



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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SEANAD ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 16 Iúil 2026

Thursday, 16 July 2026

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

Machnamh agus Paidir.

Prayer and Reflection.

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad

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

Senator Garret Kelleher - The need for the Minister for Health to provide an update on the section 39 core funding and State support being provided to Westgate Foundation, Ballincollig, County Cork.

Senator Laura Harmon - The need for the Minister for Education and Youth to provide an update on additional school accommodation for Coláiste Daibhéid, Cork city.

Senator Teresa Costello - The need for the Minister for Transport to make a statement on a review and update of the design manual for urban roads and streets.

Senator Dee Ryan - The need for the Minister for Transport to make a statement on the provision of funding to deliver the Limerick BusConnects programme.

Senator Aubrey McCarthy - The need for the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment to make a statement on the timeframe for the transposition of the platform work directive.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove - The need for the Minister for Transport to make a statement on the approval of tender documents for the construction of the eastern Garavogue Bridge and approach roads in Sligo.

Senator Robbie Gallagher - The need for the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to make a statement on the roll-out of a nationwide DNA dog testing trial.

Senator Gareth Scahill - The need for the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality to make a statement on the measures being taken to improve accessibility for people with disabilities in our towns and villages.

Senator Alison Comyn - The need for the Minister for Education and Youth to make a statement on the inclusion of philosophy as a leaving certificate subject.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly - The need for the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment to make a statement on the environmental benefits of the deposit return scheme.

The matters raised by the Senators are suitable for discussion. The Cathaoirleach has selected those raised by Senators Kelleher, Harmon, Costello and Ryan and they will be taken now. The other Senators may give notice on another day of the matters they wish to raise.

Nithe i dtosach suíonna - Commencement Matters

Community Care

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Kieran O'Donnell.

Senator Garret Kelleher: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit, an Teachta O'Donnell, as ucht teacht isteach maidin inniu chun déileáil leis an ní seo, a bhaineann le Westgate Foundation i mBaile an Chollaigh i gCorcaigh. Tá sé riachtanach go ndéanfar gach aon iarracht na seirbhísí iontacha atá á soláthar ag Westgate Foundation a chosaint. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit as an obair ar fad atá déanta aige ar son Westgate Foundation agus as an gcuart a thug sé air i mí an Mhárta chun na seirbhísí ar fad a fheiscint agus chun bualadh leis an bhfoireann bainistíochta, chomh maith le lucht bainistíochta HSE.

Mar is eol don Aire Stáit, is fiorthábhachtach an rud é cinnteacht a thabhairt do Westgate Foundation faoi thodhchaí na heagraíochta agus seans a thabhairt don fhoireann bainistíochta na seirbhísí a fhorbairt i gcomhréir leis na riachtanais atá ag dul i méid i measc daoine aosta inár bpobal i mBaile an Chollaigh agus sna ceantair mórthimpeall orainn. Ballincollig is a very special place. It is a thriving and progressive town with a fantastic community spirit, a culture of volunteerism and a strong sense of togetherness and inclusion. At the heart of our community, quietly catering for the needs of our senior citizens, is the Westgate Foundation. Westgate provides invaluable services to our senior citizens and the areas surrounding Ballincollig. These services include a day care programme led by nurses and healthcare assistants, community catering with meals-on-wheels, social activities and transport.

The work done by the team at Westgate Foundation enables older people in our community to stay at home and live independently while maintaining a vital social connection. The services provided give Westgate clients the support they need to maintain and enjoy this independence. Without the provision of these community-based services, there is no doubt that the likelihood of elderly service users requiring home care packages and nursing home support would increase significantly. A majority of service users have considerable health challenges associated with growing old, including dementia, declining mobility, and the adverse impacts of social isolation.

As the Minister of State is aware, Westgate Foundation is reliant on section 39 State funding, administered through the HSE South West, to provide services to senior citizens. It has become increasingly apparent over the past number of years that the funding provided through the service level agreement is no longer sufficient to maintain services at their current levels. This

issue has been dealt with at irregular intervals and on an *ad hoc* basis by the HSE in recent years when it has been recognised that the core funding provided is inadequate and top-up payments of various amounts have been made in an effort to ensure the continuity the services.

As the Minister of State is aware, one of the primary reasons for the increased costs being borne by Westgate Foundation is related to the fact that the organisation had been heavily dependent on the community employment scheme, which is an unsustainable position given that the economy is effectively operating at full employment. It is of a crucial importance that Westgate is given the financial support and certainty from the State that it needs to ensure its future and long-term viability at the heart of the Ballincollig community. The Minister of State will be aware from his recent visit that there are long waiting lists for services. These waiting lists are primarily administered through HSE referrals and public health nurses locally.

That lends further emphasis to the fact that needs are growing and there is increasing demand in the community. Financial certainty is required on a long-term basis to ensure the viability of the organisation. I thank the Minister of State for the support he has given thus far in relation to these challenges.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Before I call on the Minister of State, I would like to acknowledge Senator Kelleher's parents in the Gallery. It is great to see them here for the Senator's debate.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): I join the Leas-Chathaoirleach in welcoming the Kellehers to the Seanad, which is a beautiful building in its own right.

I thank Senator Kelleher for raising this important matter. He has advocated for Westgate Foundation over a sustained period of time and that has to be acknowledged. I know the work it does is close to his heart. I know first-hand because I visited the Westgate Foundation centre with him. I found it to be warm and engaging and it provides a great service to its community. I thank all the people involved.

It is a key priority for the Government to support older people to remain living independently in their own homes and communities for as long as possible with dignity, choice and appropriate supports. The triangle of supports of home care, day care and meals on wheels services — including dementia-specific supports — plays a vital role in helping older people to age well in their own communities. Meals on wheels services provide much more than nutritious meals. They are an invaluable resource in helping older people maintain their health and independence while also addressing social isolation. The services benefit not only those who receive meals, but also their families, who gain reassurance from regular contact and support for their loved ones. Day care services are similarly an essential component of social care provision. They provide opportunities for social engagement, health monitoring and community participation for older people who may otherwise be at risk of isolation and loneliness.

The Government has significantly increased investment in meals on wheels services in recent years. Funding increased from €3.5 million in 2022 to €6.25 million in 2025, with a further €2 million allocated in budget 2026 to support service expansion and maintenance.

Nationally, almost 2.94 million meals were delivered in 2025, while funding has been allocated to deliver 3.3 million meals during 2026.

To the Senator's specific point, the HSE advises that Westgate Foundation plays an important role in supporting older people in their communities through the provision of day care and meals on wheels services. From visiting with the Senator, I have seen that at first hand. The organisation currently operates a day care service four days per week, supporting approximately 60 registered users, and a meals on wheels service with 104 registered users.

The HSE has advised that increased funding has been committed to support the organisation. Total funding of over €520,000 was provided in 2025, while agreed funding for 2026 amounts to almost €686,000, including core section 39 funding, once-off supports, WRC funding and meals on wheels funding. In addition, Westgate Foundation received €25,000 under the community capital programme.

The HSE continues to engage closely with the organisation regarding its operational and financial position, staffing arrangements and service delivery needs to older people in the area. I welcome the ongoing engagement between HSE South West and Westgate Foundation and I look forward to the continued provision of these valuable services for older people and their families in the greater Ballincollig area. I understand meetings will take place in the coming days between HSE South West and Westgate Foundation. It is a hugely important service that Westgate Foundation provides. I know how committed the Senator is to advocating on its behalf.

Senator Garret Kelleher: I thank the Minister of State for his response and acknowledge the behind-the-scenes work going on between the HSE management in the south-west region and the management team at Westgate, which is crucial.

I neglected to mention one thing in my initial contribution, of which the Minister of State will be well aware. It was opportune he came down and visited, given he is also a Minister of State in the Department of housing. It is the fact that Westgate provides housing and sheltered housing. I mentioned in my opening remarks that there is a strong voluntary and community spirit. One service user and resident in Westgate is in her 90s and is an active member of Ballincollig Tidy Towns. She is somebody of whom we as a community are very proud. The fact she is in Westgate and able to participate and volunteer at local level speaks volumes about the independence it affords to people.

There is an ongoing conversation in Cork on the development of light rail, the Luas line, with Ballincollig being on the western side of that. A lot of people contacting me locally were lobbying for the extension of the Luas line further west and one of the key reasons was to include Westgate. It is recognised Westgate is at the heart of the community.

I emphasise again the urgency with which this must be dealt with. It is a matter of immediate concern to the management team in Westgate and it is causing stress. We need to deliver certainty and predictability so the future of the organisation can be guaranteed.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I again thank the Senator for raising Westgate Foundation in Ballincollig and the work it does on behalf of the community, particularly older people. The

Senator referred to housing on-site. It is very much an integrated model. I could see how committed the staff and the board, many of them voluntary, were.

The HSE has confirmed it continues to work closely with the Westgate Foundation regarding its operational and financial position. Meetings have taken place between the HSE and Westgate in relation to organisational and funding requirements, staffing arrangements and service delivery. Further meetings are to take place in the coming days between HSE South West and Westgate Foundation to discuss the situation. The shared objective of the HSE and Westgate Foundation is to ensure high-quality day care and meals on wheels services continue to be available to older people who rely on them, particularly in the greater Ballincollig area. These services make a real difference to the lives of older people, helping them remain connected, supported and independent in their communities.

I welcome the continued engagement between HSE and Westgate Foundation and look forward to seeing these important services maintained and strengthened for the benefit of older people and their families in the greater Ballincollig area.

School Accommodation

Senator Laura Harmon: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit, an Teachta Harkin. I want to discuss Coláiste Daibhéid in Cork city, which is a fantastic school I had the privilege of visiting recently. Bhí an-áthas orm bualadh leis an scoil agus na daltaí le déanaí, chomh maith leis an bpríomhoide agus leis an bhfoireann, chun plé a dhéanamh ar go leor ceistanna trí Ghaeilge. Tá súil agam go mór go mbeidh muid in ann dul chun cinn a dhéanamh maidir le foirgneamh nua don scoil. Tá géarghá leis an bhfoirgneamh nua. Ba mhór an t-ábhar inní é an t-uisce ag sceitheadh ón díon a fheiceáil, chomh maith leis na buicéid a chuirtear amach chun an uisce a bhailiú. Tá sé seo ar fad ag tarlú gar do cháblaí leictreachais. Is ceist sláinte agus sábháilteachta í seo. Tá géarghá leis an bhfoirgneamh nua seo don scoil.

Will the Minister of State provide an update on what has been done to progress the request for additional school accommodation for Coláiste Daibhéid in Cork city and a timeline for the project? The school's preference is option 1B, to ensure a hall, canteen and ASD hub can be provided, while also addressing accessibility, safety and serious roof leak issues. Some 23 leaks have been identified in one part of the school currently, which is worrying, and a lot of them are affecting electricity cables. This is worrying for staff and students. Coláiste Daibhéid is a Gaelcholáiste, an Irish-medium second level school, which provides the students of Cork city and surrounding areas access to a co-educational, multi-denominational educational opportunity through Irish. The school's patron is the Cork Education and Training Board, CETB. It reaches high standards academically as well as in sport, STEM and stewardship. It has fantastic students and they deserve better.

At present, the school is on the edge of Douglas Street Campus on Sawmill Street. There are two buildings. One is Buckingham House, which dates from the mid-19th century. It is a protected building with a first floor that is only accessible by a stairs. It houses practical subjects, offices and work areas. The second building, known as an t-áras, was completed in 2011. It has eight classrooms with toilet facilities. The first floor is accessed by stairs and a lift.

What are the problems? Buckingham House is not fit for purpose for a school. When I visited, I noticed some of the following issues. It cannot be accessed from the road. There are parking issues. There is not enough room for a wheelchair to go around the side of the building. There is no obvious proper entrance. The reception is upstairs. There is no lift access for anyone with mobility issues, buggies or deliveries. The classrooms are an irregular shape and are not the standard classroom size of 49 sq. m. There are inadequate corridor space, uneven floor levels and an unsatisfactory ASD room and it is necessary to go through one classroom to access another. It is cold, with high heating costs and the pipes burst regularly. The woodwork room has no machinery. The home economics room is too small and has no storage area. There is a lack of storage space in general.

What is the school seeking? An application for additional accommodation for the school was first raised in January 2020. Since then, it has been waiting for updates. The latest report was submitted in August 2025 and the school wants the Minister of State's help to move the project to a stage 1B meeting with the Department. The aim would be to move the process to a joint stage 2A and 2B to advance the project at a rapid pace but the preferred building plan option is option 1B.

I would like to hear the Minister of State's response on this. I thank her for attending this morning.

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Marian Harkin): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Seanadóir Harmon for raising this issue as it gives me the opportunity to update the House on behalf of the Minister for Education and Youth on the current position regarding the planned school building project at Coláiste Daibhéid, Cork. As the Senator said, her question is a ceist sláinte agus sábháiblteachta.

An extension project at the school has been approved to enter the Department's pipeline for school building projects under the additional school accommodation, ASA, scheme to provide one multimedia room, one textiles room, one graphics room, one construction room, one technology preparation area, one science laboratory, one science laboratory preparation area and one project store. The feasibility of a physical education, PE, hall or general purpose-dining hall accommodation on the site is also to be explored as part of the design process. This project is devolved to the Cork Education and Training Board, CETB, for delivery.

The stage 1 preliminary design report, outlining the proposed design and costings, has been submitted to the Department and is currently under review. In line with the Department's infrastructure guidelines, all projects, including this one, are subject to the necessary technical and cost assessments as part of this process. Given the complexity of the evaluation, and the need to ensure full cost compliance and alignment with the national development plan, NDP, this review is necessarily thorough. Once the review is complete, the outcome will be communicated to CETB, which will continue to engage directly with the school authorities to ensure they are kept fully informed of progress.

Although this project is not included in the first tranche of school building projects under the NDP sectoral investment plan, it remains part of the Department's overall pipeline. A Department-led prioritisation process will continue over the course of 2026 and 2027 to assess and evaluate the progression of individual projects through the design pipeline. The process

will involve engagement with key stakeholders and individual schools and will ultimately inform the next tranches of programme roll-out.

The Department-led energy and condition survey of the school estate, which will be finalised later in 2026, will provide an additional evidence base for assessing priorities. A further tranche of projects to progress to tender is expected to be confirmed in 2027. As prioritisation continues, additional projects may be included where justified by urgency and readiness to proceed, and subject to funding. Opportunities for advance enabling works will also be considered for the most urgent and complex projects to support delivery from 2028 onwards.

Do I still have time? The clock is red.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Garret Kelleher): You still have 30 seconds. It is just counting down.

Deputy Marian Harkin: Furthermore, priority projects at earlier stages of the pipeline continue to be advanced - the Senator probably needs to hear that - with particular emphasis on special schools, schools operating entirely in interim accommodation, projects providing significant special education capacity, additional accommodation to meet demographic growth, and schools with the most pressing building condition issues.

Senator Laura Harmon: I thank the Minister of State for her response. Will she call for a meeting in person with the school? Could that be facilitated to give the school an update in person? Does she have an idea as to a commitment on the timeline? In order that I have clarity on the timeline, did she say it will be considered in the next tranche in 2026-27 or will it be confirmed in 2028?

I reiterate the value the school brings to Cork in the education it provides. It was a pleasure to meet the principal, Mr. Tadhg Ó Laighin, and the students, recently. I have heard from many parents who are concerned, particularly about the safety issues. I have a serious concern. They need to be addressed without delay because there is an accident waiting to happen with these leaks and the water going onto the electricity cables. It is a matter of utmost urgency.

Deputy Marian Harkin: As I said, a further tranche of projects to progress to tender is expected to be confirmed next year. I gave a list of the types of priority projects that will be looked at. They include special schools, schools operating entirely in interim accommodation, projects providing significant special education capacity, additional accommodation to meet demographic growth, and schools with the most pressing building condition issues - that seems to be what the Senator is describing.

Regarding meetings with the Minister, I am not in a position to commit to that.

Obviously, if that is what the Senator is looking for, she can contact the Minister. I will send the Minister a note stating that is what she is looking for. As she and I know, it will be up to her to organise it. I thank her for providing me, on behalf of the Minister, an opportunity to outline the Department's position on the project. The Department remains committed to providing ongoing guidance and practical support in the delivery of this project and will

continue to engage closely with patron bodies, management bodies and schools on the progression of projects through the school building pipeline. This includes continued engagement with Coláiste Daibhéid and Cork ETB.

Road Projects

Senator Teresa Costello: I thank the Minister of State for being here today. Over the past few years and during my time as a councillor, there have been many changes to the roads in my area. It led me to ask the Minister to undertake a comprehensive review of the design manual for urban roads and streets, commonly known as DMURS. I appreciate the principles behind DMURS are good ones. We all want safer roads, lower vehicle speeds, where appropriate, better facilities for pedestrians and cyclists, and communities that are more accessible and more sustainable. However, while the policy objectives are commendable, there is increasing concern that the implementation of DMURS in some locations has gone too far and is creating unintended consequences.

These concerns are being raised repeatedly by residents in my area. For example, in Tallaght, Firhouse and Ballyroan, people are telling me that the road and junction narrowing has led to increased congestion, longer journey times and frustration on the part of motorists, while also making it more difficult for buses, delivery vehicles and larger vehicles to navigate safely. They are not isolated complaints. They are concerns that are being expressed consistently by people in my area. On Firhouse Road West, residents have raised concerns during the delivery of active travel measures that the narrowing of junctions creates delays and operational difficulties. The response they got was that the design complied with DMURS, the national guidance, and that the narrowing was intended to reduce speeding without affecting capacity. Independent road safety audits were also carried out. I looked at one particular junction where cars were constantly overshooting white lines. It was very confusing and difficult for motorists.

The proposed removal of village car parking under DMURS creates significant challenges. We have just gone through a Part 8 public consultation process in Tallaght where the Tallaght village on-street car parking is being removed. Many villages have limited on-street car parking already and public transport is not really up to scratch to facilitate people's needs. People rely on convenient parking to support local businesses, residents, older people and visitors. Reducing parking without providing practical alternatives risks harming accessibility, weakens village centres and places unnecessary pressure on local economies.

While I acknowledge the council's position, many local people's lived experience has been different from what has been said about DMURS. We are seeing queues building up at peak times, greater difficulty accessing side roads and a road network that is becoming less efficient for everyone who depends on it. The issue is not whether we should provide safe infrastructure for pedestrians and cyclists; we should. It is not about reversing active travel investment. It is about ensuring that road design is proportionate, flexible and responsive to the needs of each community.

At the moment projects are continuing to be rolled out in Tallaght. It is important that we evaluate what is working well and where adjustments are needed. The time has come for a review of DMURS. We need to examine whether excessive road narrowing is contributing to

congestion, the impact on emergency services, buses and commercial traffic, whether local authorities have sufficient flexibility to adapt designs to local conditions and whether post-construction views should become standard practice so that schemes can be amended where genuine problems arise.

I reiterate that the removal of car parking is causing huge difficulty. People are frustrated and annoyed. I am seeing what I would say is a waste of money in some locations. Footpaths have been changed and there are potholes in roads. Something needs to be changed.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I thank Senator Costello for raising this matter. The Government is committed to preserving our existing roads network. This is demonstrated through the Department of Transport's provision of regular grant funding to eligible local authorities.

By statute, local authorities are responsible for the maintenance and improvement of the regional and local roads present in their respective areas of responsibility. Any work undertaken on these roads is funded by the resources of the local authority concerned and, where eligible, this is supplemented by the Department of Transport's regional and local roads grant programme. The initial selection and prioritisation of work to be funded is a matter for local authorities. Our regional and local roads play a critical role in supporting economic activity and community links. As a result, the regional and local roads grant programme is primarily targeted at the maintenance and renewal of our existing roads network, with the remainder invested in new road projects, the rehabilitation of bridges, climate adaptation and safety improvements. The funds available through this programme have been steadily increasing in recent years. In 2026, €718 million was made available, which will facilitate an increase of €26 million for road protection and renewal throughout Ireland.

I come to the core of the issue the Senator raised. The design manual for urban roads and streets, DMURS, was jointly prepared by the Department of Transport and Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage in 2013. It places well-designed streets at the centre of our communities by supporting broader environmental, planning and transport objectives. It promotes highly connected, attractive and safe streets that encourage walking and cycling, support vibrant communities, and use design measures to calm traffic and create a safer, more people-focused environment.

DMURS is a living document and is updated as required. A review of it was undertaken in May 2019, with many chapters amended. In addition to this review, six advice notes have been prepared on various aspects, such as transition zones, materials and specifications, geometric design and quality audits. The most recent advice notes on urban drainage and junction tightening were prepared in 2023. This year, work commenced on a review of all minimum standards, guidelines and regulations that apply to the public transport network where it interacts with the built environment, including DMURS, as part of the national human rights strategy for disabled people.

The Department of Transport has prepared a programme for the review of DMURS - which is what the Senator is talking about - alongside other standards and guidelines that apply to the public transport network where it interacts with associated built environment with regard to accessibility. The first meeting took place in March 2026 and included members of disabled persons' organisations. The Department is in the process of assembling an expert group to co-ordinate and lead the review.

The current programme assumes the publication of a strategic report with recommendations in quarter 2 of 2027. This date is subject to the progress of the review process. Following approval of the national human rights strategy for disabled people review, action 71 of the Sustainable Mobility Policy Action Plan 2026-2030 commits to the review of DMURS by 2030.

From this, it is evident that the DMURS is not a static manual, but is continually updated and informed by road users, interested groups and experts.

Senator Teresa Costello: I am a road user. My constituents who are road users do not feel it is being informed by them. There is frustration in the community. There is congestion, roads are being narrowed and buses passing each other are clipping their mirrors. The DMURS is not up to scratch. Money is being wasted unnecessarily. If disability groups are being included, I recommend that somebody who is blind is included as well. I say this because I did a walk around Tallaght with a blind man and the navigation of the roads was not up to scratch.

People are being forced out of their cars with all of this. That is what it feels like, and we are not there yet with transport. We are talking about banning e-scooters, but we do not have the alternatives. We have to respect people's lived experience, their lives and how they navigate them comfortably and not leave them frustrated and angry over changes I feel are unnecessary a lot of time.

Deputy Marian Harkin: When the Senator speaks, I know she is reflecting the views of the people she represents and what she hears. The objective of the DMURS is to have well-designed streets accessible to all forms of road users. Furthermore, there is a growing appreciation that our streets are not just spaces designed to facilitate the movement of traffic, but spaces where people should want to live and to spend time. I hear what the Senator is saying about blind people. I will certainly convey the Senator's point to the Minister in this regard to make sure they are included in any ongoing consultation or negotiations.

It is important to say, however, that the DMURS is a living document and there is always the opportunity to respond to changes in transport options, in priorities and in new technologies. Significant funding has been provided by the Department for our regional and local roads each year. This does not mean that I am not hearing what the Senator is saying. I will bring her concerns back to the Minister because sometimes concerns are national, sometimes they are regional and sometimes they are local. Regardless of where they come from, however, they have to be dealt with. I will bring this issue back to the Minister.

Bus Services

Senator Dee Ryan: I thank the Minister of State for coming in to take my question. She is very welcome.

I am standing here to ask her if she can, and I really hope she will be able to, clarify for the people of Limerick what is going on with Limerick BusConnects. To give the Minister of State the background, BusConnects was first mooted more than a decade ago. The public in Limerick, including employers, members of pedestrian and cycling organisations, traders, all the different city centre stakeholders and councillors, would have been consulted on this great

vision for public transport in Limerick since about 2020. It was finally unveiled for us in December 2023. We were told originally that this project was going to be delivered in 2025.

I am out on the doors in Limerick every week and frustration with the public transport service in Limerick comes up everywhere and repeatedly. I have parents complaining that they cannot give their teenagers a little bit of freedom and let them off to go somewhere on the bus, so they have to play taxi. I have students genuinely upset that they have to pay for petrol or diesel. We do not have sufficient cycle lanes and routes everywhere across the city, so they have to drive the short distance into the university or into one of our many institutes of learning because they cannot get the bus. Of course, I also have employers speaking to me. I would have been very familiar with the employer perspective in the past in my role as an employer representative. Employers cannot take on people unless they have a car because their particular place of employment is not serviced by public transport. Workers are frustrated that they cannot get to work on a bus. They would like to be saving some money with the cost of living by using public transport. Generally speaking, people feel that they pay taxes, work hard and hold up their end of the bargain, so they want to know why they cannot use public services and avail of a proper bus system in Limerick.

We have had many different and conflicting reports on when BusConnects is going to be delivered. I really hope the Minister of State will be able to bring clarity to this subject today. We were first told it was going to be happening in 2025, then it was going to be in 2026, and more recently we were told it was going to be 2028. I am nearly even afraid to say it out loud but in the last month, I have heard that it could be 2030, which is unthinkable.

Can the Minister of State please tell us what is holding us back and the reason for the delay? Has the local authority completed all the works it needs to do to run the system? Has the city centre transport plan been finalised with the mayor? It has been on his desk and I know his team has been liaising with the National Transport Authority, NTA, for over two years on it. Has the Department funded the project? Has the NTA hired the mechanics and drivers? I ask these questions because this is like the Spider-Man meme. When I start asking questions, all these organisations start pointing at each other and give me all the reasons I outlined as to why BusConnects has not been delivered. Perhaps the Minister of State can clarify the answers to some of those questions for us now. Ultimately, all I want to know is when BusConnects will be operational.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I thank the Senator for her question. Let us see what answer I can provide for her. On behalf of the Minister for Transport, I thank Senator Ryan for the opportunity to discuss BusConnects in Limerick. I will also use the opportunity to highlight sustainable mobility developments in Leitrim - I am sorry, I must have been thinking of my own constituency - in Limerick more generally.

The Limerick-Shannon metropolitan area transport strategy was developed by the NTA to deliver an accessible, integrated transport network that enables the sustainable growth of Limerick up to 2040. This includes the development of the Limerick BusConnects programme. Good progress has been made in delivering the strategy, including BusConnects Limerick. In 2023, the NTA carried out an extensive review of the Limerick bus network. This review was conducted in collaboration with Limerick City and County Council, Clare County Council and Bus Éireann, and was supported by the specialised expertise of transport system designers

Jarrett Walker and Associates. Following public consultation, the NTA published its final new bus network for Limerick in December 2023. The redesign of the bus network is one of the nine key elements of BusConnects Limerick that aim to transform the city's bus system, making public transport more useful to more people. The new bus network will enable more people to avail of public transport, resulting in increased access to a greater number of schools and workplaces across Limerick City. Overall, 41% of residents will live within 400 m of a high-frequency bus route running every 15 minutes or better. Limerick is the first city in Ireland with a fully electrified bus service, with two phases of charger installation works having come on stream at Roxboro bus depot during 2024 and 61 zero-emission buses in active passenger service today.

Regarding future phases of BusConnects Limerick, and the BusConnects programme across the cities more generally, the NTA will publish its detailed national development plan, NDP, implementation plan later this year, which will set out the elements of the programme to be progressed in the coming years within available funding to 2030. This follows on from the publication of the NDP sectoral investment plan by the Department of Transport last November and the publication of the NDP review last July.

In addition to bus-based improvements, the Limerick-Shannon metropolitan area transport strategy also recommends a number of improvements to rail infrastructure, including a new rail station at Moyross. Planning permission for this station was received from Limerick City and County Council in November 2025, with procurement preparation now under way. Other rail interventions include increasing the frequency of services on the Ballybrophy line to up to two trains per hour, double-tracking of the line from Limerick Junction to Colbert Station and the upgrading of Colbert Station, which was successfully completed in November 2024.

The public is now benefiting from these improved facilities, including the new ticket offices, toilets, bus concourse, set-down area and car park. The NDP sectoral plan also allocates funding for the delivery of a number of priority rail projects by 2030 as identified by the rail project prioritisation strategy published last December with the assistance of the European Investment Bank.

Senator Dee Ryan: Having heard my account of what is going on the ground in Limerick, the Minister of State will understand why I am really disappointed with that response. The NTA will be publishing an implementation plan by the end of this year. Is she joking me? What in the name of God is going on in the NTA? Clearly, it has no interest in Limerick. It has no interest in delivering the public transport needs we have and serving our needs in Limerick. What happens in there when they are faced with a tough question and asked why they have not done something yet? Do they say they will do another implementation plan? We are sick of plans in Limerick. We want delivery. We are clear on this. The NTA in its response also sounds like it is kind of blaming the Department saying it will engage with the Department on funding this. We have been told separately by the Department that the NTA is fully funded for this. I am not satisfied with that answer. Where do I go? Where do I get the answers to the questions I need?

Deputy Marian Harkin: I thank the Senator. I am of course providing the answers given to me by the Department. As we know, the new Limerick bus network will provide more frequent public transport offerings to more people across Limerick. I hear what she is saying. She is

talking about now. As with the previous Senator, I will bring her concerns to the Minister. I will let him know how strongly she feels about this and that she is looking for timelines insofar as they can be delivered. What we are looking at here is that aspects of the BusConnects programme include a 70% increase in bus services in Limerick city and suburbs, shorter waits, more direct routes, simpler networks and schedules, additional services at weekends and a 24-hour bus route connecting University Hospital Limerick, the city centre and the University of Limerick. As I said, Limerick is the first city in Ireland with a fully electrified bus service. I hear what the Senator is saying. She is asking when this will be delivered. People are waiting for it, and the Senator does not really want to hear about plans next year or the year after. As she will understand these are all part of the process, but I will ask that-----

Senator Dee Ryan: It has been a six-year process so far and it sounds like the process is being delayed even further. It is unacceptable.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I will not dispute that because I do not have the detail of what the Senator is speaking about.

Senator Dee Ryan: I appreciate that.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I will certainly bring her concerns to the Minister. That is not just something I am saying. I will do that.

Senator Dee Ryan: I thank the Minister of State.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Garret Kelleher): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit as glacadh leis na trí ní, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Seanadóir Ryan chomh maith.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 10.24 a.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 10.31 a.m.

Sitting suspended at 10.24 a.m. and resumed at 10.31 a.m.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

Senator Garret Ahearn: The Order of Business is No. 1, motion regarding Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2022 (Section 9(2)) (Amount of Financial Contribution) Order 2025 (Revocation) Order 2026, to be taken on the conclusion of the Order of Business without debate; No. 2, motion regarding Planning and Development (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) Regulations 2026, back from committee, to be taken on conclusion of No. 1 without debate; No. 3, motion regarding Planning and Development (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) (No. 2) Regulations 2026, back from committee, to be taken on conclusion of No. 2 without debate; No. 4, motion regarding Planning and Development (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) (No. 3) Regulations 2026, back from committee, to be taken on conclusion of No. 3 without debate; No. 5, motion regarding Planning and Development (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) (No. 4) Regulations 2026, back from committee, to be taken on conclusion of No. 4 without debate; No. 6, motion regarding Planning and Development (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) (No. 5) Regulations 2026, back from committee, to be

taken on conclusion of No. 5 without debate; No. 7, motion regarding Planning and Development (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) (No. 6) Regulations 2026, back from committee, to be taken on conclusion of No. 6 without debate; No. 8, motion regarding Planning and Development (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) (No. 7) Regulations 2026, back from committee, to be taken on conclusion of No. 7 without debate; No. 9, motion regarding Planning and Development (Licensing of Outdoor Events) Regulations 2026, back from committee, to be taken on the conclusion of No. 8 without debate; No. 10, Health (Provision of Contraception Prescribing Service in Retail Pharmacy Businesses) Bill 2026 - All Stages, to be taken at 11.30 a.m. or on the conclusion of No. 9, whichever is later, and the proceedings thereon shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 75 minutes by the putting of one question from the Chair, which shall, in relation to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Government, the time allocated to the opening remarks of the Minister at the debate on Second Stage shall not exceed five minutes, all Senators shall not exceed five minutes, and the Minister shall be given no less than five minutes to reply to the debate, with Committee and Remaining Stages to be taken immediately thereafter; and No. 11, Development (Strategic Gas Reserve) Bill 2026 - Committee and Remaining Stages, to be taken at 12.45 p.m. or on the conclusion of No. 10, whichever is the later, and the proceedings thereon shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after two hours by the putting of one question from the Chair, which shall, in relation to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Government.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: This morning's news coverage is dominated by calls from medical professionals for a ban on e-scooters. This follows calls for bans on social media. The Government has moved to ban vapes. We are actively engaged as a country in banning a lot of things at the moment and there is very good reasoning behind a lot of these proposals. However, we have an obligation to examine the deeper causes of the behaviour and understand and attempt to understand the causes of the behaviour. That is something we did at the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Drugs Use. Our report included a recommendation for an Irish primary prevention system, particularly for adolescents. I would appreciate it if we could have a debate early in the autumn term on that proposal for an Irish primary prevention system for our adolescents. It would help inform policy, not just in the drugs space but in all areas of mental health, physical health and our social well-being.

I draw the House's attention to the publication this morning of the Government's latest progress report on housing - Delivering Homes, Building Communities. This report details progress that has been made up to the end of this month. While we are all very conscious of the number of people who are still being accommodated in emergency accommodation and that number remains stubbornly high - we all understand the reasons for that - it is important we engage in the debate on housing in an informed way. We must examine the progress that is being made. There was a record supply delivery in 2025 of more than 36,000 homes. In this year so far, over 7,800 homes have been completed. That is just in the first quarter and it is up 33%. More than 46,000 new homes have commenced. There is a lot of activity in terms of supply.

Affordability is a huge issue for a lot of people but, in the last year, more than 20,000 first-time home purchasers acquired their own home. Close to €1 billion has been allocated by the Government for more than 7,900 affordable homes. Progress is being made. It is important

that we do not lose sight of that progress. Regarding the reusing of vacant properties, more than 13,000 vacant refurbishment grants have been paid out already and more than 3,400 additional homes are in the process of being converted from commercial spaces into residential homes.

Nobody thinks the job is done. We all appreciate that there is continuing pressure and demand for increased supply and affordability, but I encourage every Member of the House to examine the report and to engage in the debate in a constructive way.

Senator Michael McDowell: I note that the whole scheme of the planning Act is that exempt development proposals are considered by the Houses. It is questionable whether this House has really considered the exempt development regulations. Without debate, we sent them off to a committee. We do not know what it made of them but it reported them back to us and, without debate, we are going to adopt them. That is not what the spirit of the Act required.

On behalf of the Seanad Independent Group, I express our collective gratitude to the Leas-Chathaoirleach, the Cathaoirleach, Martin Hughes, Aileen Fallon and all of the staff in the Seanad for the great work they have put into making this House function properly and effectively and in making it a pleasant place to be. I often think of Dáil Éireann and compare it in my mind to Westminster, which is a bear pit. Then I think of this particular Chamber where people are polite and kind to each other and listen to each other respectfully. There is no baying or shouting down or whatever.

It is a great tribute to the Seanad staff that that spirit continues to exist in this House.

Apart from them, throughout Leinster House there are the ushers, the secretaries, the people manning the committees, the technical staff and the like, the catering staff and the bar staff. All of these people make this Parliament a pleasant and effective Parliament, which operates as a democratic institution of which the Irish people can be proud. I want to express our gratitude to all of them for everything they do. They are not sufficiently thanked but they deserve our thanks.

I will go to what Senator Fitzpatrick mentioned. She mentioned the drugs committee report. I am one of the people who disagrees with the substance of that report. We have to have a real solid debate on it here in this House, not merely a cursory one. It is an issue of fundamental importance. It cannot be avoided, one way or the other. Whatever your views are on it, it needs to be thrashed out. The same applies to the housing crisis, which Senator Fitzpatrick mentioned. Whether we will ever hit the 60,000 target we have set for ourselves is doubtful but at least it has to be said that there is significant production of homes in a period of homelessness.

Finally, we need in this House to have a sincere and realistic debate on immigration, migration and asylum-seeking. All of those issues have to be considered in the autumn. Although coming up to the end of this term we are rushing things through, and the guillotine is well-oiled and slicing this way and that, we have a lot of work to do in the autumn. To prepare ourselves for that work, all the Members of both Houses are entitled to a good break so they can recharge their batteries and address these real issues which the people need to have addressed in this House.

Senator Manus Boyle: I will raise an issue about small craft registration in Ireland. The Marine Survey Office is responsible for registering all vessels, from large cargo ships to small pleasure boats. Registration is essential for every ship travelling to ports in and out of the EU and other countries. However, the current system is simply not working for small-craft owners. Many are facing lengthy delays, excessive paperwork and requirements that suit larger commercial ships rather than recreational boats. In some cases, owners are being asked to provide an unbroken chain of ownership going back decades which simply is impossible for older boats.

I know of one young couple who applied to register their vessel and paid the required fee immediately. Four months later, they have still not received a survey or any meaningful communication from the Department. In the end, they had no choice but to register their boat in another EU country so they could continue their plans. They are proud Irish people and wanted to sail under the Irish flag but instead have been forced to fly the flag of another country because of the delays in our system. I also spoke to a number of small-craft owners over the weekend and they told me the same. Registering in Ireland is so difficult many choose to register in other countries, such as Poland, instead.

This simply does not make sense. An Irish boat should be able to be registered effectively in Ireland. I am asking the Minister to be contacted to explain why this situation has arisen and what actions will be taken to introduce a straightforward effective registering system for small craft boats without further delay. It is totally wrong when people save, put their good money into a boat and want to go sailing, yet have to go to another EU country to register the boat. There is something wrong with the Department here and it needs to be shaken up.

Senator Chris Andrews: I want to move an amendment to No. 1 on the Order Paper, proposing an orderly winding down of the accommodation recognition payment scheme in a way that is fair and efficient.

I note today is the last day of Dáil and Seanad sittings before the summer recess. I thank the Leader, as Senator McDowell said, for his kindness and work, the Leas-Chathaoirleach for always being so helpful and supportive, and of course all the staff without whom we could not do our work. I acknowledge the work that the staff across the Houses put in. Of course, I wish all the Members well. I hope everybody enjoys the recess. I think everybody will do that.

It is also important to recognise the amount of work we all have ahead of us when we come back in September considering the scale of the problems facing this country. Government will say, "Look at the positives", but there are a huge amount of challenges. You need not look any further than the housing crisis. Of course, the Government will point to an increased number of housing developments. However, those housing developments are for the very well-off.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: That is just not true.

Senator Chris Andrews: You just have to look down at the Glass Bottle site. Ordinary people cannot afford those homes.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: You and I both know that they are not the only ones being built.

Senator Chris Andrews: It would take the salary of three Senators to be able to afford-----

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: If Sinn Féin did not object to as much housing, we could build more of it.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Senator Andrews without interruption.

Senator Chris Andrews: It would take the salary of three Senators to be able to afford a one-bedroom or two-bedroom home on the Glass Bottle site. They are clearly not for ordinary working people.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: Stop objecting to the housing-----

Senator Chris Andrews: There are 3,500 homes. Nobody in Sinn Féin objected to the Glass Bottle site.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: The Senator's leader has.

Senator Chris Andrews: We supported-----

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: You have objected to enough housing in Dublin.

Senator Chris Andrews: -----the strategic development zone, SDZ.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: You have objected to enough housing in Dublin. Your leader has made a career out of it.

Senator Chris Andrews: We supported the development of housing on the Glass Bottle site. We worked hard to ensure to get more social housing. Unfortunately, the Government would not do that. Now it seems that the so-called "affordable housing" on the Glass Bottle site will be unaffordable.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: It is such fake news.

Senator Chris Andrews: You also have to look at-----

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: You know that your party has made a career out of objecting to housing in Dublin.

Senator Chris Andrews: We have supported the Glass Bottle site.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: Look at O'Devaney Gardens, the first affordable house site delivered in more than 20 years.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Please.

Senator Chris Andrews: We have 18,000-----

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: Your own leader objected to it.

Senator Chris Andrews: Eighteen thousand people are homeless.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: Your leader has objected.

Senator Chris Andrews: Five thousand children are homeless. The Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Government is responsible-----

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: On you.

Senator Chris Andrews: -----for the 18,000 people homeless and the 5,000-----

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: It is on Sinn Féin.

Senator Chris Andrews: We are not in government. We cannot make the decisions that are required.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: Yes, but you are weaponising the planning process to block housing delivery.

Senator Chris Andrews: We would not rely on the market.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: You are weaponising the planning process.

Senator Chris Andrews: We would not rely on private developers to develop the housing.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Senators.

Senator Chris Andrews: There are 5,000 children homeless and that is on Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: On Sinn Féin.

Senator Chris Andrews: You can say whatever you want-----

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Go raibh maith agat.

Senator Chris Andrews: Sorry, a Leas-Chathaoirligh?

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Your time is up, Senator.

Senator Chris Andrews: In fairness, I did not get much of my time. I should be given a little more leeway given the constant interruptions.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I will give you another 30 seconds.

Senator Chris Andrews: Thank you.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Can I confirm with Senator Andrews as well that when he moved the amendment, it is amendment No. 1 that he was talking about?

Senator Chris Andrews: Amendment No. 1, yes.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: It is not an amendment to the Order of Business.

Senator Chris Andrews: Item 1.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: It is amendment No. 1 on item 1.

Senator Chris Andrews: Yes.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Can I have a seconder for it?

Senator Joanne Collins: I second the amendment.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Thank you.

Senator Chris Andrews: The Government can point to housing and claim that there are huge successes. There is only success for the wealthy, the well-off, the developers and the landlords. They are all delighted with Government policy. When you look at the 18,000 people on the homeless list, the 5,000 children who are homeless, whether the Government likes it or not, it is Government's responsibility.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: We take responsibility for delivering-----

Senator Chris Andrews: Sorry, Chair, can you-----

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Senator Fitzpatrick.

Senator Chris Andrews: Even a few seconds without interruption would be nice.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: You have only five seconds left.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: You are well over 30 seconds at this point.

Senator Chris Andrews: Yes, but I have been interrupted through the 30 seconds.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: You are well over.

Senator Chris Andrews: I have been interrupted through the 30 seconds again.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: We have heard the speech a couple of times.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Senator Andrews, I have to bring in so many more. Could you just wrap up, please?

Senator Chris Andrews: I know, but if I was not interrupted all the time.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Senator Andrews, you have got well over the time now at this stage.

Senator Chris Andrews: I did not get over the time because I was interrupted throughout.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I gave you an extra 35 seconds.

Senator Chris Andrews: In which I was interrupted for most of it.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Senator Andrews, please.

Senator Chris Andrews: All I am saying is, "Good luck to everyone in the summer."

Senator Lynn Ruane: I join Senator McDowell in thanking all the people we should thank for the efficient and smooth running of these Houses. He ran through them all. Even if we have had a few ding-dongs over rulings on amendments and stuff, other than that, things have moved well, as they always do. I thank the staff across both Houses.

Senator Fitzpatrick mentioned the drugs report. It is important. Ireland is in a unique position. We have had requests to have that report translated into languages like Ukrainian and others, because people are watching the evidence that has been gathered in Ireland over the past five years, especially before the citizens' assembly and by all the working groups. The world is watching how Ireland has done the most extensive interrogation of drugs policy ever seen, and is waiting in hope to see what we do next to make sure that we move with the evidence. It is not just opinion. Some of us obviously have great emotion about the subject or certain opinions, but what is in the report is evidence-based. One of the issues we focused on was obviously section 3 but that is not the only thing in the report. An Garda Síochána has said several times, unchallenged, that section 3 is rarely used and its use has been going down over the years.

I draw attention to RTÉ's report this week on the drug cases in the District Court and the headline that they are up 8% year on year. The chairperson of the board of the Courts Service, Ms Justice Aileen Donnelly, said that the rise in drugs cases of a less serious kind had increased the workload of the lower courts. There were just over 30,000 new drug cases before the District Court last year, compared with 27,000 in 2024, yet the Garda, even on national television, is saying it does not really use this law, whereas all the evidence says differently. We need to be clear that this report lays out the facts and we need to challenge people when they say otherwise.

This House will have roughly 45 days off. Two people a day, on average, die in Ireland from drug-related issues. In the 45 days before we come back and sit in this Chamber, roughly 90 people will be dead while we have been off. That is the gravity of the situation with drugs.

I remember I could barely write when I started studying addiction. I was 16 when I applied for an addiction studies course. They would not let me on it because they said I was too young and it was for adults. I fought and fought. I did not know how to write an essay. I had not engaged in school since I was about 12. I had been a drug user myself. I remember making a video because I could not write an essay. I got my two friends, who at that stage, aged 16, were strung out on heroin and had been on it since we were at school at 13, and I made a video essay, interviewing them. I found a video cassette the other day and hope I can get it put on something. The essay was about why they engaged in drug use so young. I could barely write an essay when I started studying this. There are not many things I will claim some level of expertise in, but this is one where I will claim it. I have been obsessed with it since I was about 16. I look forward to coming back in the new year, and not just for 90 minutes. We need a substantial time to discuss this report, whether three hours, four hours or six hours. I would welcome the largest possible slot to discuss the most extensive research Ireland has ever done into drugs policy.

Senator Alison Comyn: I know we are on the cusp of the summer recess but I want to talk about school for a moment. I raise a matter for a future debate or possible Commencement matter with the Minister for education about the inclusion of philosophy as a leaving certificate subject. I have been approached about this issue by Robert Finan, a brilliant Trinity graduate in philosophy from Drogheda who makes the compelling case that the subject is not abstract or elitist, but one with enormous practical value for young people today. At a time when artificial intelligence is transforming how we learn, work and consume information, the ability to think critically and independently evaluate evidence, question assumptions, not follow the herd, and construct reasoned arguments has never been more important. These are life skills, not just academic skills.

I believe this proposal sits naturally within the broader reform of the leaving certificate currently being championed by my colleague Senator Shane Curley. As we reimagine and modernise senior cycle education, we should not only be asking what students need to know, but how they should learn to think for themselves. I hope to bring this forward as a debate or Commencement matter when the House returns in September and I look forward to engaging with the Minister on what I believe is a timely and worthwhile proposal.

I echo the comments made by my colleagues on the cusp of the summer recess. It has been an absolute pleasure to work alongside the Leas-Chathaoirleach, Cathaoirleach, Leader and all

my colleagues. Senators mentioned the background staff, including Martin Hughes, the clerks here, and the ushers as well. I especially compliment the staff who work in the background for me, including my assistant, Anna Brennan, who I have many times introduced as my right-hand woman. I would not be able to manage without her. I hope she has a very restful week. The work will go on here. Just because we are not sitting in the Seanad or Dáil does not mean that we are not working for everybody. I wish everybody some time off, but as for the rest of it, the work will continue.

Senator Cathal Byrne: I join colleagues in thanking so many of the staff here who make it possible for us to do our day-to-day work. That includes not only Martin Hughes and the team here in the Seanad, but also the ushers and all those who make the day-to-day life of Leinster House possible, including those who work in the restaurant, the canteen and behind the scenes. The work they do is very much appreciated. It would be remiss of me, as we come to the conclusion of another term, not to join in what many other colleagues and Senators have said about that.

I want to speak about the local democracy task force and the work done over recent months to prepare that report. I join other Senators in urging the Government, including the Minister for local government, to produce the action plan on local democracy and make it a key priority to work on it over the summer so that the hard-working councillors up and down Ireland can have clarity about what exactly the changes will be as they face into another round of local elections, in particular the boundary report and the terms and conditions of that report. Local councillors find it very difficult that they do not know if the area they represent is going to be part of the ground they will be contesting in 2029. For all involved, it is important that we have clarity and certainty about that.

I urge the Minister to take into account the need to rebalance the power of the executive and the power of local members. It is so important at local democracy level that the voice of the people, through their councillors, is heard loud and clear. I urge him to make that a cornerstone of those recommendations when they come available.

Senator Aubrey McCarthy: I briefly mention what my colleague Senator Andrews mentioned about the accommodation recognition payment, ARP, and its proposed reduction for those who are hosting Ukrainians in Ireland. I understand that the Government has difficult decisions to make in this regard, and we must make sure that public money is wisely spent, but we also have to consider the human consequences of this. I notice in the last number of months, at our homeless café on Pearse Street, a number of Ukrainians are turning up and that number is starting to increase. The Irish Red Cross warned today that many of the families who are hosting Ukrainians in Ireland will no longer host when the ARP has been wound down.

I am speaking from personal experience. When the war broke out, I took Ukrainians into the organisation, Tiglin. I have travelled to Ukraine and seen first-hand the resilience and dignity of the people. Many of the people I hosted are from Mariupol and have nothing to go back to. They are not just people receiving support but people who have become part of the community here. We should never forget why they came here in the first place. They did not leave their homes by choice. They fled bombs, violence and a loss of everything that they knew as home.

As we review the supports, I agree with Senator Andrews that it has to be fair. I ask that we do so with wisdom and compassion. Let us make the decisions that are financially responsible for the Irish but also recognise the enormous situation the Ukrainians are in.

11 o'clock

I hope the Minister will carefully consider the concerns raised by the Irish Red Cross.

Just as I was coming in this morning, standing on the lawn at the Merrion side of Leinster House it is hard to ignore the ragwort that is growing on the grass. Under the Noxious Weeds Act 1936, ragwort is a noxious weed. Landowners have a legal duty to prevent its growth, as do councils, etc., and failure to do so can result of a fine of up to €1,000. This is the House that makes the laws. There is an argument that ragwort should not be illegal and then that would be fine. However, we cannot ask farmer councils and ordinary people to uphold the law if we do not do it ourselves. We are the ones who make the law. Either we change the law or we uphold it; we should not be seen to tolerate it.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I am trying to keep people to time because there are a lot of people to bring in and we are under pressure of time. I call Senator Costello.

Senator Teresa Costello: I was taken by what Senator Ruane said. It is not often I have heard her compliment herself but everybody in Tallaght is so proud of her. She has achieved so much and she has huge respect in Tallaght.

I also want to comment on what Senator Andrews said. I think people are bored of the whole "Government let you down" thing. A lot of my constituents, when they get that response from Sinn Féin, just come to me to get stuff sorted out. It is boring now at this point. I am going to buy the Senator a present. It is a book called *The Secret*. It is about positive thinking and all that. It is really good for the health.

Today, I raise the growing problem of the misuse of nitrous oxide and the serious impact it is having in my community. I am not the first to raise this and I will not be the last but I am constantly receiving reports - one as recently as this morning - about the huge number of dumped nitrous oxide canisters in the community. If there is a car park that does not have a gate on it is left full of these. I have had to clear up car parks with people. It is not just an environmental issue. It is clear to see from the huge quantities of these canisters that recreational use is becoming more widespread in public places. What concerns me most is not the litter, because litter can be fixed; it is the health implications that cannot be undone. A recent study by the RCSI in Beaumont Hospital found a significant increase in cases of young people suffering spinal cord damage linked to nitrous oxide use. The neurological issues can be helped but nobody is making a full recovery on this and that is really concerning. It is also a huge issue with road safety. People are going around with balloons hanging off their lips. I want to know what powers An Garda Síochána has to deal with this. If members of the Garda see someone who is found driving while under the influence of nitrous oxide or are consuming it behind the wheel, are there sufficient drug driving laws or are there gaps that need to be addressed? The Minister will have to come in on this because it is a public health issue, an environmental issue but also a road safety issue.

Senator Linda Nelson Murray: The Irish Cancer Society is in the news today. We met its representatives last week and had a very good engagement over in Buswells Hotel where they were giving us some numbers. I wanted to home in on bowel cancer. There are 2,500 people diagnosed with bowel cancer each year in Ireland. The target for the Irish Cancer Society is that not one patient should wait more than 28 days. Last year, in Our Lady's Hospital Navan, over the whole year 400 people waited more than 28 days. However, in quarter 1 of this year, not one patient waited more than 28 days in Navan hospital for an urgent colonoscopy. I commend the manager, the staff and everybody in the hospital on that. We are very proud of our hospital in Navan. When I saw the numbers it got me thinking about the rapidly growing population in County Meath. Navan hospital always needs to be strengthened, not sidelined. We need investment in that to grow with the population that is growing in Meath, and that Meath people have a hospital that grows with their needs and does not fall behind. I am discussing this with the Minister for Health, Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill. I think every political person who comes from Meath will always want to push for Navan hospital to be continually invested in. I acknowledge the great work the hospital has done when it comes to colonoscopies in the first quarter of this year. I wish the hospital well in its ongoing work in that space and we must ensure we continue the investment in that hospital.

In my last 25 seconds, I say to everyone in this room as we go into recess today that it has been an absolute pleasure to work with them. We have had amazing debates in here from all sides of the Chamber. Everybody, without a shadow of a doubt, is a pleasure to work with. We can achieve things together whether we are in opposition or in government. I thank everybody. It is really nice to come in to the Chamber and I look forward to it every Tuesday. I wish everyone a very nice summer. I hope they drop loads of leaflets, go out to their constituents, talk to them all and fill the air with loads of positivity.

Senator Joanne Collins: I will break the Internet today by not giving out for the first time.

Senator Garret Ahearn: Is that so?

Senator Joanne Collins: Yes, I am not going to give out. Regardless of what is said to me I am going to be nice today on our last day. I echo what is being said about everybody enjoying their break and the thanks to all the staff in here. It can be very daunting when you first come in but everybody makes you feel like you can do it. It is great to work here. I am going to end by wishing the Limerick hurlers the best of luck on Sunday. I am proposing that everybody in Limerick gets a day off on Monday because there will be mighty celebrations. It is probably too late to bring this up - I should have brought this up about a month ago when I knew we were going to be in the final - but it would be nice to see, maybe for the next one, extra buses and train times being put on. I know it was done for the Kerry games but Kerry seems to take precedence when it comes to transport for some reason. They think they are better than Limerick. I wish the two teams the best of luck, but we are going to enjoy our celebrations on Sunday.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Before I call Senator Martin Conway, I welcome Leryn Stephenson to the Public Gallery. She is a guest of Senator Conway and is visiting from Texas in the United States of America. I hope she enjoys her visit here today. It is lovely to see her.

Senator Martin Conway: I too would like to welcome Leryn to Seanad Éireann. It is a very special trip back to Ireland for her and I hope she enjoys her time here. I also echo the good wishes and the thanks to Martin and all his team who make life so much easier for us here, and I hope all colleagues across the House have an enjoyable summer. They can all come to County Clare on their holidays. We have many beautiful spots that they can visit starting with Lahinch and the Cliffs of Moher. There is lots to do in Clare and I hope I see many of them down there over the next few weeks.

When the Leader returns in September, I ask for two quick debates. The first is on the protocols the Department of agriculture uses in culling animals on-site in farms. We need to have a discussion and a conversation on the protocols because they could certainly be improved. I have come across a number of examples lately that are quite distressing. I have to do further research but if the information that has been brought to my attention is correct, it is very distressing. I also seek a further debate on tourism. We have the Walker Cup coming to Lahinch in September and people are very excited about. We also have the Irish Open in Doonbeg this year. Those big tourism events, coupled with the Ryder Cup that is coming to Adare next year, are bringing fantastic revenue and excitement. We need more of these type of events. Any investment the Government makes in big-ball tourism sporting events is well worthwhile, not just because of the revenue generated but also the international coverage we get.

Finally, I commend Cara Darmody, someone the Leader knows very well, who is at the gates of Leinster House doing her two-day protest. I think it is her second in the last year. I commend her on what she has achieved through her advocacy and her campaigning and what she will achieve. I know the Leader would agree with me on that.

Senator Margaret Murphy O'Mahony: I wish to raise awareness of two cards that people who have a lot going on in their lives use. The first one is called a "No Wait" card and it is used by people who need access to a toilet, often very often, but always very quickly. They show this card to business so that they can get access to toilets. It is often used if there is a queue for a loo that they are allowed go ahead. It is not given lightly. It is there for a reason. It is something that is not spoken about a lot.

It is a pity because it is obviously a bodily function and these people need to go when they need to go. I ask businesses to respect this card and work with the people using them.

The next card is the "Just a Minute" card and is used by people with hidden disabilities who may need just a minute longer than other people to get their stuff together or maybe realise what they are being asked. It is particularly used in banks, post offices and shops and means the person does not have to say they do not understand. They can just show the card so that the staff member can see they need a little bit of extra time to process what is going on.

As we head into recess I, too, thank everybody – Members and staff. It has been a pleasure doing business with them. I hope everyone has a good summer, do not work too hard and stay safe. Be kind and be positive. I look forward to working with everyone again in September.

Senator Paraic Brady: I wish to discuss a case that is ongoing all over social media where animals were euthanised on a farm in Roscommon and in County Clare last week. Forget about

the rights and wrongs or who is right and who is wrong. The manner in which the animals were euthanised is where I see a problem. I call on the Minister for agriculture to strengthen the regulations around euthanising these animals. There have to be stronger regulations. It was overseen by the Department even though the Department did not carry out the euthanising of the animals. I am very passionate about how animals are treated, as everybody in this House knows, and I would never like to see any animals mistreated. There is an ongoing case of animal cruelty but we need to see stronger regulation around how animals are euthanised.

I wish everyone in this House an enjoyable summer. It is probably the first time I can say all the work is done before we actually go home. With the weather, the turf is home, the hay is done the silage is made and the feet are up. We are surely going to enjoy the summer. I wish all the teams in the hurling and football the very best. I personally would like to see Mayo bring home the Sam Maguire, as would everybody else because I do feel their time has come - let us hope Mike Kennelly is not here – and let us hope it does go west. If it does go west, it will be full of people from all over Ireland. It has been long enough and maybe this is their time. Maybe the bad luck is gone after all.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I want to raise a couple of points on the Order of Business and the guillotining of the LNG Bill. This is a really significant shift away from Ireland, which previously had a track record where we have a ban on fracking. It was introduced by a Fine Gael backbencher back in a good time when backbenchers from Government parties were able to bring legislation forward and have it become law, which is something which should happen again. It is a very significant measure. It is one we had very detailed scrutiny of in the committee. There is a lot to be discussed here. It should not be guillotined. It is an important thing. I do not think you can get it right but it is one where harm reduction is really important in relation to this legislation and it should not be guillotined.

I also raise a concern that we have eight sets of regulations added to the Order Paper. I do not blame the Seanad Office or the Leader, indeed, for the lateness of their being added. That sits squarely with the Department responsible for planning and development, which has an extraordinary record - I checked back on it – where ten of 11 planning and development Bills in the last decade were brought in the last week of July or the last week of December. It seems like it has a systematic departmental policy of bringing significant decisions through at the last minute. That is something that needs to be addressed. It is a direct pattern. I have looked back. It is always guillotining something through in the last week of July. That is not acceptable practice because planning is part of the democratic structure, the decisions we make about how we want to live together, and it needs proper attention and scrutiny whether you agree or disagree with each of these exemptions. I regret that it is coming so late but also, when we are getting these last-minute measures, the regulations should be circulated. I know they are there to access, but when we are getting these for last-minute decision, that would be a useful measure.

Finally, I commend SIPTU-----

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Go raibh maith agat.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: Just a comment. We are coming back in September. The assessment of needs piece has been highlighted by Cara Darmody and the school transport issues have been raised, but childcare is also really important. I signal that SIPTU has produced a really important paper and I was very happy to host its launch. It looks at a roadmap to affordable early years care and sets out really practical steps for how we deliver affordability early and quality employment that ends that situation of the revolving door in our childcare services, which I am sure every Member is familiar with.

Senator Laura Harmon: I am speaking again about the issue of Bessborough in Cork city and to call once again on the Taoiseach to act on this. There is still time to do the right thing and to have a negotiation process with the developer now or, failing that, to look at compulsory purchase of this site.

The burial records have been sealed in relation to this. There is an opportunity to legislate and publish these records. The Attorney General could instruct an inquest in relation to this site too. There will be a march on Saturday in Cork city which meets at 2.30 p.m. outside the library. We hope to see cross-party support at this.

I will take the opportunity to read a random selection of names of people who died at Bessborough to put them into the record. Christina Lehane was born 22 December 1938. She died on 29 March 1939. She was three months old. Her cause of death was recorded as “congenital debilities”. For many of those babies who died at Bessborough, the reason given for their death was congenital debility or marasmus, which was essentially starvation. The reason given for these babies’ deaths was often very vague. Kathleen Collins died on 27 August 1926, Bernadette Gould died on 7 August 1943, Thomas Higgins died on 19 July 1977, Patrick O’Donnell died on 10 December 1967, and Paula McCarthy died on 28 January 1990.

I wanted to read a selection of the names into the record but we know 923 babies died at Bessborough. Many women are missing also. If over 800 babies were missing in Ireland now, there would be a national search and a global outcry. We need the truth about this site. We cannot concrete over the past. I encourage the Taoiseach to meet all survivor groups. I know he has met a selection of them but he had not met the Bessborough Mother and Baby Home Support Group which represents over 700 people. It has made several requests to meet the Taoiseach and I feel he needs to meet everyone. We cannot pit different survivor groups against each other. All their voices are important. The Taoiseach needs to engage with all of them.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: Hear, hear.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: Hear, hear.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Before I move on to the next speaker, I welcome the Shandon Retired Group who are guests of Deputy Marie Sherlock.

We also have guests from Grangecon. There is a very special man in the Gallery who is seven years of age today. Happy birthday Ben and enjoy your visit to Leinster House today. They are guests of Deputy Timmins. They are all very welcome and I hope they enjoy their visit.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: I support Senator Harmon in everything she has said. I want to raise the ongoing crisis in assessments of need and the impact this is having on families in Cavan and Monaghan. Earlier this year, I was helping a mother whose young son had been offered a place in an early intervention preschool. She should have been delighted but instead she was under huge pressure because to take up the place she needed an assessment of need. We contacted the HSE and I followed up again and again but we received the same template over and over as a reply. He was on a waiting list with no indication of when he would be seen and no recognition of the fact that every week matters to a family who is really desperate.

At the end of March there were more than 21,000 children waiting longer than the legal six-month deadline for an assessment of need. In Cavan and Monaghan alone there are 578 overdue assessments. I commend Cara Darmody on continuing to shine a light on this issue. She is absolutely right when she says children are missing the window for early intervention. We all know that the earlier a child gets support, the better the outcome. These early years are precious. Once they are gone there is no getting them back. Many parents simply cannot wait any longer. They take out loans, borrow from family and empty their savings to pay privately for assessments. This should never happen.

If the HSE cannot provide an assessment within the legal timeframe, then the State should meet the cost of a private assessment. The parent I spoke about got an assessment within two weeks when she went private and it cost €1,800. Parents should not have to pay out of their own pocket because the State has failed to meet its own legal obligations. Disability teams continue to be short-staffed while many newly qualified therapists and psychologists cannot get the supervised placements and recognised experience they need to practise. This is one issue the Government could address. All families want is for their children to get the support they need when they need it and not years after the opportunity for early intervention has gone.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: I want to raise an issue that I feel is having a very detrimental and suffocating effect on rural Ireland. This is the declining number of taxis available. It is so bad now that it is causing an economic bottleneck and, in my opinion, is also acting as a social barrier. The figures from the NTA released last May paint a very bleak picture in that 20 counties are seeing a decline in taxi numbers. This is despite the fact that over the past ten years our population has increased by more than 8%. The Border region is particularly badly affected, with taxi numbers down a staggering 20%. My county of Monaghan has seen a decline of 31.29%, which is the worst in all of Ireland. Cavan has seen a drop of 19%, Donegal has seen a drop of 21% and Louth has seen a drop of 16% or 17%. This clearly shows we have a serious problem in this regard.

This is killing the night-time economy especially. People would like to go out and socialise, which we would like to see, and go out for a bite to eat or a few drinks or whatever. It is important that we encourage this type of behaviour. The reality for many people thinking about going into the town or the village this evening is that they would have no way home so they make the decision not to go out at all. This is not what we want to see in rural Ireland. I call on the NTA to address this particular issue because it is affecting the people of rural Ireland very much. We cannot allow this decline to continue in our rural counties. I call on the NTA to address this matter urgently.

I join others in thanking all of the staff in the campus of Leinster House for their hospitality and the manner in which they look after us all year in, year out. I say to all of my colleagues in the Chamber that I enjoy their company, perhaps not all of the time but most of the time I am glad to say. I wish them all a very enjoyable rest during the summer period.

Senator Chris Andrews: There was a lot of negativity in that. We are only allowed the positive today.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: The sun is shining.

Senator Gareth Scahill: Can we reset the clock? I will start by mentioning the "parents notify" portal on the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, website for special classes and special places, which has a deadline of 1 September. The whole principle of the early notification this year is to determine demand, plan ahead and provide the special class places and special classes for 2027-28. To clarify for people, the portal is open 12 months of the year but the deadline is to allow the NCSE to plan and prepare a budget. The additional documentation has an extended deadline of 15 September but the documentation will be taken at a much later stage if necessary. The important thing is that people who need the places get on the portal now and identify the demand that is there.

Before we finish up I call for a debate on home care services when we come back in September. We all know the value of carers in our society but an awful lot of the HSE support service staff going into houses are private agency staff and when the person they are looking after goes into hospital or into respite the support they are getting immediately stops. This affects their availability because the staff will not be paid should the person come out of care again. Family carers and people getting the carer's allowance have a 13-week extension, whereby they continue to receive the carer's allowance for 13 weeks after somebody goes in. This is something we need to look at, especially in rural areas where we need to retain the expertise of people who are desperately needed to look after people and extend their time in their own homes.

Like previous speakers, the Leas-Chathaoirleach might allow me to thank the staff of the House, including the ushers and all the catering staff and, reluctantly, all of my colleagues in the House. We do not always get on or agree but there is great respect in the House. I extend a wish for happy holidays to everybody and thank them for the past couple of months. I thank all of the staff. To clarify what Senator Brady said, the work does not stop here and we are not finished for the summer. He may have given that impression but I think he was talking about the fact he had the hay done and the turf home. The real work starts now.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: All of us were probably at the IFA briefing yesterday. When they gave us the briefing document I saw that it was exactly the same as the one last year and I wondered whether it had got anything it looked for. I was told not really, apart perhaps with regard to areas of natural constraint. I would like a debate on these, which affect farmers where I live. Is there any possibility we could have debate on this? As we all know, farming is different in different areas of the country. The areas of natural constraint payment was taken away in 2008 and we are wondering whether it could be restored to that level. Generational renewal is another area that was also raised. It is difficult, particularly for the farmers I met

yesterday from Sligo and Leitrim, who are not full-time farmers. They work part time because we do not all have land like there is in the Golden Vale down in Cork. Could we have a specific discussion or debate on farming in various areas in the country? I thank the Leas-Chathaoirleach for fitting me in and I wish everyone the best for the summer. The work is only starting now.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: I thank the Leas-Chathaoirleach for her forbearance and patience with us. I thank Martin and all of the staff of the Seanad Office on behalf of the Fianna Fáil group. It is a tremendous personal honour and privilege for me to serve with all of the Senators. We only operate to our best because of the support we are given by the staff of the Houses and we are eternally grateful. Enjoy your break from us and we will be back with a vengeance in September.

Senator Garret Ahearn: I am very conscious that No. 10 is to be taken at 11.30 a.m. and it is now 11.30 a.m. I will be brief.

I will make a note of any contributions relating to debates for when we come back in September. There were a lot of calls for debates. I will make sure there is a significant amount of time for a debate about drugs, in particular, because it is an important piece of legislation. To anyone who has called for a debate, I hope we will have opportunities when we come back in September. I will record those requests and try to facilitate them as much as possible.

Unfortunately, I cannot accept the amendment proposed by Senator Andrews. The Order of Business has been lined out and I cannot accept it. I understand Senator Higgins's point about planning and the Department of housing. We have been here for a number of years and she is correct; a lot of it has come through in July. Technically, it is for the Leader to set out the timeline of debates but I understand the frustration when it comes late or when there is little scope for debate. The motions, in fairness, were referred to committee for debate. It is not like they just arrived this morning, but I accept exactly what Senator Higgins said.

Like everyone else, I thank the Leas-Chathaoirleach, Aileen, Martin and all the staff in the Seanad. They have done incredible work over the past number of months. There has been a lot of legislation coming through the House, particularly in the past month. They have put a lot of work in. I wish them and their families all the best over the summer. We will have a busy time coming back in September with an expected by-election to this House, which will create more work for them.

To all colleagues across the House, on a personal level, I thank them for the last number of weeks since I took over as Leader of the Seanad. It has been a busy number of weeks for all of us. I wish them, their families and their staff, who have put in incredible work, a happy summer.

We spoke about positivity. If you just talk about soccer to Senator Andrews, the positivity comes out naturally straight away. That is my strategy with him every time and it seems to work. There is positivity there; you just need to find it in people. I say that half-jokingly. I wish everyone a happy summer. I am looking forward to coming back in September to work on important stuff, as people outlined in their contributions, which we can get stuck into when we come back.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: On a personal note, I too would like to thank everyone for their collegiality over the last 12 months. I thank Aileen, Martin, the staff in the Seanad Office, the ushers and all the staff in the House from the cleaners up. This House would not function without every member of staff within it. I wish Members a happy break. As has been said, many of them will be working in their areas but everybody deserves a break. I look forward to working with them all in September. I thank the Leader, Deputy Leader and Cathaoirleach for their help and support.

Question put: : "That the Order of Business be agreed to."

The Seanad divided: Tá, 18; Níl, 11.	
Tá	Níl
Ahearn, Garret.	Andrews, Chris.
Boyle, Manus.	Clonan, Tom.
Brady, Paraic.	Collins, Joanne.
Byrne, Cathal.	Cosgrove, Nessa.
Byrne, Maria.	Harmon, Laura.
Casey, Pat.	Higgins, Alice-Mary.
Comyn, Alison.	McCarthy, Aubrey.
Costello, Teresa.	Murphy, Conor.
Crowe, Ollie.	Ruane, Lynn.
Fitzpatrick, Mary.	Stephenson, Patricia.
Gallagher, Robbie.	Tully, Pauline.
Kennelly, Mike.	
Murphy O'Mahony, Margaret.	
Nelson Murray, Linda.	
Ní Chuilinn, Evanne.	
O'Reilly, Joe.	
Rabbitte, Anne.	
Scahill, Gareth.	

Tellers: Tá, Senators Cathal Byrne and Pat Casey; Níl, s: Tá, Senators Cathal Byrne and Pat Casey.

Question declared carried.

Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2022 (Section 9(2)) (Amount of Financial Contribution) Order 2025 (Revocation) Order 2026: Motion

Senator Garret Ahearn: I move:

That Seanad Éireann approves the following Order in draft:

Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2022 (Section 9(2)) (Amount of Financial Contribution) Order 2025 (Revocation) Order 2026,

a copy of which was laid in draft form before Seanad Éireann on 2nd July, 2026."

Senator Chris Andrews: I move amendment No. 1:

1. To delete all words after “That Seanad Éireann approves the following Order in draft:” and substitute the following:

“Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2022 (Section 9(2)) (Amount of Financial Contribution) Order 2025 (Revocation) Order 2026, a copy of which was laid in draft form before Seanad Éireann on 2nd July, 2026, and further calls on the Government to provide that the Accommodation Recognition Payment (ARP) Scheme shall apply only to:

- existing recipients with respect to the beneficiaries of temporary protection currently benefitting from the scheme where those beneficiaries of temporary protection have satisfied a means test similar to those applicable for other housing assistance payments;
- new applicants who propose to host a beneficiary of temporary protection in their property which is also their own primary residence and who have not availed of the Rent-a-Room Scheme in the previous 24 months; ensuring that the ARP does not further distort the rental sector; and
- recipients who are not in receipt of any additional or ‘top-up’ payments from a beneficiary of temporary protection.”

Senator Joanne Collins: I second the amendment.

Amendment put:

The Seanad divided: Tá, 6; Níl, 29.	
Tá	Níl
Andrews, Chris.	Ahearn, Garret.
Clonan, Tom.	Blaney, Niall.
Collins, Joanne.	Boyle, Manus.
Murphy, Conor.	Brady, Paraic.
O'Reilly, Sarah.	Byrne, Cathal.
Tully, Pauline.	Byrne, Maria.
	Casey, Pat.
	Comyn, Alison.
	Conway, Martin.
	Cosgrove, Nessa.
	Costello, Teresa.
	Crowe, Ollie.
	Fitzpatrick, Mary.
	Gallagher, Robbie.
	Harmon, Laura.
	Higgins, Alice-Mary.
	Kelleher, Garret.
	Kennelly, Mike.
	McCarthy, Aubrey.
	Murphy O'Mahony, Margaret.
	Nelson Murray, Linda.
	Ní Chuilinn, Evanne.

	O'Reilly, Joe.
	Rabbitte, Anne.
	Ruane, Lynn.
	Ryan, Dee.
	Scahill, Gareth.
	Stephenson, Patricia.
	Wilson, Diarmuid.

Tellers: Tá, Senators Chris Andrews and Joanne Collins; Níl, s: Tá, Senators Chris Andrews and Joanne Collins.

Amendment declared lost.

12 o'clock

Motion agreed to.

Planning and Development (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) Regulations 2026: Motion

Senator Garret Ahearn: I move:

That Seanad Éireann approves the following Regulations in draft:

Planning and Development (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) Regulations 2026,
a copy of which was laid in draft form before Seanad Éireann on 2nd July, 2026.”

Question put and declared carried.

Planning and Development (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) (No.2) Regulations 2026: Motion

Senator Garret Ahearn: I move:

That Seanad Éireann approves the following Regulations in draft:

Planning and Development (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) (No.2) Regulations
2026,

a copy of which was laid in draft form before Seanad Éireann on 2nd July, 2026.”

Question put and agreed to.

Planning and Development (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) (No.3) Regulations 2026: Motion

Senator Garret Ahearn: I move:

That Seanad Éireann approves the following Regulations in draft:

Planning and Development (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) (No.3) Regulations 2026,

a copy of which was laid in draft form before Seanad Éireann on 14th July, 2026.”

Question put and agreed to.

Planning and Development (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) (No.4) Regulations 2026: Motion

Senator Garret Ahearn: I move:

That Seanad Éireann approves the following Regulations in draft:

Planning and Development (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) (No.4) Regulations 2026,

a copy of which was laid in draft form before Seanad Éireann on 2nd July, 2026.”

Question put and agreed to.

Planning and Development (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) (No.5) Regulations 2026: Motion

Senator Garret Ahearn: I move:

That Seanad Éireann approves the following Regulations in draft:

Planning and Development (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) (No.5) Regulations 2026,

a copy of which was laid in draft form before Seanad Éireann on 2nd July, 2026.”

Question put and agreed to.

Planning and Development (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) (No.6) Regulations 2026: Motion

Senator Garret Ahearn: I move:

That Seanad Éireann approves the following Regulations in draft:

Planning and Development (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) (No.6) Regulations 2026,

a copy of which was laid in draft form before Seanad Éireann on 2nd July, 2026.”

Question put and agreed to.

**Planning and Development (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) (No.7) Regulations
2026: Motion**

Senator Garret Ahearn: I move:

That Seanad Éireann approves the following Regulations in draft:

Planning and Development (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) (No.7) Regulations
2026,

a copy of which was laid in draft form before Seanad Éireann on 2nd July, 2026.”

Question put and agreed to.

Planning and Development (Licensing of Outdoor Events) Regulations 2026: Motion

Senator Garret Ahearn: I move:

That Seanad Éireann approves the following Regulations in draft:

Planning and Development (Licensing of Outdoor Events) Regulations 2026,

a copy of which was laid in draft form before Seanad Éireann on 2nd July, 2026.”

Question put and agreed to.

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad

An Cathaoirleach: I understand the Leader has a proposal for the House.

Senator Garret Ahearn: I propose that notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders or the order of the House today, that No. 10 be taken at 12.25 p.m.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 12.06 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 12.29 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 12.06 p.m. and resumed at 12.29 p.m.

**Health (Provision of Contraception Prescribing Service in Retail Pharmacy Businesses)
Bill 2026: Second and Subsequent Stages**

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

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome guests of Deputy George Lawlor from Women's Shed New Ross. You are most welcome to Seanad Éireann.

I thank the Minister for coming to the House.

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): I am pleased to introduce the Health (Provision of Contraception Prescribing Service in Retail Pharmacy Businesses) Bill 2026 to the Seanad. The Bill proposes to include pharmacists as prescribers of contraception in clearly defined clinical circumstances, in addition to their existing role in dispensing. It will also ensure that the service will be available free of charge under the free contraception scheme. It is a big expansion of what we have been trying to do for women. The plans for this were published in 2025. We had a comprehensive engagement with stakeholders and pharmacy sector representatives. To enable pharmacy prescription, the Bill needs to amend the Health Act 1970, the Irish Medicines Board Act 1995 and the Pharmacy Act 2007.

The service will involve the prescription of short-acting contraception, such as the contraceptive pill, the patch and the ring, by pharmacists, who already supply emergency contraception. The service will be free of charge to women aged 17 to 35, who are covered by the free contraception scheme.

It will also be available to private patients with the fees for this service determined locally by the pharmacy. It is almost certainly going to be less costly and more convenient than returning to a GP for every prescription. People would have to go to the GP in the first instance for the first prescription, but thereafter for the next four and a half years they can go back to the pharmacy and get the prescription renewed there. It is likely to be cheaper for those private patients and much more convenient.

The clinical basis for pharmacies prescribing is provided for in the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2024 and similar to the common conditions service, regulations for this service are going to have to be published after the Bill is enacted. The Bill and the secondary legislation, training and clinical protocols that will follow it will support the terms and conditions for this service, as laid out in the community pharmacy agreement.

I will take Senators through the provisions of the Bill. Section 1 amends the definition of "scheme provider", previously limited to medical practitioners, for the provision of prescriptions. The Bill expands the definition to include retail pharmacy businesses entering into an agreement with the HSE for the provision of primary prescription services to women. It will be provided by a registered pharmacist in accordance with the relevant pharmacy legislation, including this Bill. Section 2 of the Bill makes various amendments to the Irish Medicines Board Act and the Pharmacy Act. Those amendments ensure that whole legislative framework is cross-referenced correctly. Section 4, the final section, provides the Short Title for the commencement of the Bill. Sections 1 to 3, along with the clinical statutory instruments to be drafted, align the relevant Acts to accurately define the new service. The sections also provide for clinical protocols, rules, codes of conduct and training provisions for pharmacists who would like to provide the new service, and I hope they will be many.

I would also like to note that I introduced amendments in the Dáil to remove the term "medical devices" from the Bill. That followed confirmation from the Pharmaceutical Society of Ireland and the Health Products Regulatory Authority that the patch and ring are classified as medicinal products, not medical devices. That is just a correction there.

To sum up, the most important thing is that the Bill will improve access to hormonal contraception, including but not limited to the free contraception scheme. It will widen the range of services that can be delivered in the convenience of one's local pharmacy. It will

improve patient choice and convenience. It will save money for private patients and, separately, for the State, by reducing costs for the free contraception scheme. It is going to provide essential additional capacity for additional women's health measures.

We have spent a lot of time trying to expand what pharmacies can do. We now have a common conditions service where you can go to a pharmacy instead of a GP to get a diagnosis and prescription for eight basic conditions like conjunctivitis or urinary tract infections - the kind of things that just come up in people's lives all the time. We would like to expand more and more what pharmacies can do. They are the first point of contact for medical contact. Pharmacists are extremely well trained. They have been in university for five and often six years. They are exceptionally good medical practitioners and they are trusted by the community. I want to see more done much more naturally in a pharmacist's than in a GP clinic. We can expand access to GPs, who will have the commensurate space in their practices due to people going to pharmacies for common condition services and the free contraception scheme. This will free up space otherwise needed for more complex consultations in GP surgeries. We are trying to move as much as we can into pharmacies. 2026 is a big year for that because we have launched the common conditions service and now have 95% of pharmacists signed up to it. People can go in and pay €30 or €35, whatever it happens to be, and get a quick diagnosis and a prescription there and then. Now we are adding this as well, for the convenience of women. Yes, that first prescription has to come from a GP because we know that many women have complex conditions, maybe blood pressure, or are of a certain age whereby there has to be an initial clinical assessment done. Thereafter they will go back to the pharmacist to get their blood pressure checked, have a consultation and have the prescription renewed for the next four and a half years. It is a fantastic thing for expanding women's health and access to healthcare generally. I hope the Seanad will agree.

Senator Maria Byrne: I thank the Minister for coming to discuss this really important Bill today. I thank her personally and her Department for all they are doing for women's health since she came into office. The roll-out of this important Bill and the many other prescription services that can now be accessed through the pharmacy are really important. As the Minister said herself, people were queueing up to get a doctor's appointment and those appointments now will be available for people with more complex health issues. I understand that for the first appointment they need to go to the doctor but after that, it will be through the pharmacy. Pharmacists have a huge role to play. I compliment the IPU and its president and members for their involvement and willingness to step up to the plate. The Minister listed some of the different issues that can now be dealt with there. They are quite common issues which do happen in people's lives on a regular basis. Not having to go to a doctor for a prescription certainly saves people money but also time. For most people, especially for the less minor things like a urinary tract infection or conjunctivitis, people just want them dealt with and to move on with their day. They are not impeding most of the time.

Certainly I think that the contraception is going to be free for most people and for private patients it will be a lower price than normal. This is a really important step. I am sure the Minister has more things that she will be bringing forward in terms of the role of the pharmacy. People feel very comfortable in going to their pharmacist. Nine times out of ten, people have the same pharmacist and they build a relationship with that person. Even before this, people

were often asking the advice of the pharmacist rather than going to the GP. It is a very important step. I compliment all involved. The Minister has the full support of Fine Gael.

Senator Teresa Costello: I welcome the Minister. She has made herself very available to the Seanad during this term. I understand how busy she is but we really do appreciate the time she has given and how she has listened to us. I mean that very sincerely. I welcome this Bill. It is practical and sensible legislation. It reflects how healthcare is evolving in Ireland. It is about making access to care easier and reducing unnecessary delays. The Minister spoke about pharmacists and their qualifications, which just brought me back to my childhood. We had a pharmacist whose name was Mattie. He worked out of Glenview. My grandparents and parents had such faith in him. He was a miracle worker in our community. People still talk about him to this day. He is long since retired. The existing pharmacists in our community are approachable and knowledgeable and deserve that respect to be given the extra trust to carry out extra work. They are one of the greatest strengths of our primary care system. The Bill builds on that trusted relationship. It is allowing them, under strict clinical protocols, to provide the repeat prescriptions for certain forms of short-acting contraception. It is not replacing the GPs but just complementing them and allowing them to focus on more complex issues and patients who have more complex needs.

The programme for Government committed to continuing the expansion of access to free contraception and this legislation delivers on that commitment in a practical and patient-centered way. The Bill benefits women outside the free contraception scheme and women aged over 35 are able to avail of the service privately where clinically approved, at a cost that is expected to be lower than the cost of attending a GP. It is a welcome step in improving accessibility and affordability. Just as importantly, the legislation contains important safeguards. As the Minister explained, patients must first receive the assessment and prescription from a GP. Pharmacists will operate under nationally approved clinical protocols with mandatory training and clear professional standards. Women with complex medical conditions or higher clinical risks will remain under the care of their GP, and that is really important. Likewise, long-acting reversible contraception such as implants and intrauterine devices will continue to be provided through appropriately trained medical professionals. These safeguards ensure that patient safety remains at the heart of this new service. The legislation represents good use of public resources. Every repeat prescription that can be safely managed in a pharmacy is one less routine appointment occupying valuable GP time. It creates additional capacity within general practice for patients with chronic illnesses, mental health concerns, children's healthcare and more complex conditions.

It creates the additional capacity within general capacity, including patients with chronic illnesses, mental health concerns, children's healthcare and more complex conditions. It is also a cost-effective reform. Under the community pharmacy agreement, the agreed reimbursement for a pharmacy consultation is significantly lower than the current allocation for a GP consultation, so it delivers value for taxpayers while improving patient convenience. I acknowledge the constructive engagement between the Department of Health, the HSE, the IPU and all those involved in developing this service. Their collaboration demonstrates how healthcare reform can be delivered through partnership and careful planning. As it is rolled out, it is important that the Government continues to monitor its implementation and ensure

pharmacists receive the necessary training and support and maintain close collaboration with GPs to ensure a seamless continuity of care for patients.

Senator Pauline Tully: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire chuig an Seanad. I welcome the Bill. We will be fully supporting it. It makes sense. It will reduce barriers for women and make access to contraception easier, which is always going to be welcome. It will also ease pressure on primary care. It is a welcome step in the expansion of community pharmacy and women's healthcare services.

The free contraception scheme is still limited to women aged 17 to 35. The scheme should be reformed to cover all hormone therapy for all women and girls from adolescence through to and beyond menopause, and not restricted to those within certain age brackets.

Women's health is not embedded as a core service across primary and community care services. I acknowledge that there have been huge improvements on what is available for women, compared with a few years ago when there was nothing, but still far too often conditions affecting women are seen as a specialty or mystery when there is a range of supports and advice that women could receive through primary and community care services. A structured approach is needed to drive improvements in care for women in their local communities.

Sinn Féin has proposed a structured women's healthcare scheme in primary care, which would include general practice, pharmacy, nursing and allied primary care professions. The scheme would ensure appropriate support for women and girls at every stage of their life. Current services and supports are somewhat disjointed and can be costly. I welcome the Bill and will be supporting it.

Senator Patricia Stephenson: Senator Harmon and I are sharing time.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Patricia Stephenson: I thank the Minister for coming in. This is a really positive step. I am delighted she is pushing it forward. By and large, the oral contraceptive is incredibly safe. A lot of well-studied medicines are available. Over-the-counter oral contraception has been recommended by the WHO since 2019. I understand that this process has been endorsed by the Irish Pharmacy Union, which is unequivocal that there is no clinical reason for this not to be done.

I recognise that it is going to alleviate pressure on GPs and expand access for many women, who simply do not have access to a regular GP. The Minister's commitment to further expand what pharmacists can prescribe and dispense is really positive. It has been happening in the North for many years and has worked very well.

Freeing up space for GPs is crucial. We also have to be mindful of the burden it will place on pharmacists without the correct resourcing for pharmacies to deliver the scheme to safeguard against them withdrawing from this or any future scheme simply because they feel they do not have the resources to deliver it in a timely manner. As Senator Costello explained beautifully about her own community pharmacist, they are highly trained experts with

extensive knowledge, which this Bill acknowledges, but it is about making sure that they have the capacity to do it well and sustainably.

Families tend to stay with one pharmacy through generations. There is trust at a time when we have little access to our GPs. Many people do not have a regular GP. They rely on online GPs or it can take a month to get an appointment. I know a lot of women my age who cannot go to a GP so they are still spending the €20 to get their repeat prescription from a GP for their oral contraception. The prescription is free when they go to the pharmacy and they have their PPSN, but the process of getting the prescription costs them €20 because they simply cannot get a GP appointment. Women in that category are falling through the gap. I recognise that the Bill is going to address that, which is brilliant. It really is a positive move.

It is also a positive move for migrant women, women who cannot access a GP appointment or women who are forced to avail of online GPs, as I mentioned. It also includes women who do not have access to transport and maybe women experiencing coercive control in a domestic violence situation who cannot pop down to the GP, whereas accessing a pharmacy in a high-street shop is much easier. It creates a sense of additional safety around that.

I want to re-emphasise the piece around the workload for pharmacists. I know the Minister will be working with the Irish Pharmacy Union and moving forward on that, but we must ensure that pharmacies are staffed and resourced in an appropriate way.

The National Women's Council has found that 31% of women experience barriers in accessing the free contraception scheme as it stands. There are obviously concerns about the age restriction, although I know that is changing. I believe the age category for accessing free contraception is to increase in the next women's health action plan but perhaps I misread that. The Minister might refer to it in her response. It may be the case. We do not know yet. We would support an expansion of the scheme to women of fertile age. Just because a woman is over 35 does not necessarily mean she can afford access to contraception.

Senator Laura Harmon: I welcome the Minister to the House. The Labour Party welcomes this Bill, which will allow pharmacists to prescribe contraception in certain circumstances. It is a sensible step that will help to improve access to the free contraception scheme, which was launched in 2022. We all know that many barriers exist in Ireland in terms of cost, geography or simply time for many people when trying to access a GP. That is particularly true in rural areas or socially disadvantaged areas. Empowering pharmacists to renew prescriptions is a sensible solution to one part of that problem.

We believe the age range for the free contraception scheme should be extended beyond the current range of 17 to 35. There are women well into their 40s and beyond who need access to contraception. In our view, raising the age to 40 at a minimum would cost just €5 million. We believe this should happen without delay.

As was mentioned, research by the National Women's Council has pointed out other barriers to access that exist with regard to the scheme. Its research found that 31% of women experience barriers to access to contraception. There is a real issue with access for migrant women, including those in IPAS centres, who will not have the PPS number needed to access the scheme. There are also issues around cultural beliefs that shape attitudes to contraception in certain migrant or perhaps Traveller communities and we should ensure that women in these

communities are met with sensitivity and appropriate support to enable them to access the scheme in whatever way works for them.

We believe this Bill is a very positive and welcome step. I commend the Minister on it. It is also a timely reminder that we need to ensure the scheme works for every woman in this country. That means expanding age limits and looking seriously at how we remove any existing barriers to access.

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): I thank Senators for their support and enthusiasm for this legislation. It is very practical and will improve access to healthcare for women.

On the age range, this scheme was introduced in a phased way to protect the taxpayer. The emphasis was on the youngest women first, recognising that they probably had less money and that they were not as likely to be at the phase of trying to conceive as somebody in their late 20s or early 30s. The intention was to focus and build over time. I would very much like to continue to extend it. We reckon that for every year we extend the scheme, the additional cost is about €1 million. The extension to 36- to 40-year-olds is likely to be €5 million. The extension to 41- to 45-year-olds could possibly be €5 million to €8 million because there are statistically fewer women in that bracket trying to conceive, so the numbers are higher. It really is a question of funding.

I remind Senators that they have also asked me to fund various other programmes. We could be here talking about menopause and how we would like more specialist menopause clinics, which we are extending. It is important that Senator Tully raised this. I have put an emphasis on women's health generally. We have not had an emphasis on women's health historically. I pay tribute to my predecessor, Stephen Donnelly, and to a previous Minister, now Tánaiste, Deputy Harris, who both began the women's health task force. We have seen nearly €200 million invested in women's health specifically as a consequence of that. However, it is still true to say that women's health has not been understood as a distinct thing. For example, cardiovascular disease presents entirely differently in many cases with women. Heart failure has different symptoms in women than in men. We know that. We have a Her Heart Matters programme to try to dedicate more resources and understand the differences between women and men when it comes to conditions of that kind. This year, we have provided funding of €2 million to the Health Research Board specifically for research on women's health to differentiate it and make it different.

In particular, the board will be focusing on aspects of menstrual health, on aspects of postpartum mental health, particularly in traumatic birth cases, on something we have overlooked for some time, which is endometriosis, on women who are finding it difficult to access services in different ways, as Senator Harmon suggested, and on more marginalised groups. It is about trying to find and understand different ways to make contact with them and make sure they have the health they are entirely entitled to.

I forgot to mention the hormone replacement therapy, HRT, arrangement, which is now free for women. I do not have concerns about pharmacists' continued participation. It is always wonderful to see advocacy for private businesses by the Social Democrats. They have been enthusiastic in signing up to the common conditions service. It is a service that generates fees for pharmacists. It is an opportunity to work at the top of their profession. I have found them

to be really enthusiastic about this whole programme about expansion. It is far from withdrawing. They are able to hire more people. We have put more supports into being able to train at a totally different level. We want to give them the respect they need. I am more interested, if the Senator will forgive me, on supporting patients and access to patients.

Senator Patricia Stephenson: Not all pharmacists are business owners.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: That is why we have put so much money into supporting them in different ways, including the conclusion of a €50 million increase to their fees and to provide for the opportunity to raise private funds in this way, for example, the common conditions service. I want to see pharmacists doing more. I believe in pharmacists and community pharmacy. It is an exciting opportunity for any pharmacist to continue to participate in these different schemes.

First and foremost, and most importantly, this will make a big difference to women. I would like to go further with the free contraception scheme. It is a question of how we balance the budget and different needs that we all recognise for people. How do we do that in the most sensitive, appropriate and intelligent way over time with the funding that is available?

Question put and agreed to.

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

Senator Maria Byrne: Now.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Sections 1 to 4, inclusive, agreed to.

Title agreed to.

Bill reported without amendment.

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

Senator Maria Byrne: Now.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Bill received for final consideration.

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

Senator Maria Byrne: Now.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Question, "That the Bill do now pass", put and agreed to.

Development (Strategic Gas Reserve) Bill 2026: Committee and Remaining Stages

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

Section 1 agreed to.

SECTION 2

An Cathaoirleach: Amendments Nos. 1, 2, 4, 8 and 15 are related and may be discussed together by agreement. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Patricia Stephenson: I move amendment No. 1:

In page 7, between lines 22 and 23, to insert the following:

“ “emergency” means a situation where the State is experiencing a significant and protracted physical disruption of gas supply, or other catastrophic deterioration of the supply situation, and where—

(a) all relevant market-based measures have been fully implemented, exhausted, and proven insufficient to meet gas demand, and

(b) non-market-based measures must be introduced to safeguard gas supplies to protected customers, in accordance with the criteria for an Emergency Level under Article 11(1)(c) of Regulation (EU) 2017/1938.

For the avoidance of doubt, an emergency does not include localised network constraints, or routine seasonal increases in gas demand where physical supply remains available.”.

A number of us on this side of the House have concerns around what this is opening us up to.

I o'clock

We are concerned that we do not have the correct protections and safeguards in place to ensure that the supply will be State-owned and State-led because it is not included in the definitions in the legislation.

This amendment seeks to define genuine emergency supply. We want to make sure it is written into legislation and we do not see any mission creep whereby this facility is allowed to become a de facto gas intake facility that would increase our gas intake more broadly.

There are huge environmental concerns around this. It should be a last ditch option. We are not delighted about the disapplication of the climate Act, first and foremost, in this legislation. If it is to go ahead, it is crucial that there are safeguards in place. The world is literally on fire in some places. We have a forest fire in Ireland for the first time in years perhaps. I know we sometimes have them in the Mourne Mountains in the North. This is cause for concern, not just for future generations but for us today. The impacts of climate change are terrifying, and there are people dying in Europe because of the heat. We have serious concerns

that this proposal will facilitate further carbon emissions. Effectively, we are disapplying the climate Act and our climate obligations at a time when we should be leaning in to climate policies and sustainability, which this legislation does not do. I cannot fathom why we are taking this approach.

I understand the Government's arguments around energy security but, at the same time, we are not doing anything. Look at our offshore wind. We are absolute laggards when once upon a time we led in Europe. There is no sense to it. Instead, we are forced to resort to this because of inaction and a lack of adequate planning for decades by the Government.

We feel there could be a de facto gas intake facility, which would not be an emergency, special-use only facility for when we really need it, just in case. The Government will spend €1 billion on this facility, which it called temporary. That is a huge investment for something that is temporary. My understanding is that this is €1 billion of taxpayers' money for a facility that will be used by private companies. They will benefit from the existence of this facility but it will cost €1 billion in taxpayers' money to establish it.

The Department has stated this facility "will provide the resilience required to support our energy transition" and that "the reserve will only be used in genuine emergencies", yet there is no definition in this Bill of what the Government means by an emergency and when that would apply. To prevent this reserve from creeping towards a permanent facility used for the general provision of energy, we need an up-to-date comprehensive energy security review. An amendment put forward by my colleagues in the Social Democrats and signed by a number of us in this House would evaluate all energy security alternatives, such as battery storage and alternative sustainable fuel resources. As the Minister of State will know, our capacity for storing renewable energy in Ireland is rubbish. With all of the great weather we are having, people, businesses and individual households can send power back to the grid, but it is not being stored in the capacity that it should be. We need cheaper battery storage for individual households as well.

It is important that an emergency does not include routine winter demand increases, seasonal demand spikes and local network constraints where gas remains available. The Bill does not clearly explain when the LNG could be activated. Without a clear definition, the threshold for using the facility would become increasingly broad, the strategic reserve could become a normal part of gas operations and operators could justify using it for reasons of commercial convenience. We are concerned that this is going to become utterly normalised, rather than being this so-called last-ditch option to be used only in a real emergency. We have absolutely no definition of what that means to the Government. An emergency could mean very different things to me and to the Government. When the world is on fire why are we leaning not towards climate-friendly, green, sustainable energy sources but towards something that is so incredibly harmful for our planet?

On climate change and the climate emergency, we cared about it in 2017, when we had "Fridays for the Future", and in 2019 but now, a few years later, we have forgotten about it. Now, it seems like it is so far down the line that we are all happy to engage in cognitive dissonance, stick our heads in the sand and pretend the world is not literally on fire, not for future generations but for our generation today, as people die from the heat in Europe.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I am a member of the Joint Committee on Climate, Environment and Energy which examined this issue in some detail. As the Minister of State will be aware, I looked at this issue for a number of years prior to that, and he and I engaged on it when he was a Member of this House.

Interestingly, when the committee examined this issue the evidence and case for this terminal were not strong, and the warnings and dangers about its impact, environmentally, socially, in terms of security and financially, were really severe and serious. The case that was being made was limited. The committee produced a cross-party report, which, in its opener, states that there is only one very narrow kind of scenario in which such a terminal might be an appropriate solution and other appropriate solutions might be possible instead. In terms of the wider emergency pressures, the wider crisis we are facing and the wider issues of security and energy security, LNG does not deliver what we need in terms of energy security. It does not deal with the crisis we are having in terms of energy security. That is dealt with by renewables. It does not deal with the climate crisis and the emergencies that have been created. In fact, it intensifies the crisis and the problems we are facing in terms of climate change and related emergencies. It does not help us in those scenarios. It helps only in this very narrow scenario, which is in the case of an interconnector cable being broken. That is it. We are spending €1 billion on this one hypothetical scenario when we have real scenarios such as the climate crisis that is accelerating and which we can physically feel, yet we are not putting the same equivalent resources into tackling those issues of energy security. I know some things are being done on renewables and batteries but, again, there is a big question of what €1 billion adds further to what we are doing and what that would look like.

There were a lot of concerns about balancing out and whether this was the right decision to make, some of which I will come to in later amendments. There was a cost-benefit scenario which only looked at whether a terminal is a better cost when compared with wind or battery, not compared with wind and battery. That is ludicrous because we know that renewable energy and battery storage are needed. That is the combination we would be using and seeking to intensify and deliver in an emergency scenario. That is where the investment can deliver more, not just for that specific scenario but for the wider range of energy security scenarios we have.

In the time between the committee initially scrutinising this issue and raising a lot of serious concerns and the Bill coming before us, the volatility and insecurity associated with gas, particularly this kind of LNG, have only intensified. We have seen it in relation to what has happened in Iran and the Strait of Hormuz. It is clearly not a safety net; it is a vulnerability.

On the emergency scenario, while giving credit to an emergency, if one were to arise, it is still not a great solution because it does not give us six months' supply. We were told we needed to do this because of the N-1 standard. What was unequivocally dealt with in the committee's hearing, and it is in the committee's report, is that the N-1 standard - can demand be met on an individual day? - can be met by demand-management measures, on the day. We can meet the European standard using demand-management measures. The committee was very clear on that. It is not the European N-1 standard making us do that. That angle was put to bed. What we were left with was this one hypothetical scenario of a damaged interconnector, and the idea that we might need six months of supply. The problem with that is an LNG terminal does not deliver six months of supply because the gas has to be vented and replaced every two months.

Even if we had an LNG terminal, at an absolute maximum, if an event were to happen on the day after a new supply came in, there would be two months' supply available.

Otherwise, you are talking about ships bringing fuel in to replenish the reserve rather than ships being brought in with fuel for an emergency. I just want to be clear that doing this is not even great in an emergency scenario.

Here is the problem. When we were talking about this at a meeting of the committee, only one emergency scenario was identified in which this could actually be relevant. "Emergency" in the Bill could mean anything. There is no definition. We do not know what is meant by "emergency". Are we going to say that, because one hypothetical scenario we used to justify the €1 billion expenditure is not occurring, we should use the reserve for other emergencies, such as a bad day or a day when all of the gazillion large energy users we have added to the grid want to keep going and we also have a heatwave or cold day? What is going to count as an emergency?

I am worried that the scenario in which the provision is actually relevant is so narrow. The gas would literally be vented into the air. We would not and should not be using it in the system, but it would add to our emissions every two months. I worry that a narrative will emerge that we should use it for some other emergencies.

Amendment No. 1 makes it very clear that what is proposed should be the last resort. It should happen only after all relevant market-based measures have been implemented. Those market measures should include the demand-reduction strategies that are eligible under N-1, including demand reduction by large energy users, and should have been implemented, exhausted and proven insufficient. We are in a situation where only non-market-based measures can be introduced to safeguard gas supplies. This does not include localised constraints or routine seasonal increases in demand where physical supply remains available. That is amendment No. 1.

Amendments Nos. 4, 2 and 8 are Sinn Féin amendments and I will leave it to its members to speak to the specifics. They tackle the same core issue. The key question is that of what is going to constitute an emergency, and the slippage in what is used in defining an emergency.

Am I right that amendment No. 15 is in this grouping? I probably would not have put it in this grouping.

An Cathaoirleach: Yes.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: Amendment No. 15 actually tackles a separate issue. I do not know whether I want to let the Minister of State contribute on the emergency aspect now and then come back in on amendment No. 15, because it deals with a quite different topic, namely ownership and operation. I could refer to both now.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I do not mind.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: Maybe we will deal with them separately given that amendment No. 15 is on ownership and operation, and the question of whether this will genuinely be public.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: I have called this a Trojan Horse in the House before. This week, a new version of Homer's *Odyssey* is being released in cinemas nationwide. It is the tale of Odysseus's protracted journey following the end of the Trojan War. We all know the Trojan War ended when the cunning Greeks infiltrated the fortifications of Troy using a horse that was filled with Greek warriors. I know we might not have been talking about this, but this is a Trojan Horse. To say that the gas is for emergency use is an absolute Trojan Horse. It is going to be used in our energy mix. There is nothing else we can call it but a Trojan Horse.

People question the strategic thinking of the Trojans in bringing a wooden horse filled with danger into their city. Historians, no doubt, are going to refer to this legislation in that way, because the reserve is not going to be used solely for emergencies.

We are trying to define what an emergency is. There is no definition. Seven years ago, we led the way in the international community by committing to phase out oil and gas exploration. In fairness to Fine Gael, its former member Tony McLoughlin, who lives in my area, was actually behind banning the importation of fracked gas. This has been settled Government policy ever since. This amendment, which would reassert the commitment to reduce and legally phase out the use of natural gas, should not even be controversial at this stage; it should be accepted as a given. We are obliged to comply with our legally binding carbon budget targets. All this amendment does is reiterate that we will ensure compliance with these legally binding carbon budgets.

We have tabled many amendments. According to the summary, the purpose of this Bill is to secure a supply of gas in the event of an emergency, yet it does not include a definition of an emergency. An emergency needs to be defined so the Bill will not allow and encourage the incorporation of gas that the Oireachtas has authorised for use only in an emergency into the day-to-day energy mix.

The definition included in this amendment makes very clear what constitutes an emergency. That is why I wish the Minister of State would accept it. Without a definition of an emergency, there is a risk that we are going to be using filthy, horrible fracked gas in our energy mix. If the Government really believes the gas is for use in an emergency, why does it not accept this amendment?

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call the next speaker, I welcome Senator Frances Black and her guests: Shay Black, brother of the Senator, and Erica Pagels, from San Francisco – or, more accurately, Berkeley, which is just outside San Francisco – which is a nice part of the world. I thank Ms Pagels for coming over. I thank Senator Black for bringing her guests here. I am sure Shay is her favourite brother, just as the last brother she had here was also her favourite. Shay is most welcome to Seanad Éireann.

Senator Joanne Collins: I am going to speak to amendments Nos. 2, 4 and 8.

Amendment No. 2 makes it absolutely clear that the strategic emergency gas reserve is exactly that: an emergency reserve. It cannot become another source of gas for day-to-day commercial supply or market management. As my colleagues have said, we need to know what "emergency" actually means when it comes to this reserve. If we are establishing this

facility on energy security grounds, it must only ever be used in a genuine emergency, as defined under EU rules.

Amendment No. 4 places a clear sunset clause on the reserve. It ensures that the facility would remain a temporary response to a specific energy security challenge and not become a permanent piece of fossil fuel infrastructure that would undermine our climate commitments.

On amendment No. 8, I will keep my remarks short and sweet. The amendment strengthens accountability by requiring the Minister to report annually that the reserve is being maintained solely for emergency purposes and remains a temporary measure.

Minister of State at the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Timmy Dooley): I am grateful for the opportunity to address the House on this Stage. I thank Senators Stephenson, Higgins, Cosgrove and Collins for their contributions. In fairness, having listened to them outlining the background to their amendments, I can fully understand where they are coming from. I share their concerns about the climate and take their points about the really negative impact of fossil fuels and the burning of them on our climate, and the impact that they are having domestically, across the rest of Europe and in countries where we see starvation as a result of the abuse of this source of energy.

This is a last-ditch measure that we have had to introduce to put ourselves in a position to have security of supply in the event of a rupture in one of our connections to the North Sea supplies through the UK.

On Senator Stephenson's point about the very significant cost, she is correct that the gas will be used by private companies. Private companies use gas and in the event of a rupture, they would be in the same position as every other gas user. Gas users include hospitals, schools and large centres of employment that require gas. That is what it is about. It is not as if we are doing something just for the benefit of corporates' balance sheets; it is about ensuring the economy can ride out an event. Such an event is unlikely, I hope, but it is possible.

What is really important is that, from a Government perspective, as was the case with the previous two Governments, we regard gas and oil as transition fuels. We have a very clear agenda for powering our economy from renewable sources. Yes, we have fallen behind on the deployment of offshore wind turbines. Yes, we were the leaders at a stage, but we have a very strong pipeline in place.

There are about 5 GW going through the planning process at the minute, at various different stages, as part of what are referred to as the phase 1 projects. Those are developer-led projects. Sites have been identified and have to go through a significant amount of clearance.

This is under way. We hope that about 5 GW will be energised by 2031 or 2032. We expect by 2030 that much of this construction will be under way. The State pivoted through initiatives of the previous Government to take a plan-led approach to developing offshore renewables. We are undertaking a national designated maritime area plan, which is effectively a plan to identify suitable sites around our coastline for offshore renewables. We will have this completed by the end of 2027 and this is aimed at having an additional 15 GW of electricity on the grid by 2040. We are very clear on the direction of travel. The component referred to in the Bill is purely about getting us there. We know, it is accepted, and I take the point on trying

to reduce insofar as we can the use of gas and encouraging insofar as we can large energy users to reduce their dependence on fossil fuels, even in that interim.

Longer term, a recent report from the ESB would indicate that to get to net zero by 2050 will not be done on just wind or solar alone but will require batteries. Even in addition to batteries, it will require some liquid fuel. The one that has the best chance to emerge will be hydrogen. We are developing a hydrogen strategy in the Department. We are planning ahead but we must also be clear about the here and now and what we do today, tomorrow and next year in the event of a rupture to the gas supply. This was not as acute until more recent years, and particularly as a result of the renewed assault by the Russians into Ukraine and its usage of the grey fleet we know it uses, on occasion menacingly hovering in waters close enough to our EEZ, and sometimes within it with no clear intent. It would be foolhardy of us not to put in place the capacity in the event of a rupture to the gas supply to get us through those difficult days.

I accept the motivation of the amendments but the Bill is about getting through the planning phase. There will be another Bill towards the end of the next term, which will consider the operations of the facility when it is constructed. In the discussion we are having now, I want to fully explain where we are going on it, and it is at that stage we will engage on how we deal with an emergency and what the operation of it will be. Our discussions then might be more fruitful in terms of that legislation. I will not accept the amendments and we will have a conversation again on the legislation when it is published and I will happily come back and go through it in detail. This applies to a lot of the amendments today because this is just about making the appropriate changes to allow for the appropriate assessment to be done to get through the decision the Minister will take on the planning and the construction works that have to take place around it.

Another point raised was regarding in what event it might be used or whether it could lead to greater usage of gas. This is not at all the intention. The intention is to have it as a strategic reserve. Technologies are advancing and Senator Higgins mentioned the idea of flaring and boiling off. Technology is improving. I am no expert on this but I have read a little about it and it can be done in a closed loop way. Previous technologies required a boil-off every number of weeks or months. We have moved beyond that but I will clarify it when we are back in discussions on the next occasion.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: The Government wants permission to build it and to suspend the climate Act so it does not apply and get it built. This is important because it should be borne in mind that building this terminal is not just about this terminal, as it will also open the door to commercial, which I will come to in a moment. It is reversing years of Government policy whereby we had the fossil fuel divestment Bill and the ban on fracking, because this will include fracked gas. There was also, of course, the policy prohibiting LNG which we had. It was not law and should have been law. The then Minister, Eamon Ryan, should have made it to law and it was wrong that it was only policy.

We are reversing all of these policies that have helped to keep commercial LNG at bay. We put measures into our planning and development Acts that allow for a fast-track planning process not just for this LNG structure but any LNG structure. It is a fast-track planning process so it goes straight to An Coimisiún Pleanála. A lot is being asked and saying we will discuss

what happens with it later is not really on. If the Minister of State is asking for so much to be set aside, and so many new risks to be taken on, he cannot say we will decide how we do it later. A recommendation of the committee and of many of the experts we heard from is that there should be a single Bill rather than seeking permission to build it and then talking about what we do with it. This is not good practice.

The Minister of State cannot say we do not want to discuss whether there will be an emergency. Sure there is detail in it but the key issue is that what he is asking of the Oireachtas, which is to agree to it being built, is on the argument of there being an emergency. It should be very clear what the emergency is. I mentioned previously that the committee said our N-1 obligations could be met through demand management. It agreed there was one scenario, an incident relating to the interconnectors, but noted it would do little to insulate Ireland from more generalised risk to energy security and, in fact, what the Government should be doing is accelerating onshore, decarbonisation and secondary fuels and fast tracking other interconnectors and all of the rest that the Minister of State has described. The problem is that a lot of our renewable energy is being immediately absorbed by the increase in usage.

Nonetheless, I have some practical questions. We need a little more on what the emergency is because it is not sufficient to say we will deal with it then. The emergency is the ground on which the Minister of State is asking for the normal planning process and the climate Act to be suspended. We need to know what the emergency is. If it is the case that there is an exit plan by 2040, it should answer the amendment tabled by Sinn Féin. The groupings are a little bit strange because I have also tabled a sunset clause amendment, which will be dealt with later and has not been grouped with Sinn Féin's sunset clause amendment. If this is about a transition and getting the house in order, there should be a sunset clause. We need a sunset clause. If it is going to be temporary, then temporary needs to be quantified in the Bill.

Amendment No. 15 is also grouped with this amendment and this is a core issue in respect of ownership and operation. In the amendment, Senators Harmon, Cosgrove and Noonan and I are asking that the designated strategic gas reserve would remain exclusively in public ownership and under State control and would not be transferred or outsourced in whole or in part to any private commercial entity. That is vital. It is part of the core rationale as to why all of this special waiving and fast-tracking is being requested and the reversal of so much previous Government policy. I remember a moment, and I am sure the Minister of State does, when Ireland was going around the world selling green bonds on the back of our anti-fracking legislation and our fossil fuel divestment laws. We were selling bonds whereby Ireland was the future and getting into leading world anti-fossil fuel and climate change conferences yet we have this happening now.

The committee is very clear on this. All provisions in the Bill that allow for development or operation by commercial entities must be explicitly limited to public bodies.

The committee looked for this to be explicitly limited, both the development and operation, to the public bodies. That was a very clear message from the committee. Our amendment does the same thing. It says that it cannot be transferred to private commercial entities; it must be a designated public body; the Minister would not direct, permit or authorise any send-out of the gas unless the CRU has formally certified that a gas supply emergency exists that cannot be resolved by any other balancing; and all large energy users operating within the State have been curtailed. This is another one. I see now why it is grouped. It is because part of it is on the

public ownership and the other part is that there is curtailment, if necessary, of large energy users in terms of minimum operation of electricity and natural gas consensual process. The Minister of State might touch on that. Will he talk to the emergency? What comes first in terms of demand reduction? That is not operational. That is policy. What are the policy measures that are going to be activated in terms of demand reduction and other measures before this last tier gets used? What measures are there in terms of ensuring that this is only under public ownership and only under public operation, as the committee has called for?

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: I will speak to amendment No. 15. If the stated intent of the FSRU is for it to be an emergency reserve, then the logical thing to do is to put it into public ownership. There should be no question that this will go to private providers. There is no room at all for commercial operators to make a profit out of this really dangerous gas. If we are going to end up with it as a reserve - I do not think it is a reserve - can we make sure it stays in public ownership and legislate for that? The Minister of State told us it will only be used in emergencies but that is not clear in the Bill because there is no definition of an emergency. If there is an insistence that it is going to be there, this amendment would provide a safeguard that it would only be used in an emergency, it would remain in public ownership and it will not open the door to commercial operators, which is a real threat. It would be great if the Minister of State could speak to that.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I thank both Senators for the amendments they are putting forward and the sentiment behind them. I will deal with the points about the emergency. The Government made it very clear that a decision was taken, based on a decision taken by the previous Government in November 2024. It looked to Gas Networks Ireland, a State entity, to bring forward a series of measures as a solution to the very real threat, albeit one we hope to never have to deal with. The then Government made very clear at that stage that this would not be a market play. It was not an injection point into the grid that effectively allowed for a competing entity to sell gas into the Irish market. If that was the case, we would have done it in an entirely different way. That was a very clear policy statement.

The fact is that GNI will have ownership and control of the entity. As the Senators know, the piece of kit – effectively the ship – will be leased in. There are a number of these around the world and they move on. First, we are not investing in the kind of infrastructure that had been a feature of discussions in the past. Other sites were identified by corporate players outside of Ireland that saw opportunities on a commercial basis to use LNG as a tertiary source of gas supplied into the network. The State did not engage with that option. It looked at ownership and control. At the core of this policy decision, which the legislation is attempting to implement, is that this would be retained and owned by the State. It was not a market play or another opportunity to reduce the price of gas, etc. It was not about an additional quantum of gas being utilised. It was purely about the strategic reserve. That was at the core of the Government decision at the time. It was the core of the policy paper and it is still very much the case, as set out here.

Senator Higgins is right that this legislation is about getting through the building of the facility. There will be further legislation in relation to its operation. The Senator asked me directly about an emergency. From my perspective, an emergency is in the event of a rupture to the gas supply. As she is aware, we have an adequate supply coming through two

interconnectors from Scotland, but it is effectively North Sea gas. We have some gas coming from the Corrib reserve. That has six or seven years of supply left, so it is dwindling. I am not a scientist but where there are very significant reserves of gas, it tails off towards the end, so there is not the same rate of supply on a daily or monthly basis as when the reserve was at its full capacity. The Corrib reserve is going to peter out. Corrib gas is down to maybe 10% of what we utilise now.

Senator Higgins is right that the previous Government, when we were in opposition, supported then Deputy Bríd Smith and others on ending licensing of further drilling for oil and gas because we just did not think there was a long-term future in it. I still do not think there is. I stand over that decision, yet I am able to explain the necessity that we have today, which is to give ourselves resilience in the event of something unforeseen happening to that reserve. I respectfully differ with Senator Higgins. I know all the Senators present have a long track record of campaigning on these issues but it is not the Government pivoting towards using more gas at all; it is quite the opposite actually. This is a recognition that we have to get to a better place, and we do.

We can talk about sunsets, but the fact that it is a temporary facility in the first instance would send a very strong signal on what the policy is about. When we get to a point where we do not have to depend on it any more, it will be moved on to the next location. There will be some infrastructure on shore but it will be limited enough. That might cover the point.

There were three issues. I have given my thoughts on the emergency. The commercial piece is very clear. This is managed by GNI in a non-commercial way. It is purely for storage. It is not meant to be an infusion of gas into the network in a market-sensitive way. That is not how it is going to play out. On the ownership piece, because GNI is a State entity, it is managing all of that. To me, that effectively answers the worries and concerns the Senators might have had in regard to those particular amendments.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: Again, with absolute respect, the issue is that the Minister of State is giving us his understanding but that is not the same as having it in legislation. The position taken by the then Minister, Eamon Ryan, and some others was deeply wrong and regrettable. They relied on a policy statement, rather than bringing in the prohibition that should and could have been brought in on public policy grounds under EU law. Ireland would have had very strong grounds, in particular given our national ban on fracking and hydraulic fracking. When we should have had a hard legal measure we had a policy position. We saw that as soon as Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil were in government together and the Green Party was gone that policy changed. It flipped.

Simply saying "Our policy is" or "I envisage it is this" is not the same as having a definition of "emergency" in the Bill. We do not know what this Government or a future government might decide is its version of an emergency. I appreciate that the Minister of State speaks in good faith about what he thinks it will be, but unless it is in the Bill, that can change, much like the Government that went around the world selling green bonds and saying it was against fracking, fracking is horrendous and came from a Government backbencher at the time. Now, we are suddenly okay with it having an input. Those things change. That is why the law needs to be got right.

We are not getting hard measures to copper-fasten the ownership and operation as being public and copper-fasten a definition of emergency. We are not getting solid measures on those safeguards. The other safeguards we have, which are our planning laws and climate laws, are being either fast-tracked or suspended. We are suspending the existing safeguards and are not putting hard safeguards into this Bill, and we are being asked to go on faith. We have seen the dilution in the position in this regard and the deterioration of the commitment in being against this type of hideous accelerant of the climate crisis.

This is one of the dirtiest fuels. It involves the production of methane, which is an accelerant. As the Minister of State rightly said, and I know he understands, we are doing this at a time when there is no global space in the atmosphere for it. Anything extra should be happening in developing countries that have been hit by this climate crisis and have not caused it. We are keeping digging and we are buying what people who keep digging are producing. That is the problem.

I accept that we are here to discuss it but, frankly, it is not enough to have the Minister of State's good faith in respect of what he interprets an emergency as being. We have to vote on what is in front of us, and what is in front of us is ambiguous and dangerous.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I thank the Senator very much. I think I made very clear what my understanding is and also what the Government's position has been for some time. An emergency is when or if, and hopefully never, a significant rupture happens to one of the interconnectors and we need an emergency backup to get us through difficult times. Of course, all efforts would be taken at that stage to mitigate, insofar as we can, the demand and manage it. Certain circumstances, however, could arise where we would have no choice but to use what is in the strategic reserve, and that is what it is there for.

Turning to the Senator's point about the position we have taken on green bonds and all of that, I still think that there is consistency in the approach and the policy here. We have sent very strong messages right around the world about where we are going with our energy mix. We are pivoting away as fast as we possibly can to a greener, brighter future for us, with less impact on the environment. Even if we move beyond the environmental necessity or imperative of doing this, it also gives us an edge in terms of energy security.

We have been debating for a number of years the necessity of doing this from the perspective of carbon emission reductions. What has happened since 2022, however, again referencing the invasion of Ukraine and the impact that had on the supply of oil, and the recent US initiative in the Middle East, the impact that is having on the Strait of Hormuz and the consequent impact on the global price of fossil fuels, creates an economic imperative, even if we choose to ignore the climate initiative or the necessity to address it. It is about having a supply of our own energy on our doorstep so that we are not dependent on the goodwill or bad actions of others.

We are driving ahead with that really aggressively, to the extent that recently the Taoiseach set up an office known as the offshore energy clearance house. This is to ensure there are no unnecessary delays or any of the bureaucratic stumbling blocks that often arise and delay major projects. I am sure we could speak about them for a number of hours here. I would not have to mention many and I am sure the Senator would identify them. The Government is absolutely committed to driving ahead with the agenda of previous Governments in moving away from fossil fuels.

Much and all as I would like to say that we can do that today, we have to recognise that we have to transition, bring our economy with us and cover, insofar as we can, any potential interruptions to supply. I hope the Senator will understand that from our perspective. I have set out the issues with commerciality and the ownership of GNI. As I said, there will be a Bill relating to the detailed operations of the entity, and we can have further discussions about it. I am not asking the Senate to have faith. This is just about the construction phase, addressing planning and getting us to a point where we can move ahead with all of that.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: I am sorry but I just do not buy the argument that it is security. A floating LNG storage facility in Qatar was blown up. It is actually more of a risk to our security to have a floating LNG terminal.

This whole thing is mad. Paul Griffiths, CEO of Predator Oil and Gas, publicly said 12 months ago that he would not live near an LNG terminal. He said, "Accidents can happen, so keeping facilities well out of the reach of habitation is vital". He went on to say, "There's like a one-in-1,000 chance perhaps of an accident happening, but when an accident does happen [- he did not even say if -] it would be catastrophic".

As for the idea that this is about some kind of energy security, it is not. It is actually the opposite. It is a real threat to our security. Why do we have two Bills? Why are we debating this Bill and then having to debate another one? It does not make any sense. I cannot understand it. This is a Trojan horse being railroaded through. I cannot understand why we would want to have two Bills on the very same thing. Why is the operation of the facility not included in this legislation? Why can the amendments not be accepted? That would be it sorted. I do not understand.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I thank the Senator very much. This Bill is going through the planning laws and addressing the issues that arise in the construction of the jetty, what all that is about and the facility that has to be built on the shoreline to allow it, in the event of a necessity, to connect into the gas grid. That is that bit. The operation is an entirely separate issue, and that is why we will have dialogue about it, legislation on it and a discussion on it. Trying to put the two together, quite frankly, would not be the best approach. The Government has taken that decision, and we will happily go through all of that as we work it through.

I take the Senator's point about the Trojan horse. There is nothing that I will be able to do to convince her otherwise. She has a very clear position on that, and I accept she has reached that point from her own thinking. I can assure her, however, that as a politician on this side of the House, I do not accept that position. The policy position and the legislation are very clear that this facility is only for an emergency.

Why else would we do it in this way? If we were going to do it in a manner that allowed for a market-led approach, then we would not be putting the burden on the State to build the facility at that cost of €1 billion. That is €1 billion that could be utilised for something else. If we were to do it, however, to get the private sector to pay for the security - I think it is accepted on all sides that there is a necessity for some security in terms of the gas supply - and if the Government were to say it would provide that through a market-led private consortium and initiate an auction to allow entities around the world to bid for it, as sure as night follows day, that would increase the use of gas. LNG would be coming in at a lower price, so more of it

would be placed into the grid system and the market generally, and that would have the consequence the Senator spoke about.

If that were the approach the Government had decided on, we would be taking a completely different approach. The Senator would rightly be identifying those issues and we would have an extra €1 billion to utilise on something else. The State has taken a view, however, that is consistent with our desire and our commitments to reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 2030, and onwards to 2040 and 2050, that this facility is strategic, as it says, that it is only for storage and that it is not meant to be a market play and cannot be a market play. The ownership will be in the hands of GNI, which has responsibility for the infrastructure and not for the provision of gas. That is not its thing. It buys gas into the system from different sources. I am not going to be able to convince the Senator, but I can reassure her that what she suggested is not what is at play here. I do not foresee any future Government taking decisions such as that.

I think Senator Higgins's point was she wanted something in the legislation because a future Government might take a different opinion. A future Government might take a different view and it would also be able to change the law in those circumstances to facilitate whatever its ultimate policy might be.

We have to be mindful of what this is attempting to do. It is attempting to put the legal framework in place to implement a policy that has been clearly set out as to what we are trying to achieve here. I would ask the Senators in good faith to accept that. Of course, if the Senators push their amendments, I will have to reject them. I accept where the Senators are coming from and the points they are trying to make. From the Government's perspective, we are on the same side as the Senators in terms of what they want to achieve. We think that what the Senators are proposing is unnecessary and is already catered for.

Amendment put:

The Committee divided: Tá, 11; Níl, 26.	
Tá	Níl
Collins, Joanne.	Ahearn, Garret.
Conway, Joe.	Blaney, Niall.
Cosgrove, Nessa.	Boyle, Manus.
Harmon, Laura.	Brady, Paraic.
Higgins, Alice-Mary.	Byrne, Cathal.
McCarthy, Aubrey.	Byrne, Maria.
Murphy, Conor.	Casey, Pat.
O'Reilly, Sarah.	Clifford-Lee, Lorraine.
Ruane, Lynn.	Comyn, Alison.
Stephenson, Patricia.	Conway, Martin.
Tully, Pauline.	Costello, Teresa.
	Crowe, Ollie.
	Fitzpatrick, Mary.
	Flaherty, Joe.
	Gallagher, Robbie.
	Kelleher, Garret.
	Lynch, Eileen.
	Murphy, P. J.

	Murphy O'Mahony, Margaret.
	Nelson Murray, Linda.
	Ní Chuilinn, Evanne.
	O'Loughlin, Fiona.
	O'Reilly, Joe.
	Ryan, Dee.
	Scahill, Gareth.
	Wilson, Diarmuid.

Tellers: Tá, Senators Nessa Cosgrove and Alice-Mary Higgins; Níl, Senators Cathal Byrne and Pat Casey.

Amendment declared lost.

2 o'clock

An Cathaoirleach: Before I go to the next question, as this is the last sitting day before we break up for the summer, I thank Martin and all the Seanad staff, all the ushers, all the people who work in catering and all the people in the Oireachtas community, including the staff who work around the Upper House, for all their work. Martin and all the Seanad team have done a great job this year guiding us all in what sometimes can be quite challenging times. I also thank those members of the Garda Síochána who keep us safe in here, but also the Senators' own staff and all the staff, as I said, within the Oireachtas, particularly Grace Coyle and Sarah and Caoimhe in my own office. I am sure all the Senators' staff are looking forward to seeing them leave in many cases, and giving them a small break for a few weeks. I hope the Senators all enjoy the weather and come back safe in the new term. I thank the Senators all for being here.

Is amendment No. 2 being moved?

Senator Joanne Collins: I move amendment No. 2:

In page 7, between lines 22 and 23, to insert the following:

" "Emergency use only" has the meaning as defined by the N-1 infrastructure standard defined by EU Regulation 2017/1938 only. A Strategic Emergency Gas Reserve under this Act and all future Acts relating to its construction, operation, maintenance and decommissioning cannot be used for management of day-to-day energy demand;"

Amendment put and declared lost.

An Cathaoirleach: Amendment Nos. 3, 12, 13 and 16 are related and may be discussed together by agreement. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: I move amendment No. 3:

In page 8, after line 39, to insert the following:

" "hydraulically fractured gas" means liquefied natural gas, or natural gas in any other form, that has been produced, in whole or in part, by means of hydraulic fracturing within the meaning of section 5A of the Petroleum and Other Minerals Development Act 1960;".

A definition of fracked gas or hydraulically fractured gas is required to accompany a reiteration of the ban that was introduced on fracked gas and which is necessary to protect our environment. We banned the fracking of gas in this jurisdiction on health grounds and environment grounds for the good but if we allow imported fracked gas to be used, we will be hypocrites. It is wrong that it is fine for us to ban it here but it is fine for us then to import it. It is not right.

The amendment defines "fracked gas", which does not appear anywhere in the Bill. This, with amendment No. 13, would make clear that the importation of fracked gas would not be possible under the Bill. LNG particularly when sourced in the US, is usually derived from fracking. In Pennsylvania, we can see the devastating consequences, not only environmental consequences but health consequences as well. This is why we have included a definition of "hydraulically fractured gas" as meaning "liquefied natural gas, or natural gas in any other form, that has been produced, in whole or in part, by means of hydraulic fracturing within the meaning of section 5A of the Petroleum and Other Minerals Development Act 1960". That Act defines hydraulic fracturing and, after amendment in 2017, banned the practice of fracking in Ireland. Unfortunately, it did not ban the importation of fracked gas.

As I said earlier, it was a brave move banning fracked gas in Ireland at the time. As I said about former Deputy, Tony McLoughlin, in fairness, he did a lot of work up in our area. Deputy Scanlon did as well. They did a lot of work in the area.

Subsequent Government policy introducing a de facto ban on the importation of fracked gas will be overturned to develop this LNG facility. It is definitely hypocritical for us to say that it is grand for us to import it, that we do not want to have it here ourselves but it is grand for us that other countries can have the damage of fracking and then we will import it.

I hope the Minister of State will consider those amendments.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: As I said, credit is due to former Deputy ,Tony McLoughlin as well as to former Deputy, Thomas Pringle, of course, who brought in the Fossil Fuel Divestment Bill. These were measures, loudly trumpeted by the Government, that came from backbenchers, both on the Government and Opposition sides. We made a decision collectively as a Parliament to say that fracking was wrong and that we did not want fracking happening in Ireland, and it was for very good reason. It was for environmental reasons. It was for safety reasons. It was for all of the climate reasons. It was very real.

The idea is a striking and unacceptable hypocrisy. We agreed fracked gas was wrong because the fracking of gas is this incredibly intensive process that produces incredibly dirty and dangerous fuel in an incredibly dirty and dangerous way. It is the cracking of earth deep down to release emissions that might otherwise never see the surface.

We said it was wrong, so we should not then say it is okay to buy it from other places.

I support amendment No. 3 and the other amendments relating to this, but I also have my own amendment. It is amendment No. 12, which states we should limit importation of liquefied

natural gas from any country not party to the Paris Agreement, as well as limiting any LNG produced by hydraulic fracturing. Amendment No. 13 focuses solely on the importation of LNG obtained through hydraulic fracturing. There are amendments tackling the wider issue of fracking and saying fuels obtained through it should not be part of the Bill, but I want to specifically talk about importation. The majority of the European Union's imported liquefied natural gas, approximately 58%, comes from the United States, a country that is not party to the Paris Agreement, which has abandoned the idea of global and national climate targets and whose President is paying energy companies to stop building renewable energy. They are so actively hostile to renewable energy and so deeply committed to "Drill, baby, drill". That is what is happening in the United States right now. It is not just not party to the Paris Agreement, but is actively working against climate action. It has abandoned the concept of common but differentiated responsibilities that is core to the Paris Agreement and to the global movement for climate justice and against climate breakdown.

It is a minimum and should be in this law - the Minister of State should accept this amendment - to say it is bad enough that we suspend our own climate Act in respect of this terminal. We have to suspend the climate Act because there will not be a climate justification. The narrative we have heard is about transition and renewables. If that stood up, the Minister of State would be able to work within the climate Act because that logic could be checked against that. If it really was a transition, the Minister of State would not have to suspend the climate Act. It is one thing to suspend our climate Act, but it is another to support and facilitate the efforts to torpedo global climate action that are happening in the United States.

We should not import fracked gas because it is immoral. It comes from real places with real communities that are immediately and terribly impacted by fracking, as well as having an impact on the atmosphere that surrounds our beautiful planet, which we are destroying. As the Minister of State said, it impacts not just on business but on the liveability of large portions of this planet. This is as real as it gets. The idea we would be part of that in terms of fracking is hideous, as is the idea we would take up to 58% of it from a country that is working against climate targets and where we know the drilling part of the fracking will not be measured. This is not a one-off. We will not only buy LNG if it is an emergency. Rather, we will buy and use it every day this terminal is in existence. Every two months, because of the venting mechanism, we will be refilling it.

We are signing up to be customers of liquefied natural gas - potentially fracked gas, potentially coming from a country that is busily fighting against climate action and trying to fast-track our route to destruction. We will be doing that every year in the budget and every day in the terminal. Every two months, we will get another shipment in. We will actively be part of it. That is not a hypothetical; that is the reality of building this terminal.

If it is not going to be used, then let us find our gas elsewhere. If it is going to be such a rare circumstance, then let us not take liquefied natural gas that comes from hydraulic fracturing and let us not import it from a country that is busy destroying climate targets. Let us not give support to the fossil fuel industry, which lobbies nationally and internationally against climate action. If it is going to be such a rare usage, the minimum the Minister of State should be able to tell us is it will not be hydraulic fractured gas and will not come from countries not party to the Paris Agreement. That last is currently the United States, but who knows in

the future who else might be relevant there? I think that is a minimum. I hope the Minister of State will accept these amendments.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I understand clearly the Senator's position on fracked gas and I share it. I mentioned Tony McLoughlin, Eamon Scanlon and a number of others who worked on behalf of campaigns. There was a group in Fermanagh, a group in Clare, a group in Sligo and there may have been others.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: Eddie Mitchell.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Absolutely. There was quite a campaign against that. We all saw the damage hydraulic fracturing could do to certain environments and the impact it could have on groundwater. That stands, but it is a whole different ball game for us in terms of the procurement of supplies to fill a strategic reserve. That is effectively traded on international markets. We go to the markets, as the State will, through GNI to procure the gas. It is a commodity. I do not think we can start to decide who we take it from and who we do not.

I need to get clarity for the Senator about the latest technologies for boil-off of gas and whether it has to be filled every couple of months. My understanding is that is changing significantly at a global level and it will be possible to have a reserve without the necessity to utilise it or boil it through on a frequent basis. I will get the Senator more information on that.

The Senator raised the 2021 policy statement on the importation of fracked gas. That statement was to remain in place pending completion of the review of Ireland's energy security. When we put that in place, it was clear that we did not want fracked gas in our network as a competitive element. However, it was recognised that if we had to build a strategic reserve, liquefied natural gas would be the source of that and there was potential for fracked gas to be part of that. We made it clear that the policy statement would only remain in place until the security review had been done. The review has been completed, so that position changes. The security element is now decided by the Government and by Government policy to have a facility for storing LNG. Procurement of that will be done on the open market, will be based on commodity prices and will not dictate one way or another what the source of that is. That is the appropriate way to deal with the situation.

At all times, it is about minimisation of LNG usage in our grid mix. It is only in case of an emergency. I have told the Senator what I believe the Government's position is on that emergency and what is involved there. We will not be accepting the amendment.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: The Paris Agreement.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: The Minister of State recognised that there was a grassroots movement and the documentary "Groundswell" captured it. There is also the documentary "Gasland", which was made in America and came out in 2010. We know it is going to come from America. Again, this is the Trojan horse. We know that if it is going to be LNG, it is going to be fracked gas and it is going to come from America. We know that it does have to be vented. The majority of LNG is methane and is 80 times more warming than carbon dioxide. It is 33% more damaging to the atmosphere than coal. Why are we having it at all? It is fine

for us not to have it here. We know the detrimental affects it has on communities and we successfully stopped fracking from happening in our country, so why is it okay for the Government, as Senator Higgins said, to say "Drill baby, drill". Why is it okay that we are going to say it is fine for communities in places like Pennsylvania to have their lives destroyed? Communities have been destroyed by it. It is sinking into the water supply and we know there are not only health concerns but environmental concerns around areas where people are living. Has the Minister of State seen that documentary? It is really good but it is also terrifying. Why would we say that it is grand for those communities to get along with fracking and we will accept the product? More and more, I think it is the Trojan horse.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I would like an explicit answer in relation to the Paris Agreement component of my amendment as well.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The Senator's reference to the Paris Agreement was that the United States is no longer part of it. That is a decision its democratically elected Government has taken.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: We decide who we import from.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Pat Casey): Please let the Minister of State answer and I will let you back in, Senator.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: To be consistent, we purchase oil and gas on the commodities markets and that is the intention here. We are not going to stray from that. We need to look at the bigger picture as to what our ultimate objective is. I do not agree with the Senator's comments about a Trojan horse. Our objective is to have a safety mechanism to address any rupture to the security of supply as we transition from the use of fossil fuels to a greener economy. If I was arguing that we should now be taking fracked gas from the United States or wherever, through an injection point into the grid as a method of reducing the overall cost of energy, the Senator's argument would be well made. I am not minimising the Senator's argument but it would have more validity. We are just looking at this as a methodology for transitioning away from fossil fuels. All fossil fuels are harmful to the environment. The Senator is right that methane has a much higher concentration and is more impactful by what is referred to as the carbon dioxide equivalence. It is much greater than carbon dioxide but it also has shorter life in the atmosphere. It dissipates over time whereas carbon dioxide does not. Let me be clear that I am not making the case for methane. I am just making a point. From our perspective, we are trying to put in place that security piece on a transition. We recognise that the wind is not always blowing, the sun is not always shining and battery storage is not where it needs to be right now. Of course in all of those there will be greater advances and I have indicated that we have great hope for hydrogen and ammonia as the ultimate enablers to decarbonise our entire energy mix. Instead of depending on electrons, which is the electrification everybody is talking about, there is a recognition now here and across Europe that we will need some liquid or gas molecules as part of the future. Hydrogen is more likely to be the source of that energy. The Department is working on a longer-term strategy on hydrogen. We have had good engagement on it. I spoke at a couple of events recently. As part of the pre-Presidency work Hydrogen Ireland had brought its counterparts from around Europe

to an event in UCD to show that there are opportunities emerging here from the potential for hydrogen as we capture more offshore wind and convert to hydrogen. There is a better future ahead. The Trojan horse here is about getting away from fossil fuels and towards a cleaner, safer and more secure supply of a resource and an energy that is within our own remit and grasp. I thank the Senators for their contributions.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: Some €900 million is to be spent on the development of these. It is a lot of money to be investing. If it is going to be temporary why not invest it in renewable energy that is not going to be temporary? Nine hundred million euro is a lot of money.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: It is, but it is not an either-or situation. If €1 billion could sort it out with more batteries, wind or solar then that is the route we would be taking. We are investing very significant amounts of money in our electricity grid. This year, the State will put about €3.8 billion into EirGrid and ESB Networks to strengthen the grid to enable it to take more renewables. That will allow them to borrow about €18 billion, which will be spent between now and 2030. The State is making very large investments in our overall energy architecture and infrastructure. That notwithstanding, there is - for want of a better expression - a gaping hole in our energy security. I would much prefer to see €1 billion being spent on anything else than on this but it is an imperative. It has been identified as a very significant risk to our energy security. It would have a long-term impact on our economy, not just on our hospitals and schools and those that use energy but on some of our large energy users that are very large employers. The negative impact of a loss of gas could do very significant damage to the reputation of the country, which has taken a lot of time to build up. It has been built on the back of successive Governments' industrial policies and Ireland's attractiveness for inward investment. The IDA and others have put so much time and effort into it. It would be remiss of any Government in possession of a report on our energy security that identifies a strategic risk not to respond in the way we are doing, the very significant cost notwithstanding. It is the appropriate thing to do in the circumstances that we find ourselves in.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Senator Joanne Collins: I move amendment No. 4:

In page 9, between lines 32 and 33, to insert the following:

“ “temporary” has the meaning that a Strategic Emergency Gas Reserve under this Act and all future Acts relating to its construction, operation, maintenance and decommissioning shall be in operation for a limited time frame of 10 years only; “the Regulator” means the Commission for the Regulation of Utilities;”.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Section 2 agreed to.

Section 3 agreed to.

NEW SECTION

Senator Joanne Collins: I move amendment No. 5:

In page 10, between lines 26 and 27, to insert the following:

“Expenses

4. (1) The expenses incurred by the Minister in the administration of this Act shall, to such extent as may be sanctioned by the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, be paid out of moneys provided by the Oireachtas.

(2) The expenses to establish a Strategic Emergency Gas Reserve under this Act and all future Acts relating to its construction, operation, maintenance and decommissioning will not be socialised across household and SME energy bills.

(3) The Minister must mandate that the CRU carries out an assessment on the impact of the expenses incurred on household bills under this Act and all future Acts relating to construction, operation, maintenance and decommissioning of a Strategic Emergency Gas Reserve.”.

I will keep this very brief. This amendment is around the cost of this facility not being passed on to households. At a time when bills are so high for energy in this country it is something about which we seek an amendment. The amendment protects consumers from footing the bill for this facility. Families and small businesses are already under enough pressure from high energy costs. Before any costs are imposed, the CRU should assess the impact and ensure that these expenses are not simply added to electricity and gas bills for the public.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I thank the Senator. This amendment relates to the cost recovery mechanism that will apply to the strategic gas emergency reserve. The standard approach for cost recovery for security of supply measures and investments to meet EU regulations is through the existing regulatory framework and achieved over the lifetime of the asset. Identifying opportunities to minimise the potential impact of this cost on energy consumers is a key work stream of the project and is currently under way. The scope of this consenting legislation is limited to what is necessary to allow an application for development consent to be submitted later this year, which is critical to achieving accelerated delivery of the project. It is intended, as I mentioned previously in relation to one of the other amendments, to bring a memo to Government later this year to draft the strategic gas emergency reserve operational Bill. There will be provisions contained in that relating to the operation, use and cost recovery mechanism, as well as a number of other policy matters identified by Oireachtas Members in the pre-legislative scrutiny report, which was done, as Senators know, with the committee.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Section 4 agreed to.

NEW SECTIONS

Acting Chairperson (Senator Pat Casey): Amendments Nos. 6 and 34 are related and may be discussed together, by agreement. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Joanne Collins: I move amendment No. 6:

In page 10, between lines 31 and 32, to insert the following:

"State-led

5. (1) The Strategic Emergency Gas Reserve constructed, operated and maintained under this Act and all future Acts relating to its construction, operation, maintenance and decommissioning will be a State-led asset.

(2) Any permission granted under this Act and all future Acts relating to construction, operation, maintenance and decommissioning of a Strategic Emergency Gas Reserve must be explicitly limited to a public body only.”.

This amendment relates to the facility being State-led, which we have been calling for since the beginning. Energy security is a matter of national interest. This amendment ensures that any strategic gas reserve remains in public ownership and under State control. Essential infrastructure should serve the public interest rather than private commercial interests. We submitted amendments both here and in the Dáil and Seanad because we believe that energy security, as with food security or any kind of security for this country, should be State-owned. We should not give our gas or electricity to outside State companies.

Senator Patricia Stephenson: When the Minister first introduced the legislation, the facility was specifically referred to as State-led and that it would be a State-owned gas storage facility. We have not had the assurances from the Minister that the facility will be State-owned. Well, pardon me, the Minister has said that it will be State-owned, but that is not legislated for in the Bill. This is about making sure that the line in the Title of the Bill reflects that it will be State-led and State-owned.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: As the Senators have identified, the amendments relate to the ownership of the strategic gas emergency reserve. The strategic reserve will be in the form of a floating storage regasification unit, which is the ship that we talked about. It is to be owned on behalf of the State by the system operator, Gas Networks Ireland, which Senators, and particularly those who are members of the committee, will be well familiar with. An application for development under the project-specific pathway provided for in the Bill is limited to Gas Networks Ireland or such other public body as may be specified by the Minister. Further legislation and policy measures will, as I said, be brought forward later this year to ensure that the operation of the gas reserve is in accordance with the Government decision of March 2025, which was very clear that it would be in State ownership. I have already rehashed for Senators on a number of occasions the fact that the decision was taken not to involve private enterprise. It will be off market or out of market where it concerns the supply of gas to the reserve.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Pat Casey): Amendments Nos. 7 and 28 are related and may be discussed together, by agreement. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Joanne Collins: I move amendment No. 7:

In page 10, between lines 31 and 32, to insert the following:

"Gas demand

5. (1) The Minister shall ensure that a Strategic Emergency Gas Reserve established under this Act and all future Acts relating to its construction, operation, maintenance and decommissioning does not lead to an increase in gas demand.

(2) The Minister, within 12 months of the commencement of this Act, shall lay an annual report before both Houses of the Oireachtas which demonstrates that the Strategic Emergency Gas Reserve established under this Act and all future Acts relating to its construction, operation, maintenance and decommissioning is not leading to an increase in gas demand."

This amendment relates to the increase of gas demand. This amendment relates to the reserve and security of supply so that it is not going to be for outside vested interests when it comes to gas consumption. This amendment requires the Minister to demonstrate annually that the reserve is not driving greater dependence on fossil fuels. The Minister knows that we have an okay, if not good, track record in this country so far in trying to come off fossil fuels. We have used an awful lot of initiatives. It would be nice to know that this does not push us backwards from where we are at the moment.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: With amendment No. 28, which we have submitted, we would replace the existing section 33 with a new section. We are spelling out the hard-won protections of the climate Act. This is the third time that the Government has adopted anti-climate policy. There is the Critical Infrastructure Act, the Dublin Airport (Capacity) Bill and now this legislation. The Government does not want to go down as the anti-climate Government, but there is risk of that happening if these protections are not put in. We tabled these amendments so that these protections would be put into the legislation.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: This amendment removes section 33. As I said, section 33 is yet another disapplication of the climate Act. This is becoming a pattern. The Government seems to acknowledge that the climate Act exists but thinks it does not apply to anything it wants to do. That is not how it works. It is not how climate works. It is not how climate science works. Emissions do not stop hitting the atmosphere because the Government has a really good reason why it wants to do something. That is not how it works. It is damaging the credibility of the Government, a Government that is going to be representing Europe at the Conference of the Parties, COP, in Turkey later this year, if it says that we have a climate and development Act but disapplies it all the time.

This amendment would replace section 30. The new section 30 would keep the application of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act. We do not have time to go through it because of the guillotine, unfortunately, but amendment No. 28 sets out what it means to be thinking about the sectoral emissions ceilings and the carbon budgets when it comes to the management of gas. We spell out all the many ways that what is going to happen here is likely to be extremely relevant for the purposes of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act. There are so many ways in which the Act is relevant to what is being proposed and it is being disapplied. As I say, because of the time limitations I cannot go through the list of ways

but this is really dangerous. It is not just symbolically bad. In practical terms, it is a very poor decision. It will lead to a number of subsequent poor decisions within the construction, planning and operation of the facility. There are so many points at which this project should be checked against the climate Act - not just in the general concept of it but in its operation and construction. Instead of doing that, instead of checking it repeatedly against the climate change Act, at each decision point we are suspending it altogether.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I thank the Senator. From our perspective, the fact that the reserve is State-led and transitional in nature, meaning it is for emergency-use only, will ensure that it does not support increased gas consumption. That has been the kernel of the issue for us, with a view to minimising the impact of greenhouse gas emissions, as well as mitigating the risk of standard fossil fuel assets. I am being somewhat repetitive, but the single purpose here is to provide security. It is not about growing the use of fossil fuels. It is quite the opposite. We have a clear policy agenda around where we are going to power our economy and where we are going in terms of electrification. I have been open with Senators about the challenges we face for electrification out to 2050 as we try to get to net zero. Doing that without the continued use of some gas or liquid fuel will be difficult, based on the science of the here and now.

That is where we see hydrogen as being a potential component of the energy mix. We need to get there, however, and we need to do so with as much of the potential risk covered as we can. It is not about trying to reduce the price of energy by bringing in another more harmful fossil fuel. It is quite the opposite. That is where we are aligned in terms of our objective but I know that the Senator views it differently and I recognise that.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: If it was aligned with the climate objective, it would be aligned with the Climate Act.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Senator Joanne Collins: I move amendment No.8:

In page 10, between lines 31 and 32, to insert the following:

“Temporary and emergency use

5. (1) The Minister shall ensure that a Strategic Emergency Gas Reserve established under this Act and all future Acts relating to its construction, operation, maintenance and decommissioning is temporary and for emergency use only.

(2) The Minister shall lay a report before both Houses of the Oireachtas annually which demonstrates that the Strategic Emergency Gas Reserve is temporary and for emergency use only.”.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Pat Casey): Amendments Nos. 9 and 18 are related and may be discussed together. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Joanne Collins: I move amendment No .9:

In page 10, between lines 31 and 32, to insert the following:

“Meaningful public consultation

5. The Minister shall ensure meaningful public participation, including—

- (a) accessible publication of all technical material,
- (b) community impact assessments, and
- (c) public hearings where significant local effects are identified.”.

This amendment is around consultation. Communities deserve to be properly informed and consulted about infrastructure of this scale. This amendment provides for accessible information, community impact assessments and public hearings where significant local impacts are identified. As the Minister of State knows from living in County Clare with wind farms and whatnot, consultation is important because it can be dragged out as if the consultation side for the public is bypassed, they can think there is something going on that may not be going on. It is to ensure that the public are on board and consulted with hearings or public meetings. If this goes ahead, which it will, this proposed amendment would ensure that there is not uproar, litigations and judicial reviews whereby everything gets dragged out. It is just to keep the public informed and consulted throughout.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: Amendment No. 18 seeks to ensure that if there are going to be environmental impact assessments, they will include the evaluations of the vulnerability of the development to risks of major accidents or disasters relevant to the project and the direct or indirect impacts of the development on human health, safety and the well-being of the adjacent communities. That is not me making up some language. That was a recommendation of the committee and those are factors within environmental impact assessment reports. There are characteristics commonly used in environmental impact assessment reports and the decision was made in the drafting of this Bill to not include those established areas of impact assessment, such as the risk of major accidents and disasters and the direct and indirect impacts of the development on human health, safety and the well-being of adjacent communities. Why would we have an environmental impact assessment that does not include these two factors, specifically when the committee, as well as local communities who spoke to the committee, called for those to be included?

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: We are obviously going to oppose the Bill, but this is trying to strengthen it, and we hope that the Government will consider putting it in so that if this facility is going to be built, there is some commitment that safety has to be the priority in it. That is all this proposed amendment is trying to do, and we hope that the Government will consider accepting it.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I thank the Senators and, as I have said, I recognise their bona fides and their good faith. Any application for approval to carry out designated development under this process will be subject to environmental impact assessment and appropriate assessment. Key features of this process are a public notice of an application and publication of the application, as well as public consultation on the contents of the application. Members of the public and designated authorities may also make submissions and observations as they would

to the Minister relating to the determination of an application by the Minister, and these submissions must be considered when the Minister is making a decision on an application for designated development under the Bill.

A robust, fit-for-purpose gas safety framework is essential to protect lives and property, and it is of the utmost priority as we seek to deliver the strategic gas emergency reserve. Liquefied natural gas is one of the main methods used for storing natural gas, and it is a method deployed at scale internationally and subject to thorough international and EU legislation and regulation.

On the point about consultation, on Tuesday of next week I have organised for members of the local community to meet with Gas Networks Ireland, GNI, which is very much part of that engagement. It rightly recognises that there will be concerns about a large-scale project like that. GNI had a number of engagements in the local community where its representatives were available for a number of hours in the evening to allow people to come and chat through their concerns. That is advancing with the committee that has been established because like any other major piece of critical infrastructure, there is a community benefit fund and we need to look at that for the next piece of legislation in terms of how that is recognised, whether it be statutorily or otherwise. I certainly would favour that piece of it. There is also then the putting in place of the appropriate governance that is necessary to manage whatever that funding stream is to assist the community and see some benefit and gain for it. That is very much part of our thinking there, so we are aligned on that. I will not be able to take the amendment but I get the spirit of what the Senators are at.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Pat Casey): Amendments Nos. 10, 26 and 27 are related and may be discussed together by agreement. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Joanne Collins: I move amendment No. 10:

In page 10, between lines 31 and 32, to insert the following:

“Decommissioning

5. The Minister shall, within 12 months of the commencement of this Act, outline a plan for decommissioning any Strategic Emergency Gas Reserve constructed, operated, maintained or decommissioned under this Act and all future Acts relating to its construction, operation, maintenance and decommissioning.”.

Amendment No. 10 is around decommissioning. If this is a temporary reserve, which is in the name of the Bill, we reckon there also should be a strategy put in place for its decommissioning, whenever that may be, and that it is not left to the next government to come up with a strategy. Looking into the future, if this is five, ten, 15 or 20 years down the line, we could have an anti-green Government and having a decommissioning plan in place beforehand would alleviate the fear that this could go completely sideways. I know that the Minister of State hopes that it is so but Fianna Fáil may not always be in government. Just in case.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Maybe we will have Sinn Féin in at some stage and we will have a grand coalition.

Senator Joanne Collins: Just in case.

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: Do not worry, Senator, we would not allow that.

Senator Joanne Collins: It is about having a plan in place for if or when we do not need the reserve and that it is not left up to the Government of the day.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: We are also looking for a proper plan on decommissioning and for the CRU to be able to take the Climate Act properly into line in its operation.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I thank the Senators for the amendment. I would welcome having all of them in government as some stage. I have no doubt that they would find it challenging on occasion, maybe not as challenging as me because they would not have the firepower coming back at them to challenge them as well as they are doing to us on this occasion.

The scope of this legislation is limited to what is necessary to allow an application to get through development and to get the consent to be submitted towards the end of 2026. This is critical to achieving the accelerated delivery of the project, which is at the core of this legislation. As I said previously, there will be further legislation and policy measures that we will bring forward later in the year to ensure the operation of the strategic gas reserve in accordance with the decision that was taken back in March and that will also include addressing the end-of-life provisions.

I do not want to create any false hope but as we progress by bringing more energy ashore by getting more renewables on the grid, the expectation is, of course, that the dependence on fossil fuels will reduce significantly, particularly in respect of gas used for electricity generation. That is obviously an important part of it. There are other elements of our economy where we have a good bit more to do, particularly on transportation, etc., and there is a lot of work on there.

However, I get the Senator's point about having a plan towards the end of life and her point about any future Government that may not be as environmentally conscious as the Senator suggests we are; I thank her for that, I appreciate it. I have no doubt that were any of the Members in government it would remain, but we can never predict what the future holds. Neither, of course, can you prevent a future Government from making its own decisions that might differ with where we are at now.

We have to look at this practically, and we need to send signals as to what would constitute the elimination of risk and what would allow you to be in a position not to have that security reserve in place. We will be addressing that at a later stage, and I am sure we will try to find some common ground on that.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Pat Casey): Before I bring Members back in, I welcome guests of the Ceann Comhairle to the Distinguished Visitors Gallery today. We hope they enjoy their day.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Pat Casey): Amendments Nos. 11, 23 and 24 are related and may be taken together, by agreement. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Joanne Collins: I move amendment No. 11:

In page 10, between lines 31 and 32, to insert the following:

“Review

5.Any approval granted under this Act shall be subject to review every 3 years.”.

Amendment No. 11 concerns review, in particular, a three-year review. Given Ireland's energy landscape changes throughout time, it proposes there would be a mandatory review every three years to ensure the reserve remains necessary and appropriate in light of developments of renewable energy storage and interconnection. It is really just to keep a review on it, which I do not think is a bad thing. I like a good review.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I thought we were going to get a bigger reveal there.

Senator Joanne Collins: It keeps us all on our feet, and it is not every year; we have given the Government a bit of leeway there. Every three years is fairly reasonable to ensure it is doing what it needs to and is not going the wrong way.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: We have similar amendments in respect of a review. We are looking for a review every five years, which is even more reasonable. However, it is also not just looking at the continued necessity as regard threat or risk but also at what the alternatives may be. If we are in a position where battery and renewables can meet that risk at that point, then we should not be going for this as a preferred option.

Again, we are seeking extra components to the review.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: While not wanting to sound repetitive, I will. Effectively, this is about the planning and permitting we need to get through to get the fast-tracking of the construction phase. The Bill coming through later this year is where that discussion can take place. I agree with the Senator that a good review can be welcome; there is nothing wrong with it.

As to what the timing might be, we certainly will be looking at that. It was probably part of the discussions and if it was not, it will form part of discussions around pre-legislative scrutiny of that Bill. That is where Senators can have dialogue with our officials who will be drafting this. Certainly, the principle behind what the Senators are suggesting is a point well made. I do not see a reason for this at this stage but I may have to defend a different position in a couple

of months because the legislation has not been put together or fully formatted yet. However, the principle is certainly a sound one.

Amendment put and declared lost.

SECTION 5

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I move amendment No. 12:

In page 11, to delete line 10 and substitute the following:

“(e) the importation and offloading of LNG to the FSRU, where such LNG has been produced by a country which is a party to the Paris Agreement 2015, has not been produced by means of hydraulic fracturing;”.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: I move amendment No. 13:

In page 11, between lines 13 and 14, to insert the following:

“(2) Notwithstanding *subsection (1)*, the importation, offloading, storage or regasification of hydraulically fractured gas shall not constitute designated development for the purposes of this Act and shall not be carried out at any facility approved under *section 29*.”

Amendment put and declared lost.

Section 5 agreed to.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Pat Casey): Amendment No. 14 has been ruled out of order due to a conflict with the principle of the Bill as read a second time.

Amendment No. 14 not moved.

Section 6 agreed to.

NEW SECTION

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I move amendment No. 15:

In page 11, between lines 26 and 27, to insert the following:

“Ownership and Operation

7.(1) The designated strategic gas reserve, including any terminal, infrastructure, or facility developed under this Act, shall remain exclusively in public ownership and under State control and shall not be transferred or outsourced, in whole or in part, to any private commercial entity.

(2) The facility shall be operated solely by a designated public body for emergency energy security purposes and shall not be utilised for commercial trading of gas supplies by any private enterprise.

(3) The Minister shall not direct, permit, or authorise any send-out of gas from the designated development unless the Commission for Regulation of Utilities has formally certified to the Minister that—

(a) a gas supply emergency exists that cannot be resolved by standard network balancing, and

(b) all Large Energy Users operating within the State have been curtailed to mandatory, pre-defined minimum operational electricity and natural gas consumption thresholds.

(4) For the purposes of this section, the pre-defined minimum thresholds shall be prescribed by the Commission for Regulation of Utilities.”.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Section 7 agreed to.

Question, "That section 8 stand part of the Bill", put and declared carried.

SECTION 9

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: I move amendment No. 16:

In page 13, between lines 3 and 4, to insert the following:

“(l) a declaration by the applicant setting out the proposed sources of liquefied natural gas to be imported to the facility and, in particular, confirming whether any proposed source involves natural gas produced by means of hydraulic fracturing;”.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Section 9 agreed to.

Sections 10 and 11, inclusive, agreed to.

NEW SECTION

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I move amendment No. 17:

In page 14, between lines 23 and 24, to insert the following:

“Application for exemption to the principal of third-party access

12.The Minister shall, before approval of a designated development, apply to the European Commission for an exemption to Directive 2009/73/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 July 2009, concerning common rules for the internal market in natural gas and repealing Directive 2003/55/EC1, Article 36(9), providing an exemption to the principal of third-party access.”.

This refers to a very important danger that has been highlighted to me, which is the danger of third parties seeking the right to access. This is something that can and has been done in other instances in the European Union. States can look for an exemption in the common rules around third party access, saying they explicitly wish to ensure there will not be third party

access to this resource. Will the Minister of State apply to the European Commission for an exemption to Directive 2009/73/EC of the European Parliament concerning the common rules and repealing directive and seek an exemption to the principle of third party access for this facility?

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Again, this matter will be addressed in forthcoming legislation on the operation of the facility and those measures can be addressed as part of that. It is not drafted yet but as I said, there is an opportunity for the Senator to participate in the pre-legislative scrutiny and when it comes back to the House. However, I will not accept this amendment on the basis that I do not think it fits this legislation. However, it is an item for discussion under the operational piece.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Sections 12 to 25, inclusive, agreed to.

SECTION 26

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I move amendment No. 18:

In page 22, between lines 3 and 4, to insert the following:

“(6) In identifying, describing, and assessing the likely significant effects of the designated development on the environment, the Environmental Impact Assessment Report in section 22 and subsequent assessment shall include an evaluation of—

(a) the vulnerability of the development to risks of major accidents or disasters relevant to the project, and

(b) the direct and indirect, impacts of the development on human health, safety, and well-being of adjacent communities.”

Amendment put and declared lost.

Section 26 agreed to.

Sections 27 and 28 agreed to.

SECTION 29

Acting Chairperson (Senator Pat Casey): Amendment Nos. 19 to 22, inclusive, are related and may be taken together by agreement. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I move amendment No. 19:

In page 23, line 17, after “may” to insert the following:

“in determining whether the designated development is necessary having regard to the purpose of this Act”.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: I move amendment No. 20:

In page 23, line 19, after “State,” to insert the following:

“the State’s obligations under the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015, as amended, including in particular the obligation to pursue the transition to a climate resilient, biodiversity rich, environmentally sustainable and climate neutral economy,”.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: I move amendment No. 21:

In page 23, line 21, after "*section 26*" to insert “and the matters specified in *subsection (3)*”.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: I move amendment No. 22:

In page 23, between lines 29 and 30, to insert the following:

“(3) The matters referred to in *subsection (2)* are:

(a) an assessment by the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, following a public consultation, of the projected impact of the designated development on domestic utility bills, including any socialisation of costs across households and small businesses;

(b) an assessment by the Minister, following a public consultation, of the potential public health impacts and security risks posed to adjacent communities, including risks arising from industrial accidents, structural failures or attacks on the facility;

(c) an updated energy security review and risk assessment prepared by the Minister, following a public consultation, evaluating contemporary geopolitical scenarios and LNG supply disruptions, impacts on national climate targets, against—

(i) the accelerated deployment of renewable energy,

(ii) battery energy storage systems,

(iii) increased interconnection,

(iv) demand reduction measures for large energy users, and

(v) secondary fuel obligations;

(d) a cost-benefit analysis prepared by the Minister which shall—

(i) be prepared in accordance with the Public Spending Code Infrastructure Guidelines,

(ii) assess the full capital, operational and lifecycle costs to both the Exchequer and energy consumers,

(iii) quantify the security-of-supply costs and benefits under multiple distinct energy demand and supply scenarios,

(iv) include a comparative cost assessment of reasonable alternative measures, including demand reduction, system flexibility, increased storage, interconnection and renewable energy deployment, and

(4) The Minister shall lay each assessment, review and analysis referred to in subsection (3) before each House of the Oireachtas as soon as practicable after its completion.”.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Pat Casey): As the time permitted for this debate has expired, I am required to put the following question in accordance with the order of the Senate of this day: "That section 29 is hereby agreed to in Committee; in respect of each of the sections of, the section is hereby agreed to in Committee; the Title is hereby agreed to in Committee; the Bill is accordingly reported to the House without amendment; Fourth Stage is hereby completed and the Bill is hereby received for final consideration; and the Bill is hereby passed."

Question put:

The Seanad divided: Tá, 27; Níl, 10.	
Tá	Níl
Ahearn, Garret.	Black, Frances.
Blaney, Niall.	Collins, Joanne.
Boyle, Manus.	Cosgrove, Nessa.
Brady, Paraic.	Harmon, Laura.
Byrne, Cathal.	Higgins, Alice-Mary.
Byrne, Maria.	McCarthy, Aubrey.
Casey, Pat.	Murphy, Conor.
Clifford-Lee, Lorraine.	O'Reilly, Sarah.
Comyn, Alison.	Stephenson, Patricia.
Conway, Martin.	Tully, Pauline.
Costello, Teresa.	
Crowe, Ollie.	
Fitzpatrick, Mary.	
Flaherty, Joe.	
Gallagher, Robbie.	
Kelleher, Garret.	
Lynch, Eileen.	
Murphy, P. J.	
Murphy O'Mahony, Margaret.	
Nelson Murray, Linda.	
Ní Chuilinn, Evanne.	
O'Loughlin, Fiona.	
O'Reilly, Joe.	
Rabbitte, Anne.	
Ryan, Dee.	
Scahill, Gareth.	
Wilson, Diarmuid.	

Tellers: Tá, Senators Cathal Byrne and Pat Casey; Níl, Senators Nessa Cosgrove and Alice-Mary Higgins.

Question declared carried.

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome again to the Gallery the Black family. Shay Black was here already with Erica Pagels, but Martin Black, another brother of Senator Black, is now here and is also most welcome to Seanad Éireann. Martin told me there were no hard feelings after the Dublin-Kerry game, but that Dublin was robbed. That is according to Martin. It is not the official result. I thank the Black brothers for being here.

When is it proposed to sit again?

Senator Garret Ahearn: At 1 p.m. on Tuesday, 22 September 2026.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed

Cuireadh an Seanad ar athló ar 3.14 p.m. go dtí 1 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 22 Meán Fómhair 2026

The Seanad adjourned at 3.14 p.m. until 1 p.m. on Tuesday, 22 September 2026.