Clare. Sections 6 and 7 provide that the Planning and Development Act 2000, the Planning and Development Act 2024, and Regulation 2 of the European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations 2011 are disapplied in relation to designated development, to facilitate the alternative consenting process set out in the Bill.

Part 3 contains four sections relating to the seeking of approval to carry out designated development. It provides for a mechanism for pre-application consultation. The required contents of an application are specified, as is a requirement to give public notice of an application and details of the public consultation procedure. The section sets out who may submit an application for designated development under this procedure, being limited to Gas Networks Ireland or such other public bodies as may be prescribed.

Part 4 contains 17 sections relating to the environmental impact assessment and appropriate assessment procedures that will apply to an application for designated development. These assessments shall be carried out by An Coimisiún Pleanála within specified accelerated timelines. It provides for a period of 18 weeks for a decision to be made by An Coimisiún Pleanála from receipt of an application to final decision. Time when An Coimisiún Pleanála is waiting for a return of further information by the applicant will be disregarded towards this overall time period.

Part 5 contains three sections relating to the determination of an application for approval to carry out designated development.

Part 6 provides for miscellaneous provisions relating to designated development granted approval under this bespoke process. Section 15 of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015 is disapplied to relevant bodies performing functions in relation to designated development. The Minister may also issue a direction to competent authorities responsible for the granting of relevant consents, to facilitate priority consenting of the project. The judicial review and access to justice provisions have been adapted from the Planning and Development Act 2000, retaining the well-tested framework that currently applies to a challenge to a planning decision in the courts.

Part 7 contains one section relating to a consequential amendment to the Environmental Protection Act 1992. I commend the Bill to the House and look forward to the debate.

Senator Mark Duffy: I thank the Minister of State for being here for the Second Stage debate on this important legislation. I wish place on record my support for the Development (Strategic Gas Reserve) Bill 2026. In recent years we have seen the politicisation and weaponisation of gas, be it the supply we have coming in through the North or transatlantic threats off our coasts.

In Ireland, we have 20% of supply coming from our own county of Mayo through the Corrib field and 80% coming from the North Sea, which comes in through Northern Ireland. While we are moving to a decarbonised economy and country, gas and the supply of it underpins all of that. When the wind does not blow and the sun does not shine, we need to make sure that we have a solid supply of it. Seeing the weaponisation of that on the continent of Europe poses a real risk to supply for our hospitals, schools and homes.

It is important that we make sure that we have backup supplies and reserves to make sure that the country can continue to tick in the event of major disruption. The world has become more polarised, particularly within the past ten years, and we need to make sure that we can stand on our own two feet as much as possible. This legislation will help support that.

I hope that the legislation moves through swiftly and is supported broadly. It is a mature and responsible thing to do for the State to make sure that we have good security and responsibility into the future.

On behalf of the Fine Gael side of the House, I support the Bill.

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: I thank the Minister of State for comprehensively outlining this important legislation that we are here to discuss.

The Minister of State has my full support in this legislation. It is timely. The Government made a decision in March 2025. When that decision was made, we clearly understood the need for resilience and the need to protect the interests of the State, but the Government could not have foreseen the situation that emerged, particularly over the past couple of months, when the energy supply has been weaponised by those who seek to destroy this country and our peace, security, stability and prosperity. We need to be mindful of the risks that are out there. We are a neutral country but we are part of the European bloc. There are very strong forces afoot that are trying to weaken and destroy us. Energy security is a part of that. We are insecure in our energy supply - there is no two ways about it - but I am glad that the Government is addressing it. It is the mature, responsible thing to do to protect the good lives that we lead in this country. We are doing so in conjunction with developing renewable sources of energy as well. This is not a question of putting all of our eggs in one basket, but resilience requires us to develop this LNG storage facility.

I commend the Minister of State on the work that he has done. I look forward to the debate and all Stages of this Bill progressing because we need to move swiftly. The Government has moved swiftly since taking that decision. This is a positive step but we need to get going on it because time is of the essence.

Senator Joanne Collins: I welcome the Minister of State to the House.

Energy security is one of the most fundamental responsibilities of any government and people rightly expect, when they turn on the lights or when they open the doors of their businesses, that the electricity will be there for them. Unfortunately, that confidence has been undermined for years and it is down to Government failure. We find ourselves debating legislation because of successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments that have failed to properly plan for Ireland's energy future. They have left Ireland dangerously dependent on imported fossil fuels and overly reliant on a single piece of infrastructure, the Moffat interconnector. That vulnerability should have been addressed years ago.

Nobody disputes that Ireland needs to strengthen its energy security and the 2023 energy security review recognised that a strategic gas reserve may be necessary to ensure secure supply in the event of catastrophic disruption. We have seen the disruption in this country as a result of the Strait of Hormuz being closed.

Sinn Féin accepts that protecting our energy security is a legitimate objective. However, this Bill is not the legislation that Ireland needs. Instead of delivering a genuinely State-led strategic reserve in the public interest, the Bill opens the doors to commercial LNG. That is a significant departure from the recommendations of the Government's own energy security review, which review envisaged a State-led facility operating solely for strategic purposes.

3 o'clock

Energy security should never become an opportunity for private developers to profit. Decisions of national importance should be made in the interests of the Irish people and not those of corporate shareholders.

Equally concerning is the Government's proposal to disapply elements of the planning Acts. We have spoken about this plenty of times when discussing wind energy and other planning matters. Communities need to be on board. They need to be consulted. They deserve to be heard. The people of County Clare deserved meaningful consultation before the location was announced. Good planning is not an obstacle to progress. It builds trust, strengthens projects and reduces the likelihood of costly legal challenges further down the line. We have seen lots of those over the years because we did not listen to communities and bypassed certain areas.

Ordinary households are going to be expected to pick up the bill for this. Our understanding is that the operation of this facility could cost anything up to €60 million a year with those costs covered by levies pushed onto families and businesses that already have some of the highest energy bills in Europe. They should not be asked to pay more because this Government has failed to plan properly over the years.

The truth is that Ireland remains one of the most fossil fuel-dependent countries in Europe. We import virtually all of our oil and coal and the vast majority of our natural gas. That leaves us exposed every time there is international instability or conflict. We have seen the consequences this has had over the years. Global events have translated directly into soaring energy bills for workers, families and businesses across Ireland.

This dependency was not inevitable. Ireland possesses one of Europe's greatest renewable energy resources, our offshore wind. If the Minister of State were ever to take a trip down to Foynes in County Limerick, as he may have already, Pat Keating of the Shannon Foynes Port Company will tell him about the amazing project the company wants to get off the ground. We need to tap into things like this. The country could not only be energy independent but a major exporter of wind energy.

Progress is painfully slow, however. We have been waiting for designated maritime area plans, DMAPs, for years. This process has only started. It started on the east coast, on the other side of the country, despite there being a plan and strategy for the area outside the estuary in County Limerick on the west coast. We are now waiting for the process to move around. By the time it does, the funding stream from Europe will have stopped and we will have to wait for the next funding stream. Everything seems to take so long. When there is such a good idea, we should move with it and go at pace to get these projects up and running and to get the funding in.

Sinn Féin believes there is a better way. I have said there is a better way through offshore wind, but we also support greater public investment in and public ownership of renewable

energy infrastructure. We want to see more community-owned and locally owned renewable projects so that the wealth generated by Ireland's natural resources benefits Irish people rather than flowing overseas. A secure energy future should be built around renewable energy, democratic accountability and public ownership, where appropriate. That is how we can reduce emissions, strengthen our energy security and bring down costs for consumers for the long term. Energy security is too important to be left to commercial interests. If a strategic gas reserve is required, it must be genuinely State-led, subject to full democratic oversight, developed with proper community consultation and operated solely in the public interest. It must not be a back door for commercial LNG and it should not result in even higher energy bills for households that are already under financial pressure. This Bill fails those tests. For those reasons, Sinn Féin cannot support the legislation as currently drafted. We will continue to argue for an energy policy that delivers genuine security of supply while accelerating Ireland's transition towards affordable, publicly accountable and renewable energy independence.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: I will share my time with Senator Stephenson. Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit. It is an old joke that the Holy Roman Empire was not holy, Roman or an empire. The strategic gas reserve suffers from a similar misnomer.

Our continuing dependence on fossil fuels for energy security is not strategic, and the gas that will be stored at the envisioned facility will be far from a reserve. From the very outset, it will become part of our everyday energy mix. I have highlighted this many times in the Chamber, as has my Labour Party colleague Ciarán Ahern in the Dáil. It will be used in our energy mix because LNG requires venting in order to remain usable and safe. It will need to be vented, either into the atmosphere or into the system. Obviously, it does not make sense to vent gas which is acquired at such a cost to the economy and the earth into the atmosphere. Therefore, we will vent it into the system. We are going to use the gas. That is the logical thing to do once we have the gas and it needs to be used.

The problem is that when we vent the gas, we will need to refill the tank. In order to maintain a seven-day supply of LNG, we will need to replenish the floating storage unit at least six times each year. It is not a reserve; it is intended to be part of the general energy mix. Even if it is used only at an absolute minimum level to keep it safe, we will discharge the daily equivalent of 10 GW to 30 GW of hours of energy into the national network. It is clear that the environmental arguments are failing to have any influence whatsoever on the Government. The influence of the Green Party is severely missed. The deal that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael did with the rural Independent Deputies really is as bad for the environment as many of us feared, particularly where I live in the north west. There is no coherent strategic thinking regarding the environmental emergency in which we find ourselves.

Does the economic strategy make sense? The economic case for an LNG terminal was made in April 2024 at a time when the price of LNG delivered to the EU was on a downward trajectory. The price for a megawatt hour was just under €23 in February 2024. In March 2026, just two years later, it climbed to €55.20, an increase of more than double. The experience of Germany, which spent an initial €2.5 billion on four floating storage regasification units shows how the costs spiralled. Germany has to keep committing an amount of €4 billion to keep these units operational, with no benefit to the German consumer in terms of electricity prices. There has never been a clearer case of supply and demand affecting price

than the impact which conflict in oil producing regions has upon the price of energy. If the economic case made strategic sense in April 2024, it does not make sense in Trump's 2026.

It has never made sense, from the point of view of military security, to have floating gas terminals. Attacks on Russian and Qatari LNG infrastructure clearly demonstrates the truth of this assertion. It does not make sense to depend on LNG from the Middle East, and it does not make strategic sense to make ourselves even more dependent on America than we already are. What does make strategic sense is investing rapidly in indigenous renewables and a combination of offshore and onshore wind, along with solar and tidal energy, and when the wind blows or the sun shines, save that surplus as a reserve. Gas, particularly LNG acquired by fracking, does not make sense as a strategic reserve. We need to see quick action, not on a strategic gas reserve but on a strategic renewable reserve. I really hope the Minister will listen to what I am saying. I am like a broken record in here talking about this, because it affects me so much where I live in the north west.

Senator Patricia Stephenson: The Government's handling of this legislation has been appalling. Not only is it preposterous that a Bill that will see almost €1 billion being invested in fossil fuel infrastructure is being rammed through the legislative process with little opportunity for proper scrutiny; it is also ludicrous that we are even debating such investment in fossil fuels in view of the scale of the climate calamity we are facing. This is not a future problem; it is a problem of today. The climate crisis and climate breakdown are very much on our doorstep. Anyone who goes out into nature can see that at first hand. As we speak, Europe is quite literally being scorched by extreme temperatures, which is wreaking havoc on healthcare, energy and transport systems. Schools are closing. Vulnerable people are dying as a consequence of the climate change we are seeing. Scientists tell us that this is direct result of a climate crisis driven by the burning of fossil fuels, yet here we are being asked to sanction a €1 billion investment in LNG. This is, quite frankly, a betrayal of our children and the generation that will come after them.

There are warnings that we cannot reverse this and that we will see an increased frequency and intensity of heatwaves in Europe, which is warming at more than twice the global average. Within the next decade, global temperatures will likely increase by more than 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. This is the critical tipping point identified in the 2015 Paris Agreement that will have devastating consequences for humanity. Despite the scale of climate catastrophe we are hurtling towards, the Government appears to be the victim of a sort of climate fatigue or, perhaps, cognitive dissonance, with its head in the sand pretending it is not happening.

Not only has the Government conceded that we are not even going to get close to meeting our 2030 emissions reduction targets, but we continue to see it rowing back on climate ambition, not least through the disapplication of climate laws and biodiversity protections when they are inconvenient, which we seem to be doing with this legislation. I feel that the Government's failure to explicitly state in this legislation that the LNG terminal will be State owned and State led and not for commercial use is taking us for fools. If it is going to be State led and not for commercial use, then the Government should just put it into the legislation. It is quite simple. We can then trust that the protections exist. We can be forgiven for not trusting that this will be provided for at a later stage, given that there has been a complete lack of transparency thus far and we have seen the rollback of key climate provisions. It is hard,

therefore, to have any faith that these protections will somehow manifest in legislation down the line.

The Bill speaks to a broader mismanagement of demand of our energy system, with the Government consistently prioritising the needs of energy-hungry big business and corporate interests over those of ordinary households and our environment. The reason we apparently need this €1 billion LNG facility is to safeguard supply, but we have large energy users, like data centres, that have proliferated in the State, driving up prices for consumers. The environmental impact of these resource-intensive data centres is stark and their energy needs are outpacing the development of new renewables. According to new figures from the Central Statistics Office, CSO, for 2025, data centres now account for almost one quarter of Irish electricity usage, and this is set to increase to one third by 2030.

The stark reality is that we are now a cautionary tale for the rest of the world in how not to manage energy. We heard this from the UN report. The public did not sign up for this or for having the highest energy prices in Europe. It is the public who have to foot the bill for these data centres and it is again the public who will have to foot the bill for the €1 billion LNG facility, which could actually be used by private companies for their profits, because there are no protections in this legislation to stop that from happening. I do not see public or community buy-in for this approach. Why has the Government decided to steamroll any attempt to include safeguards for the public interest and the environment in this legislation with the promise that we will get protections further down the line instead of just putting them into the Bill in the first place? There has not been sufficient transparency and sufficient consideration has not been given to the alternative approaches to account for our national climate objectives while the world burns. Watching Europe on fire, and the heat in our own communities, I feel a degree of existential dread about the future of the climate, of our environment and of our humanity in the current context we are seeing. I cannot fathom why we would not have any protections in this legislation if the Government also felt any concern about the climate.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I welcome the members of St. Finbarr's GAA club, who are guests of Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire. They are all very welcome and I hope they enjoy their visit to the Houses of the Oireachtas today. I call Senator Higgins.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: This legislation, which seeks to allow for the accelerated development of an LNG terminal by bypassing key planning and environmental processes, is a misguided, dangerous and reckless move by the Government that threatens to lock us into increased fossil fuel usage for years to come. During pre-legislative scrutiny of the Bill in the Joint Committee on Climate, Environment and Energy, of which I am a member, the report we produced highlighted and noted that there was a significant divergence between the departmental officials and other witnesses who spoke "to the major climate, legal, social, and governance risks in the proposed legislative approach." These witnesses said, "Recurring concerns centred on compatibility with climate law, legal soundness, planning system integrity, demand side management, commercial LNG risks, and impacts on local communities." That is just to give a small set of concerns. They also included security risks. All of this was highlighted by the committee in its report.

This was alongside a number of recommendations that have not been taken on board and are not reflected in this legislation. The committee called on the Government not to disapply

the planning Acts and the climate targets and measures. It called for clarity on how decisions would be made and remarked on this process moving away from the Minister. The committee also said that there needed to be a definition of how consumption emissions were to be balanced to ensure that these would be offset by an associated reduction in the intake of gas through other mechanisms.

There were concerns expressed in really clear language from the committee about the development or operation by a commercial operator and the need for it be explicitly limited to public bodies. The committee did not just say it should be State-led, but State-owned and operated with particular measures to ensure it would not be used as a precedent or as the opening of the door to commercial operators. The Government has disregarded all of these recommendations. The committee looked for safeguards including ensuring it remains in State ownership and operation and is only used for emergency supply. None of these measures from our detailed scrutiny are properly reflected in the Bill before us.

Experts pointed consistently to glaring holes in the Government's plan to bring LNG to Ireland. They pointed out the energy security and supply arguments do not stand up to scrutiny. They do not show us, for example, that it was necessary for our energy supply. CSO figures released today show data centres accounting for 23% of metered Irish electricity consumption, which is up 3% on just two years ago. Use by data centres has gone up by 10% while all other industrial and household users have risen by only 2%. The Government has made it clear its plan is to encourage new data centres and new demand. If there really was a concern about security we would be looking for plans to, as was said, really intensify renewable energy and genuinely deliver on that and on storage rather than a measure that has so many negative side effects.

I will address a couple of these effects in the context of security. On the economic side, the reliance on gas as a price setter has been shown to drive up bills in Ireland consistently. We have seen how the reliance on gas contributes to the escalation of energy bills and how gas is allowed set the price. The economic case for the terminal put forward by the Government was based on a low point in the highly fluctuating costs of LNG. Interestingly, there was no comparison in this cost-benefit analysis between the terminal a combination of renewables and batteries. It was decided to compare the costs solely with batteries or solely to renewables when clearly, the real alternative is a combination of renewables and batteries. That was not stacked against LNG in the cost analysis.

The thing about the fluctuating price of LNG is that it is not a moment in time. We are going to be exposed to them constantly because LNG burns off. It is not a reserve. The Government is signing us up to the continued and sustained use of liquified natural gas, including fracked gas, because at least six times a year the reserve will need to be released into the system and replenished. That is the science of what is happening. As for the idea this is going to be a six-month reserve, it will never be more than a two-month reserve because every two months it will need to be renewed. If we were to be in a situation of conflict it would become a target and the supply of LNG itself would become an area of vulnerability.

We want to put almost €1 billion into this, a cost that will be carried by the public, although it does not stack up from an energy security or economic perspective. Crucially, not only does it not stack up but it is an act of recklessness in respect of our climate targets. It does not stack

up in climate terms to such an extent that the Government is having to disapply the climate Act because it knows no credible consideration of the climate Act would back this.

The Climate Change Advisory Council has explicitly spoken about how the further expansion of fossil fuel infrastructure through an LNG terminal will commit Ireland to further fossil fuel lock-in, with serious concerns over the total emissions, including the upstream release of methane where LNG is sourced via fracking. A large amount of this LNG comes from fracking; a process that we outlawed in our own country because of its damaging impact. Moreover, much of that fracked gas is coming from the United States, which has left the Paris Agreement.

The level of damage that is being done to other communities and collectively, globally, is not even being measured. What we do know, however, is that methane is an accelerant. We know that the LNG gas that is added to the system is actually a higher emitter and has a higher emission content than other gas that is currently in the system. This was emphasised in terms of the upstream impact in the 2026 electricity report from the Climate Change Advisory Council. Further investment in construction of fossil fuel infrastructure is going to destroy our ability to meet our targets and is an act of absolutely reckless abuse towards the rest of the world and those who are doing the work of trying to transition us to a liveable future. This is a security risk in the deepest sense because climate change is the greatest security risk we have. This is an accelerant on that risk and the damage will not only be felt by the population here in Ireland but by others right across the world. Again, this is a mistake and among a number of very poor decisions from the Government, this will go down as one of the historic mistakes.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: I join with my colleagues in our outright condemnation of this approach by the Government in relation to this legislation. The Government is going to be the lead negotiator on behalf of the European Union at both the climate Conference of the Parties, COP, and the biodiversity COP later this year. We have zero credibility in asking other member states to step up or in trying to show leadership from a European perspective when we are disapplying our climate Act every time we want to, be it the Critical Infrastructure Act the airport cap Bill or this legislation. What credibility have we got? We have none. We do not have any. We are stepping into the Presidency of European Union with no credibility whatsoever.

As has been said by my colleague, our climate committee first of all was denied the opportunity to take pre-legislative scrutiny. It was then crammed into a two-week session. Our report was subsequently ignored anyway and none of the recommendations from it were taken on board. If an emergency reserve is actually needed, and that is a really big "If", one of our recommendations was for an updated energy security review which, again, was not followed up on. If we look at how soon this can be ready and how quickly we can electrify our energy system and support interconnection and storage, then it is of critical importance that the reserve is contained strictly within our frameworks for decarbonising our society. To do otherwise creates a situation where we develop a reserve that locks us into further possible fuel use dependence, as well as being past a sell-by date. The reality is quite stark. By allowing an LNG terminal to be exempt from binding commitments of the climate Act, the terminal will not have to comply with national mitigation plans, adaptation frameworks, transition objectives or greenhouse gas mitigation strategies. Without the right guardrails in place in this legislation, we are putting ourselves at risk of creating significant fossil fuel lock-in within our energy

system, doubling down on high energy costs for families and homes. Again, this was reiterated at our climate committee. If we are to have a gas reserve, it should entail as small as possible an amount for the shortest possible amount of time, with a clear exit strategy, all underpinned by the mechanisms of the climate Act. That is what it is there for. This Bill does none of that. Instead, it leaves LNG as an open-ended question at a time when we know just how unreliable global supplies of fossil fuels can be. We have heard this from Friends of the Earth. We heard it from Trócaire, which is calling on the Government to have us carry our fair share of the burden.

On the issue around security of supply, LNG does not give us security of supply. Our energy supply for this reserve would have to be imported from countries like Qatar and the United States.

We have seen the volatility happening there. We have an opportunity here to do something radically different but, unfortunately, the Minister of State has not taken that opportunity.

An Coimisiún Pleanála announced yesterday that it is going to delay the decision on the Shannon pipeline until 2 July next year. There is a five-year timeline on this, and a €900 million cost of construction for the project. There is no doubt that is going to escalate and it will happen with the Shannon pipeline as well. For what? To lock us into fossil fuel infrastructure for decades into the future, missing our climate targets and denying an opportunity for Ireland to show leadership at a time when it is critical to do so.

This is a disgraceful piece of legislation and we will not be supporting it.

Minister of State at the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Alan Dillon): I thank all the Senators for their contributions today. Certainly, as has been noted throughout the debate, especially on the Government side of the House, there is an urgent requirement to take action to mitigate this critical risk to Ireland's energy security. As I said earlier, the main purpose of this Bill is to provide for a project-specific bespoke consenting pathway for the strategic gas emergency reserve facility that will be located in County Clare. This will enable the development consent application to be submitted later this year, which is critical in achieving an accelerated delivery of this project.

As referenced by Senators Duffy and Clifford-Lee, we are a small island nation that is very reliant on interconnectors. Our exposure to potential disruption of gas supply presents a really significant risk to energy security. I was shocked it was not referenced by anyone on the Opposition benches that the real purpose of this Bill is to ensure we have sufficient supply to protect households and business consumers in the event of major disruption of our subsea pipelines, which account for over 80% of all gas supply into this country. It is very important we have continuity of supply for businesses and householders across the country. This strategic gas reserve will provide the alternative source of gas at an appropriate scale. If Ireland were to experience such devastating interruptions, I am sure the Senators would be coming into this House calling foul that Government had done nothing. This Bill is very much focused on delivering an emergency reserve. It is critical for Ireland's energy security.

The strategic gas energy reserve is a priority project of a real and strategic nature that is required to mitigate any major consequences. I am confident the legislation before the House today will provide the robust consenting process that will enable the project to proceed at an

expedited pace. For far too long, we have been held back in major developments across major projects. We have done major reforms through the planning and development Bill and with An Coimisiún Pleanála. We now need to move forward with the Critical Infrastructure Act to enable Ireland to deliver critical projects of real strategic importance, and this is one of them.

I acknowledge and appreciate the significant work of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Climate, Energy and the Environment, which conducted pre-legislative scrutiny on the general scheme of the Bill. I also thank the Attorney General's office and all the officials and stakeholders, as well as all the Senators for their contributions today. We look forward to discussing the Bill further on Committee Stage.

Question put:

The Seanad divided: Tá, 28; Níl, 12.	
Tá	Níl
Ahearn, Garret.	Andrews, Chris.
Blaney, Niall.	Black, Frances.
Boyle, Manus.	Clonan, Tom.
Brady, Paraic.	Collins, Joanne.
Byrne, Cathal.	Cosgrove, Nessa.
Casey, Pat.	Harmon, Laura.
Clifford-Lee, Lorraine.	McCormack, Maria.
Conway, Martin.	Murphy, Conor.
Costello, Teresa.	Noonan, Malcolm.
Crowe, Ollie.	O'Reilly, Sarah.
Curley, Shane.	Stephenson, Patricia.
Daly, Paul.	Tully, Pauline.
Davitt, Aidan.	
Duffy, Mark.	
Flaherty, Joe.	
Gallagher, Robbie.	
Kelleher, Garret.	
Kennelly, Mike.	
Lynch, Eileen.	
McCarthy, Aubrey.	
Murphy, P. J.	
Nelson Murray, Linda.	
Ní Chuilinn, Evanne.	
O'Loughlin, Fiona.	
Rabbitte, Anne.	
Ryan, Dee.	
Scahill, Gareth.	
Wilson, Diarmuid.	

Tellers: Tá, Senators Cathal Byrne and Paul Daly; Níl, Senators Malcolm Noonan and Nessa Cosgrove..

Question declared carried.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I welcome to the Gallery a very special guest, Conor Kenny. He is here as a guest of Deputy Paul McAuliffe. I hope he enjoys his visit to Leinster House today.

When is it proposed to take Committee Stage?

Senator Cathal Byrne: Next Tuesday.

Senator Chathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Committee Stage ordered for Tuesday, 14 July 2026.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 3.42 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 4 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 3.42 p.m. and resumed at 4 p.m.

4 o'clock

Finance Bill 2026 [Certified Money Bill]: Committee and Remaining Stages

SECTION 1

Government recommendation No 1:

In page 4, between lines 12 and 13, to insert the following:

“(2) Section 99A of the Finance Act 1999 is further amended, with effect as on and from 1 July 2026, by the substitution of the following subsection for subsection (3):

“(3) Where—

(a) gas oil has been purchased on or after 1 January 2020 and before 1 January 2026, or on or after 1 October 2026, then, subject to a maximum repayment rate of €75.00 per 1,000 litres, the amount to be repaid per 1,000 litres of gas oil under subsection (2) is determined—

(i) when P is less than or equal to €1,070, by the formula—

$$A = (P - 1,000) \times 0.3,$$

or

(ii) when P is greater than €1,070, by the formula—

$$A = 21 + [(P - 1,070) \times 0.6],$$

or

(b) gas oil has been purchased on or after 1 January 2026 and before 1 October 2026, then, subject to a maximum repayment rate of €120.00 per 1,000 litres, the amount to be repaid per 1,000 litres of gas oil under subsection (2) is determined—

(i) when P is less than or equal to €1,070, by the formula—

$$A = (P - 1,000) \times 0.3,$$

(ii) when P is greater than €1,070 and less than or equal to €1,150, by the formula—

$$A = 21 + [(P - 1,070) \times 0.675],$$

or

(iii) when P is greater than €1,150, by the formula—

$$A = 75 + [(P - 1,150) \times 4.5],$$

where—

A is the amount to be repaid per 1,000 litres, and

P is an estimate of the average price (exclusive of value-added tax) in euro per 1,000 litres of gas oil purchased by qualifying road transport operators during the repayment period, as determined in accordance with subsection (4).”.”.

Recommendation agreed to.

Section 1, with recommendation, agreed to.

SECTION 2

An Cathaoirleach: Recommendations Nos. 2 and 4 are related and may be discussed together by agreement. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Conor Murphy: I move recommendation No. 2:

In page 6, to delete lines 1 to 22 and substitute the following:

15 July 2026	€502.8 8	€502.8 8	€371.8 5	€371.8 5	€371.8 5	€0.00	€210.4 5	€172.1 4	€167.2 5	€79.17	€11.4 8
14 October 2026	€706.1 4	€706.1 4	€615.7 6	€615.7 6	€615.7 6	€160.8 1	€210.4 5	€219.5 0	€167.2 5	€103.6 6	€11.4 8

Many families across the State are rightly appalled by the Government’s decision to withdraw the fuel tax cuts that were introduced most reluctantly in April. The decision may not make much of a difference to the Government but for ordinary people, increases in petrol and diesel in September, October, November and December will make a significant impact on their quality of life. September through to Christmas is already a very expensive time for people. Last year, Barnardo’s back-to-school cost report outlined everything parents were expected to cover, from school shoes through to voluntary contributions, classroom resources and on and on. It adds up to hundreds of euro per child.

The Zurich cost-of-education report published this year found costs of over €1,700 a year for a primary school child while secondary school education costs €3,000 per annum per child. Just yesterday, online shopping charges of €3 per item for parcels and packages originating

outside the European Union came into effect. At a time when people are under serious pressure as a result of the cost of living, the last thing they need is another unexpected charge. Ireland is uniquely exposed because of online shopping and how it is integrated with Britain. The Government could have chosen to support people. It could raise money in other ways and leave the fuel rebate in place. It could have taxed the banks but is more than happy to let the financial crash loophole remain in place, meaning that the banks continue to carry forward losses from 2008 when the economy crashed and offset them against their current booming profits. Even the measures which were introduced in April were hard to access. Many hauliers reported difficulties arising from the three-month wait for the rebate. Deputy Doherty has raised this with the Government numerous times, but we see no willingness to be agile on its part. If the Government had made the cut directly at the pump, hauliers would get the benefit immediately and would not have to wait three months for it. Everybody else would also benefit, including all of those commuters, etc., fill up their cars with petrol or diesel. In addition, it avoids the cash-flow issues that the rebate scheme has ingrained within it.

This recommendation proposes the postponement of the increases in carbon taxes on home heating oil, green diesel and canister gas until October.

For months, the Taoiseach ruled this out. While people endured the worst cost-of-living crisis in memory, the Taoiseach stood resolute.

Sinn Féin has always opposed increasing carbon taxes. They are unfair and do nothing for the climate or the environment while alternatives do not exist or are unaffordable. A further increase in this tax punishes those who are already struggling - workers, families and people with disabilities - without giving them an alternative. If this Government had imagination and listened to ordinary people, it would know that punitive tax increases such as these do one thing, that being, force people into deprivation and keep the poorest houses cold.

On recommendation No. 2, the Government typically increases the price of home heating oil, natural gas and solid fuels in May every year and the price of motor fuel in October. Our recommendation would delete all further increases in carbon tax that the Government has outlined from now until May 2030. Our proposition would leave the existing levels in place until this coming October, when they should be reviewed. This will be the right course of action at a time when the weather will be getting colder and people must heat their homes. People are crippled with the cost of living and these fuel rebates must be kept in place.

Recommendation No. 3 seeks to delete all future carbon tax increases on liquid fuel and diesel, for example. For reasons already outlined, the Government should not increase carbon taxes at this point in time.

Recommendation No. 4 proposes that the rate of mineral oil tax will increase on 1 September, 1 October, 1 November and 1 December, in addition to a budgetary increase on 14 October. Families and businesses are already crippled with the cost of everything constantly going up. The Government has the power to help and this legislation should not be enacted.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Robert Troy): I will speak to section 2 of the Bill and propose the Government's recommendation in respect of same. The Government's recommendation is No. 4 on the numbered list. I will address Senator Conor

Murphy's recommendation No. 2, which the Government does not propose to accept this recommendation.

Section 2 of the Finance Bill 2026 provides for temporary reductions to the mineral oil tax rates as set out in Schedule 2 of the Finance Act 1999, effective from 25 March 2026, and further cuts effective from 15 April 2026. By Government recommendation, section 2 further provides for an extension of these temporary reductions for petrol and auto diesel until 31 August, after which the mineral oil tax reduced rates for these fuels will be unwound on a gradual basis, with a final restoration of these rates on 1 December 2026. Section 2 also provides for an extension of the temporary reduction for green diesel until 31 October, after which the mineral oil tax reduced rate for this fuel will be unwound on 1 November and there will be a final restoration on 1 December 2026.

On 24 March, the Government announced a per litre VAT-inclusive reduction of 20 cent for auto diesel, 15 cent for petrol and 3 cent for green diesel. These cuts were initially legislated to be effective from 21 March to 31 May 2026. On 12 April, the Government announced a further reduction of 10 cent per litre for auto diesel and petrol and a further 2.4 cent reduction for green diesel, bringing the total reduction in mineral oil tax rates to 30 cent per litre for diesel, 25 cent per litre for petrol and 5.4 cent per litre for marked gas oil or green diesel. At that time, we also announced an extension of the timeframe of reduction until 31 July 2026.

On 12 April, the Government announced a deferral of the planned carbon tax increase, scheduled for 1 May, until 14 October 2026. Section 2 provides for this deferral of the carbon component of the mineral oil tax increase for non-propellant kerosene, marked gas oil and other relevant fuels.

On 30 June, the Government announced an extension of the temporary reduction to mineral oil tax and a graduated pathway to the restoration of these rates, as well as an extension of the National Oil Reserves Agency, NORA, levy reduction until 31 August. The temporary reductions to mineral oil tax, which were due to expire on 31 July, will now be extended in full until 31 August, with a phased restoration of the mineral oil tax rates taking place between September and December in four stages. The following mineral oil tax restorations are on a VAT-inclusive basis. On 1 September, there will be a restoration of 7 cent per litre for petrol and 8 cent per litre for auto diesel. On 1 October, there will be a restoration of 8 cent litre for petrol and auto diesel. On 1 November, there will be a restoration of 5 cent per litre for petrol, 7 cent per litre of auto diesel and 2.7 cent per litre for marked gas oil or green diesel. On 1 December, there will be a final restoration of 5 cent per litre for petrol, 7 cent per litre for diesel and 2.7 cent per litre for green diesel.

Recommendation No. 2 proposed by Senator Conor Murphy proposes to maintain the full reductions in the mineral oil tax rates on petrol and auto diesel until budget time and reduce the mineral oil tax rate applicable to kerosene used other than as a propellant to zero as well as reducing the rate applicable to liquefied petroleum gas used other than as a propellant. It further proposes to indefinitely set mineral oil tax rates from 14 October 2026 at the rates that were applicable when the rate cuts were introduced in March and April this year.

As a Government, we have stated at the outset that we would monitor the situation closely and reserve the right to adjust our responses as required. We have consistently said - this has been proven in this legislation - that we would avoid a cliff-edge removal of supports. Brent

crude, which is the global benchmark for oil price, currently stands at around \$72 per barrel. This is down from the peak of \$120 per barrel in late April and is now broadly in line with prices recorded immediately before the outbreak of the conflict in late February. In line with easing in wholesale commodity prices, retail prices for fuels have fallen in recent weeks. A further easing of retail prices should be anticipated as lower wholesale prices gradually feed through to the forecourts.

Global oil prices and domestic retail prices have significantly decreased over recent weeks. The situation remains uncertain, which is why the Government is committed to continuing to support families and monitoring the situation as it evolves. The Government's recommendations to the Bill are reflective of current macroeconomic and energy market situation. The restoration of the mineral oil tax rates will be done on a gradual basis, commencing on 1 September. We continue to monitor the situation closely and we reserve the right to adjust our response as required.

Government measures have helped and will continue to help alleviate some, but not all, of the pressures being felt by households and businesses affected by fuel price increases as a result of the conflict in the Middle East. The cumulative total cost of mineral tax reduction measures contained in Government recommendations to section 2 of the Bill is estimated at €655 million between March and December 2026.

For the reasons I have outlined, I am not proposing to accept Senator Conor Murphy's recommendation, but I do propose that the Government's recommendation be accepted.

Recommendation put and declared lost.

An Cathaoirleach: Recommendations Nos. 3 and 5 to 7, inclusive, are related and may be discussed together by agreement. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: I move recommendation No. 3:

In page 6, to delete lines 56 to 67, and in page 7, to delete lines 1 to 4.

I support all of the recommendations to this Bill put forward by the Opposition. Recommendations Nos. 3 and 5 to 7, inclusive, speak directly to the cost-of-living crisis facing every single family across the country. At what point does the Government accept that people cannot afford any more? Every week, I meet people who are working hard and doing everything right but who are worse off than they were five years ago. One woman contacted my office after she had paid her electricity bill because she did not know how she was going to afford the week's groceries. We ended up having to get vouchers from the Society of St. Vincent de Paul for food that week.

People who work hard 40 hours a week should not have to rely on charity to feed their children. That is the reality for thousands of families across the country yet the Government's response is to make fuel even more expensive. In effect, it is really a tax on people who are working. The current plan is to increase the price of diesel by 34 cent a litre and the price of petrol by 29 cent a litre by the end of the year. Farmers, agricultural contractors and hauliers came out in force to protest because their businesses, which provide their livelihood, could not survive under the conditions at that time. It was because of their collective work that the

Government had to reduce excise duty. The Government had no choice but to listen because the level of public outrage was too much for it to ignore. The Government cannot continue this cycle of hiking up prices, forcing people out onto the streets to protest, before introducing temporary reductions. It is not a sustainable policy. As I have said before, given the amount of money the State wastes without even blinking an eye, I actually think it could do with less money. The Government should take the burden off people and learn to manage its finances more prudently.

The Government seems to believe everyone can simply buy an electric car. The reality is that most families do not have €40,000 or €50,000 sitting in a bank to buy an EV. They are not the best thing in rural areas. Even if they did have the money, public charging costs have risen to a point at which, in many cases, it is now more expensive to charge your electric vehicle than to fill a vehicle with petrol or diesel. For many people, particularly in rural Ireland, driving is not a luxury. The Minister of State should know that. It is how people get to work and bring their children to school. They cannot simply leave the car at home because the Government tells them they should. All that happens is that they pay more for what is a necessary aspect of their lives. It is a punitive tax on those who work.

We now get to the carbon tax. We were repeatedly told that this is essential because it funds climate action yet the responses to Aontú's parliamentary questions have shown that hundreds of millions of euro collected in carbon tax have not actually been spent on climate measures. From 2020 to 2023, €247 million of money collected went unspent. This money was taken out of the pockets of people who cannot afford milk and butter only to be left sitting in the Government's coffers. At the same time, families who have been approved for SEAI grants are waiting two or three years to get works done. This is not because there is no money but because there are not enough qualified workers to carry out the retrofits. The Government keeps increasing the tax even though the money is just sitting in a pool unused and unspent. That is why recommendation No. 7 is so important. It simply asks the Minister to examine the Exchequer implications of abolishing carbon tax and to identify alternative ways of funding climate measures. It is a very modest proposal. We have to explore alternative options to fund retrofitting, especially when the money is just piling up. You cannot tax people into changing their behaviour when there are no realistic alternatives, particularly in rural Ireland. It is easy to pass legislation increasing the cost of heating a home or filling a car but it is not easy for families to absorb these additional costs.

Deputy Robert Troy: I will respond to Opposition recommendations Nos. 3 and 5 to 7, inclusive, together. Recommendations Nos. 3, 5 and 6 from Senators Sarah O'Reilly and Conor Murphy effectively propose an end to the carbon tax trajectory at the rates applicable prior to the rate cuts introduced in March and April of this year. Recommendation No. 7 from Senator O'Reilly asks that the Minister for Finance examine the implications of abolishing the carbon tax, assess the estimated reduction in tax receipts that would result, and assess options to replace these tax receipts by other means. I am not sure what other means she is talking about.

On 30 June, Government announced an extension of the temporary reductions to the mineral oil tax. These temporary reductions, which were due to expire on 31 July, will now be extended to 31 August for petrol and auto diesel and to 31 October for marked gas oil. The mineral oil tax rates will be restored on a phased basis, starting from 1 September for petrol and auto diesel and 1 November for green diesel, with all rates fully restored from 1 December.

The Government recommendations included as part of the Bill are reflective of the current macroeconomic and energy market situation. The restoration of mineral oil tax rates will be done on a gradual basis, commencing on 1 September. We continue to monitor the situation closely and continue to reserve the right to adjust the response as required.

As regards carbon tax, the mineral oil tax comprises non-carbon components and a carbon component, which is commonly referred to as the carbon tax. Legislation currently provides for multi-annual increases to the carbon component of the mineral oil tax, as well as increases to the natural gas carbon tax and solid fuel carbon tax rates. As the Senators will be aware, the programme for Government committed to continuing with the planned carbon tax increases, aligning with recommendations from the Climate Change Advisory Council and scientific experts, to using the resulting revenues raised to support climate action measures and to ensuring the most vulnerable are protected from unintended impacts of the tax increases. This includes funding from retrofitting and agri-environmental schemes, alongside targeted social welfare and other initiatives to prevent fuel poverty and to ensure a just transition. These measures are designed to be progressive.

To give effect to the programme for Government commitment to protect the vulnerable, a targeted package of social welfare protection interventions was developed, informed by ESRI research commissioned to address this issue specifically. As part of budget 2026 the Government was allocated over €4.2 billion in carbon tax revenue for these purposes since 2020. ESRI analysis consistently shows that the lower income deciles are better off as a result of the social protection measures funded by the increased carbon tax. In budget 2026, over €1.1 billion was allocated to climate action measures and to ensuring the most vulnerable are protected from unintended impacts of the increase. This was an increase on the 2025 allocation and included funding of €566 million for retrofitting programmes, just transition and the ODA green climate fund, €350 million for targeted social welfare interventions such as fuel allowance, and €173 million for green and sustainable farming measures.

In relation to the retrofitting programme, Senator O'Reilly seems to welcome deep retrofitting because she is complaining that people are waiting too long. I agree with her and I would like to see it happening much quicker but the reason there is an extended waiting list is because it is hard to get tradespeople to do it and because of the success of the scheme. I am sure all of us here who operate offices can speak of the huge number of people availing of this scheme. More and more people come to know about it when they see their neighbours accessing it.

From my experience in my constituency people are quite thankful for the scheme. It is one of the best ways to drive down energy costs for low-income families. On average we are speaking about savings on energy costs in excess of €1,000 a year when the deep retrofit is completed. As Senator O'Reilly knows, people on the fuel allowance do not pay a penny towards the deep retrofit. It is a really progressive scheme. Pausing the carbon tax trajectory would decrease the funding available for schemes such as this. Rather than speaking about expediting it and cutting down the waiting lists, it would only prolong them.

Our need to decouple from fossil fuel dependence and achieve energy security is even more apparent now, given the levels of volatility in the international energy markets. Ireland's long-term commitment to tackling climate change remains strong. A further consideration for the Government is Ireland's derogation request in respect of the EU emission trading system for

buildings, road transport and additional sectors, also known as ETS2. The ETS2 directive provides for member states that operate a national carbon tax in the buildings, road transport and additional sectors to apply for a derogation from obligations under the EU ETS2 once certain criteria are met. The derogation allows a member state with a carbon tax rate equivalent to or higher than the average ETS2 auction price to exempt regulated entities from the obligation to surrender ETS2 allowances between 2028 and 2030. Ireland has applied for a derogation from ETS2 on the basis of the national carbon tax, which is currently higher than the expected average auction price for allowances.

To fulfil derogation criteria, Ireland's carbon tax must, on average, remain above that of the ETS2 allowance price. Otherwise, Ireland would be effectively opting into the ETS2 arrangements. Pausing the carbon tax trajectory would increase the possibility that Ireland would be opted into ETS2.

The proposed recommendations from Senators O'Reilly and Murphy would come at great cost to the Exchequer and could potentially jeopardise other areas of investment. The package of Government support measures, which now totals over €1 billion, is helping to reduce the cost burden at the petrol pump, supporting those most at risk of energy poverty and assisting key sectors, including agriculture and haulage, that are critical to keeping our economy moving. These measures are deliberately time-bound and targeted because our approach must be both responsive and responsible. The Government will continue to act in a way that protects the most vulnerable and sustains our economic stability. As I said earlier, we will continue to monitor the situation and act accordingly, just as we have from the get-go. For the reasons I outlined, I am not in a position to accept the recommendations.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: I thank the Minister of State for his reply. I wish to ask about a few things. I am looking for an assessment to be carried out, and the Minister of State's indicated that this would give rise to a great cost for the Exchequer. The Government can be accused of the same thing I can be accused of, however, which is not having actual facts. What is the nature of that great cost? How much is it? That is what this recommendation is looking for, namely an assessment of the estimated annual reduction in tax receipts and the options available. It is about seeking other options. The social protection measures are very welcome, but we have the new working poor. These are the people we are most worried about, and the carbon tax affects them the most.

The Minister of State also indicated that my suggestions would only prolong the scheme times. I do not agree with him. We do not know that. I do not think that this has been thought through or that the alternatives have been investigated by the Government. Such alternatives should be investigated. That is all the recommendation asks of the Government.

Deputy Robert Troy: There is a cost to some of the Senator's recommendations. This arises on foot of the fact that she is proposing to stop the upward trajectory. If that change were to be introduced, there would be a cost associated with it. We can agree that is a matter of fact. I do understand that one of the Senator's proposals is to carry out a review of what alternatives could be used. That is fair enough. There is no cost to a review. That review is already happening, however, because every year the Department of Finance, working with the Department of public expenditure, produces the tax strategy papers whereby every tax head is examined in terms of the money it is generating annually. That includes carbon tax, VAT, PAYE

and corporation tax. The information obtained in that regard feeds into the summer economic statement, which outlines what the projected tax take for the country is going to be and the headroom relating to the upcoming budget. This is an annual process whereby every tax head, not just that relating to carbon tax - and I accept that the Senator's recommendation is exclusively concerned with the carbon tax - is examined in terms of what has come in by the end of June and what it is projected will come in by the end of the year.

In the context of the forthcoming summer economic statement, the Minister, Deputy Chambers, and the Tánaiste, Deputy Harris, will outline the parameters for the forthcoming budget. Every political party will then have an opportunity to feed into the budgetary process. The budget will be published by the governing parties and the Opposition parties will come forward with their alternative budgets.

It would be wrong to say that this carbon tax revenue could be compensated for in other ways.

As of budget 2026, that is, last October, over €4.2 billion in carbon tax had been collected since 2020. All of that has been going back into climate measures like retrofitting, fuel allowance, SEAI grants, environmental schemes from the Department of agriculture and funding for the just transition. Those moneys are being spent in the way intended all while ensuring those on the lowest incomes are protected against unintended consequences. The Senator mentioned the working poor. In recognition of people who are struggling and avail of the working family payment, in last year's budget we extended the fuel allowance. That meant 40,000 households became eligible for the allowance that had not been eligible before. That was in recognition that earners on lower incomes needed additional help.

Today is 7 July and we are focused on getting ready for budget 2027. That will be presented only a few weeks after the Dáil resumes after the summer recess. It is critically important and the Tánaiste, the Taoiseach and I are on record as saying there must be something in this budget for working families. Whether that is increased allowances or a reduction in the income tax rate, which is obviously my preference, people who are working should feel the benefit in this budget. I have every expectation they will.

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call Senator O'Reilly I welcome guests of Deputy Sheehan from the United States of America, as well as guests of Deputy Malcolm Byrne, who are teachers with a Gorey connection, I think. Enjoy the school holidays.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: This is the last time I will come in on this point. I accept what the Minister of State is saying. We are both more or less saying the same thing. It would be wrong not to recognise the measures the Government introduced have eased the burden on people who were put to the pin of their collar. People are less anxious and stressed out and the measures have eased the burden. Therefore, this was not a made-up reason to protest but was a protest based on a genuine need. If those pressures are put back on people who are to the pin of their collar we could have an escalation again and none of us want to see that. It is our responsibility to see the measures introduced have worked and worked well, which I think everybody agrees. We need to do more than tax people again. We need to come up with more alternatives. I hope what the Minister of State said is right and the budget deals with this more appropriately. However, at the minute those burdens have been eased and we cannot keep the

people who are working and keeping the country afloat taxed so highly they are unable to work, because it then becomes a hierarchy of needs. Are we going to tax them and tax them until we put them out of business, meaning they go on social welfare and we have to pay for them anyway? That is more or less what I am saying. If the Government taxes people until it puts them out of business, it is going to have to support them in some way anyway.

Recommendation put and declared lost.

Government recommendation No. 4:

In page 7, between lines 5 and 6, to insert the following:

“(3) The Finance Act 1999 is further amended, with effect as on and from the date of the passing of this Act, by the substitution of the following schedule for Schedule 2:

“SCHEDULE 2

RATES OF MINERAL OIL TAX

		Light Oil:						Heavy Oil:		Liquefied Petroleum Gas:	
		Rates per 1,000 litres						Rates per 1,000 litres		Rates per 1,000 litres	
With effect as on and from:	Petrol	Aviation gasoline	Used as a propellant	Used for air navigation	Used for private pleasure navigation	Kerosene used other than as a propellant	Fuel oil	Other heavy oil	Used as a propellant	Other liquefied petroleum gas	Vehicle gas: Rate per megawatt hour at gross calorific value
10 March 2022	€474.11	€474.11	€413.51	€413.51	€413.51	€84.84	€118.01	€120.55	€118.27	€54.68	€9.36
1 April 2022	€465.98	€465.98	€405.38	€405.38	€405.38	€84.84	€118.01	€120.55	€118.27	€54.68	€9.36
1 May 2022	€465.98	€465.98	€405.38	€405.38	€405.38	€103.83	€141.12	€111.14	€130.52	€66.93	€9.36
12 October 2022	€483.34	€483.34	€425.45	€425.45	€425.45	€103.83	€141.12	€111.14	€130.52	€66.93	€9.36
1 May 2023	€483.34	€483.34	€425.45	€425.45	€425.45	€122.83	€164.23	€131.47	€142.76	€79.17	€9.36
1 June 2023	€532.12	€532.12	€466.10	€466.10	€466.10	€122.83	€164.23	€140.28	€142.76	€79.17	€9.36

1 Septem ber 2023	€589. 03	€589. 03	€506.7 5	€506.75	€506.75	€122.8 3	€164. 23	€149. 09	€142.7 6	€79.17	€9.36
11 October 2023	€606. 39	€606. 39	€526.8 3	€526.83	€526.83	€122.8 3	€164. 23	€149. 09	€142.7 6	€79.17	€9.36
1 April 2024	€638. 91	€638. 91	€551.2 2	€551.22	€551.22	€122.8 3	€164. 23	€163. 96	€142.7 6	€79.17	€9.36
1 May 2024	€638. 91	€638. 91	€551.2 2	€551.22	€551.22	€141.8 2	€187. 34	€184. 30	€155.0 1	€91.42	€10.13
1 August 2024	€671. 43	€671. 43	€575.6 1	€575.61	€575.61	€141.8 2	€187. 34	€199. 17	€155.0 1	€91.42	€10.13
9 October 2024	€688. 78	€688. 78	€595.6 8	€595.68	€595.68	€141.8 2	€187. 34	€199. 17	€155.0 1	€91.42	€10.13
1 May 2025	€688. 78	€688. 78	€595.6 8	€595.68	€595.68	€160.8 1	€210. 45	€219. 50	€167.2 5	€103.66	€11.48
8 October 2025	€706. 14	€706. 14	€615.7 6	€615.76	€615.76	€160.8 1	€210. 45	€219. 50	€167.2 5	€103.66	€11.48
25 March 2026	€584. 18	€584. 18	€453.1 5	€453.15	€453.15	€160.8 1	€210. 45	€193. 06	€167.2 5	€103.66	€11.48
15 April 2026	€502. 88	€502. 88	€371.8 5	€371.85	€371.85	€160.8 1	€210. 45	€172. 14	€167.2 5	€103.66	€11.48
1 Septem ber 2026	€559. 79	€559. 79	€436.8 9	€436.89	€436.89	€160.8 1	€210. 45	€172. 14	€167.2 5	€103.66	€11.48
1 October 2026	€624. 84	€624. 84	€501.9 3	€501.93	€501.93	€160.8 1	€210. 45	€172. 14	€167.2 5	€103.66	€11.48
14 October 2026	€642. 19	€642. 19	€522.0 0	€522.00	€522.00	€179.8 1	€233. 57	€192. 47	€179.4 9	€115.90	€12.84
1 Novem ber 2026	€682. 84	€682. 84	€578.9 1	€578.91	€578.91	€179.8 1	€233. 57	€216. 15	€179.4 9	€115.90	€12.84
1 Decemb er 2026	€723. 49	€723. 49	€635.8 3	€635.83	€635.83	€179.8 1	€233. 57	€239. 83	€179.4 9	€115.90	€12.84
1 May 2027	€723. 49	€723. 49	€635.8 3	€635.83	€635.83	€198.8 0	€256. 68	€260. 16	€191.7 4	€128.15	€14.20
13 October 2027	€740. 85	€740. 85	€655.9 0	€655.90	€655.90	€198.8 0	€256. 68	€260. 16	€191.7 4	€128.15	€14.20

1 May 2028	€740.85	€740.85	€655.90	€655.90	€655.90	€217.80	€279.79	€280.49	€203.98	€140.39	€15.56
11 October 2028	€758.21	€758.21	€675.98	€675.98	€675.98	€217.80	€279.79	€280.49	€203.98	€140.39	€15.56
1 May 2029	€758.21	€758.21	€675.98	€675.98	€675.98	€236.79	€302.90	€300.83	€216.23	€152.64	€16.91
10 October 2029	€773.25	€773.25	€693.38	€693.38	€693.38	€236.79	€302.90	€300.83	€216.23	€152.64	€16.91
1 May 2030	€773.25	€773.25	€693.38	€693.38	€693.38	€253.25	€322.93	€318.45	€226.84	€163.25	€18.09

”.”.

Recommendation agreed to.

Section 2, with recommendation, agreed to.

SECTION 3

Senator Conor Murphy: I move recommendation No. 5:

In page 7, to delete lines 20 to 24.

Recommendation put and declared lost.

Section 3 agreed to.

SECTION 4

Senator Conor Murphy: I move recommendation No. 6:

In page 8 to delete lines 1 to 6.

Recommendation put and declared lost.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: I move recommendation No. 7:

In page 8, between lines 7 and 8, to insert the following:

“(2) The Minister shall undertake an examination of the Exchequer implications of abolishing Carbon Tax, including an assessment of the estimated annual reduction in tax receipts and the options available to offset such reduction.”.

Recommendation put and declared lost.

Section 4 agreed to.

An Cathaoirleach: Recommendation No. 8 in the names of Senators Harmon and Cosgrove has been ruled out of order.

Recommendation No. 8 not moved.

Section 5 agreed to.

Title agreed to.

Bill reported with recommendations.

An Cathaoirleach: When is it proposed to take the next Stage?

Senator Pat Casey: Now.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Not agreed.

Question put: "That the Bill be received for final consideration."

The Committee divided: Tá, 32; Níl, 7.	
Tá	Níl
Ahearn, Garret.	Andrews, Chris.
Blaney, Niall.	Black, Frances.
Boyle, Manus.	Collins, Joanne.
Brady, Paraic.	McCormack, Maria.
Byrne, Cathal.	Murphy, Conor.
Byrne, Maria.	O'Reilly, Sarah.
Casey, Pat.	Tully, Pauline.
Clifford-Lee, Lorraine.	
Conway, Joe.	
Conway, Martin.	
Cosgrove, Nessa.	
Crowe, Ollie.	
Curley, Shane.	
Daly, Paul.	
Davitt, Aidan.	
Duffy, Mark.	
Flaherty, Joe.	
Gallagher, Robbie.	
Harmon, Laura.	
Kelleher, Garret.	
Kennelly, Mike.	
Lynch, Eileen.	
McCarthy, Aubrey.	
Murphy, P. J.	
Nelson Murray, Linda.	
Ní Chuilinn, Evanne.	
O'Reilly, Joe.	
Rabbitte, Anne.	
Ryan, Dee.	
Scahill, Gareth.	
Stephenson, Patricia.	
Wilson, Diarmuid.	

Tellers: Tá, Senators Cathal Byrne and Paul Daly; Níl, Senators Conor Murphy and Sarah O'Reilly.

Question declared carried.

An Cathaoirleach: When will the next Stage be taken?

Senator Garret Ahearn: Now.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Question, "That the Bill be returned to the Dáil." put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 4.52 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 5.31 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 4.52 p.m. and resumed at 5.31 p.m.

Teachtaireacht ón Dáil - Message from Dáil

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Dáil Éireann passed the Israeli Settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (Prohibition of Importation of Goods) Bill 2026 on 7 July 2026, to which the agreement of Seanad Éireann is desired.

Criminal Justice (International Cooperation on Electronic Evidence and Other Matters) Bill 2026: Committee and Remaining Stages

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

Sections 1 to 7, inclusive, agreed to.

NEW SECTION

Senator Chris Andrews: I move amendment No. 1:

In page 10, between lines 33 and 34, to insert the following:

“8.The Minister, having consulted with the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, may by regulation direct that the Director suspend cooperation, in part or in full, with a state in breach of—

(a) the Rule of Law Conditionality Regulation, or

(b) Article 6 of the Treaty on European Union,

or whereby cooperation would place Ireland in breach of Article 6 of the Treaty on European Union.”.

We have seen in the past where democratic backsliding has occurred in EU member states, most notably Hungary, in terms of the rule of law and interference with the courts. There needs to be a mechanism available to Ireland which ensures that, where appropriate and necessary, we can suspend co-operation with the consent of the Ministers for justice and foreign affairs. Amendment No. 1 would introduce such a mechanism and prevent Ireland from being locked into agreements with states from which we diverge in regard to the rule of law and human rights. A case in point is that Ireland is currently stuck in the EU-Israel Association Agreement, seemingly without recourse and blocked from taking any action by other member states. We should not have signed up to that agreement. I hope we all agree that signing the agreement was a mistake. We have no ability to unilaterally leave it. We should avoid locking future Governments into that sort of position.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Catherine Ardagh): I regret that I cannot accept the Senator's amendment. The e-evidence package provides for co-operation between member states of the European Union. It does not allow one member state to unilaterally suspend its operation. The amendment would be in clear breach of our legal obligations under EU law.

On a point of principle, giving a member of the Executive the power to interfere with the exercise of judicial functions by a judicial authority within the European Union would be a breach of the democratic principles of the separation of powers and the rule of law. The director is being made independent specifically to prevent any suggestion that he or she might be subject to the influence or a direction from a member of the Executive as regards to the implementation of judicial orders. The e-evidence regulation already contains certain safeguards, including the provision in Article 1(3) which states that the regulation shall not have the effect of modifying the obligation to respect the fundamental rights and legal principles as enshrined in the charter and in Article 6 of the Treaty of the European Union.

The regulation also has specific safeguards where, under Article 8 the Irish enforcing authority must be notified of incoming European production orders, unless they relate to an offence in the issuing state committed by a person who resides in that state an execution can be refused. Article 10 provides a channel whereby the service provider may alert the Irish enforcing authority when it considers that the order would interfere with freedom of expression. Article 12 provides for a range of grounds on which an enforcing authority may refuse to execute a European production order. These grounds include: where the data is protected by immunities or privilege under the law of the enforcing state or where the data requested are covered by rules relating to freedom of the press or freedom of expression of other media where execution would result in a manifest breach of fundamental rights, as provided for by Article 6 of the Treaty of the European Union and in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union; where the execution order would violate the principle of *ne bis in idem* whereby a person cannot be tried or punished twice for the same offence; and where the conduct for which the order has been issued does not constitute an offence under the law of the enforcing state save in circumstances where the offence is listed in Annex 9 of the regulation and carries a maximum custodial sentence of at least three years in the issuing state.

In addition to the safeguards already outlined, I would also point to Recital 11 of the regulation, which confirms that nothing in the regulation should be interpreted as prohibiting the refusal of a European production order by an enforcing authority where there are reasons

to believe that the order has been issued for the purpose of prosecuting or punishing a person on account of a person's gender, racial or ethnic origin, religion, sexual orientation or gender identity, nationality, language or political opinions. For the reasons I have just outlined, I cannot accept the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Sections 8 to 16, inclusive, agreed to.

SECTION 17

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Amendments Nos. 2, 4 and 7 are related and may be discussed together by agreement. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Chris Andrews: I move amendment No. 2:

In page 15, between lines 14 and 15, to insert the following: “(g) ensure minimal administrative burden is placed on small to medium-sized service providers.”.

Ireland has a particular responsibility in terms of this legislation, given the number of service providers based here. Up to 600 service providers could be designated as addresses and they are expected to receive upwards of 300,000 orders annually as opposed to the 2,000 orders it is expected that Ireland will issue to service providers across all other EU states. As such, there is a concern as to the administrative burden that this would place on SMEs. It is right, therefore, that the director has it as a function to ensure this burden is minimised.

Amendment No. 2 seeks to address the point. While it is expected that a small handful of big tech companies will receive 90% of the requests, that still leaves a sizeable volume in terms of SMEs. The Department's SME test stated that for SMEs in particular the requirement under the e-evidence package for authorities to nominate an addressee as a single point of contact for law enforcement authorities seeking to access electronic evidence will make it easier and more affordable for service providers to authenticate production orders. However, the most significant burden on SMEs identified by the Commission's assessment is the obligation to designate and empower a legal representative. This is all taken directly from the Department's regulatory analysis. For SMEs not already engaged in voluntary direct co-operation activities, the e-evidence package presents a new regulatory burden that comes with potential legal, administrative and technical costs. SMEs that do not designate an addressee, for example, or that fail to comply with the e-evidence directive or regulation will be exposed to administrative penalties. While many large service providers will create their own infrastructure to connect with the decentralised IT system, a requirement for SMEs to do the same would have a disproportionate impact.

That report says that consideration is being given to the development of a web-based interface, which will allow service providers to communicate securely with authorities without having to establish their own infrastructure. Has this happened and will it be available by the time obligations are in force? Will SMEs be trained on it in advance? What is particularly concerning is that the Department has as yet no idea of the number of microenterprises with fewer than nine employees that will have to meet their obligation but does know, according to its own report, that SMEs will incur additional administrative costs.

Further to amendment No. 2, amendment No. 4 is needed to ensure that guidance has been provided to SMEs in advance of obligations kicking in. Likewise, amendment No. 7 seeks to protect SMEs should the Government's delay in bringing forward this legislation by the transposition deadline last February result in them being unready. Guidance must be provided and the online portal must be ready. Sinn Féin appreciates that mechanisms exist allowing for an adjudicator to opt not to impose a financial penalty in terms of micro-SMEs where requests are out of hours. However, some of these orders can have compliance times measured in hours, not days. Even an SME with 20 to 30 staff might struggle to have an appropriately trained person on hand effectively 24-7 who is able to process a request within those incredibly limited timeframes. Therefore, if these new obligations are to be placed on SMEs, the Government must hold up its end of the bargain and ensure that SMEs are adequately prepared before any financial penalties can even be considered to be brought to bear.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: Obviously, our Department is aware that the SMEs are the backbone of the Irish economy. Regretfully, I cannot accept any of these amendments. With regard to amendment No. 2, the legal obligations on service providers, including small-to-medium-sized enterprises, are determined by the regulation and directive and it is not open to the director to alter them. Furthermore, even if it were possible for Ireland to exclude SMEs from the scope of the e-evidence package, to do so would create a gap that could easily be exploited by criminals by moving to services offered by SMEs. This would seriously undermine the effectiveness of the e-evidence package.

In terms of measures to reduce the administrative burden, I will point Senators to sections 38 and 40 of the Bill, which are specifically designed to allow the director to remedy breaches by service providers without the need to proceed to investigations and the imposition of fines. In particular, the director can seek a compliance report to clarify what the issues are and may enter into an agreement with the service provider setting out the steps to be taken to remedy any issues identified. That said, if there is a case of non-compliance, there will be an administrative burden on service providers that are subject to investigation. This cannot be avoided if a proper, fair and impartial investigation is to be carried out.

The purpose of establishing an independent office is to ensure that the Minister, as a member of the Executive, does not have any direct role in the enforcement of the obligations on the service providers under this Bill. It would be neither desirable nor practical for the Minister to publish guidance notes when he or she has no role in determining compliance with the provisions. That is why section 22 provides that the director may issue guidance notes, and I will not agree to an amendment that would undermine the role of the director in that regard. I would again point out that the provisions at sections 38 and 40 are specifically designed to allow the director to remedy breaches by service providers without the need to proceed to investigations and the imposition on fines. In particular, the director can seek a compliance report to clarify what the issues are and may enter into an agreement with the service provider setting out the steps to be taken to remedy any issues. Furthermore, there is a legal obligation on adjudication officers under section 50(2)(f) to give special consideration to SMEs when considering the imposition of fines. The purpose is to ensure compliance and the imposition of fines is very much a last resort.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Is the Senator pressing the amendment?

Senator Chris Andrews: Yes.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Section 17 agreed to.

Sections 18 and 19 agreed to.

SECTION 20

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Amendments Nos. 3 and 6 are related and may be discussed together by agreement. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Chris Andrews: I move amendment No. 3:

In page 16, between lines 23 and 24, to insert the following:

“(4) Such an annual report shall contain statistical data in relation to—

(a) the number of orders which were notified to the Director,

(b) the number of orders that were refused,

(c) the number of agreements entered into with service providers under *section 40(1)* and the status thereof by category,

(d) the number of instances whereby a court confirmed, set aside, replaced, or remitted either the decision or financial penalty of an adjudicating officer,

(e) the number of instances whereby the Director failed to sanction or refuse an order within the required timeframe, and

(f) the whole-time equivalent allocation, by cost, by role,

including the data category requested, the addressees, the situation (emergency case or not), grounds for refusal by category, number of court appearances, by country of origin.”.

A significant concern raised on Dáil Committee Stage was the scale of the potential cost of the office. Deputies were not reassured by the officials. We know it is going to begin with a €2.8 million budget for this year, which will provide for 29 staff and associated costs. There are suggestions that staffing levels could reach upwards of 150. While the Department seems to think that the impact on the courts would be minimal, the Courts Service itself stated that limited data was available about the number of cases that may arise after commencement. Combined with the unknown outworkings of the Minister's reform to criminal legal aid and the EU Presidency putting pressure on the ability of gardaí to attend courts, who knows what type of backlog our courts will be facing after the summer?

Amendment No. 3 is intended, at the very least, to ensure that the Oireachtas has a full overview of the details, scale and volume of orders being processed in Ireland and the volume and associated cost being processed through this office. Similarly, amendment No. 6 seeks to

ensure that the director is supplied with the bare minimum level of information required to understand the burden being placed on our SMEs as well as to identify any potential trends of abuse of process and make sure that we are not unintentionally supporting them.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: Regretfully, I cannot accept these amendments. Section 20 requires the publication of an annual report, which shall include such information as the director considers appropriate or as the director may direct. The section deliberately did not prescribe in detail exactly what statistical data should be included. We are setting up a new entity, and until we have some experience of how it operates, it would be premature to determine what statistical information is most relevant and available. I believe we should maintain a flexible approach at this stage, but I will put on the record that I see no reason for the information referred to in the amendment not to be included in the annual report in due course. I remind Senators that the Freedom of Information Act will apply, so there will be no question of hiding information.

On amendment No. 6, the e-evidence package, as set out in the relevant regulation and directive, is an EU-wide measure. Article 28 of the regulation provides for the European Commission to establish a detailed programme for monitoring and reporting the outputs, results and impacts of the regulations and member states are obliged to gather the statistical data specified in Article 28(2). Some of the data may be collected by the director but it would not be right to impose a legal obligation on the director to gather data that may be more easily collected through other sources. The new regulation already provides a legally binding mechanism for monitoring and reporting and would not be appropriate or a good use of resources to try to create a duplicate system at this stage.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Is the Senator pressing the amendment?

Senator Chris Andrews: I am.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Section 20 agreed to.

Section 21 agreed to.

SECTION 22

Senator Chris Andrews: I move amendment No. 4:

In page 17, between lines 3 and 4, to insert the following:

“(2) Notwithstanding this section, the Minister shall, no later than 31 July, publish guidance notes for small to medium-sized service providers to promote compliance with their obligations under this Act.”.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Section 22 agreed to.

Sections 23 to 31, inclusive, agreed to,

SECTION 32

Senator Chris Andrews: I move amendment No. 5:

In page 21, between lines 34 and 35, to insert the following:

“(9) Counselling records in relation to sexual offence trials shall not be processed under this Act.”.

Over recent months, the Oireachtas discussed the disclosure of counselling notes during sexual offence trials in a domestic context. This amendment gets to the core of concerns with this Bill. What if a court in another jurisdiction ordered the release of counselling notes held by an Irish service provider, such as one that provides data storage?

Is the Minister of State willing to stand over legal protection for survivors of domestic, sexual or gender-based violence that is less than what we would provide for people in Ireland? The Minister of State might say that the legal system here is different and has different safeguards, and that would be true, but is she willing to stand over whichever legal system in the EU may provide the least protection to survivors? That would, in effect, be Ireland playing a supporting role in the lowest common denominator of European justice systems.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: I thank the Senators for this amendment and commend them for raising what is a very significant topic of concern and one that has been debated recently in this House at length.

I understand exactly why this issue matters so much to survivors of sexual violence and domestic abuse. For many survivors, counselling is a crucial and essential part of recovery. Counselling notes record some of the most private and painful information that a person will ever share, often at a time when they are at their most vulnerable. However, regrettably, I cannot accept this amendment. I want to set out why, in a manner that reflects the protections being put in place within the State and also in the context of the e-evidence regulation itself, to which this Bill will give further effect. I hope this will serve to provide some reassurance to survivors and to the Senators proposing these amendments.

We can all agree that the current statutory regime in Ireland relating to the use of counselling records in criminal trials for sexual offences is unacceptable. It is for that reason that the Minister has proposed, via the Criminal Law, Civil Law and Defence (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026, which was recently debated in this House, to amend section 19A of the Criminal Evidence Act 1992 to restrict the disclosure of counselling records and other personal records in sexual offence trials.

The amendment would delete the waiver provision contained in section 19A, which has all too often meant that victims have failed to benefit from the protections provided by the legislation. From now on, every time such counselling notes or personal records are sought by the defence, a court will carefully scrutinise the material and make an impartial and objective decision on whether disclosure is warranted.

Those amendments will also provide for a presumption of non-disclosure, ensuring that the default position is that these records are not to be disclosed. The exception will be where the court is satisfied, after examining the records, that they are likely to be relevant to an issue at

trial and that there would be a real risk of an unfair trial in the absence of such disclosure, or that it is otherwise in the interest of justice to so order.

The Minister was advised by the Attorney General that it was not possible to introduce an outright ban on the disclosure of counselling notes, as to do so would be unconstitutional. Nonetheless, the Minister is confident that the proposed amendments, if accepted by the Oireachtas, will end the routine disclosure to the accused of the complainant's counselling notes in the trial.

Neither the e-evidence regulation nor this Bill is the appropriate vehicle to legislate for this issue. Applications under the e-evidence regulation for the disclosure of counselling records during sexual offence proceedings in this or any other EU jurisdiction are likely to be exceedingly rare. In most jurisdictions, including our own, the person in possession or control of counselling records will normally be the counsellor or therapist concerned, not a service provider. In the ordinary course of events, any order by a court to produce such records would be directed to that counsellor and not to a service provider under the e-evidence regulation. Therefore, while I understand the concerns of Senators, the fact of the matter is that the e-evidence regulation is unlikely to play any significant role in applications for the production of such records, much less their disclosure during a trial.

Additionally, the regulation, which will have direct effect in all member states, provides under Article 5.2 that a European production order may be issued only if a similar order could have been issued under the same conditions in a similar domestic case. Thus, the relevant national law will apply in each jurisdiction. Each EU member state regulates the disclosure of sensitive medical and therapeutic records differently through its own criminal procedure laws. In each jurisdiction, the courts must balance the necessity of the evidence for the prosecution or defence against the profound intrusion into the victim's privacy that the disclosure of personal records may entail.

In Ireland, section 19A of the 1992 Act will apply, and the Minister's amendments are clearly intended to rebalance the current statutory regime in favour of protecting the victim's right to privacy. Ireland cannot act unilaterally to limit the scope of the regulation in this way. Likewise, it is for each member state, including Ireland, to determine the national rules that should apply to the disclosure of personal records in sexual offence trials. It is for this reason that I cannot accept the amendment.

Senator Chris Andrews: Could I ask for clarity?

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Yes.

Senator Chris Andrews: Consider where the records go before a judge for him or her to decide whether something is relevant. If it is a big file, does the judge redact all the material that he or she feels is not relevant to the case? There could be material that is irrelevant but could be used to hurt the abused person or the survivor.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: There is obviously a presumption of non-disclosure, so unless it is relevant, it would not be disclosed. That is my understanding.

Senator Chris Andrews: The judge could redact, in effect, the material he or she determines to be irrelevant.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: When it comes to regular legal privilege, such as between a solicitor and client, one would get the material only if it were absolutely relevant. If it were not relevant, it would not be disclosed. It would not be admissible.

Senator Chris Andrews: All right. I thank the Minister of State.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Section 32 agreed to.

Sections 33 to 37, inclusive, agreed to.

SECTION 38

Senator Chris Andrews: I move amendment No. 6:

In page 26, between lines 27 and 28, to insert the following:

"(2) The Director shall require all service providers to provide statistical information in relation to all orders received, including, by the data category requested, the addressees, the situation (emergency case or not), grounds for refusal by category, by country of origin."

Amendment put and declared lost.

Section 38 agreed to.

Sections 39 to 48, inclusive, agreed to.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Amendment No. 7 cannot be moved. It was already discussed with amendment No. 2.

Amendment No. 7 not moved.

Sections 49 to 70, inclusive, agreed to.

Schedule agreed to.

6 o'clock

Title agreed to.

Bill reported without amendment.

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

Senator Robbie Gallagher: Now.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Bill received for final consideration.

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

Senator Robbie Gallagher: Now.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Question proposed: "That the Bill do now pass."

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Catherine Ardagh): I thank colleagues for their engagement today and for the Bill's progression through the Houses.

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 6.01 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 6.31 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 6.01 p.m. and resumed at 6.31 p.m.

Public Health (Single-Use Vapes) Bill 2025: Committee and Remaining Stages

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Murnane O'Connor and her officials.

Sections 1 to 20, inclusive, agreed to.

NEW SECTION

Senator Joanne Collins: I move amendment No. 1:

In page 16, after line 20, to insert the following:

“Review of Act and of smoking cessation supports

21.(1) The Minister shall, within 18 months of the passing of this Act, conduct a review, to be laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas within 24 months of the passing of this Act, to—

- (a) examine the operation and effectiveness of this Act,
- (b) examine more broadly the effectiveness of public health laws and cessation supports relating to tobacco and nicotine products, and
- (c) recommend measures for achieving reductions in the nicotine content of tobacco products, expanded smoking cessation supports, and further encourage a reduction in smoking rates.”.

This amendment is an effort to gauge the public's reaction to the Bill, examine if banning single-use vapes actually changes anything, including whether it is having an impact on people taking up smoking or vaping, and investigates smoking cessation. Let us see what is out there

and whether there are any new products or if we can be more active rather than consistently reactive to nicotine or smoking cessation. We should look to see what products are out there and whether we can make them more accessible to individuals who want to give up smoking.

I do not have a problem banning single-use vapes and nor does my party. I am a vaper and I think single-use vapes are the most expensive way to go. You might as well go back smoking with their cost. If you are going to vape like a smoker does, you will use one single-use vape every single day. I think it is a good thing to ban them whether because of the littering we see everywhere or their incorrect disposal.

I do not think this Bill will have the effect the Department hopes for. Single-use vapes will be imported. If someone wants to use a single-use vape, they will find a way around this. I do not think it is something you can mitigate against here today. Vaping is a part of our culture now.

The next Bill coming will look at flavours. Again, I do not think that will sort anything. I have been told that if I want flavours after the new Bill comes in, there will be no problem getting them - they can be got. We need to look at the reasons people are vaping and coming off cigarettes, but we also need to look at making this ban more acceptable to people. The Bill is looking at banning single-use vapes. People are asking me why there was never anything done about cigarettes bar changing the packaging. It took until December 2023 to say that vapes were illegal for sale to under-18s. It completely blew my mind. I thought it was a given that under-18s could not buy them because there was nicotine in them.

Enforcement will be our biggest issue with vaping. We need to go back to what it was like when I was young and you went into a shop to buy cigarettes and the person behind the till would ask for ID because they knew they would be fined. They had the fear regardless of whether it ever happened. We need to go back to that because I do not believe any child should have a vape in their hand. It is absolutely crazy. The only reason I started vaping was to give up cigarettes. Shamefully, I will say I was 11 when I first started smoking, which was the norm back when I was 11 years old - everybody did it. I was lucky to be able to come off cigarettes and go on a vape. Do not ask me if it is healthier – I could not say, as I have not got a clue – but I know it is cheaper for me. I did not have any negative health effects from smoking, I do not have any negative health effects from vaping but I do not like to see children with them in their hands, so I am with the Minister of State on that. However, we need to put a lot of effort into the enforcement side and not collective punishment. We need to make sure that the sellers of vapes are afraid in the same way those selling cigarettes were afraid a long time ago. You will not see someone asking for 20 Benson and Hedges without being asked for ID if they look like they are under the age of 18. Sellers need to start doing that. We need to be a lot stricter about checking the age for buying vapes.

We have tabled this amendment because we want to see how the legislation is working. If it is not working, then we can come back and look at something else. It will be good to have a report on the legislation. I am a great advocate for doing something and checking later to make sure that whatever you did actually worked. If it does not, then it can be amended or added to where necessary.

I will leave it at that and not ramble too much more.

Senator Teresa Costello: I think that the Bill will be very successful in reducing the amount of people who vape. Single-use vapes are easily accessible for kids. They are something to grab. Kids are not going to get into the habit of charging vapes and so on but they can just grab a single-use vape and fling it away. Where we will see how it is working is when we take a walk in our local communities and we are not kicking vape packages out of our way.

As a cancer survivor, I hate cigarettes and smoking. I never took up smoking because I was far too vain - I thought it would age me – so vanity saved me from that addiction. I understand that nicotine is an addiction. Senator Collins made me shudder when she said vaping was a part of our culture. I welcomed the smoking ban. The smoking ban was one of the single best things that ever happened in Ireland. I worked in a pub and used to smell of cigarettes coming home. I did not like the smell of them. The ban was brilliant. It took away the fashionable thing of having a cigarette in the pub and we need to do that with vapes. Kids these days are into the gym and keeping fit – I see that with my young fellow – but single-use vapes look like they are harmless. There is an education piece. I have no doubt that the Bill will be successful. Anything we can do to make vapes more difficult for kids to get their hands on is a win for me.

On the Senator's amendment, I think we will see the evidence on the roads, our parks and everywhere. We will see a decline in the packaging and the environmental hazard it creates.

Senator Gareth Scahill: I agree wholeheartedly. As someone who has been out with communities cleaning up our streets and parks, the volume of these single-use vapes that builds up all over the place is amazing.

The Bill has an enforcement side. Every day, Senators come in to this Chamber to talk about one thing or another, and the lack of enforcement. The Minister and Ministers of State empower the HSE in this area and are giving them powers to impose significant fines on businesses found in contravention. Rather than including an amendment to revisit and analyse effectiveness we need to come down strong on vapes because they are a blight on communities. If we give the HSE the powers to enforce this and people still say they will be able to get single-use vapes then they need to be reported and the vapes tracked down because we are not fully sure what is in the stuff that is coming here from other jurisdictions as those products do not undergo the same safety measures and precautions according to European standards. We need to do that because there is an onus on us to protect everyone, including young people who vape. If the protections are not there with the levels of nicotine and other substances that are in these single-use vapes then we must come down hard on them and the Bill does that. I do not feel that the amendment is needed but I see exactly where this Bill is going and fully support it.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I welcome the guests of Senator McCarthy. It is a great privilege to welcome Niall and Gillian Quinn. I thank them for all their years of service to football. I wish them all the best and I hope they enjoy their visit here this evening.

Senator Martin Conway: I echo the welcome to Niall and Gillian Quinn, and the commendation on the great work they do.

I welcome the Minister of State. I have spoken extensively in this House on the need for tougher regulations on vaping and the detrimental effect that vaping is having on a generation

of young people in this country. I strongly believe we have been far too slow in dealing with this issue.

In the last term I had rows with the former Minister for Health, Stephen Donnelly, over his absolute snail's pace movement to deal with this. At least the Minister of State is dealing with it in a much more efficient and determined way. Of course I would have liked to have seen an awful lot more in this legislation. Personally, I believe that vapes should be banned and that if a person requires a vape to give up nicotine and cigarettes then it should be by prescription. That is not an unprecedented move. That is how it is done in Australia. People can vape in Australia but they require a prescription from their GP to acquire a vape. A prescription is only granted on the basis that a person requires a vape to give up smoking.

I believe that the proliferation of vape shops the length and breadth of this country, in every town and village, has destroyed the streetscape. Vape shops, coupled with mobile phone shops and other such outlets but particularly vape shops, are very unpleasant. I have quoted extensively the situation in my own county of Clare. When I was a child there was a very famous music shop in Ennis called the Record Rack where we all went to buy CDs, tapes, etc. It is horrendous to think that the old Record Rack is now a vape shop. Around the corner there is a number of vape shops on Abbey Street and O'Connell Street. In any shopping centre in this country there are vape shops. There are vape kiosks. There are vapes advertised in SuperValu and all of the big retail outlets and they are glorious looking. The signage for vapes is in your face. The situation will not improve until such time as we are bold and brave and decide that we will treat vapes the same way as we treated cigarettes and put them under the counter. We must get rid of these awful shops from our main streets and do what Micheál did. In March 2004, Micheál Martin banned smoking in pubs and restaurants and I recall the reaction of vintners. I have great time for the vintners and they do great work but at the time they said that they run the parties because they have their meetings in their premises. At that stage, the majority of people probably were against the smoking ban but now 98% of the population would oppose a proposal to re-introduce smoking in pubs and restaurants.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: May I interrupt the Senator and remind him that we are speaking about single-use vapes.

Senator Martin Conway: I am aware of that.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: His conversation is going everywhere.

Senator Martin Conway: It is all interwoven. I want to make the point that if the Minister of State were to propose the re-introduction of smoking now as many as 98% of people would oppose it and even people who smoke would be opposed to it. To make a tough decision on vaping may sound unpopular or draconian but I can assure everyone that in a few years' time, the public will realise that it was the right thing to do. By banning single-use vapes is a very important incremental step in the right direction and I commend the Minister of State on that.

Senator Aubrey McCarthy: I thank the Minister of State for being here and commend her on this important Bill. We should have dealt with vapes before now so it is timely that the Minister of State, as a new appointee, is dealing with it now.

Before I continue I would like to welcome my friends in the Gallery, as the Leas-Chathaoirleach has mentioned, especially Gillian who is here with her husband Niall. Gillian has recently graduated with a PhD in psychology from Dublin City University so she is assessing every one of the Senators now as they speak. Congratulations from all of us here and we are delighted to have the couple with us here today.

I support the amendment because it adds value to the legislation. Tobacco control cannot stand still as the products constantly change, as has been mentioned by my colleagues. There is also the changing tactics and colours used to market vapes and our response must keep pace. We also need to continue to invest in helping people who genuinely want to quit whether that is better access to counselling, community-based supports or nicotine replacement therapies. I know that there is a view of changing the colours and things like that. I believe all of that working together will save lives and reduce the long-term costs for the State.

I simply ask the Minister of State and her Department continue to keep this area under close review, as the amendment suggests. With the products that cause real harm, particularly to young people - the Minister of State will know that I am involved in the youth sector through Tiglin - we need to ensure that the legislation evolves just as quickly as the challenges that we face.

Senator Joanne Collins: It is great that enforcement is mentioned in the Bill but we need to do more than simply having it in the Bill on its own without having staff to enforce the legislation. The reason I say that is because I have spoken to representatives of The Sunbed Council of Ireland who have told me about scenarios. They told me about one or two incidents where they were in salons and saw underage people going in to use sunbeds but when they reported it they were told, "Yes, we kind of know that goes on sometimes but we do not have the staff to go out". Therefore, I ask that the Minister of State ensures that it is included in the Bill that staff are provided who will enforce the legislation.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): I thank everyone and understand that there are challenges. We never had the intention of ever removing the ban on disposable vapes because they are targeted at young people. As Senators have said, vapes are a blight on society and vape shops are visible in every town and village. We are very mindful of the fact that after one use vapes are put in bins or littered on streets and have no place in society. It is important for everyone to realise that the national environmental health service will report on its enforcement as it does with all tobacco-related products.

The amendment also proposes a broader review of the effectiveness of the public health laws, along with the recommendations around reducing nicotine levels in tobacco and expanding support for stop smoking services and general reduction of nicotine campaign. I have done a lot of work on that. There has been a lot of work invested through my own Department whether that is through the Quit Smoking campaign, apps and working with young people. Awareness is very important and it is information and education.

The Department has invested in that and we will continue to do more because we know that we need to. We are in complete agreement on the need for the work to happen. However, this amendment to the Bill is not necessary because - this is the good news for the Senator - we are already reviewing our national tobacco control policy, Tobacco Free Ireland, with the aim of

bringing our smoking rates to lower than 5%. It is being reviewed. We are bringing in policy. I understand that there are concerns but that is happening. As we are currently at 17%, it is clear that we need to do more. We are looking at all possible measures. That includes looking at reducing barriers to access to all the different services.

The Senator spoke about enforcement. That is important. As part of this programme, 30 additional whole-time equivalent staff have been allocated to the national environmental health service. Recruitment for those posts is ongoing. We need to enforce this. I understand that. When we bring in legislation, we have to enforce it. As I have said, we are investing in 30 additional new whole-time equivalent staff. We are putting funding into this so that we can enforce the law. The Senator spoke about inspections. There were 754 inspections in 2025. This was an increase of 310 on 2024. In prosecutions, we had 38 of the 40. We are doing that.

Work is being done. I understand that we absolutely need to do more, as the Senator has said. I will work with all of the Senators here. We must all work together. This is about our young people. It about awareness, information and education. As the Senator will know, I am bringing forward a second Bill. That will be later this year. It will ban flavourings and restrict the colours on packaging. I hope to have that in quite soon. On the policies the Senator has spoken about, which are vital, I will have them ready by the end of the year. It is important that everything is reviewed and that policies are in place because we need them.

I again thank the Senator and everyone who has spoken but I do not propose to accept this amendment because the work the amendment seeks, which is needed, is already under way. It is important to have these conversations so that the Senators will know what work my Department is doing. If any Senators want any more information or if there is anything they need to know, I encourage them to contact myself or the Department. We will be absolutely delighted to fill them in on the work that is being done.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Title agreed to.

Bill reported without amendment.

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

Senator Gareth Scahill: Now.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Bill received for final consideration.

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

Senator Gareth Scahill: Now.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Question proposed: "That the Bill do now pass."

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): I thank everyone. This is my first Bill so I am absolutely thrilled. I will have a second Bill coming in a few months. This is about all of us working together. It is about our young people. We do not need single-use vapes. This is a health-led approach. We in the Department of Health are leading on this with health in mind. The EU law is expected soon. I hope there will be an EU-wide ban. That is what we are looking for in working with our EU colleagues. I again thank all of the Senators. As I have said, if they want information or updates on anything at any time, they should contact my Department.

Question put and agreed to.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I congratulate the Minister of State.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar athló ar 6.54 p.m. go dtí 10.30 p.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 8 Iúil 2026.

The Seanad adjourned at 6.54 p.m. until 10.30 p.m. on Wednesday, 8 July 2026.