

Vol. 316
No. 3



Tuesday,
22 September
2026

DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad.....	228
Nithe i dtosach suíonna - Commencement Matters	229
Men's Sheds.....	229
Student Visas	231
Bus Services	235
Dental Services.....	238
Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad.....	240
An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business	241
Death of Former Member: Motion	265
Vacancy in Seanad Membership: Motion	265
Address to Seanad Éireann by Members of the European Parliament: Motion	265
Public Health (Tobacco Products and Nicotine Inhaling Products) (Amendment) Bill 2026: Second Stage	266
Council of the European Union Decision: Motions	275

SEANAD ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 22 Meán Fómhair 2026

Tuesday, 22 September 2026

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach i gceannas ar 1 p.m.

Machnamh agus Paidir.

Prayer and Reflection.

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome students and guests of Senator Joe Conway from Italia to the Visitors Gallery. I believe the Senator is downstairs with more students from Italy. I think the best thing to say is "*Ciao*". After that, my Italian gets very poor. I thank them for being here in Seanad Éireann.

I welcome the Minister, Deputy Calleary, to the House for the Commencement matters, which are submitted by Members of the Seanad on the day previous to sitting. Four of the Commencement matters are selected by the Cathaoirleach for Ministers to come to the House to answer. The first is by Senator Robbie Gallagher. Each of the Commencement matters are a four-minute statement and question by the Senator, followed by a response by the Minister and then a follow-up question by the Senator.

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

Senator Robbie Gallagher - the need for the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht to make a statement on the future funding arrangements for women's and men's sheds.

Senator Aubrey McCarthy - the need for the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration to make a statement on the levels of refusals of long-stay student visas for Palestinian nationals in 2026 compared with 2025.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin - the need for the Minister for Transport to provide an update on a dedicated town bus for Newbridge, County Kildare.

Senator Maria Byrne - the need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the measures being taken to provide sustainable funding for oral health promotion and prevention services.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove - the need for the Minister of Health to make a statement on the introduction of a mandatory, nationwide and standardised breast density reporting to all women with mammogram results until the HIQA health technology assessment process has concluded.

Senator Mike Kennelly - the need for the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to provide a national planning statement on solar energy development.

Senator Linda Nelson Murray - the need for the Minister for Education and Youth to make a statement on the roll-out of the holiday meals pilot programme during Christmas and Easter holidays.

Senator Eileen Lynch - the need for the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality to make a statement on the age eligibility conditions of the early childhood care and education scheme.

The matters raised by the Senators are suitable for discussion. I have selected Senators Gallagher, McCarthy, O'Loughlin and Byrne 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

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister, Deputy Calleary, to Seanad Éireann. I officially congratulate, on the record, County Mayo on winning the all-Ireland football title. It is a bit delayed but the county is celebrating since the victory. We are a humble people in County Kerry and we are willing to wait another year for our 40th title. I congratulate County Mayo on its title after only 75 years. I thank the Minister for being here today.

Men's Sheds

Senator Robbie Gallagher: Cuirim fáilte mhór roimh an Aire go dtí an Teach. Gabhaim buíochas leis as a bheith anseo.

The Minister is very welcome to the House. The topic of men's sheds is one he and I have discussed previously. We are all aware of the truly wonderful organisations they are. The sheds are a place where men can come together in a safe, comfortable environment where they can meet new friends, perhaps reconnect with old friends, learn a new skill or simply put the kettle on and have a cup of tea. It is a wonderful organisation. In my own neck of the woods of Cavan-Monaghan, we have ten sheds in County Cavan and four in County Monaghan. I understand there may be more springing up in both counties shortly.

From a funding perspective, in the overall Government spending pool the amount of funding allocated to men's sheds is relatively modest but nevertheless, hugely significant to the sheds, which have very limited financial resources to keep going. The funding they get from the Minister's Department each year is hugely significant in that it helps them to keep the lights on, pay for rent if that is an issue or to pay for light or heat or whatever the situation may be. I have been contacted by many sheds in my neck of the woods because some concern or a degree of confusion has arisen in relation to funding for 2026. They are fearful that funding will not

be forthcoming and that could potentially result in them having to close shop altogether. That is something that is causing an awful lot of annoyance and concern.

The people who run these sheds are all volunteers and do their best to keep the show on the road. It is hugely important that the Minister has said that the confusion that has arisen in relation to the funding is not factual as the funding is ring-fenced. However, there is some confusion to which I hope the Minister will bring some clarity. He has met the Irish Men's Sheds Association and another meeting is scheduled for this evening where perhaps we can put the confusion to bed. I would be grateful if the Minister could share that information with me and give reassurance and confidence to the men's sheds both in Cavan and Monaghan and the length and breadth of the country that there is no issue with funding for men's sheds going forward and all his Department is trying to do is streamline and simplify the process whereby men's sheds get funding, which is in everybody's interest.

I wish the Minister well in that regard. We are looking for an assurance that there is basically nothing to see here.

Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Dara Calleary): I thank the Cathaoirleach, Senator Daly, for his good wishes and place on the record of the Oireachtas my congratulations and thanks to the Mayo team for the lift they have given us all this year. For a Kerryman to do that is particularly special but even more special is to see Senator Goldsboro back looking hale and hearty. It is so good to have her back and it was great to see her coming in there.

I thank Senator Gallagher for raising the important issue regarding men's sheds and I will include women's sheds in my response. There is no threat to the ongoing funds to local sheds from the Department. We are supportive. The Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, and I, and our Department officials are working closely with men's and women's sheds. In fact, we are meeting the Irish Men's Shed Association, IMSA, this evening, which is a long-standing commitment. I am conscious of the role they play. The Senator touched on it and I know it in my locality. I have also engaged with a lot of sheds across the country.

Under the programme for Government, there is a commitment to continue to fund men's and women's sheds and to that end, in addition to the core funding provided by the Department to men's sheds through the IMSA, it is important to note that we provide a range of other supports to individual men's and women's sheds through the local enhancement programme, the social inclusion and community activation programme, SICAP, and LEADER.

Since 2018, under the local enhancement programme and its various supports, men's and women's sheds have been allocated over €2.7 million to assist with capital works, building upgrades and the purchase of equipment. We also provide funding directly to the IMSA under the scheme to support national organisations, SSNO. The current iteration of SSNO started a few weeks ago on 1 July last with funding of €297,766 made available to the IMSA over the next three years and six months. In addition, the funding that Senator Gallagher referred to has provided over €2.3 million in current funding directly to the IMSA for onward distribution to individual men's sheds. That figure includes about €700,000 which was paid out earlier this year between January and the end of April.

The IMSA and the Women's Sheds of Ireland have submitted funding proposals to the Department and we are currently reviewing them. However, the Senator spoke about the concerns of volunteers and about the extraordinary work of volunteers in men's sheds across the country. Some of my engagement with them has pointed to the frustration at the form filling and the level of bureaucracy that comes with the funding, as well as the delay in getting that funding directly to men's sheds. We are engaging with the IMSA as to how we can reduce the delay but also how we can control the funding, which is taxpayers' money, while also reducing the bureaucracy and the burden on volunteers. We received a new proposal from the IMSA late last night and the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, and I, will be working through those proposals.

In terms of 2027, as the Senator knows, all funding programmes are subject to the annual budgetary Estimates. They are costed to provide ongoing funding to these groups as part of the negotiation, and I will be in a position to give clarity on this after 6 October. However, I can assure the Senator of my commitment and that of the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer. I also want to put on the record my thanks to the officials in the Department who have worked exceptionally hard on this scheme over the last number of years through challenging times to get funding to sheds and to local sheds in particular. That commitment is real. That commitment from the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, and I is real and I look forward to my meeting with the IMSA this evening and to building a relationship with the new women's sheds association.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: I thank the Minister for that comprehensive and clear response to my question. It is reassuring to know the Minister is a huge fan of men's and women's sheds and I know this from past experience. It is great to see so many of them springing up throughout the length and breadth of the country.

I welcome the fact that proposals have come forward from the Irish Men's Sheds Association, which the Minister is looking at, and he is due to meet them again this evening.

His comments will bring reassurance and clarity to the men's sheds in Cavan and Monaghan that I have been in contact with. I am hopeful we can see a more streamlined process going forward where the funding can get directly to the sheds involved.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank Senator Gallagher and the Senators who have approached me. My priority and that of the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, is to ensure the allocation and the application process is streamlined for local sheds, that the funding is targeted and is distributed effectively and efficiently. We really want to reduce the stress on volunteers but at the same time this is taxpayers' money that has to be managed and controlled. I look forward to working through the IMSA proposals and bringing absolute clarity to this situation as soon as we can.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Chris Andrews): I thank the Minister.

Student Visas

Acting Chairperson (Senator Chris Andrews): While we are waiting for the Minister, I will take this opportunity to give a warm welcome back to Senator Goldsboro. It is great to have her back and I hope she gets plenty of work done over the next few months. It is good to see her back. She is looking very well.

Senator Aubrey McCarthy: This morning I went to the dentist as I had to get a filling. He gave me an injection. It did not work therefore he gave me three injections so I am half paralysed on my face. He assured me that even an anaesthetic will not shut up a Senator so I will give it my best shot. I thank the Cathaoirleach for selecting this important matter. I also welcome the Minister of State to the House. The Palestinian ambassador, Dr. Jilan Wahba Abdalmajid, intended to be present but something came up. However, in the Distinguished Visitors Gallery, we have Dr. Emma Stokes, who has certainly worked hard on the Palestinian student visa issue, and my colleague, Cillian Walsh, who also is passionate about this issue.

As a university Senator, I am seeking clarity from the Minister for justice on the significant increase in refusals of long-stay student visas for Palestinian nationals, particularly those from Gaza, during 2026. At present, 58 students from Gaza, who have secured their places in higher education institutions and have full practical and financial supports in place, have been refused visas. Of those, 28 hold full university scholarships while others have equivalent support through donors, family sponsorships, fee waivers and other arrangements. It is particularly concerning that 12 recipients of the Government of Ireland scholarships and Ireland-Palestine scholarship programme have been granted visas, while many others with similar or even stronger supports have been refused. These students are attempting to leave a war-torn area to pursue education in safety and their circumstances cannot be compared with those of other international students applying from stable jurisdictions. Yet, they appear to be assessed through the same process. Irish universities and colleges have worked to meet their obligations under our international commitments regarding displaced students and the recognition of the qualifications, however, many of the students are now facing appeals and that can take up to a year. Effectively, that denies them the opportunity of studying in the present academic year.

I have three questions to put to the Minister of State. First, what explains the very significant increase in refusals of Palestinian student visas between 2025 and 2026? In 2025 there were 25 refusals and in 2026 there have been 115 refusals. Second, will the Minister of State examine whether applications from Gaza require a more appropriate approach to documentation and evidence that recognises the extraordinary circumstances in which the students who have got their scholarships are living presently? Third, and perhaps most urgently, will the Minister of State examine a way of expediting the process for appeals so that the fully funded students, whose courses have already commenced or are about to commence, can know the result of their appeals? These are young people who have their whole lives ahead of them and they have earned their university places. They have scholarships and accommodation and they have financial support.

I know from talking to the various institutions – Dr. Emma Stokes has worked with Trinity College for years – that the institutions are waiting to welcome them. We can do so much more in this regard. I thank the Minister of State.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Colm Brophy): I thank the Senator for raising this important matter. His dentist obviously did a very good job because he was well able to communicate.

I am very much aware of the grave humanitarian crisis in Gaza. My Department continues to work closely with our colleagues in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to ensure we have a co-ordinated national response to this situation. The Irish Government has been at the absolute forefront, particularly among European governments, in supporting Gaza. The genocide that is taking place in Gaza is appalling and I condemn it in the absolute strongest possible terms. Ireland has been very steadfast in its commitment to the people of Palestine, and that support will continue.

Palestinian nationals are required to have a visa and must have a valid Irish visa before they seek to enter Ireland. It is important to note that visa applications are part of a screening process. I know the Senator is aware of that. The process is designed to establish that a person has a legitimate reason to come to Ireland prior to travel. All such applications undergo this process. There are no special arrangements for Palestinian students, or indeed students in any other conflict zone. There are other conflict zones that somehow do not ever seem to attract the same attention. No change has been made to the criteria that are being applied to the applications. That is the most important thing to put on record here.

Palestinian student visa applications are assessed against the same immigration requirements that we apply to all visa-required nationals seeking to enter Ireland. Each application is considered on its own merits, having regard to all the information, the documentation submitted, the circumstances of the applicant, the purpose of the proposed travel, previous immigration history where relevant and the requirements of Ireland's immigration policy and legislation. It is important to put on record that each application is examined on an individual basis.

The Senator referred to the increase in refusals compared with 2025. The refusal rates reflect the individual circumstances of the applications received rather than any change that we made to the criteria. Applications from Palestinian nationals are examined at first instance by the Embassy of Ireland in Tel Aviv, which processes certain visa applications under delegated sanction on behalf of my Department. Officials in my Department's visa division are in regular contact with the embassy regarding visa applications for residents of Gaza, the West Bank and Lebanon. Both Departments work together to ensure that visa applications from Palestinian nationals who meet the relevant criteria are, wherever possible, processed as swiftly as possible.

Between 1 January 2026 and 15 September 2026, 50 study visa applications from Palestinian nationals were granted. A total of 115 were refused. I cannot comment on individual cases. The reasons for refusal are set out in detail for each applicant. I point out, on behalf of the very dedicated and hard-working staff who do this, that the reasons are not flimsy. Applications are individually assessed and reasons are supplied. However, I believe we need to be sure we have absolute clarity when dealing with vulnerable people in relation to the granting of an academic scholarship to make sure that the understanding exists that the granting of such a scholarship does not mean an automatic right to come to Ireland. That has never been the case.

I remind institutions and their staff who are dealing with vulnerable people in Palestine or, if they choose to, in Sudan, South Sudan or any other conflict zone that we have a duty of care to vulnerable people to explain fully to them how the visa process works. In practice, what is being proposed is that we actually waive visa criteria for individuals who have been selected by third level institutions on criteria that they have set without consultation with the State. The principal factors arising in refused cases have related to applicants' ability to meet established immigration requirements, including documentation and financial requirements, English-language requirements and the conditions attached to a study permission.

It is open to any applicant to appeal the process. Visa appeals are processed by my Department in accordance with established procedures and are considered by visa appeals officers following a full examination of the information. A number of appeals have now been received in respect of recently refused Palestinian student visas.

Senator Aubrey McCarthy: I thank the Minister of State. I hear what he is saying about there being other war-torn areas, but today I specifically want to deal with the 58 visa refusals for people from Gaza. Yesterday, *The Irish Times* told the story of 19-year-old Hazem Faris from Gaza. He secured a full scholarship to study computer science in SETU in Waterford. His fees, accommodation and living expenses were covered. He came from Gaza where his home was destroyed. He had been displaced several times. He had lost all his friends and neighbours, yet his visa was refused. Basically, it was refused because there was insufficient documentation. There were gaps in his education, employment history and insufficient evidence of obligations to return to his home country. My fear is that this is a young guy whose home country has been demolished. He has not got the paperwork or the evidence and is therefore judged on that.

The Minister of State mentioned how all cases are treated the same and a scholarship cannot guarantee a visa. However, the Lisbon Recognition Convention, to which Ireland is a party, allows HEIs and other arms to take a different approach. When the Department is looking at a visa application from the likes of Hazem Faris, how does a 19-year-old living through the most awful circumstances provide all of the documentation needed? How does somebody explain their present circumstances when they are coming from the likes of Gaza? I agree that Sudan and other areas are similar, but it is something we have to address.

Deputy Colm Brophy: Unfortunately, I have to begin by saying what the Senator has heard me say quite a few times. I cannot directly address an individual case. It is unfair to a person who is an applicant. It is unfair to ever engage in that type of scenario. We have to have a rules-based system. I know that can sometimes cause people to ask why and why we are doing that, but there has to be an understanding that there is fairness, clarity and a process in place. It is so that if people can go through that process to qualify that they get it and it is not a response to protest, loud voices or the media, but they are getting their visa having followed a due process.

That said, I want to put on record that I would love to see a better system in place when it comes to dealing with this. I would love to see co-ordination between the sectors, and between my Department and the Department of foreign affairs, to look at how we can build out an approach to dealing with this so this type of event does not happen next year or the year after, whether it involves Gaza or any other part of the world. It behoves us all to try to work towards

generating that type of solution. We have a rules-based system but I would certainly like to see us working with others to develop a system that helps us deal with this, so we are not back here again in 12 months' time.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Chris Andrews): I thank Senator McCarthy. That is a really important issue. He mentioned that Irish universities are looking forward to welcoming students. The Irish public is also looking forward to welcoming students from Gaza.

Bus Services

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, for being here. I know he is very committed to rural transport and making sure we have connectivity, which is so important. It does not matter what age somebody is; there is a need for connectivity. The town buses are a wonderful example of that. We have had successful pilot schemes in places like Drogheda, Mullingar, Carlow and Portlaoise. Newbridge, the town I am making the case for, is now one of the largest towns. It is growing and developing rapidly. We have quite good inter-city connections and into Dublin with buses and the railway station.

However, there is a serious lack of connectivity within the town itself. Because of the nature of Newbridge, someone can live in the town but be three miles from the railway station, for example. Anybody living on the bigger estates such as Curragh Grange, Liffey Hall and Belin Woods who wants to commute to Dublin would need to have a second car to go to the train station. Parking spaces in the train station are getting congested. The small travel distances of just a few miles are congesting our roads and streets. It makes absolute sense to have a commuter bus to link the train station, our places of education and work and our shopping and health facilities. I was at the five-year celebration of KDP Ireland in Newbridge last week. One of the directors had driven down from Dublin. He made the point to me that he wanted to come by public transport, being a believer in public transport. He could easily have gotten to the train station but then he would have had a gap of four miles. He would have had to get a taxi, so he drove. In a town bus, I am not just looking for a convenience. It would be a strategic investment in mobility, the economic vitality of the town and safety and social inclusion. There is a strong case for the need for this, which I have outlined. There is a strong case for the benefit. I have spoken to people who keep a second car because they need to be able to access the railway station. There is clear evidence and feasibility there. Thousands of people access the commuter train from Newbridge every day. We want to do everything we can to reduce car dependency. A town bus would support local businesses, cut emissions and improve access to services. I am thinking of people who cannot drive and those who are older or who have a disability. People need to have the second car to access the main transport networks. Not having to get a second car for that speaks for itself. I will hand over to the Minister of State.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Jerry Buttimer): I thank the Senator for her ongoing advocacy on behalf of the people of Newbridge. She makes a very strong case for the town bus and is 100% correct on reducing car dependency. Like her, I am very passionate about accessibility of services and enhanced connectivity, in this case for people of Newbridge to the town. She makes a very good case in respect of the hinterland, which must also be listened to as part of this debate.

The Minister for Transport has overall responsibility for the policy piece, but funding and delivery are matters for the NTA. The Senator is right and I will work with her on this. Connectivity is so important and rural transport has been a success. The town bus and commuter bus in Newbridge is, I hope, the next piece of that jigsaw. Working with the NTA and the operators, I hope we will see the delivery of the services. The NTA has that responsibility. I assure the Senator that the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, the Minister of State, Deputy Canney and the whole of Government are committed to providing all of our citizens with reliable, realistic, sustainable mobility options. Public transport plays a key role in the delivery of that goal. In our budget for this year, we have seen significant funding of €940 million for the public service obligation, PSO, and Transport for Ireland Local Link services, which has been an increase on the €658 million provided in 2025. More importantly, we are engaging with the NTA on the existing levels of service, in respect of resilience and an issue with driver shortage, which must be addressed to ensure that we can plan for strategic decisions around new routes. The informed debate and decisions will be about that engagement with the NTA.

While we have seen a significant increase in funding to €31 million in 2026, which is a 38% increase, there are gaps.

There are 11 town bus services in Ireland. They are in Kilkenny, Drogheda, Navan, Athlone, Clonmel, Carlow, Portlaoise, Sligo, Balbriggan, Dundalk and Mullingar, and Ennis is planned to start operating next month. Would it not be great to have that in Newbridge? We will look with the NTA at a potential Newbridge town bus service as part of our town bus programme. The NTA is planning new town bus services in both Newbridge and Naas. Public consultation will commence in October and the NTA will provide an online briefing for representatives before that public consultation. I thank the Senator for her advocacy, work and support on that. Representatives of the NTA service planning team will be in Newbridge and Naas for an in-person information public service during that consultation period. There will be an elected public representatives-only slot on the day of one of the public information sessions. This will give those representatives an opportunity to meet the team on more of a one-to-one basis.

The connecting rural Ireland mobility plan is about investment in new and improved public transport services for rural areas, including County Kildare. Under the programme, almost 600,000 people have access to useful daily public transport services for the first time, with 188 new and improved rural regular services provided, resulting in a huge - I think it is fivefold - increase in passenger numbers on rural services. The services provide new transport connections to 41 higher education facilities and 61 healthcare facilities, as well as offering 71 connections to rail services, allowing passengers to connect to the wider TFI network and negating the point the Senator made about the need to buy a second car. The Senator's work and advocacy allow us to make decisions on future programmes and to prioritise the delivery of existing programmes in areas like Newbridge.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I thank the Minister of State and I appreciate his supportive words. I am pleased to hear him say that the NTA is planning new town bus services in Newbridge and in Naas, which is another growing town, and that public consultation will begin in October. It is important that the NTA does a briefing for all public representatives. We all get a lot of responses in relation to this. I look forward to that piece and to the implementation.

Once we have that, I will be looking for a service for Kildare town, which is another growing town. It has nearly a bigger problem because of the car parking spaces at the railway station. If you get there after 7 a.m., you have no parking space. They did some works and actually took away car parking space. There is a huge problem there.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I reassure the Senator and the House that I am fully committed to delivering a more sustainable, inclusive and accessible transport system for current and future generations. The Senator is right that it is about getting away from the car and enhanced connectivity.

The NTA is planning for further phases of the town bus programme, which include Newbridge and Naas, with public consultation taking place in October. I am committed to the expansion of the public transport network and to increasing the service throughout the country, including County Kildare. Congratulations on having the ploughing next year in Rathangan.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: Woo-hoo.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The Senator mentioned Kildare town as well. The funding for the new and enhanced services in 2027 will be considered as part of the annual Estimates process.

My good friends, Deputy Michael Murphy in the Public Gallery and Senator Maria Byrne, are here. I would not wish the Deputy to be in the Seanad, even though it is a great place to be.

It is important that we get rural transport and connectivity right in the budget.

The Senator has been a strong champion of County Kildare. I have an affinity having spent five years studying in the county. The Senator is right that Kildare, with Cork, is one of the fastest-growing places in the country. The population base is there. That connectivity piece is there. Deputy Murphy and Senator Byrne will argue for Tipperary and Limerick and Senator Andrews will argue for Dublin but the map will show Kildare and Cork are fast growing.

I want to support the Senator on this. I hope that the Ministers, Deputies O'Brien and Chambers, and the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, will do so as well. I thank the Senator for what she has said this morning.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Chris Andrews): I will let the Minister of State off, seeing as it is early in the day.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Excuse me. I did take advantage of the clock.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I am always tripping up with it as well.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I was beating the offside trap.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Chris Andrews): Like a good Cork footballer.

I welcome Deputy Murphy and his guests to the Visitors Gallery. I hope they enjoy their visit. Usually, when visitors are very young, we let them off homework. Do not judge me for making this statement but I suspect they do not have homework, but I am sure he will buy them lunch in the bar or somewhere.

Dental Services

Senator Maria Byrne: I thank the Minister of State for coming in to answer my question today, which is to do with the funding of oral and dental health. I want to raise the issue of the future of oral health promotion and prevention in Ireland and specifically the work done by Dental Health Foundation Ireland, which is a registered charity. A lot of that work is done on behalf of the Government, where the organisation goes into schools to promote oral health and to teach children the importance of brushing their teeth properly. For almost five decades, the foundation has worked alongside the Government on this. We do a lot of talking in this House about early intervention and keeping people healthier. That is where I am coming from in raising this. I believe that oral health should be treated the same as any other type of health. I sit on the health committee and I note that prevention and early intervention come up as common themes at all our committee meetings. The foundation has been doing a lot of work and the Government's national oral health policy, *Smile agus Sláinte*, recognises oral health as an integral part of overall health and well-being and rightly places an emphasis on prevention. Dental Health Foundation Ireland is already doing the work that supports these objectives.

My request to the Minister of State is about the core funding solution for Dental Health Foundation Ireland because I understand it is running out of funding. If it does not receive funding it will have to wind down the work it is doing. It has funding until around November. My concern is that while the foundation is doing great work with children in schools and working with dentists, and is doing great work in promoting the best type of oral health, core funding needs to be distinguished from once-off funding for projects. I ask the Minister of State and the Department to work with the HSE to urgently examine how core funding can be secured for the Dental Health Foundation to continue to do that great work. Recently at the health committee we heard that because of a shortage of dentists they do not get to the school in time and some children go through school without seeing the public dentist unless they go to a private dentist.

I see that intervention piece as being crucial in the interim.

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Marian Harkin): I thank the Senator for the opportunity to address this important issue on oral health promotion and prevention services. I am taking the matter on behalf of the Minister for Health, Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill. The Minister acknowledges the importance of health promotion and disease prevention, and the need for our services to reflect this. The Dental Health Foundation, which the Senator spoke about, is an independent registered charity with a key aim: to support improvement in oral health in Ireland through advocacy and oral health promotion.

The Minister would like to acknowledge the important work that the foundation carried out in its function as the secretariat to the Irish expert body on fluorides and health from 2004 to

2023. The expert body was put in place as an independent group to advise the Minister for Health on issues relating to community water fluoridation in order to discharge the Minister's obligations under the Health Act 1960 to monitor the general health of the population who are receiving fluoridated water. Since 2023, the fluoridation surveillance working group has acquired this function in line with best practice for public health surveillance.

The national oral health policy, *Smile agus Sláinte*, which the Senator mentioned, aims to radically reform oral healthcare services, recognising the need for an entirely new approach to oral healthcare to meet the needs of the population into the future. The policy is in line with the 2024 WHO global strategy and action plan on oral health, which has a focus on oral health promotion and prevention.

While reform is progressed through the national oral health policy, the Minister is determined to ease the pressure that people are facing in accessing oral healthcare. In practical terms, this means improving access to the public oral healthcare system, especially for children and medical card holders. Officials in the Department of Health and the HSE are finalising a focused two-year action plan to deliver real improvements on the ground. It will aim to respond to sustained service pressures, workforce constraints and long waiting lists, particularly for children and people with additional needs. It will focus on a small number of clear priorities, including reducing waiting lists in the school dental programme, orthodontics and expanding the access programme for people with additional needs and disabilities. Over the next two years, the aim is to stabilise services, reduce waiting times and make access measurably better for patients while laying the groundwork for longer-term reform.

The HSE has responsibility for operationalising oral health promotion and prevention services and is funded by the Department to do so. Included in this is the need for keeping up to date with modern evidence and best practice. The HSE currently funds the Dental Health Foundation through a grant-aid agreement under sections 38 and 39 of the Health Act 2024. Therefore, matters relating to additional funding for the foundation are appropriate for the HSE to consider in line with business needs, avoidance of duplication, value for money and budgetary processes.

Senator Maria Byrne: I thank the Minister of State for her comprehensive response on behalf of the Minister. I appreciate that, at the end of the day, the responsibility lies with the HSE. Nonetheless, I have a concern.

While oral and dental health services are being streamlined, better value for money is being sought and new ways of doing things are considered, my concern is that if the Dental Health Foundation is wound up, there would be no body there to oversee things in the interim period between now and whenever new ways of promoting oral health are in place. There should be some sort of funding to manage that. The Minister of State might bring to the attention of the Minister and the HSE the important work that is being carried out to ensure our children have good dental and oral health. It is really important that the whole education effort should continue.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I have listened to and taken on board the points the Senator raised, including on early intervention, keeping people healthier and, which was her core point, the need for some kind of core funding solution for the Dental Health Foundation. I assure her that

improving access to oral health promotion and prevention services is a priority for the Minister for Health and her Department. I restate my recognition of the important work carried out by the foundation as part of its function as secretariat to the expert body on fluorides and health. The foundation played a key role in assisting the Minister for Health in discharging the duty to monitor the health of the population receiving fluoridated water.

The HSE has responsibility for managing oral health promotion and prevention services. As I outlined, that includes the Supporting Smiles initiative, support for patients in residential homes and an upcoming initiative on oral health promotion in early childhood, which is currently in development. The oral health action plan reflects the importance of health promotion and disease prevention. The Minister is carefully considering that plan. I will convey directly to her the points the Senator raised today.

Senator Maria Byrne: I thank the Minister of State.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 1.52 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.01 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.52 p.m. and resumed at 2.01 p.m.

2 o'clock

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call on the Leader to outline the Order of Business, I extend my sympathies to Senator Craughwell on the sad passing of his wife during the summer. We all know that it had been a very difficult year for him and I know that all Senators were praying for him over the past number of weeks and months. On behalf of the House, I extend our sympathies to Senator Craughwell.

We will be observing a minute's silence - and we will include the Senator's wife in that - in relation to a former Member of this House, Enda Bonner, who died over the summer. He was a member of Donegal County Council. He served as a Member of this House from 1997 to 2002, and as a member of Donegal County Council from 1999 to 2019, representing the people of Glenties with dedication, integrity and distinction. He was widely respected across the political divide because of his tireless advocacy on behalf of the community he represented. He was hard-working, loyal and - like all Donegal people - resilient; qualities and characteristics he brought into his professional and public lives. He was a strong champion for rural, coastal and fishing communities, economic development and, of course, the Irish language.

Beyond politics, he was deeply rooted in the community. He was also a proud Dungloe man, a successful accountant and a senior partner in an accountancy practice in Letterkenny. He combined this professional career with his public and community service. He was also a great champion of the GAA and the Donegal senior football team. He was a graduate of University College Galway, where he captained the Sigerson Cup-winning team. His lifelong dedication to the GAA continued long after his playing days in his leadership as chairman and vice president of his club. He gave many years of service to Donegal GAA. He was well regarded not only in Donegal GAA circles but throughout the country. A devoted husband,

father and grandfather, he will be deeply missed by his family. On behalf of Seanad Éireann, to his wife Phyllis, his children Elaine, Elizabeth and Patrick, grandchildren, sisters, extended family and friends and his colleagues in the Fianna Fáil party who mourn his sad loss, ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam dílis.

I welcome another Donegal man here today to the Distinguished Visitors Gallery, Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher. The Minister of State, Deputy Charlie McConalogue, will also be joining us later to stand for a minute's silence in memory of the former Member of this House, Enda Bonner, and Senator Craughwell's wife as well.

I ask Members to be upstanding.

Members rose.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

An Cathaoirleach: I ask the Leader to outline the Order of Business.

Senator Garret Ahearn: Thanks very much, a Chathaoirligh. May I also be associated with your comments about former Senator Enda Bonner, who served his community in Donegal very well, especially Glenties? He was a Senator for five years from 1997 to 2002. All our thoughts are with Phyllis and his family at this difficult time.

As you said, a Chathaoirligh, we acknowledge Senator Craughwell on the very sad passing of Helen during the summer. I think we all knew it was going to be a difficult summer. I know that looking above, she would be delighted that you, Senator, are back where you love being and putting pressure on us. We were thinking of you during the summer; we all were.

The Order of Business is No. 72(6), motion regarding the notice of a vacancy in the membership of Seanad Éireann, to be taken on the conclusion of the Order of Business without debate; No. 1, motion regarding the arrangements for the address to Seanad Éireann by MEPs representing the European Parliament Dublin constituency on Wednesday, 23 September 2026 to be taken on the conclusion of No. 72(6) without debate; No. 2, Public Health (Tobacco Products and Nicotine Inhaling Products) (Amendment) Bill 2026 - Second Stage, to be taken at 4 p.m. and to conclude at 5.30 p.m. if not previously concluded, with the time allocated to the opening remarks of the Minister not to exceed ten minutes, group spokespersons not to exceed eight minutes, all other Senators not to exceed five minutes and the Minister to be given no less than ten minutes to reply to the debate; and Nos. 3 and 4, motions regarding proposed approval by Seanad Éireann of a proposal for a Council Decision on the conclusion of the agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Korea on the transfer of passenger name record data for the prevention, detection, investigation and prosecution of terrorist offences and serious crime; and proposed approval by Seanad Éireann of a proposal for a Council Decision on the signing on behalf of the European Union of the agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Korea on the transfer of passenger name record data for the prevention, detection, investigation and prosecution of terrorist offences and serious crime, to be taken at 5.30 p.m. and to conclude after 60 minutes, if not previously concluded, the motions shall be discussed together with the time allocated to the opening remarks of the

Minister not to exceed five minutes, all Senators not to exceed five minutes and the Minister to be given no less than five minutes to reply to the debate.

I will also be moving a motion of sympathy at the end of the debate.

An Cathaoirleach: Thank you. Anois, Senator O'Loughlin.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: Go raibh maith agat a Chathaoirligh. I thank the Leader for the Order of Business as outlined, which I support.

I extend on behalf of the Fianna Fáil group our deepest sympathies to Phyllis, Elaine, Patrick and Elizabeth on the passing of Enda, who was an exemplary Senator but also a very effective and committed county councillor for the Glenties area for 20 years. He was incredibly committed to his community and to his political family. He excelled in everything he did, whether that was at a community level, a political level or at a football level, where his greatest pride was wearing his county jersey. He was a cousin of Packie Bonner and this was something he was incredibly proud of. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam.

I also extend our sympathies to our colleague Senator Craughwell. As we approached recess we knew Helen was very ill, but the difference now is that she is gone and I know that is a huge void in your life, Senator Craughwell, and our very deepest sympathies and thoughts go to you.

I also extend my sympathies to the Leader's secretary, Orla Murray, who lost her brother Brian very closely after the loss of her mother Joy. We extend our very deepest sympathy to Orla, who keeps us all in check and order.

I want to mention the Committee of the Regions, which is a really important organisation in which councillors right across Europe get a say in all the legislation that goes through the European Parliament. We have an excellent cross-party group of councillors. Gillian Coughlan is the leader and an exemplary one. The Committee of the Regions is having its bureau meeting in Mullingar today. Its members are going to the Custom House and they are going to be in Leinster House tomorrow. I really want to congratulate Gillian. She is the incoming leader of the Renew Europe group on the Committee of the Regions. She is the first Irish person to take that role. It is an incredible one, so the very best of luck to Gillian and, of course, to the Irish delegation going forward.

I congratulate Anna May, Anne Marie and everybody who was involved in the ploughing in Scraggan. It was a fantastic microcosm of Irish life. We are all thrilled in Rathangan that it is coming to my home village and we are looking forward to giving everybody an incredible welcome. We will work really hard to make sure that happens.

The final point I want to bring up relates to solar farms and my concern that there is no national policy on them. There are many different applications and they vary across the 31 local authorities. The Departments of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, and Climate, Energy and the Environment are working to develop a national planning statement on solar energy but there does not seem to be an urgency around this. We see applications coming in right across the country. Germany, France, Spain, Italy and the Netherlands have a matrix for the use of land. We need a single framework that would standardise solar farms and solar farm applications.

Senator Linda Nelson Murray: I would also very much like to pass on my condolences to Senator Craughwell. I spoke to him during the summer just before his wife passed away. It must be hard, but I am delighted to see him back here.

Today, I welcome the very positive changes announced yesterday to the hot school meals programme. These changes show what can happen when Government listens to parents, principals, teachers, children and those delivering the programme on the ground. A few months ago, I ran a survey and received over 8,000 responses. The Minister, Deputy Calleary, also conducted a survey and thousands of responses came in. A lot of work has been done on the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Youth, of which I am a member. Through that work, we heard so much feedback. I am glad that feedback has been taken on board and changes are coming. One of the strongest messages we and the Minister heard was the need for greater choice, particularly the option of a hot or cold lunch. I am very pleased that this has been addressed and from September 2027, there will be an option for children to have a hot or cold lunch. I also strongly welcome specially adapted menus for special schools and special classes, robust nutritional compliance audits with consequence for standards that are not being met and different portion sizes for different age groups because, quite simply, a sixth-class student should not be receiving the same portion as a child in junior infants. We are also going to see the procurement process examined and recipes revised. These are all very positive and practical changes. We sometimes forget how far this programme has actually come. It began as a pilot in 2017 in just 35 schools and is now in 3,200 schools, with 550,000 children benefiting every day.

We also need to remember why this matters. I was in a school in my hometown of Navan last week and the principal said to me that the children in the school are absolutely starving. Is that not heartbreaking to hear in 2026? While there are improvements being made and this announcement shows we are making them, we must also recognise the enormous positive impact of the scheme. Perfection must not become the enemy of good. This programme gives children equal access to food regardless of his or her family circumstances and that is something of which we should be incredibly proud. I also want to build on this by making sure the holiday hunger programme reaches as many children as possible next summer and that we are looking at providing support during Christmas and Easter holidays too.

Finally, I acknowledge and thank the Minister, Deputy Calleary. I am glad I got to thank him personally today. I also commend the Minister, Deputy Naughton, all the people behind the scenes, such as the interdepartmental working group, and everyone working to improve this scheme.

This has been a positive step forward. Let us keep listening, improving and, most important, feeding our children.

Senator Michael McDowell: I want to be associated with the words of condolences from everyone to my colleague, Senator Craughwell.

Anyone who listened to Claire Byrne's programme this morning and who has seen the "RTÉ Investigates" programme, which has now been taken down, will appreciate that the people involved in this major controversy are credible, well-motivated and truthful citizens. I have met on a number of occasions with Luke Rochford, Detective Superintendent Brian O'Reilly, Dr. Donal Corcoran, Rose Sweeney and Alan Kearney, and I am 100% satisfied that these are

genuine and patriotic servants of the Irish State. I predicted that Garda management would attempt to cover up this major scandal, only part of which is in the public domain. Indeed, the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions sent two missives to RTÉ even before the broadcast of the programme.

What we are concerned with here is the abuse of Garda power on a major scale. A young Irish soldier with an exemplary record in the Defence Forces armoury raised concerns with colleagues within the Garda and with people outside the Garda about major abuses in the Garda armoury and firearms sections at Garda headquarters. These abuses concerned not merely the dangerous storage of firearms and explosives, but issues such as the procurement of ammunition and the supply of equipment to An Garda Síochána. He was warned against speaking to other persons about his concerns and his position was threatened by his superiors. The matters he was concerned with were very serious. They included the procurement of €500,000 worth of grossly defective and dangerous ammunition in respect of which, remarkably, the Irish taxpayer bore the brunt of the €120,000 cost of destruction. His complaints also concerned improper travel and entertainment perks offered by suppliers to Garda personnel in Italy, which included wining and dining, a visit to a nightclub and, subsequently, to a brothel.

He raised the dubious procurement of hugely defective holsters, which have now been withdrawn on safety grounds, but not before the very serious injury of Detective Garda Connell while protecting the Israeli Embassy, who, for his trouble, was subjected to disciplinary actions by his superiors.

He also raised the authorisation of the use of Garda funds to carry out work on weapons possessed by a gun club, one of whose members was the son of his Garda superior, and the importation of parts for that purpose on foot of fraudulent documentation submitted to the Department of justice by persons within the Garda firearms section. None of these people involved in that matter have been suspended or disciplined.

For his trouble, he was arrested by members of An Garda Síochána publicly at a five-a-side football match, made to lie on the ground, had his hands handcuffed behind him and was detained under the Offences Against the State Act and brought to Irishtown Garda station. His locker had previously been opened and pages of notes in which he had detailed his concerns were ripped from a notebook there. A later staged opening of his locker was photographed by members of the Garda technical branch.

The home of his former commanding officer in the Defence Forces were searched under the Offences Against the State Act. The officer also has an exemplary record and had been selected for appointment as Captain of the Guard in Leinster House but his Garda security clearance was withdrawn and he was denied his due promotion in the Defence Forces until the intervention of the Ombudsman for the Defence Forces.

The efforts of Rose Sweeney and Donal Corcoran to have the holster protected disclosure of Luke Rochford properly investigated using Colonel Ray Lane, a highly respected Army officer, were then illegally countermanded by the then Commissioner, as has now been openly admitted by the current deputy commissioner. The careers of honourable decent people in Ireland have been blighted and destroyed. I am profoundly shocked by what I know and have learned.

I raised some of these issues on the record of this House on 17 July last year, the last day of the previous term, and was assured by the then Leader that the new Commissioner and Minister for justice would address these matters. These issues need to be fully and independently investigated in order that public confidence in An Garda Síochána and its supervision at force and governmental level can be examined independently.

An Cathaoirleach: As Members are aware, Standing Order 52 covers the issue around adverse effects on people who are not here to defend and speak for themselves. Standing Order 53(8) also talks about the public interest.

I understand that Members will raise issues here under public interest for the citizens of Ireland who may raise issues. On the other hand, they may be on the receiving end of adverse effects upon them for speaking up on behalf of people or on issues that they feel need to be raised. When Members raise issues they will take the public interest into account. Due to the privilege they have here as Members of this House they are allowed to speak openly and freely and not suffer any adverse consequences, while taking into account the balance they have to strike in relation to any statements they make in this House. The public interest is always the one that people keep to the fore in their thoughts when they are discussing issues here.

Senator Conor Murphy: I join with those who have offered condolences to former Senator Bonner's family and to our colleague, Senator Craughwell, on his sad loss over the course of the past number of weeks.

During the summer season, most people expect that political debate goes to bed but in relation to issues of our Constitution and the future on this island, the debate was very much alive over the latter days of the summer, should that be the foolish remarks of the new Prime Minister, Mr. Burnham, in dismissing the prospect of a unity referendum, or the remarks of the American President when he was visiting here. His remarks are not anything to build any solid foundation on but nonetheless those remarks, and his preference and offered support for reunification in Ireland, had the effect of elevating that debate and discussion onto an international level. It very much reflects the bipartisan support there always has been in the United States, not just for the peace process in Ireland but for constitutional change in Ireland.

Following that, the development between my own party, the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru also had the effect of elevating that debate in Britain where it very much needs to be heard because it is not just a question of our constitutional future. There is a real question now over the constitutional future of Britain itself, which has been advanced. We have made it very clear. Unfortunately, there was an attempt to misrepresent this. We are all on different paths regarding this. The future of constitutional change in Ireland is not contingent on anything happening in Scotland or Wales or *vice versa*. The arrangement we have with them is a long-standing one. Other parties in this State had it in previous times gone by. It also reflects the nature that in the event of constitutional change, both in Ireland and Britain, we need to maintain those relationships right across these islands and have productive working relationships together. The attempt by the Taoiseach to misrepresent that was unfortunate but given where he is in this space, I get that he tends to react in a hostile way to anyone else discussing the issue of unity.

On a more negative note, we also had the development of the attempt to bring us back into the past in the North where the leadership of the Orange Order and leaders of political unionism want to revisit the Drumcree issue of a march along the Garvaghy Road, which is something that has been settled for almost 30 years. It is something that has caused real concern and trauma for those who lived through that experience back in the nineties when significant loss of life was attached to the attempts to force a parade down the Garvaghy Road. I hope that wise heads will prevail in the Parades Commission and that we do not have a decision to try to force a parade along the Garvaghy Road. It would be hugely detrimental to all that we have achieved over the past number of years. The Taoiseach has an invitation to meet with the residents of the Garvaghy Road. I hope that he takes that up and recognises there is a contribution to made here. I ask that the Leader ensures that senior Government Ministers remain engaged on this process and issue because it has a potential for setting us back some way in the North.

Senator Patricia Stephenson: I lend my support to the condolences as well, particularly to Senator Craughwell.

Over the past few days, and throughout August, we had consistent attacks on the International Criminal Court, ICC, by Trump's Administration, most recently with the plan to have sweeping sanctions against the entire court. It is an incredibly troubling escalation and attack on our international justice mechanisms. They are effectively aiming to dismantle the systems and the institutions of international law and take a sledgehammer to the whole concept of a rules-based order. These new measures would severely undermine the work of the court with the ICC president, who is already under sanction, warning that they could jeopardise the court's very existence.

ICC officials have warned that court-wide sanctions would disrupt things like IT, insurance, empowering investigators and routine transactions such as paying US-based employees. This constitutes yet another egregious overreach and naked attack on international law from the Trump Administration. In July, Marco Rubio explicitly set out the intent to systematically disable the ICC's ability to operate. We have already seen how the Trump Administration has weaponised sanctions against individuals, including several of the court's judges. These sanctions were retaliatory measures for the ICC's work regarding the actions of US personnel in Afghanistan and, indeed, the issuance of the arrest warrant against Netanyahu for the genocide in Gaza. We have to stand up to this. We have to stand up to these attempts to undermine our international systems.

The Taoiseach and the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy McEntee are attending the UN General Assembly this week. I call on both of them to take actual action to draw a line under these attacks from the US and through our European Presidency role, introduce a blocking statute to protect EU citizens who are under sanctions by the US. We have been calling for this for a while. It does not seem like anything is being done to push this forward. This is crucial to stopping the tide of the impact of these sanctions. Otherwise, there is no accountability for international war crimes, the heinous genocide in Gaza or those committed historically in places like Rwanda, Sierra Leon or Kosovo. We are saying it does not matter anymore. That is what Trump is trying to do because he himself is trying to hide from accountability and justice. It is urgent and crucial that in the next three or four months,

while we retain the Presidency of the EU, we really push for the EU blocking mechanism to be put in place and, more broadly, call the US's actions out very clearly to the Government.

Senator Frances Black: On behalf of the Civil Engagement Group, CEG, I too send condolences to the family of Enda Bonner and especially our own colleague, Senator Craughwell, and his family. It has been a tough road for him and our thoughts are with him. I also send condolences to Orla Murray on the loss of her brother.

The last time I spoke in the Chamber was just before the summer recess to mark the passage of the Government's version of the Occupied Territories Bill. It was a very significant step after so many years of work by many fantastic activists and organisations. However, as I and many of my colleagues made clear at that time, it was also a missed opportunity. The Government's ban will prohibit the import of physical goods from illegal Israeli settlements and I welcome the fact that the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade signed the commencement order last week. However, for the ban to actually take effect, it requires a second Statutory Instrument from her to designate relevant postcodes taken from EU level. I would like for the Government to update this House on when that will happen. It would be really great if the Minister could come in and give us an update on that.

More importantly, despite recognising that this is an obligation under international law and the ICJ advisory opinion, the legislation banned only physical goods and did not cover trade, services and investment. The Minister told this House that she recognises that this is necessary and will push for it to be done at EU level. There have been many developments over the summer that are important. First, Ursula von der Leyen and the European Commission have made it crystal clear that they will not come forward with a proposal to ban trade with settlements, never mind one that goes further than individual member states that have acted already and whose legislation includes services. If that is the Government's strategy to meet these legal obligations, it is clear that it will not happen. However, it was encouraging earlier this month to see a joint statement by a long list of countries stating that they are going to move ahead with national level bans, including France, Canada and the UK, which pledged to include provisions on services just like Spain and Norway. We can see here the benefit of Ireland acting and showing leadership, despite what several Ministers told me over many years – and I mean several. We have not been left isolated. Other countries are now following. However, we also see there is much more for us to do. With the right political will, we can do as others are doing, and include services. I would like the Minister to update the House on the Government's response to these very important developments.

Senator Alison Comyn: I also extend my condolences to the family of the late Senator Enda Bonner, and to my colleague in the Seanad, Senator Craughwell, on the passing of his beloved Helen. May her gentle soul rest in peace.

I raise something that I have raised in the past in the Chamber, the proliferation of vape shops across the country. There is a particular impetus at the moment because there are so many issues, such as heritage, health and legal considerations. We need a timely debate in the Chamber. I raised it at the Fianna Fáil think-in. I was delighted that the Taoiseach, Micheál Martin, picked up on it and said that we have to seriously look at them. We have to look at whether the vapes themselves should be on our streets. How many vape shops do we need in every town? They are popping up on every street corner. In my hometown of Drogheda, we

are into the multiple figures. We have four of them in one street. It is the same with nail bars, mobile phone shops and all of those kinds of shops. How many do we need? They need to be seriously examined. Many vape shops are masquerading as sweet shops. They are now being called "candy stores". We have obesity problems with our children. We know that some of those who are pushing sweets to bring children into their shops are selling these products to those who are under age. We have made that illegal here and we have also made it illegal to sell HHC products. I know from speaking to many people, particularly in my hometown and county, that they are still being sold over the counter quite openly. The shops are being raided again and again, and we do not seem to be able to close them. A timely debate is needed with the Minister for justice or the Minister for Health. I know that the Minister of State, Deputy Murnane O'Connor, has worked incredibly hard on this issue. We need to look at how many we need. Do we need to bring Revenue in to see whether some of them are legitimate? I know some of them are. I am not anti-business, but surely we can come up with better quality shops for our towns and cities.

Senator Manus Boyle: I pass on my condolences to Senator Craughwell on the death of his wife and also to Phyllis and the Bonner family. Enda was a man who I knew fairly well. He served on the council along with my father years ago. We had many chats. Believe it or not, during the last chat I had with him about six months ago he told me what I was doing wrong and how he was only putting me right. I thank him for those kind words. We also lost a superstar in Donegal during the summer. I send my condolences to the McHugh and O'Donnell families, and especially to Emma and Eoin, on the deaths of James and Noreen McHugh, who sadly lost their lives over the summer. James was part of the 1992 panel. He really was one of the superstars who brought Sam to Donegal.

Over the summer I travelled to fishing ports over the length and breadth of this country. The frustration that is out there is unreal. It is coming from fishermen and fisherwomen all over this country. I cannot put it into words without getting really mad. I know from talking to inshore fishermen, factory owners and pelagic boat owners that they are all feeling the pain. I know the fuel support scheme came in and there is money left. It needs to be drawn down. We need the Minister to get us answers. We need to get answers on where the Berkery report is at. When will it be published? When can we see it? Where are the port listings for Killybegs? We were told before Christmas that the port listings for Killybegs had been applied for, but I heard today that they have not been applied for. Other countries like Denmark had it within three months. Simple things can make a big difference to coastal communities. Where is the brown crab consultation process at? This issue with brown crab has been going on for years now. We need to get that sorted. Are we going to stand up and fight for Ireland on the Hague preferences or we are just going to roll over as usual? We need our people out fighting for this. All I have heard since I entered politics is about the reform of the Common Fisheries Policy, CFP. We need to be doing more than reforming it. We need to get it sorted out. I am sorry, a Chathaoirligh, but it is time for action. We have heard enough words being spoken for the last while. We need action on this.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I thank everybody for their offers of condolence and in particular my group which stood by me for the three months that Helen was in hospital and the hospice.

It is a pretty shocking thing when you get notice and are told you likely have a year ahead of you, when that year shrinks to a couple of weeks.

Over the next couple of Orders of Business there are a number of things I want to address. Helen was very accepting of her fate and she set about planning everything to do with the end of her life. That included such things as enduring power of attorney, the advanced health declaration form, the hospice itself and how she wanted her final burial carried out. It was extraordinary at times to visit her in the hospice and find the level of good humour I found. She was still able to take the mick out of people and to deal with some of the horrendous things that were confronting her. Her love of her children and her grandchildren was palpable all of the time. The one thing she was adamant I would do was to use the office I have to point out some of the issues that families encounter at this time.

Some of these are issues we all should be thinking about today and are some of the things we should be doing in preparation for the end of our own lives. None of us knows when we get up in the morning that we will go to bed that night or when we go to bed at night that we will get up the following morning. It takes a person of extraordinary courage and strength to sit down, having been given her diagnosis, to engage with me on things like the kind of music she wanted for her funeral. One of the amusing things she said to me at the time was "I wonder will Micheál Martin attend my funeral". I laughed and said there was no chance of that. She said, "What about the Defence Forces? You spend your life talking about them. Will I get a guard of honour?" I said I doubted that very much. I remember the day before we went to the church the funeral directors contacted me saying they needed to talk about protocols. I asked what protocols they meant and they said the Taoiseach was going to be represented at my wife's funeral. I said, "Jesus, do not do that to me, she will sit up." The Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces and the Ceann Comhairle were represented, and many Members of this House and the Lower House contacted me. It was in the middle of holiday season and people were away and not able to attend, but there is a massive comfort in having people come to you at a time like this and sympathise with you.

Looking around the Chamber here now, I do not think any of us can possibly understand what it is like. I went away for a week to try to clear my head once everything was over. I came back at 10 o'clock on a Friday night and turned the key in my front door. I walked in the door and the silence was deafening. I walked into the conservatory and switched on the TV set and the bloody sound would not work. I looked towards the heavens and I said, "You really are having a laugh now, aren't you?" At the end of the day, that silence is there every day. Her beloved dog, Pickles, is in the house, and the lazy so-and-so will not move himself. He just curls up in a ball and lies down. Every now and then he goes out and looks up the stairs to see what is happening and comes back in and sits down, but for company I would be better off with a teddy bear.

I really do thank colleagues and over the coming days I want to deal with those things, such as enduring power of attorney, the advanced health declaration and the hospice. When we were told Helen was going to the hospice I thought "death". Never once did anybody in the hospice mention the words "die", "death" or anything like that. Thursday night in Our Lady's Hospice in Harold's Cross is the place to be if you fancy a drink and a bit of music because the bar opens and it is a great night. I will leave it at that and will come back on the other stuff over the next few days.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank Senator Craughwell for sharing that very intimate final few weeks and days of his wife's journey on this earth and his support for her.

Senator Joe Flaherty: This summer finally saw Horse Sport Ireland, HSI, enter examinership and, finally, the rest of the country knew what those in the sector have been saying for many years, namely that HSI is, in fact, an impediment to the growth of a sector that the examiner, Joe Walsh, has said is worth in excess of €1 billion annually and employs upwards of 20,000 people.

We are not likely to hear again from those behind the examinership process until early October. However, many within the sector were taken aback by comments from Ross Gorman, counsel for the examiner, who said there was a distinct possibility that they may be able to salvage HSI. He spoke about broad consultation with directors, senior executives, employees, creditors, Revenue, bankers and other stakeholders.

I want to try to give voice to the people who are very much at the heart of the €1 billion industry every year. These are the breeders and horse owners, the man with one horse, the man who might have one foal a year and the people who have given blood, sweat and tears to this industry over the years. It is important that their voice be heard.

For the past four years, HSI has been bedevilled by controversy, all of its own making. As far back as October 2022, the board split amid CEO controversy. In November 2022, there was an attempted removal of the CEO, six directors resigned, and there were reports of a €650,000 severance package and settlements. In 2023, five former staff took court cases against HSI in just two years. In October 2023, there were reports of hurdles remaining for HSI after the boardroom fallout the previous year. Fast forward to July 2024 and divisions deepened between HSI and affiliates. In 2024, we had the absolute calamity of the passport and IT failure, when we saw a complete breakdown in the issuing of passports for foals and new horses. In 2025, showjumpers revolted. In October 2025, there had been more bullying complaints and eventing owners had complained. In front of our eyes, we saw a much-loved sector literally falling apart under the gaze of an organisation that is heavily funded by the Government to support and promote the sector. Finally, in August 2026 there was the financial crisis and the entry into examinership.

No other State-funded organisation or affiliate has undergone such a barrage of criticism and damning reportage over a four-year period. The facts are telling and beyond question. The facts cannot be ignored. This examinership process presents the perfect opportunity to finally disband HSI before it can do any more damage.

An Cathaoirleach: I referred earlier to Standing Order 52 in relation to utterances in the House and the public interest. I realise many of the issues raised here today are in the public domain and many of the names mentioned are also in the public domain, having been reported in the media and dealt with by committees. I just want to make sure Members strike the balance between the public interest and people's right to their good name.

Senator Pauline Tully: I too would like to be associated with the expressions of sympathy, particularly to my colleague Senator Gerard Craughwell on the sad passing of his wife, Helen.

I want to raise the issue of the school bus transport system because, since the beginning of August, I have been inundated with communications from distressed parents over the fact that their children have not received school bus tickets for the return to school. Some children who had tickets for several years were suddenly left with no place on the bus. Some of the parents were not even notified by email or anything like that. They saw on the portal, when they went to check whether a ticket had been issued, that they were going to receive a refund. In many cases, both parents are working. They have to pay the cost of living, mortgages and so forth.

In many cases, there are very easy fixes. In several instances, there is a small bus doing a run that, if replaced with 24-, 33- or 52-seater, or whatever the case may be, would accommodate all of the students on statutory tickets who have been left without tickets for this school term. It would not cost very much. It would still be the case that only one driver would be paid. There might be a slight increase in the cost of fuel, but that is it.

The whole system is in disarray. A school transport review was carried out, which took years. The report was published in 2024 and, from what I can see, none of its recommendations has been implemented, even though the Government said it would take them on board and make the changes over the period 2024 to 2030.

Nothing has happened. I cannot see any capacity increases. The distance rules have not been changed. The necessity to attend the nearest school to be deemed eligible has not changed. It is something that needs to be addressed. School transport is essential for many families. It also gives a very good life pattern for young people in that they get into the habit of using public transport, which is important for the environment and to reduce our emissions.

I am calling on both Ministers and the Department of Education and Youth to address this issue once and for all, so we do not see a repeat every year. We need to address the shortages that exist now for those students who have been left without any transport. It cannot be allowed to happen again and again. There are some easy fixes. They have the review. What needs to happen is given. That review must be implemented without any delay.

Senator Niall Blaney: I begin by passing my condolences to Senator Craughwell on the passing of his wife. I apologise I missed the funeral over the summer. I was not around.

I concur with the expressions from the Chair in relation to my former colleague Enda Bonner, who was a former Member of the House. Rather than trying to address all that Enda was in the small amount of time left for me, I ask that time be allocated on our agenda at a stage when we can invite his family here to hear the expressions of sympathy, as has been afforded to other Members in the past. I propose that to the House.

My colleague, Senator Manus Boyle, mentioned the sad passing in west Donegal, which is his neck of the woods, of James and Noreen McHugh. I attended the wake also and met Manus there that day. Such a sad scene I have never witnessed at a funeral or a wake, where two coffins were side by side. I send my condolences for the loss to all the people in west Donegal and all the GAA family in Donegal on the passing of Enda and James.

An Cathaoirleach: I am sure the Leader will provide time in the Order of Business in the coming weeks, in conjunction with the families and Members from Donegal, to ensure we have

expressions of sympathy for the former Senator to give people more time to put on the record his great service to this House, to Donegal and to Ireland.

Senator Shane Curley: I also express my condolences to Senator Craughwell on his sad loss and also to the family of former Senator Enda Bonner from Donegal.

Another summer has gone by and Carrabane National School in east Galway is still in limbo when it comes to its new-build primary school. It is disappointing to be back here, with kids back at school for yet another school year, and still have that bit of uncertainty around the future of those students and where they are going to be located in the coming months and years. They literally just need the letter of intent. They have gone through the entire school-build process from start to finish twice. They had to go back to square one on the planning permission and went through it a second time. This is decades in the making to get to the point where they can hopefully get diggers on the ground in the coming weeks. Even the planning and building unit, PBU, in a joint Oireachtas committee, admitted that this is an exceptionally long process that has been drawn out and that the people in the local area should not have had to go through the timeframe they have had to go through.

Builders do not magically appear on site. There is a lead-in time where they have to plan out their first steps once they get on site. As we head into the winter months, we urgently need to get them on site as quickly as possible. It is just to get that letter of intent issued to the people locally and give them certainty that their school is finally being built. They are crying out for it and we have gone on so long that I have had to raise this numerous times in the House. People are really frustrated. I would like to see this happen immediately. If we have to talk to the Minister to talk through why there are such delays in this process causing such anger in the community, that could be something we have to look at.

I wish to raise the issue of wind energy guidelines. Tonight, in Killalaghton Hall there will be a meeting of the public to discuss the proposed wind farm in their area, for people in Killalaghton and the neighbouring parishes like Mullagh and Kiltormer. It is 20 years since 2006 when wind energy guidelines were last updated. Since then, the average size of a windmill has gone from 70 m to upwards of 180 m, which is huge and nearly a trebling of the size of a windmill that is then put into a local community. There is uncertainty out there. People want clarity on what the new rules are going to be. They want them urgently so there is a process in place, people know where they stand, and that there is a very clear process by which companies get the go-ahead to put windmills and wind farms into communities, especially in east Galway, where we see a huge influx of applications for planning permission for them.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: I also want to be associated with the expressions of sympathy today, particularly to my colleague, on Helen. Suaimhneas síoraí dá hanam dílis.

I welcome the transition year student who is on placement with me from Summerhill College in Sligo, who is very welcome.

We are going to be speaking about budget submissions. I went to the recent ESRI report conference about poverty, income inequality and living standards. The question of how we measure poverty came up. The Taoiseach was disputed or there was confusion about how we

measure poverty. The Taoiseach was cited as saying that the rate of children living in consistent poverty has actually gone down, but in fact it has been rising when we take housing costs into account. I would hope that any debate we are having here over the next couple of weeks, when we are looking at budgets, will include relative income poverty and how much spending power people actually have. This report lines up with the CSO statistics as well. When we are measuring poverty, we see that one in five children lives below the poverty line. When we look at the amount of income people have left after being able to afford new shoes or a decent coat to spend on going out for leisure activities or after-school costs, we see that one in five children in Ireland is living in poverty. Over the years, housing costs have been overlooked in the measurement of poverty. Children who are most at risk of living in poverty are those whose families are in private rented accommodation or in receipt of the housing assistance payment. Their disposable income is left too low and they are left with nothing at the end of the month. Over the next few weeks when we are looking at budget submissions, I hope housing will be included when we are considering children living in poverty.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: I share in the sympathies of all Members with Senator Craughwell on his sad loss. I know that he provided loving care; may his wife rest in peace. I am very sorry for his loss. I would also like to extend my condolences to the Bonner family and support Senator Blaney's request for time for the family to be allowed to come to the House and for an appropriate tribute to be made to the former Senator Enda Bonner.

It is a great privilege for all of us to be back here after the recess. I was nominated by RGDATA, which represents all the small, independent Irish retailers. The Leader will be aware that over the term of this Oireachtas, I have raised many times the burden of the increasing cost of doing business on small, independent enterprises. They are the backbone of employment, community and service right around the country. Over the summer the Minister, Deputy Peter Burke, launched the report on the cost of doing business. It was a result of the work of his Department and all the stakeholders. I commend everyone who contributed to that report. We are hearing all the time about increasing costs and the cost of living. Small businesses have experienced energy cost increases of almost 50%, while insurance costs have increased by over 26% and labour costs by over 15%. These are real costs which in many cases are preventing the businesses from growing, expanding their services or even being sustained. I would like the Minister to be invited to the House at the very earliest opportunity to outline the Government's priorities. There were 63 recommendations to improve the ability of small business and enterprises to compete, not just here in Ireland but internationally. I would like the Minister to outline to the House how the Government intends to prioritise the 63 recommendations and how their implementation will be monitored.

Senator Joe Conway: All Members will be familiar with the murder, in the not-too-distant past on our neighbouring island, of two parliamentarians, Jo Cox and Sir David Amess.

During the summer past, we had Ann Widdecombe, a former MP, and last week, unfortunately, in our own State, a serious assault on a Member of the Lower House.

To protect against these things, the Government wisely brought in a scheme whereby people could enhance the security of their residences. Unfortunately, that has yielded up unintended consequences. During the summer the local radio station in Waterford, which was only doing its job, sent in a freedom of information request to the local authority asking for the names of

councillors who availed of the grant. This was published with the names and addresses of the recipients and the amounts they drew down. For more unintended consequences, while highlighting the two who got the security grant, it also drew attention to the fact that 30 councillors were without security at their homes.

This is not the way things should happen with freedom of information. Councils must be cognisant of section 37 of the Freedom of Information Act, which forbids people giving out the address, location or personal details of third parties. It is an offence under that section to do so. Whenever the Leader or any Member of the House is interchanging with the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, or the Minister, Deputy Browne, will they ask that the Department sends out a circular to local authorities, reminding them of section 37 so that no councillor has to go through the ignominy of having their security threatened by that release of information?

Senator Chris Andrews: I also extend my condolences to the family and friends of former Senator Enda Bonner, and to Senator Craughwell. It is a difficult time for him and it is great to see him back in the Chamber.

I was in the 3Arena on 1 August when a 31-year-old boxer, Lee Reeves, was fighting. It was a tough fight. Lee was stopped. It looked serious at the time but we only found out afterwards how serious it was. Lee is in a coma. He is breathing on his own but in desperate and urgent need of an operation. I have been in contact with his family and they are understandably devastated. Lee has had to have a section of his skull removed to allow for his brain to expand. It needs to be replaced but the operation has been cancelled twice. That is simply not good enough. The operation is needed as a matter of urgency.

Yesterday, Lee managed to partially open his eyes and to squeeze his father's hand when prompted. It is a very small step to recovery but at least it is something positive. The HSE needs to ensure this vital operation is carried out as a matter of urgency. There is a meeting with the Reeves family and medics in the Mater Hospital today. It is important for his recovery that Lee gets the operation. He needs a definite timeline. They cannot afford for it to be cancelled for a third time. The family is devastated. Lee is in a very delicate state of health. Will the Leader's office engage with the HSE to ensure the urgency of this operation is passed on? He is a young man, 31 years of age, with a big future ahead of him but it is vital he gets the treatment he needs now. Our thoughts remain with Lee and his family and we hope he makes a speedy and positive recovery.

Senator Sharon Keogan: I join my colleagues in expressing condolences to the friends and family of Enda Bonner - may he rest in peace - and to my colleague, Senator Gerard Craughwell, on the loss of his wife, Helen.

3 o'clock

What I wish to speak about today is the story that was in *The Irish Times* this morning, where the president of the Irish Road Haulage Association, IRHA, warned that hauliers cannot sustain current fuel prices. When asked if there would be another round of protests, he said that desperate times make desperate people. As fuel prices continue to climb, regardless of Government taxes or not, I think it is fair to acknowledge that we are now in desperate times. Before anyone says that this is just one group of people representing one industry, it is not.

Last week, a poll showed that if fuel prices continue to rise, a massive 60% to 66% of the Irish public would support a new round of protests. That is no surprise, because fuel protests do not just affect truck drivers. Everything in this country relies on fuel and energy prices. If anything goes up, the ordinary working people of Ireland are already on a knife's edge. All of Europe is reporting record high fuel prices. The Middle East is in crisis, as there looks to be no resolution with Iran and the Saudi Government is cancelling its oil shipments. While I naturally believe that the Government should delay the taxes, this is a stop-gap solution. What this entire crisis says is that we need a total overhaul of our energy policy. I will repeat my call from before. I think we need to go further and scrap fuel taxes altogether, and we need to invest our current surplus into serious long-term infrastructure such as public transport, roads, railways, and even nuclear energy, things that will pay us back in the long run. Most of all, I believe we need to seriously re-evaluate and scrap much of the eco-alarmist policies that have left our hands tied behind our backs at a time when we are fighting for our lives.

Senator Maria McCormack: My condolences to Senator Gerard Craughwell. I thank him for sharing those details of his wife, Helen.

I am really delighted to be back. The most important issue and what I have been listening to people talking about in rural Ireland all over the summer and especially at the ploughing match in Screggan last week is the cost of fuels, including home heating oil, petrol and diesel. We are up at €2.20 a litre in the midlands for diesel. This cannot be sustained and green diesel has gone through the roof. Today, my colleague, Deputy Pearse Doherty, will bring legislation through the Dáil to cut the carbon tax on home heating oil and I really urge us to work together here. We have solutions. We know that families cannot take this any more. A full tank of home heating oil can now cost between €1,600 and €1,700. People in rural Ireland and all across Ireland cannot afford this, especially those in rural Ireland who rely on oil. We are thinking of our elderly people - pensioners - who cannot afford it. They are putting €100 or €200 worth of fuel in their tank and they cannot sustain it like this, on top of everything else that families are facing. In rural Ireland, people need fuel to go to work, the supermarket and to hospital appointments. We have to look at the overall tax that we have on fuel. I am asking the Government Senators here to urge their Government colleagues to support the legislation before us, and let us remove the carbon tax on home heating oil. We know that it can make a difference and it can be done now. People have to take to the streets to protest because they could not cope any more. We are going to see more of that and I support them 100% to peacefully protest because they cannot sustain the level at which the price of fuel is going up and how much tax is going into the Government's pockets and how much profit is being made here. We know that is as clear as day for everyone to see.

Senator Laura Harmon: I also want to extend my condolences to Senator Craughwell on the passing of his wife. My condolences also to the family of Enda Bonner.

I want to talk about the issue of Bessborough, Cork. There have been significant developments in recent months in relation to this. We had a rally in July in Cork city with over 1,000 people attending from across the country. The evening before the rally, the Taoiseach said that he was going to intervene, which he did. Cork City Council is now engaging with the developer as a mediator has been appointed. That is where we are at but this issue is not going away.

I know that I will stand with campaigners all the way to ensure that this site is fully protected. We have to listen to survivors in terms of what the future of that site will become, whether it is a memorial or an educational institution. Survivors have to be at the heart of this. Just last week, Cork City Council, through Labour Party councillors led by Councillor Peter Horgan, unanimously passed a motion calling on the Government to unseal all the burial records and technical reports in relation to this site, and also for the Government to work with the Attorney General to open an inquest into the deaths that occurred at Bessborough. We know that Bessborough is just one of many institutions across the country. On “The Late Late Show” last Friday night, we saw Catherine Corless describe it as a mirror to what happened in Tuam. Siobhán McSweeney, the actor from Cork, said rightly that private developers cannot get in the way of our collective healing as a country. We need more answers from the Government on this. We need to ensure there is justice for all survivors, and that survivors are at the heart of any decisions in relation to Bessborough and other sites across the country.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: I too wish to be associated with the condolences to Senator Gerard Craughwell on the death of his wife, Helen, and also to the family of former Senator Enda Bonner.

Since the last few weeks of August, my office has been dealing with the school bus ticket chaos, as I call it. We have parents contacting us who cannot get their children on the bus to school. It is the same story every year, with parents desperately trying to find a solution when school comes back, bus drivers threatening to walk off the job and empty buses travelling past children standing along the side of the road. I have been dealing with families from Crosskeys, Shercock, Tierlahood, Laragh and Lurgan and from Emyvale in County Monaghan. The stress on parents, especially on families where both parents are working, is unbearable. They cannot take time off work and rearrange their lives indefinitely to drive their children to school. Bus Éireann has been offering a refund, but that does not resolve the problem. I know of parents who are putting their children on buses with no tickets, which is extremely stressful for the children, who are terrified that a bus inspector will inspect them. That is not a solution. I raised this issue in 2021, when there was a review of the school bus scheme, and the same thing was happening then. We have had that scheme and, in my view, nothing has changed or been achieved. The solution is more capacity. Bus Éireann has confirmed to me that the Minister has not approved any additional capacity this year to date. The school year starts in September. However, Bus Éireann knows the figures at the end of May because the applications for bus tickets close at the end of May. It is unacceptable that we have this mess every year in the week or so before school starts, when people get notification at the very last minute. We should have the Minister in the House to discuss this.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I want to join in the expressions of condolence.

I agree on the issue of buses. I have been hearing about the school bus issues. I request that the Leader would arrange a debate in the House on public transport. Many people were shocked to see that at a time when we should be doubling down and increasing our public transport, when we know we are facing an environmental crisis and when fuel prices are going up, instead of increasing capacity in our public transport system, including our public school transport system, we are looking to increase the costs and increase the charges that people are paying. We have heard the statistics that when these costs increase, fewer people use public

transport. It is a wildly counterintuitive measure to be taking at this time. I would like a debate on transport.

I also note that as we are coming back today, we can see the rooms filling up, but people are missing today as the schools and colleges start.

Students from Gaza who have full scholarships, are fully supported, have met every academic bar, have funding in order to attend colleges, have overcome unimaginable obstacles coming out of Gaza - a place where every university has been destroyed and bombed - and who have managed to achieve the offers of places and scholarships in Irish universities are being blocked by the Department of justice. I would like the Minister to come in to explain that issue. He could also explain his remarkable lack of progress on the issue of criminal legal aid.

I also note that we are moving the writ for the Seanad by-election. I care a lot about the Seanad and think it has an extraordinary contribution to make to politics. One thing I have seen over recent times that I regret is the fact that for two or three Seanads in the time I have been here, we moved from having Independent Members, civil society and voices from Northern Ireland and from the idea that we would try to bring a different sense of civil society, expert voices and diverse voices into the Seanad to contribute to the debate and scrutiny we carry out in terms of legislation. I would love if this by-election became an opportunity to bring back that focus on the voices that might be different, that might bring something different to the work we do and that might add something new to what we are doing. I believe the Seanad should not simply be a staging post for the Dáil and a focus on the Dáil. It is fine if people move their ambitions to the other House after being here but when we are collectively deciding on a new addition, it would be good if we were to think in terms of what will directly and specifically contribute to our collective work and be open to that idea.

Senator Aubrey McCarthy: As a Senator on the university panel, I wish to point out that between 2022 and 2024, our universities took in more than 10,000 additional students of whom 9,000 have arrived without the additional funding. I ran for the Seanad two years ago and one of my campaign messages was that universities should be properly funded. I certainly stand over that. I also see that education is the future of our youth. I know that since 2022, the Government has funded the gap, which was underfunded by €307 million per year. Budget decisions have cut the gap by more than half but university chairs are saying that they need extra funding as the deficit is over €250 million per year because pay awards are not fully funded and student numbers keep rising. State funding per student is around €8,000, which is 30% lower in real terms than in 2008.

I acknowledge the hard work of lecturers, research staff and everybody who carries that load. As we can see, the universities have not stood still. They have raised funds through philanthropy, loans and even the immigrant investor programme and the microcredits programme, and have brought in 600 more courses and reached over 20,000 learners. The Irish Universities Association is asking for an increase of €190 million in core funding in budget 2027 and that part of the near €2 billion surplus in the National Training Fund be unlocked for lifelong learning and reskilling. Our universities contribute over €10 billion per year to the economy. University chairs are warning that if that investment does not come, within ten years, FDI will go elsewhere so there is certainly a need for that. I ask that the Minister for Further

and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science comes to the House for a debate on university funding before then. I ask the Leader to use his offices to make that happen.

Senator Martin Conway: I also wish to be associated with the expressions of sympathy to Senator Craughwell and to say to him that we are thinking of him at the moment and have been thinking about him over recent times.

I stood here a number of months ago and expressed my disappointment at the fact that Lahinch Beach in County Clare lost its Blue Flag. The primary reason for this was the lack of a proper wastewater treatment facility in Lahinch-Ennistimon. The system was and is not fit for purpose.

There has been movement on the issue over the past couple of months but, sadly, that is where the good news stops. What is being proposed in the first instance is what we call the Cregg-Calluragh wastewater treatment facility. It is a secondary treatment plant whereas what is required at a minimum is a tertiary facility. The people who have decided this, in their wisdom, through their research, etc., maintain that at any point over the next 25 years, the Lahinch and Ennistimon area will not have more than 10,000 people who will use the facility, which I do not think is credible.

The other issue is its location. The neighbours and people whose land it is proposed to put this facility on are not happy. It is not good enough to dismiss it in any cavalier way and say that because it is in my land or my neighbourhood, I do not want it. That is not the case. These people live in the community, are part of it and work in it. They want to see a proper treatment plant the same as anybody else. However, there are concerns, including environmental, habitat and ecological concerns, and so on. The fairest and most ethical and moral stance to progress this project for Irish Water is to have a non-statutory public consultation, which will at least give people the opportunity to make submissions. My request to the Leader is that he would write to the Minister and request him to instruct Irish Water to launch a non-statutory public consultation so that the concerns of the public in the immediate area, and surrounding Lahinch and Ennistimon area, can be heard properly in an ethical framework and in a timely manner that is transparent in all its deliberations.

Senator Mark Duffy: I offer my sincere condolences to the Bonner family on the sad passing of former Senator Enda Bonner and, of course, to our good friend and colleague, Senator Craughwell, on the sad passing of his dear wife over the summer. My thoughts and sympathies will be with Senator Craughwell in the difficult weeks and months ahead. I thank him for sharing his difficult story with us today.

Tomorrow will mark 75 years since the beginning of one of the longest droughts in sporting history. That was when Mayo beat Meath in the 1951 all-Ireland football final. I am glad to report that since we last convened, that drought and famine was lifted against the Cathaoirleach's county of Kerry.

An Cathaoirleach: We have already discussed it this morning but I congratulate the Senator.

Senator Mark Duffy: We discussed it before the recess and there was an air of arrogance that has since been put to bed.

An Cathaoirleach: I admit that the Senator is not incorrect in his statement.

Senator Mark Duffy: Mayo played and lost 11 finals. There was a lot of heartbreak and many near misses. There were a lot of great memories along the way. A lot of loved ones have since passed. For Mayo to be finally crowned all-Ireland champions has given the whole county and country, and our diaspora around the world, a brilliant lift, even among Kerry folk. I acknowledge and thank the Mayo players, team and staff, and the volunteers across the clubs of the county, who have given so much joy and happiness to young and old alike. They have handled themselves with incredible integrity and have been so generous with their time. They have been present at every school, hospice and hospital across the county. They have attended every fundraiser. They have answered the call. It is no wonder they are all-Ireland champions, given how they have handled themselves since the final whistle. I thank them. I would welcome the opportunity to have both teams visit Leinster House and the Houses of the Oireachtas. The Cathaoirleach can meet and eyeball them. He can welcome and acknowledge----

An Cathaoirleach: I would be quite happy to welcome them to the Seanad.

Senator Chris Andrews: As long as there is celebration.

Senator Mark Duffy: The celebration has only begun.

Senator Chris Andrews: We know.

Senator Mark Duffy: I congratulate the 11 nominees for the all-star team, including Jack Carney and Ryan O'Donoghue, and Kobe McDonald and Darragh Beirne, who have been nominated for the young player of the year award.

It has been a brilliant summer of celebrations in Mayo. It will continue on into the winter and with our diaspora as well. I would encourage them to come to Leinster House and would welcome them letting us share in that with all Oireachtas Members who have Mayo connections.

I thank Andy Moran and all of the team. I was there when he came into Ballaghaderreen. I was thinking of the late John O'Mahony and all who have gone before us, who would love to have been there. The curse is finally over. The famine is over, as Stephen Grealish reminded us. For every young Mayo boy and girl, the spark has been lit and the dream is back alive. Mayo are back.

An Cathaoirleach: You see how gracious we are in Kerry that the Senator went way over time and I never even rang the bell once. I said, "You know what? If it only happens once every 75 years we can definitely give extra time on it". I said this morning that it was quite a scene after the game itself to see the celebrations on the pitch in Croke Park. I think there was somebody who was 91 years of age when the cup arrived in Mayo in the past couple of weeks and he was quite emotional on the return of the cup after 75 years. We look forward to the Mayo team coming here at Senator Duffy's invitation. We will welcome them to the Seanad

with an open heart and I congratulate them on what was a fantastic achievement in football. After ten minutes, it looked like it was going to be number 12 but it did not turn into number 12, which showed the fierce heart of the team.

Before I call on the Leader to respond on the Order of Business, I welcome guests of Deputy John Paul O'Shea, Deputy Brennan and Deputy Mairéad Farrell. I think we have a great-granddaughter of the former Senator Gaffney, who served here in the 1930s. She is most welcome to Seanad Éireann. I thank her for being here. The particular bell I was ringing to restore order is the same bell that he would have heard when he was here nearly 100 years ago now. We also have friends of Sharon Pettit, and we have the Texas and Wicklow Roses here as well. They are most welcome to Seanad Éireann and I thank them for being here. Anois, the Leader to respond on the first Order of Business of the new term.

Senator Garret Ahearn: I thank the Cathaoirleach. You would know we were on summer holidays. Twenty-five questions have come in today, which is much larger than most days.

I will take the last one first. You even see an air of confidence and a little bit of arrogance coming into Mayo as well after the couple of weeks they have had.

An Cathaoirleach: I would not say that. It is joy unconfined.

Senator Garret Ahearn: Like the Cathaoirleach, I come from a county where we are used to winning. It is actually nice to see Mayo succeed. It is a good idea to bring them in. On a serious note, it creates excitement and a buzz, particularly for young children. It is a time they will never forget and they will be talking about the win of 2026 in 50 years' time.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: Wait for the next one.

Senator Garret Ahearn: They are a very good team. I think they could go on a run here. Confidence is a great thing as well. There is a good opportunity to bring them in here and if for nothing but to frustrate the Cathaoirleach, I think I should allocate some time to speak about it when they are here as well, if that is agreed.

Senator Mark Duffy: Agreed.

Senator Garret Ahearn: As I said, we have 25 contributions so I will try to keep it as brief as I can.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin spoke about the work the European Committee of the Regions does. It is led by Councillor Gillian Coughlan and we know members of that committee who are in our own party. I know Councillors Brídín Murphy, Jimmy McClearn and Neil Feighery do incredible work, but as a team they represent local authorities across the country incredibly well. It is great to see them acknowledged.

As the Senator said, the ploughing championship has been a real success and that brings pressure when it comes to Kildare next year. It is great to see good numbers and good weather for it. The Senator's main point was on solar farms and I think she is right. There is a need for

a Government policy on this. I know the Minister of State, Deputy John Cummins, is doing a lot of work in his Department on it but it affects a number of Departments, including the Department of agriculture with the Minister, Deputy Martin Heydon. It is something a policy needs to be put together for because, as the Senator knows, it is being talked about an awful lot, particularly in rural areas where there is good land being used for solar farms.

Senator Nelson Murray spoke about the changes to the hot school meals programme. She has been pushing this for months and months and doing up her own survey and report on it. It is good to see the feedback has been taken on board and that changes are going to be made this time next year in having hot and cold meals. Anyone who, like me, has young children going to school knows children want a choice between hot and cold meals. It is important to say we will have a debate with the Minister responsible, Deputy Calleary, next Wednesday specifically on the programme and the changes that are going to be made.

Senator McDowell spoke about the "RTÉ Investigates" programme that aired last week. It has actually come down from the RTÉ Player. I was trying to watch it on the player but it was not available. An awful lot came out from that, which is very worrying and disturbing. Questions need to be answered in terms of An Garda Síochána. The Senator raised a number of issues. It is not for me to speak on them without having all the facts but he referred to responses from the Commissioner and An Garda Síochána. I think he said the former Leader of the House responded to him as well and that he was not satisfied with it. In relation to the then Leader's response, I have it here, and he spoke about this before it became a big issue. In fairness to the Leader he said he would request a debate on it. He said: "It is an important issue and he has obviously put a lot on the public record in this Chamber. In doing so, I hope it gains traction and that this is examined." That is what the former Leader of this House said, so he took it very seriously at the time.

Senator Conor Murphy spoke about Irish unity. This has been touched on in the past number of weeks because of the UK Prime Minister coming over here saying one thing and the US President coming here and saying another thing. As the Senator said, it is important to keep relationships going and to maintain relationships on both sides, irrespective of what one side or the other says. An awful lot is changing and we need to be real about the fact the conversations are now happening about what a united Ireland would be and what it would represent. We need to be open to that. It is always important to acknowledge as well that the president came over here and talked about a united Ireland. This was a visit some people did not want to have or they did not want to meet him. What I encourage, even in the contribution of the Senator, is having dialogue, being open and continuing relationships. I ask for that to happen during the St. Patrick's Day visit when Ministers and people who have influence and who have contact, especially with America, go and use that to benefit the progression of the united Ireland ambition.

Senator Stephenson spoke about the attack by the USA on the International Court of Justice. This has been an ongoing issue. The Taoiseach and many Ministers are in America this week at the UN and I have full confidence they will raise an awful lot of those issues the Senator has raised.

Senator Black spoke about the occupied territories Bill. She said other countries are now following, and it has been the Government's position from the very start that if we do this, other countries can follow. The biggest strength would be if there was a European-led movement on

this. As the Senator said, Ursula von der Leyen's comments are not extremely helpful and there are a lot of countries that just are not willing to move but we still need to keep working. We have done an awful lot over the past year by convincing countries to come on board and we will continue to do that.

Senator Comyn spoke about vape shops. It is an incredibly frustrating situation. I have been speaking to Councillor Fergal Nealon in Sligo who has done an awful lot on it in his hometown. It is incredibly frustrating that shops are being done up to attract young kids in particular. By "young" I do not mean 15- or 16-year-olds but eight-, nine- and ten-year-olds. Something needs to be done about it. In fairness to the UK Prime Minister Andy Burnham, he is doing an awful lot to make changes and give more responsibility to councillors. It is something I am working on via legislation to give power to councillors to say what can be in their town centres. We see four, five or six vape shops in a row on some main streets and that is not good for anyone. According to the police investigation report that was done in the UK, a lot of the vape shops are being used for money laundering.

I am not saying that is happening but I am saying that it would be helpful if we had some sort of investigation in this country.

Senator Boyle spoke about the fishing industry and frustration within the community. No one knows the fishing industry better than the Senator. He is constantly an advocate for the people in County Donegal and the people of Killybegs and the fishing community as a whole across the country. They need answers and they need reform and it is time, with a budget coming up in the next couple of weeks, when money is needed to support that sector. I know the Senator will work extremely hard to convince the Ministers to do that.

Senator Craughwell spoke about his late wife, Helen, which was very touching and very moving. It reminded me a lot of mam. When he was talking about Helen and the good times, even in her last couple of days - I said this to him last week in a private conversation - you have some of the funniest times two or three days before they pass and you know they are passing, but they are great memories in a really weird way. He spoke incredibly well. It was my mother's anniversary mass on Sunday - 26 years. Time heals but you still remember. I understand what he means in terms of those lovely moments you have.

Senator Flaherty spoke in relation to Horse Sport Ireland. I need to be careful in terms of anything I say on that because there is still a process in place in terms of the examinership. In fairness to the Senator, he outlined the concerns he has been raising in this Chamber for quite some time.

Senators Tully and O'Reilly spoke about the school bus transport system. This is something that comes up every year but it seems to be coming up a bit more. One of the issues many people know is that because it is free transport, a lot of kids are put on a school bus but they are not actually taking the seats. It is one of the reasons the price of the school bus increased previously. Certainly, more needs to be done because it is a huge worry for families and parents. As the Senator said, it is actually a really good thing for kids to get used to using public transport.

Senator Blaney spoke in relation to the late Enda Bonner. I am more than happy to allocate time to have an opportunity to speak about the late Senator's contribution in the Seanad and his

contribution as a councillor at a time that might be suitable for when the family could be here as well. I will speak to the Cathaoirleach and the Deputy Leader to see what would be possible.

Senator Curley spoke about a school in Carrabane in his own constituency, which just needs a letter of intent. I will speak to the Minister on that. That really should be done. I cannot see why there should be a hold-up on that. I hope that can be done as soon as possible. In relation to his contribution on wind energy guidelines, there has been no update on those guidelines in 20 years. People need to know what the new rules will be. I suggest that the Senator tables a Commencement matter on that issue.

Senator Cosgrove spoke about poverty and particularly child poverty. That is a challenge and it is a focus of every budget that is done every year to try to minimise child poverty. In her contribution, the Senator spoke an awful lot about certain issues but did not talk about the actual changes that have helped child poverty, including simple changes such as free transport to school, free books, hot school meals and reduced fees in colleges. An awful lot has been done to try to tackle that issue. It is not enough and more needs to be done but the Government will not be found wanting in terms of supporting children.

Senator Fitzpatrick spoke about small retailers and the representation RGDATA engages in on the cost of business. She asked for a debate with the Minister, Deputy Burke, which I will try to facilitate. I will contact his office to have a debate on the report on the cost of doing business. There were 63 recommendations in that. It is a good opportunity when businesses are struggling to have that debate in this House.

Senator Conway spoke about assaults on politicians from all levels; we all know councillors. There was a long conversation - I was going to say on the Joe Duffy show but it is now the Joe Duffy replacement show - about women in politics and how challenging it is for them. Then, we had the awful assault that happened to Deputy Michael Healy-Rae last week. The Senator brought up an issue that is critically important in terms of councillors, however. There was a situation during the summer where councillors who had security allowances to protect their homes or offices were named and they should not have been named.

Every Member in this building, be it a TD or a Senator, can avail of security allowances to protect them and their staff. They cannot be named for security reasons. It should be no different in all councils.

FOI requests are done by councils on an individual basis, as is the case with Departments. It is not up to the Minister to say how a council should manage FOI requests; that is up to the council. It seems to me to be blindingly obvious that no council should give out the addresses of councillors. Tipperary County Council has taken down all addresses of councillors from its website.

As we know, when an FOI request is submitted for a councillor, the councillor should be informed before the FOI request goes out in order that if there are any issues like this, the councillor can go to the council and say he or she does not think his or her address should be given or that something should be stated. The council can then make an informed decision based on what a councillor said and the FOI request. We struggle to get people to run for local office. If people are named and supposedly shamed for trying to protect themselves and their families, that is wrong and needs to be changed. I have spoken to the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, about this and he is of the same view.

Senator Andrews spoke about a boxing match where a young boxer, Lee Reeves, was terribly injured. He needs help and support, which I am sure he is getting from the hospital. I do not know why the operation has been cancelled twice. It is obviously a clinical matter for the doctors. I will speak to the Senator after the Order of Business to try to get the details and contact the hospital to see what can be done. It seems to be a terrible case and incredibly worrying for the family.

Senator Keogan spoke about the comments from the president of the Irish Road Haulage Association on fuel prices, which Senator McCormack also mentioned. Prices have increased dramatically over the past number of months. That is why the measures were extended until November. We will have a budget and decisions will be made in a number of weeks but the Government has not been found wanting when it comes to supporting people during the fuel crisis. Some €750 million was allocated only a couple of months ago to try to support farms, businesses and citizens. If more support is required, it will be provided. I note the Senator said we need to scrap all taxes on fuel and to fund public transport. I am not sure how we pay for putting additional funds into public transport if we cut taxes on fuel. There is an opportunity to have a debate on that. I am sure that when the budget is announced in a couple of weeks, one of the topics in this Chamber later that day will be fuel support.

Senator Harmon spoke about Bessborough, Cork. I believe she was one of the first people to raise the matter in this House and it is now getting traction due to the comments of Siobhán McSweeney and others. It is in the Taoiseach's constituency and he is very conscious of it. Decisions will have to be made, as the Senator said, being conscious of survivors at the heart. I hope that will be the case.

Senator Higgins asked for a debate on school transport, which we will try to have. She also raised difficulties faced by students in Gaza, something which has been raised in the Seanad on previous occasions.

Senator McCarthy raised a very interesting point on the number of students across the country having increased over the past two or three years and the added financial burden that places on colleges. There is a request for an extra €190 million in the budget and he has advocated for that. We will try to have a debate with the Minister for higher education on funding and support for third level colleges.

Senator Conway spoke about Lahinch Beach, a beach I know very well. I was there during the summer for a couple of days with my family. It is a fantastic area, beach and town. It is another prime example of where infrastructure is critically important. He spoke about wastewater treatment. We need to provide significant investment for and speed up the provision of infrastructure. He asked me to contact the Minister for housing to get Irish Water to set up a public consultation.

I will do that. It is only right that Irish Water should be available and open to consultation with members of the public from Lahinch.

Regarding Senator Duffy's remarks, I have clarified that already. Everyone has congratulated the Senator. The one thing that I forgot to say is that when the Mayo team was lifting the trophy, I thought they were going to hand it to Senator Duffy, who was literally behind the captain.

An Cathaoirleach: I do not know about the football field, but Senator Duffy always had great positional sense in politics.

Senator Garret Ahearn: He is now going to be in a photo that will be seen for hundreds of years.

Order of Business agreed to.

Death of Former Member: Motion

An Cathaoirleach: Regarding Standing Order 153(1), before the Order of Business I announced the death of a former Member of this House, Enda Bonner. Members stood for a minute's silence. One of the Standing Orders of this House ensures that all former Members are remembered by the House. I ask the Leader to read out the motion that will be sent to the family this week.

Senator Garret Ahearn: I move:

That Seanad Éireann:

- expresses its deep sadness on the death of Enda Bonner;
- conveys its sincere condolences to his family; and
- expresses its gratitude for his notable contribution, as a member of Seanad Éireann, to Irish public life and for his dedicated service to the people of Ireland.

Question put and agreed to.

Vacancy in Seanad Membership: Motion

Senator Garret Ahearn: I move:

That the Clerk of Seanad Éireann do send to the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage notice of a vacancy in the membership of Seanad Éireann occasioned by the election to Dáil Éireann of Senator Seán Kyne, a member elected from the Nominating Bodies Sub-Panel of the Cultural and Educational Panel at the General Election for Seanad Éireann, January, 2025.

Question put and agreed to.

Address to Seanad Éireann by Members of the European Parliament: Motion

Senator Garret Ahearn: I move:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 63(1) and the approval of the Committee on Parliamentary Privileges and Oversight, Seanad Éireann agrees that, in respect of the European Parliament Dublin Constituency, Mr. Barry Andrews MEP, Ms. Regina Doherty

MEP and Mr. Aodhán Ó Ríordáin MEP, may attend and be heard in Seanad Éireann on Wednesday, 23rd September, 2026, and that the following arrangements shall apply:

The proceedings shall commence at 2 p.m., shall not exceed two hours, and shall consist of—

- (a) a speech of welcome by the Cathaoirleach;
- (b) an opening address by each MEP which shall not exceed six minutes in each case;
- (c) a contribution not exceeding five minutes by a Spokesperson from each Group;
- (d) a single response not exceeding five minutes by each MEP to the combined issues raised by the Group Spokespersons;
- (e) questions from all other Senators in accordance with the sequence set out in the Schedule to this resolution, which shall not exceed two minutes in each case;
- (f) a reply and concluding statement of not less than five minutes by each MEP;
- (g) a speech of thanks by the Leader of the House; and
- (h) concluding remarks by the Leas-Chathaoirleach;

and the members of the European Parliament may take seats on the floor of the Seanad Chamber.

Schedule

Fianna Fáil Group

Fine Gael Group

Independent Group

Sinn Féin Group

Cross-Party Group

Civil Engagement Group.

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 3.42 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 4.01 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 3.42 p.m. and resumed at 4.01 p.m.

4 o'clock

Public Health (Tobacco Products and Nicotine Inhaling Products) (Amendment) Bill 2026: Second Stage

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

Acting Chairperson (Senator Chris Andrews): I welcome the Minister of State. She has ten minutes.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): I am delighted to introduce the Bill to the House. Its purpose is to reduce the appeal and accessibility of e-cigarettes, vapes and other nicotine products, including nicotine pouches, particularly to our young people. This Bill has passed through Dáil Éireann without amendment. While there was constructive debate on some of the specific details, there is a shared goal with this legislation to do everything we can to reduce the number of young people using these products.

This issue is not new to us after all the debates we have had. We had the single-use vapes legislation, which I spoke on here. I thank Members again for their contributions and support in getting that legislation over the line. It has been commenced and the ban will take effect from 24 January next, so we are nearly there. The National Environmental Health Service will engage with the industry to make sure everyone is aware of the new rules.

Ireland has one of the strongest legal frameworks in the EU for these products. Nicotine is highly addictive and we do not want a new generation becoming dependent on it or moving on to tobacco smoking and, of course, the devastating health harms it can cause. A Health Research Board, HRB, report found that young people who vape are more likely to smoke. Overall, smoking among children has fallen to 5%, but smoking among older teenagers is still very widespread. Our ambition must be to bring that rate to zero.

Tackling tobacco directly remains essential, but we must also ensure that the changing nicotine market does not undermine that progress. This Bill therefore introduces targeted measures to reduce the appeal and visibility of nicotine inhaling products. It will restrict colours and imagery on vapes and on the packaging, ban devices that resemble or function as toys, games or other products, restrict flavours and promotional flavour names, restrict point-of-sale display and ban advertising in retail settings.

During this Bill's passage in the Dáil, there was some debate around the decision to restrict certain flavours. That was the biggest issue I came across when I spoke on this in the Dáil. In developing this Bill, however, we have recognised that most adults who vape previously smoked and that some people use vapes as part of an attempt to quit. However, smoking rates have remained broadly similar since 2019 despite an increase in vaping. There has been an increase in the number of adults who use vapes but who have never smoked, so that is another concern. Research using Healthy Ireland data also found that the link between the use of vapes and the intention to stop smoking had disappeared across all age groups by 2023.

The measures in this Bill are therefore designed to reduce use among young people while ensuring that these products remain available in some form to adults who smoke. The flavours proposed are those that are less likely to appeal to young people and follow the recommendations of the WHO, as well as several other member states that have already regulated in this area.

The review provision and the Minister's power to amend the list of proscribed flavours will allow us to monitor the impact of the legislation and respond where necessary. This legislation is also being introduced alongside significant investment in free, safe and effective stop-smoking support. Funding for the HSE Quit programme increased from €13 million in 2021 to more than €20 million in 2025. We will continue to increase access to evidence-based

support for people who want to quit smoking. I have been on to my own Department and have also been looking at a programme for quitting vaping. That also needs to be examined.

The Bill also creates a new category of nicotine consumption products, including nicotine pouches and future products intended for the recreational consumption of nicotine. This futureproofs the legislation so that new products entering the market can fall within the regulatory framework. These products will not be permitted for sale to persons under 18 years of age. As I always say, it is illegal to sell to under-18s. Retail display and advertising will also be prohibited. These will also apply where products are being distributed for free.

During the Dáil debates there were, of course, those who would have liked to see this legislation go further for these products. I broadly supported this but there are issues of timing and the interaction of this law with the EU legislation. We are working with EU legislation, which can take up to six months. This is what is happening with this particular Bill, which has taken just about six months. This Bill has been notified to the EU under the technical standards directive. The standstill period for that notification ends on 7 October so we will have word from the EU on that date. It is my intention to enact the Bill as soon as possible after that.

We have moved ahead of the EU with our original plans for vapes and newly approved baseline measures for other nicotine products that would, by their nature, not fall under this harmonised EU law. However, regulations of these products themselves would be most effective at European Union level. A proposal for a revision of the EU tobacco products and advertising directives is expected towards the end of this year. We are expecting that by the end of the year. That is why it is important. If we got that word by 7 October, we could work on this Bill. The EU is to come back to us hopefully by the end of the year on its own regulations. The European Commission recently published its evaluation report, and it highlighted some key areas that a revised directive should address such as new nicotine and tobacco products and the rise of digital marketing. That is a huge concern for everyone.

The aim with the Bill is, therefore, to move forward with these important restrictions as soon as possible without risking further delays due to EU developments. Ireland is ready to progress broader EU-wide regulations should the proposal be published during our Presidency of the European Union.

Senator Teresa Costello: I thank the Minister of State for being here today. I welcome the Bill. It is an important public health issue, particularly for our children and young people. It is about ensuring that our legislation keeps pace with a nicotine market that is changing rapidly. For many years, when we talked about nicotine addiction, we were talking about cigarettes. Today it is very different. We have vapes in a wide range of flavours and packaging and we have newer products such as nicotine pouches, which are small, discreet and easily concealed.

I welcome the fact that the Bill takes a future-proofed approach. It creates a category of nicotine consumption products that will encompass nicotine pouches and other recreational nicotine products that may emerge in the future. This is really important because we cannot be in a situation where every time a new nicotine product appears on the market, we have to play catch-up. The Bill will prohibit the sale of nicotine consumption products including pouches to people under 18. It restricts advertising and point-of-sale displays, regulates the appearance and packaging of nicotine inhaling products, restrict flavour descriptions and addresses devices designed to resemble or function as toys, games or other products.

It is important that we look at why these measures are necessary. The concern is not simply that young people are using a new product; it is that we could have a whole new generation dependent on nicotine. The HSE tells us that children and young people are particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of nicotine.

It is highly addictive. In a developing brain, it can cause problems with attention, learning, mood and impulse control. The pouches can contain high levels of nicotine. They can increase heart rate and blood pressure and cause sleep problems. They also cause concerns around teeth and gums, mouth ulcers, nausea and nicotine poisoning. Importantly, because these are relatively new products, we do not know their long-term health consequences yet. That is something we need to stop and think about, particularly when we are talking about children and teenagers potentially beginning to use these products at a young age.

There is a question of well-being. Addiction is addiction, regardless of how nicotine is delivered. A young person should not feel they need nicotine to concentrate, relax, socialise or just to get through their day. The HSE's own research has found that experimentation with vaping can begin in children as they enter secondary school. Parents feel overwhelmed by the range of products available and uncertain about what their children may be using. The way some of these products are designed is significant, as has been dealt with in the Bill, with bright colours, sweet flavours and packaging that can resemble sweets and other everyday products. Research suggests that these characteristics can make vaping products particularly attractive to younger people. That is why I welcome the measures in the Bill dealing with the colours, imagery and flavour descriptions.

I want to briefly mention the marketing. There have been concerning media reports in recent weeks about nicotine pouch brands having a presence at major Irish festivals, including Electric Picnic, Forbidden Fruit, All Together Now and Beyond The Pale. At Electric Picnic, for example, there were reportedly games and competitions, branded caps and sunglasses, and free nicotine pouches available to adults following age verification. The companies involved have said that their products are for adults and that age verification procedures were in place. That is fair and well, but it raises a broader question about the normalisation of nicotine. We spent decades removing tobacco advertising and sponsorship from sport and entertainment because we understood the power of associating an addictive product with music, friendship and social occasions. We should be careful that we do not allow that association to be recreated with a new generation of nicotine products. The market is growing rapidly. One leading pouch brand reportedly saw Irish sales increase from 6 million pouches in 2023 to 29 million in 2024.

We should remember what Ireland has already achieved through public health legislation. The workplace smoking ban was a major change when it was introduced in 2004. Today, walking into a smoke-filled pub, restaurant or workplace would be alien to a whole generation of younger Irish people. That legislation protected workers and the public from second-hand smoke but it did something else. It changed what was considered normal and demonstrated that public health measures can change behaviour and attitudes over time. We should bring the same determination to protecting young people from nicotine addiction today.

We need to be balanced in our approach. Many adults who vaped previously smoked. Some people use vaping while trying to move away from cigarettes. Preventing people from starting smoking and helping existing smokers to quit must remain priorities in our public health policy, as smoking continues to have an enormous human cost. Tobacco smoking kills more than 100

people every week in Ireland and causes more than 1,000 hospitalisations. I welcome the fact that regulation is being accompanied by investment in cessation. Funding of the HSE quit programme has increased substantially. For young people the HSE Quit4Youth programme provides specific support to help them stop smoking or vaping. That is important because our response cannot be about telling people what they cannot do. We have to help people who have developed an addiction to get out of it. There will always be another flavour, product or package, so future-proofing our legislation really matters. We need a regulatory framework capable of dealing not only with the products that are on the shelves today but with what will arrive.

Through the smoking ban and other tobacco control measures, we have shown that strong public health policy can make a real difference and we should build on that progress. The objective is very clear: to prevent children and young people who do not smoke from becoming dependent on nicotine in the first place and to continue to support those who want to quit. I really welcome the Bill and thank the Minister of State for all her work.

Senator Joe Conway: Cuirim fáilte mhór roimh an mBille seo agus admhaím go bhfuil sé an-úsáideach sa troid i gcoinne an stuif nímhneach seo atá istigh sna "vapes" - an t-ainm a thugtar orthu. My grandfather used to tell me stories of watching poor quality American detective movies during the Second World War. He would tell stories of the private detective lurking in the shadows with his upturned collar and his hat slung down over his eyes, standing in a doorway or on a corner watching a suspect or somebody of doubtful motives. The detective would invariably be smoking a cigarette. As the quarry approached, the detective would take his cigarette from his mouth and toss it nonchalantly on the ground. There might only have been about one quarter of the cigarette smoked and because it was during the war years, a great groan would go up in the cinema to see the profligacy of these Americans throwing away three quarters of a cigarette when they could get none.

The point of my story is such behaviour glamourised cigarette smoking in the movies. We had advertising in the fifties and its growth in the sixties and into the seventies until governments came down heavily on the tobacco companies. All these people who exploit our human weaknesses have a great ability to zero in on those weaknesses and monetise them. That is what is happening to our young people with this vaping industry that has become commonplace in the last 20 years.

The Minister of State spoke of people using vapes who have never smoked in their lives. I have a couple of millennial children. Of course, they tell me they do not use them themselves but they say many of their friends who never smoked in college, or until fairly recently, are now vaping and have become seriously addicted to nicotine. There are insidious effects on their health and their pockets. It is an unseemly waste of time and it looks gauche. Short of picking your nose, I cannot think of anything more gauche than watching somebody go out into the street, sucking on a vape, blowing an aimless puff of whatever it is into the air and deriving satisfaction from that.

I applaud the Government's diligence in pursuing this legislation. It concurs with European legislation. However, I am worried that when you come down heavily on things like this, there is a great tendency for those things to go onto the back streets and the black market. Invariably, what comes into the black market is substandard - if you can have a high standard of vape.

These things are powered by batteries and if cheap batteries from countries with low standards of production are married to insidious, harmful, noxious content, there is the possibility of facial injuries, not just to the skin but to the back of the throat, and long-term effects on breathing and pulmonary health. Have we thought about bringing in strict penalties and vigilance among the Garda and other agencies to police the possible explosion, for want of a better word, in the use of black market products in response to the proposed legislation?

Time and again we hear of efforts made by the Minister of Finance and Tánaiste in trying to engender a greater culture of saving among our people. God knows, we knew that. We need only calculate the cost of a packet of cigarettes. I do not know what vapes cost, but if someone is vaping on a daily basis, it makes a nonsense of State efforts to generate saving, because the natural addictive nature of the substance is drawing people into dissipating their money. The old expression is, "A fool and his money are easily parted" and they are making fools of our young people. All of this is just a waste of money, going into criminality in the black market and going into people who are exploiting our younger people. I am delighted to wait back here in such a quiet Chamber to make my feelings known. There is a whole philosophical debate about this and that we should not be nanny stating about things like drink, gambling and vaping and so on. However, there really comes a time when we have to try to look towards the kinder angels of our nature and bring them to help people who are being exploited and impoverished by these products. Once again, I am delighted to be supportive of the proposed legislation and welcome it. I hope that in the fullness of time, the Minister of State may bring in a range of measures that will hit hard at people who are selling back street stuff and black market product as well.

Senator Maria Byrne: I thank the Minister of State for coming here today and bringing forward this very important legislation. It is good that we are bringing forward the Bill. The Minister of State outlined the scope of the Bill and what she intends to do. I recently met representatives of the Irish Cancer Society and the Irish Heart Foundation. They have concerns that in the current wording of the Bill, flavours and graphic colourful packaging are significant factors that draw young people, which the Minister of State mentioned. Is it proposed that flavour and packaging restrictions do not extend to nicotine consumption products under the current wording of the Bill? Maybe she could look at that. The organisations were concerned that the Bill would not go far enough. The flavours and smells are attracting young people. That might be the best way of putting it.

Another thing was raised with me as well that I am not sure whether it is in the Bill. These are the big puffs, which can have up to 25,000 puffs. In the UK I understand they can be up to 50,000 puffs out of one vape. That is not currently illegal in Ireland but it is something that needs to be looked at in the long term. Perhaps now is an opportune time for it to be included. It is good that there are going to be restrictions. It is about discouraging people from vaping because even though we do not have proof regarding vaping, it is believed and I believe myself, that it is not good for you. The number of people smoking has decreased due to the smoking ban but we now see people vaping all over the place. It is good that we are looking at restrictions on vaping going forward. I commend the Minister of State and the Department on bringing this forward. I am looking forward to working with her on it.

Senator Joanne Collins: I welcome the Minister of State to the Chamber. I am probably the only person who will stand up and not necessarily advocate for vaping but I will advocate against the banning of flavours. As everyone knows, I am a former smoker and a current vaper.

I have spoken to many people over the summer. It is funny. When you are on a night out and you leave the pub or you are at a wedding and you go outside to have a vape, because we have spoken about this so much in the House the first thing people say to me is: "Oh my God, please tell me they are not actually going to ban our flavours." These are adults that I am talking about, not children.

Not for one minute do I advocate for children to be vaping. For anybody who has never smoked a day in their life to pick up a vape is very silly because it is an addiction. Nicotine is an addictive substance. I started smoking at the age of 11, back when I knew no better. I wish I could go back in time and not do that. As I have said before, I gave up smoking and took up vaping for cost reasons. It had nothing to do with health reasons. I did not see that side of it because I was a smoker and I enjoyed smoking.

I will give the Minister some statistics that have been shown to me. According to a Red C poll, 33% of ex-smokers said they would return to cigarettes if flavours were banned; 73% said the fruit flavours are key to them staying off cigarettes; 49% would source flavours online and outside of the State if the ban goes ahead; 71% believe that a flavour ban would push vapers back to smoking; and 7% support a full ban on flavoured vapes. I hear that and I put it together with the tax revenue that is brought in on both nicotine and vape products. Nicotine products bring in a tax of €16.2 million per week. According to a Dáil parliamentary answer from last February, vape products will bring in an estimated €17 million a year. There is a huge difference between €16.2 million on tobacco products every week and €17 million a year on vape products. If I were to make an educated guess, I would think that maybe the Government does not mind the fact that a lot of vapers could go back on cigarettes when that kind of revenue is going to come in from tobacco products.

That is the way I am looking at it. You cannot put this under health if you are going to say that people can keep vaping as long as it is just tobacco flavour. There is no difference between strawberry ice or blueberry and tobacco. It is not going to make a difference to your health. If it is going to fall under health, it should be all or nothing. In my lifetime, I can never remember hearing anybody stand up in any of these two Chambers to say that we need to ban cigarettes. That is because they bring massive revenue into this country. The tax on them is huge. I do not see why we need this all of a sudden. If it is to do with children, a law was brought forward last year that vape products cannot be sold to those aged under 18. We need to make sure the law is enforced and make sure the consequences are high enough so that retailers do not serve the under-18s. I feel that, as Senator Conway said, we are going down the route of the nanny state - you can vape, but you can only vape the products that we are telling you that you can vape. You can only use the flavours that we think you should use.

I get it. I can only imagine that the rainbow cloud flavour is probably Skittles and candy floss stuck together. Most adults do not buy rainbow cloud but they will buy a fruit flavour. They will buy strawberry, cola, blueberry or something else because it tastes nicer. I know that sounds awful. If it is just tobacco flavour, many people, including me - I put my hand up - will be back on cigarettes tomorrow. Everybody I met over the summer months has been saying that to me.

I hear Senators and TDs advocating for this on the grounds that so many vape shops are being opened, and they are vibrant, and the colours are drawing children in. Each local authority has a development plan. If it is that much of a problem, why are councillors not going to the local authority to say, for example, that there are ten vape shops open in Newcastle West or Limerick city and we do not need them, or we do not need them to have pink writing all over them, or pictures of sweets and vapes beside each other in the shop? There are rules and plans, and it is for every local authority to enforce those rules. I do not think that is a reason to ban vapes.

I feel that we are going backwards in this country. If these flavours get banned, a huge percentage will go back on cigarettes. I know the Minister of State has stated there is scope in the Bill to reverse this or add flavours.

I am telling the Minister of State that once the flavours are gone and somebody goes back on cigarettes, it will be quite hard to get them back off cigarettes when we say sorry to them, that they can have their strawberry flavour back and that they should go back on the vapes because tobacco is worse for them than is the nicotine. The Minister of State is playing with fire and we need to leave flavours in. If this is all about children going down the wrong route, it is collective punishment and I do not think collective punishment works because vaping will go underground. I can guarantee the Minister of State it will go underground. I have been offered cheaper prices for products which are obviously not being manufactured or sold in the State so I know they are there and the Minister of State will not be able to control them. The Minister of State is going too far with this. I agree 100% that children should not be vaping. If I caught my 16-year-old with a vape in her hand I would probably fall through the floor first and then I would burn every vape that I saw; I would get rid of them. I know it is hard to control. I was the 11-year-old who was down the alley smoking cigarettes; kids do these things. What if the rules are in place and enacted so shops cannot sell vapes? When I was young, I was able to buy cigarettes but as I got older, I was being asked for ID. The consequences need to be severe enough so that vapes are not sold to children and this collective punishment is wrong.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor):
): I thank the Members of the Seanad who spoke today. This debate and engagement on this Bill are important and it is about progressing this Bill as far as we can. I will go back to some of the questions that were asked of me.

Senator Costello asked about nicotine pouches at any event in general. I will not talk about a particular event. This law will ban distribution of free nicotine pouches to children but also it will ban retail advertising of them, both in physical locations and online. The definition of "retail" includes where products are being distributed for free, so that will be banned. To keep the Senator updated, a proposal to update the EU law in advertising and sponsorship of tobacco and nicotine products is expected before the end of the year. The ban on the sale of tobacco pouches to under-18s includes a ban on giving them out for free. They should not be giving them out for free; that is not right either.

The EU tobacco products directive regulates the quality and safety of e-cigarettes devices so the non-compliant products can be seized and destroyed. That is something we are working on and I know the other Senator mentioned that as well.

EU-wide regulations will make this legislation easier to enforce. We spoke about enforcement and that is important. We are increasing resources for enforcement and I am very mindful of that. As we have brought in a licence every year to sell cigarettes and vapes, that helps with enforcement and being able to monitor this.

Senator Maria Byrne mentioned the big puff disposable vapes. This are regulated at EU level so will be a matter for the next EU directive. We spoke about the directives and I hope that will come in as soon as possible but it is at EU level, just to let the Senator know.

Senator Maria Byrne: That is perfect.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I know it was a big issue for the Senator.

On the issue of restriction of flavours which would push people back into smoking, research from other countries has shown that users respond to flavour restrictions in different ways. From reports we have received, they include switching to permanent flavours or sourcing flavours, that is, e-liquids elsewhere; quitting vaping; quitting all nicotine products, including tobacco; or switching to other nicotine products, including tobacco. The most relevant evidence to Ireland comes from the Netherlands, which found that its ban on all flavours except tobacco led to overall decreases in both vaping and smoking. We are very mindful of it and a lot of funding has gone into the quit smoking campaign we use. We are constantly putting extra funding into that and tobacco free generation measures are really important. Tobacco is a uniquely lethal product when used as intended. It causes almost 100 deaths and 1,000 hospitalisations each week in Ireland. There is no age at which it becomes safe to consume tobacco so we are not encouraging anyone to go back on cigarettes or to vape.

Our national tobacco control policy, Tobacco Free Ireland, is currently being reviewed. It is important to let everyone know that we are reviewing this. One of the central goals will be to set out a pathway to end the tobacco-related harm in Ireland. My officials and I are considering all measures to fulfil this objective, including a generational ban. That is what we are looking at now. It might take a bit of time but we are considering that possibility. The Minister and I are actively developing our own proposals, which are similar to those in the UK.

This is important. We need to make changes. We all know that vapes are more targeted at our younger people. We need to ensure that we get the information out there through the awareness campaign. We were at a festival recently. I asked that the HSE do a vaping awareness campaign about the harmfulness of vaping in the HSE tent at a huge farming event. I might as well say that it was at the ploughing championships. You have to be careful when you mention something in the House. I had the campaign there and it targeted a lot of young people. Over the past year and a half, more than €500,000 has gone into awareness campaigns about the harm of vaping. I will continue to do that. We can only say that it is important to get this Bill through as quickly as we can. This is all about the younger generation and older generations, and all of us working together. We must ensure that we give the proper information about the harmfulness and dangers. I thank Senators for their support. It is important that we get this Bill in.

Question put and agreed to.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Chris Andrews): When is it proposed to take Committee Stage?

Senator Maria Byrne: Next Tuesday.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Chris Andrews): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Committee Stage ordered for Tuesday, 29 September 2026.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 4.37 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 5.30 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 4.37 p.m. and resumed at 5.30 p.m.

Council of the European Union Decision: Motions

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: The Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, and his officials are very welcome to the House.

We are debating motions regarding approval by Seanad Éireann of the proposal for a Council decision on the conclusion of the agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Korea on the transfer of passenger name record data for the prevention, detection, investigation and prosecution of terrorist offences and serious crime; and approval by Seanad Éireann of a proposal for a Council decision on the signing on behalf of the European Union of the agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Korea on the transfer of passenger name record data for the prevention, detection, investigation and prosecution of terrorist offences and serious crime.

We will speak on both together and the two decisions will be taken separately. We are taking Nos. 3 and 4 on the Order Paper.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: I move:

That Seanad Éireann approves the exercise by the State of the option or discretion under Protocol No. 21 on the position of the United Kingdom and Ireland in respect of the area of freedom, security and justice annexed to the Treaty on European Union and to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, to take part in the adoption and application of the following proposed measure:

Proposal for a Council Decision on the conclusion of the Agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Korea on the transfer of Passenger Name Record (PNR) data for the prevention, detection, investigation and prosecution of terrorist offences and serious crime,

a copy of which was laid before Seanad Éireann on 24th August, 2026.”

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I thank the Leas-Chathaoirleach very much. I am very pleased to be back in the Seanad. I hope Senators had a good and well-deserved break. I am pleased to be back here working with them again.

I am seeking the approval of Seanad Éireann to opt in, as the Leas-Chathaoirleach said, to two proposals for Council decisions to sign and conclude an agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Korea, which is known to most of us as South Korea. That is an agreement on the transfer of passenger name record data or PNR data, as it is sometimes called.

The proposals have two main aims, first, relating to the necessity of ensuring public security by means of exchanging PNR data between the European Union and the Republic of Korea and, second, in relation to the protection of privacy and other fundamental rights and freedom of individuals. The proposed Council decisions have a Title V legal basis in the area of police co-operation. Their publication on 24 July 2026 started the three-month window for Ireland to exercise an Article 3 opt-in under Protocol 21, which is annexed to the Lisbon Treaty. That window will end on 24 October 2026 and that is why these motions are being brought before this House and the Lower House this week.

The collection and analysis of PNR data is a widely used law enforcement tool in the European Union and in other countries for the prevention, detection, investigation and prosecution of terrorist offences and serious crime. PNR data is the booking information provided by passengers and collected by air carriers for their own commercial purposes, such as names, dates of travel or travel itineraries. The collection and analysis of PNR data can provide the authorities with important elements, allowing them to detect suspicious travel patterns and identify associates of criminals and terrorists, particularly those previously unknown to law enforcement authorities.

The use of PNR data is governed by the EU PNR directive, which was transposed into national law in Ireland by the European Union (Passenger Name Record Data) Regulations 2018. The Irish passenger information unit within my Department is the body responsible for processing PNR data in Ireland. No legal or practical impediment has been identified by the Attorney General's office precluding Ireland from opting in to these proposals. Senators will recall that the Oireachtas gave approval to an Article 3 opt-in to the negotiation of this agreement in November of last year. Today, I am simply asking Senators to approve Ireland's participation in the final negotiated agreement once it enters into operation. In the past, we in Ireland have consistently opted in to similar European Union PNR agreements with other third countries, such as Canada, Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom. We have also entered into similar PNR agreements with the Schengen-associated countries of Norway, Iceland and, most recently, Switzerland.

In operational and policy terms, it is considered desirable that Ireland exercises an Article 3 opt-in to these proposals. They are appropriate and would be beneficial to Ireland for the purpose of investigating serious criminal activity. I commend these proposals to the House to consider the exercise of Ireland's right to opt-in under Article 3 of Protocol 21. I am seeking the approval of Senators for this motion so that Ireland can participate in these Council decisions to sign and conclude the agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Korea.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: The Minister is welcome back to the House to discuss these motions. On behalf of the Fianna Fáil group, I am happy to support the motions as outlined by the Minister in his contribution. Co-operation between states is vitally important in our fight against crime. It is a common enemy for us all. I firmly believe that the more co-operation we

have, ultimately, the safer our citizens will be. There are two aspects to this, as the Minister outlined, between the EU and South Korea in relation to the exchange of data, which is vitally important. Again, the Minister confirmed that the data is protected fully in relation to that. I am happy to support the motion as outlined by the Minister. I have no further comments to make in relation to this.

Senator Garret Kelleher: On behalf of the Fine Gael group, I also welcome today's proposal as articulated by Senator Gallagher. International co-operation in the area of crime prevention is of crucial importance and is becoming increasingly important given the international transnational nature of crime in the modern world in which we live. The fact that the Republic of Korea has protocols in place that are similar to the general data protection regulation, GDPR, guidelines with which we would be familiar in relation to the retention and use of sensitive data is a huge plus. Co-operation in this regard can only be positive and I welcome the proposal to participate.

Senator Conor Murphy: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire. On behalf of Sinn Féin, we will also be supporting the motion concerning this proposition that is in front of us today. The purpose of sharing this information is an important one. As the Minister said, it does assist in the prevention and prosecution of serious crime. We know that serious and organised crime does not stop at national borders and drug trafficking, human trafficking and other forms of organised crime activity operate internationally. Effective international co-operation between law enforcement authorities is therefore essential and the appropriate sharing of passenger information can play an important role in that co-operation.

We have previously supported Ireland participating in PNR agreements between the European Union and a number of other states. We also supported Ireland opting in to the negotiations for this agreement with Korea when that matter came in front of the Oireachtas in November 2025. For that reason, we are supporting the motion. However, our support comes with some important caveats that need to be put on the record. First, sharing of passenger information must always be balanced against fundamental rights and freedoms of individuals and where personal information is being collected, retained and shared internationally, there must be strong safeguards. The holding and use of this data must be necessary, proportionate and subject to strict limitations. Second, we need to be careful about an increasing tendency towards Ireland opting into measures under Article 3 of Protocol 21. Protocol 21 gives Ireland important protections in the areas of freedom, security and justice and allows Ireland to make decisions on participation based on our own national interests. While an Article 3 opt-in may be appropriate in this particular case, that should not automatically become the approach taken to every proposal.

Article 4 remains available to Ireland and, therefore, there may be circumstances where it is more appropriate to wait until the final shape of a proposal is known before deciding whether participation is in Ireland's interests. Ireland's national interests must remain central to those decisions.

Finally, there is a practical issue that deserves further consideration. Ireland is an island nation, and a considerable number of people enter and leave the State by ferry as well as air. The PNR data is considered an important tool in preventing and investigating terrorism, drug trafficking, human trafficking and other serious crimes. There is an obvious question as to why

similar provisions do not apply to ferry passengers. We should ensure that we are not creating an obvious gap where somebody who seeks to avoid the PNR system can simply choose to travel by ferry rather than by air.

We will be supporting the motion. International co-operation and appropriate information sharing are important tools in tackling serious organised crime, but that co-operation must always be accompanied by strong safeguards for privacy and fundamental rights. Ireland must retain the ability provided under Protocol 21 to make decisions based on our own national interests.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank Senators Gallagher, Kelleher and Murphy for their support and, indeed, the support of their parties. I am pleased to see that there is broad agreement across the House that this PNR data regime is important for the purpose of investigating serious crime and terrorist activity. One of the things that is most notable about crime in the past decade or 20 years is that it has become an extraordinarily international business. It is an activity that knows no jurisdiction or no boundaries. People who want to commit serious criminal activity do so by seeking to undermine the borders and the rules we have in different jurisdictions. It is very important that, as a country and as part of the European Union, we put in place measures that enable co-operation not just between countries within the European Union, but also on a broader scale so that we can combat collectively the attempts of serious criminals to get involved in and effect serious criminal activity.

I note the caveats that Senator Murphy has set out. Obviously, it is important that while we are sharing information, we also protect fundamental rights. I believe that is provided for in the PNR agreements. It is also the case that I will not recommend that we opt in to a Protocol 21 proposal unless I think it is in Ireland's best interest. I think we are all agreed here that this is in Ireland's best interest. If there is a proposal that comes under Protocol 21 that I do not believe is in Ireland's best interest, I will not opt in to it, and that has happened in the past.

In terms of how Ireland's interest is represented, it is through democracy - it is through the Members of this House and Dáil Éireann. They decide whether Ireland should opt in to Protocol 21 opt-ins. That is the democratic protection we have as a result of the Protocol 21 procedure that is available under the Lisbon treaty.

I again thank Senators and colleagues for their contributions. I very much appreciate their support.

Question put and agreed to.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: I move:

That Seanad Éireann approves the exercise by the State of the option or discretion under Protocol No. 21 on the position of the United Kingdom and Ireland in respect of the area of freedom, security and justice annexed to the Treaty on European Union and to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, to take part in the adoption and application of the following proposed measure:

Proposal for a Council Decision on the signing of the Agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Korea on the transfer of Passenger Name Record (PNR) data

for the prevention, detection, investigation and prosecution of terrorist offences and serious crime,

a copy of which was laid before Seanad Éireann on 24th August, 2026.

Question put and agreed to.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: When is it proposed to sit again?

Senator Robbie Gallagher: At 10.30 a.m tomorrow morning.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar athló ar 5.45 p.m. go dtí 10.30 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 23 Meán Fómhair 2026.

The Seanad adjourned at 5.45 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 23 September 2026.